

Overcoming

1 John 2: 14, 1 John 4: 4, 1 John 5: 4, 5.

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It has been noticeable how evening after evening the addresses have been of a practical order. My first thought as to this closing address was to have dealt with another practical theme, but, after listening to the wholesome and important exhortations that we have had, I have concluded that our closing moments ought to be given to the consideration of great, and blessed realities, which form the basis upon which a life of spiritual victory can be built.

Now, depend upon it, the Christian life, normally speaking, is a life of victory, for God has set us up with everything which conduces to that end. In the three passages we have read overcoming is spoken of, and to overcome is of course to get the victory. I think I can point out in them four things — a kind of fourfold base — on which the life of victory rests, and all four are things provided and supplied of God to us. We have to be much more concerned as to how we utilize what God provides so the practical note will not be absent from what I have to say. John's Epistle, though containing many warnings, is an epistle of victory; though the great victory book of the Bible is the book of Revelation, for there the climax is reached and the victory of God is manifested.

I am not going to speak on the theme that comes before us in Romans 7 and 8. We often speak of "victory over sin," but as a matter of fact the word, victory, does not occur in that passage: the word that does occur is, deliverance — "who shall deliver me?" This is what we need if it is a question of the working of sin in the flesh — deliverance from this state of internal slavery and confusion, into which sin has plunged us, and this we get in Christ and by His Spirit. When that deliverance has reached us, then we are prepared to face the foes of an external sort, and find that the victory is ours.

In the few words that we read from 1 John 2, we heard of those who had got the victory over *the wicked one*, we all know who he is, our great adversary, the devil. In 1 John 4, it is getting the victory over the *false prophets*. Men were speaking by another spirit than the Spirit of God, and the children of the Divine family had overcome them. In 1 John 5, the matter is very plain: it is overcoming *the world*. I propose to begin at the end, and to work backwards.

The first thing I point out is that, "Whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world." Some of you may have been thinking that victory belongs only to the older and more advanced Christians, but this word applies to all of us. It is a wonderful fact that, if you are a Christian, you have been begotten of God, and hence you have a nature which is in keeping with God who is love, and which is entirely out of keeping with the world — which is in fact entirely superior to the world — so as to get the victory over it. The world has vast attractions for the old nature; it has none whatever for the new.

Some of you may take up this statement and reason from it backwards, in a way I used to do myself. The statement alarms you, because you say to yourself — I do not overcome the world, therefore the inference is that I am not born of God. Now as to that I must remind you that in our Bible Readings on this Epistle we repeatedly dwelt upon the abstract nature of the statements which the Apostle John makes. This is one of them. The Apostle is like an analytical chemist, but of a spiritual order. He is resolving things into their primitive elements and he is showing us what are the essential properties of those elements. He is not asking us to think of all the combinations and mixtures in which the elements are found in the ordinary way. The essential property of the new nature found in those

who are begotten of God is this — it gets the victory over the world.

You know the story of Noah's Ark: how he liberated two birds as the waters began to abate. One was a raven, and one was a dove. One had an unclean nature with a very depraved taste, loving nothing better than carrion. The other, a bird of a very different order, found nothing attractive in the raven's food. The raven soon found something to satisfy its taste and did not come back. The dove found nothing till dry land began to appear. The flesh in us is like the raven, and feeds on carrion, but that which is begotten of God is like the dove, feeding only on that which is pure — the dove, we may remember, is in Scripture an emblem of the Spirit of God. Now just as the dove got the victory over the carrion, so does whatsoever is born of God get the victory over the world. It must do so: it is in its very nature to do so. We are viewing things abstractly, as I have said.

If however we view things practically we have at once to admit a different state of affairs. As born of God we have new tastes and desires, we see a whole world of things we never saw before, yet we know only too well the terrible downward drag of the flesh within us and how it loves the world and its evil. As born of God we are to have the victory, and the secret of it in practice is this — feed the dove, and starve the raven!

This is just what the Apostle Paul says in Galatians 6, only using another figure, when he speaks of our sowing to the flesh or our sowing to the Spirit. I think I see a man going forth to sow with a seed basket on either side. In one basket there is wheat, and in the other tares. He may sow one or the other, and the crop depends upon which. We may be frequently dipping our hand into the basket of tares and scattering that on the soil of our lives: if so, we must not be surprised at the ugly crop we have to reap. The exhortation of the Holy Spirit is that we sow that which is of Himself so that we reap everlasting life: in other words, that we do not feed the raven but the dove. But look at this, young Christian, and take courage from it - as begotten of God we have a nature of such a sort that it overcomes the world.

But we have a second thing in 1 John 5. The victory that overcomes the world is "our faith." As the next verse shows, the allusion here is to the Christian faith that "Jesus is the Son of God." Jesus is indeed the Christ, but our faith travels beyond that to the glorious fact that He is the Son of God. John wrote his Gospel that our souls might be established in that faith, and if He shines before our faith as the Son of God, we know Him as the One who came from that world — the Father's world — into this world. Who is he that gets the victory over this world but he that has by faith discovered the Centre of a very much brighter and better world than this? It is not a question of having the Sonship of Jesus as an article of our creed, of accepting this truth theologically, but of having it as a vital power in our souls.

A story is told of a man much used of God in days gone by. When young and at college he swept up a lot of prizes, and was complimented by the Heads. They said, "If you will do this and this, and take that course, we will make a great man of you." But he had recently been soundly converted and the answer he gave was something like this, "Gentlemen, I thank you, but I have one question to ask — if you make a great man of me, for which world?" They had no other world in view than this, so that rather surprised them no doubt. He did not pursue the course they had mapped out for him, since he had that other world in view. He spent his life in serving the Lord and he was much used in the expounding of the Scriptures. The fact of the matter was that he really believed that Jesus is the Son of God, the Master and Centre of a brighter world than this, and, in the light of that, this world lost its attractive pull, he got the victory over it.

It would indeed be good if we went from these meetings with something like that about us. God give us grace to cultivate it.

Then working backwards I come to the verse in 1 John 4. The false prophets are in question here,

men who are agents of the devil and energized by the spirit of antichrist. The children of God overcome them because indwelt by the Spirit of God. The last words of 1 John 3 are "the Spirit which He hath given us," and we know that He is given us to abide with us forever. That Spirit is referred to when we read, "Greater is He that is in you, than he that is in the world." He who is in the world is that spirit who is designated in Scripture the god and prince of this world. The Lord Jesus said, "The prince of this world cometh, and hath nothing in Me." He has something in us for we have the flesh within, but being indwelt by the Holy Spirit, we have One in us who is greater.

The spirit of darkness works in the world, and speaks through the false prophets who are gone out into the world, and who are by no means extinct today. They abound, alas, in the pulpits of Christendom — a Christendom which has become indistinguishable from the world. When the "New Theology" was brought out some thirty or more years ago, Robert Blatchford, a notorious infidel of those days, wrote to this effect, "Why, the Rev. So-and-so (naming its leading exponent) is as much an infidel as I am, and I am as much a Christian as he is. The difference between us is that he wears a white tie and I do not." The false prophets of old were inspired by the spirit of darkness, and that spirit is still at work; but He who is in us is greater than he. In that fact lies the victory for us.

Once more I step back, this time to 1 John 2. Here we have the Apostle addressing those whom he calls "young men," and telling them that they are strong and have overcome the wicked one; the ground of it being, "the Word of God abideth in you." We must emphasize that word, "abideth," for it has great significance. The Word could not possibly abide in me except I know it. I must read it; I must gain acquaintance with it; not only mentally — excellent as it is to have it stored in one's memory by constant reading — but so that the truth conveyed in the Word really dawns upon the inward eye of my soul. Then it is that the Word gets into my affections, I love it, I treasure it, it commands my conscience, it begins to extend its governing power over my life. That is where strength lies. That is the way of victory over the wicked one.

I need hardly remind you that the Lord Jesus Himself gained the victory over Satan by the Word of God. He was indeed God over all blessed for ever, yet having become a Man, He fully took man's place of subjection, and did not crush him by the might of His Deity. As the humble and dependent Man He had instantly the appropriate reply from the Word of God, and thus He gained the victory. That was the only weapon He wielded, and it is the only effective weapon available for us. If it abides in us we become skilful in using it.

Now a brief summary of what has been before us is this: As John presents things in this epistle, the adversaries are three: "the wicked one," the "false prophets," and "the world." The victory for us however rests upon a four-fold basis. First there is *the work of God*, by which we are begotten of Him. Second, *the Son of God*, as the Object of our faith. Third, *the Spirit of God*, indwelling the children of the Divine family. Fourth, *the Word of God*, which is to abide in us. And these things are all presented to us, as we have noticed, in an abstract way, so that we may grasp their real nature and character, without our minds being distracted by the mixtures and complications that we meet with in practice.

But having said that, let us be very careful to take up these things in a practical way. Let us not go away saying we have had a very good time considering a wonderful vision, a delightful kind of Utopia, in which victory is theoretically ours. No! These things are made known to us in the abstract, in order that we may turn them into concrete reality.

We are born of God, but then as this very Epistle enforces, the flesh is still in us; so the secret of practical victory in this connection is going to be — to go back to my figure — the feeding of the dove and the starving of the raven. Feeding on the Scripture will feed the dove. Prayer will feed the dove.

Service for the Lord will feed the dove. Light and trashy literature won't feed the dove but the raven, and so with many other things; only I cannot settle all the points for you. Here is a problem, says someone, I wish you would tell me what to do and relieve me of the bother in my mind. But this "bother," this exercise of mind is good for you, and it will be easily settled if you judge of a thing by asking, Will it feed the dove or the raven? These simple practical things are the hinges on which the matter turns. Victory will be yours as you go in for that which feeds the dove, and say, no, to that which feeds the raven.

And then "our faith" that Jesus is the Son of God. The Jew expected the Messiah — for that was his faith — who would appear on earth and restore all things here. His faith in the nature of things did not carry his heart outside the world. But that is exactly what "our faith" does. We are called to know the Son of God in glory. Oh! to have Him clearly, brightly shining before the eyes of our hearts. Then the world will at once be in our eyes but a very little thing, and victory over it will be ours.

Then, the Spirit of God. My word to you in that connection is the Scriptural one, "Grieve not the Holy Spirit of God," because if you do you will be absolutely powerless. Left to your own resources you are but a little pigmy in the presence of false prophets, controlled by the spirit of antichrist. Only the Spirit who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.

Lastly the Word of God, and this not merely in our hand or even in our minds, but enshrined and abiding in our hearts, when it governs and controls our lives.

Now, God grant that it may be so for every one of us. We want a life of victory — do we not? Well, these Scriptures have indicated to us the way. If by Divine grace we walk that way, we shall pass from defeat to the sweetness of victory.