

6. Finally, John concluded his treatment of the children's likeness to the Father by considering their relationship with the world (5:4-12). The heart of his argument is that the children's participation in the Father's life has set them in a new relation to the human realm that exists outside of His life. They have passed out of death into life and are now children of light in the "present darkness"; they are of their heavenly father, while the rest of mankind are children of the world ruler (3:7-10, 5:19; cf. also Ephesians 2:1-3). And because they share their Father's life and nature by sharing in the life of His incarnate Son, they embody His mind, heart, will and work among men; as He is, so are they in the world (4:17; cf. John 15:18-16:15; 2 Corinthians 2:14-17). The children – *when they live out their identity authentically* – experience the response from the world that the singular Son received: those who embraced Him and His words embrace them and theirs; those who refused and hated Him refuse and hate them (4:5-6).

- a. This dynamic, then, is the context for interpreting John's assertion that Christians have overcome the world: "*Whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that overcomes the world – our faith*" (5:4). Treated in isolation, one might conclude that John was promising and promoting a kind of Christian triumphalism – a "victorious life" in which God's children effectively live above the fray, experiencing divine deliverance from earthly troubles and trials. Though trouble or affliction may come against them, it is, at worst, a temporary disruption of the blessing that God intends for all of His sons and daughters. One need only believe and trust God for His deliverance, and it will come in due time; didn't John say that our faith is the victory by which we overcome the world?

This sort of interpretation is instinctive, for human beings naturally devise religion (in whatever form) as a scheme of *magic* by which divine forces are engaged and made amenable to desired outcomes. Humans approach the divine as their servant, and religion serves this ministrations. And so it's perfectly natural that people would find in John's words the promise of personal triumph in this world. But this sort of understanding not only ignores the wider context, it rests upon a flawed, *self-referential* definition of John's terms and ideas.

The first thing to note about John's statement is that he assigned this victory to *everything* that God has begotten. This is reflected in the KJV and certain other English versions: "*Whatever is begotten of God overcomes the world.*" John used a neuter gender adjective when a masculine one ("*everyone*") would be expected (cf. 5:1, 18), and this points to several possible meanings:

- 1) The first is that John used the neuter gender to highlight the *generic* nature of his claim. That is, he wasn't specifying a particular sort or group of individuals, but was including every person who meets his criteria for victory over the world (cf. the neuter in 1:1a; also John 6:37, 39, 17:2, 24).
- 2) The second option is that John was indicating the *creation-wide* extent of this victory; it isn't just humans who triumph over the world, but the entire creation. All things are "begotten of God" as being reconciled to Him.

- 3) Some commentators have suggested a third option, which is that John used the neuter adjective to highlight that this victory doesn't belong to the person per se, but to the *renewal* (new birth) that God effects in him. So Plummer: "It is not the man, but his new birth from God which conquers."

While it's difficult to be certain which view is correct, the third one fits well with both John's language and the context.

- Again, John's statement literally reads, "everything that has been begotten of God overcomes the world." Yet he just previously used the masculine adjective (*everyone*) in 5:1 and would do so again in verse 18. This suggests that his use of the neuter here was intentional and not arbitrary.
- With respect to the context, this statement explains the preceding assertion that God's commandments aren't "heavy" (v. 3). John seems, then, to be emphasizing that the new birth is the reason that obedience (keeping God's commandments) isn't burdensome; Christians are able and equipped to meet the obligations of love (and faith) precisely because they are *sons* who partake in the life and nature of the God who is love.

Assuming this meaning, then, John was indeed referring to human beings and not the entire creation (note vv. 4b-5). At the same time, he had in mind their *state* as begotten children and not merely their human identity. In other words, the victory he spoke of is the property of the new creation, and not human beings as such; the children have triumphed precisely because they are begotten of the Father.

But this points to the question of what John meant by saying that God's children have "overcome the world." What does the term *world* denote, and in what sense do Christians enjoy victory over it? Probably the most common view is that John was referring to the "world" as the *realm of evil* – the realm of human existence defined by the rule of the "evil one" (5:19; cf. also 2:15-17, 3:1, 4:4-5). Others interpret the term more broadly as referring to the *earthly creation* that Jesus entered, redeemed and reconciled (cf. 2:2, 4:1-3, 9, 14, 17; also John 3:16-17). In the end, John likely had both meanings in view. For while it is clearly true that God has delivered His children from the subjugating power of the world ruler (cf. John 12:31-32 with Ephesians 2:1-6; Colossians 1:13-14; Hebrews 2:14-15), He has done so by making them children of His kingdom and rule; their triumph is grounded in new creation. And so, their victory doesn't pertain merely to the devil and his power, but to the "old creation" – the created order under the curse.

This understanding, then, illumines the sense in which Christians are *overcomers*. The most appealing understanding is that God has granted His children victory over the principles and forces of this fallen world. This premise underlies the "prosperity gospel" with its promise of physical and material well-being. Because Jesus' atonement extends to the created order, the claim is that His work of healing and wholeness ensures health and wealth for all who will lay hold of it.

Other Christians don't go that far, but still argue that their victory over the world promises their deliverance from the satanic power and its human minions (4:4). This idea has broad scriptural support (ref. Psalm 18, 91, 121; Luke 10:17-19; Romans 16:20; Ephesians 6:11-13; etc.), so that the problem isn't with the concept *as such*, but how it is understood. The Scripture everywhere promises the triumph of God's children over the world powers, but not in a way that bypasses, eliminates or reduces suffering under those powers. *Quite the opposite, the nature of the children's triumph insures that their hardship and suffering in the world will exceed that of unbelievers.* For their victory is the victory of new creation in Jesus, and this triumph sets them at odds with the present world order in a way that other people can't experience. The Father's children are brethren of the Son, and relate to the fallen world in the same way He did. So also the world relates to them the way it related to Him (cf. 4:17 with John 15:18-21, 15:26-16:11).

The children's triumph ensures and exacerbates their suffering, *but it also exists in the midst of that suffering.* This is a critical truth that many Christians overlook, but John highlighted it by insisting that the children's triumph exists as a present, settled reality; they *have* overcome the world (5:4). John didn't say this because he'd experienced a Christian community free from adversity, persecution and suffering. He himself had suffered greatly and would continue to do so until the time of his death. So it was with Paul, who also spoke frequently of the children's victory over the world powers, though he was well acquainted with suffering at the hands of those powers. Indeed, many of his glorious, unequivocal affirmations of triumph were made from a prison cell (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon were all penned in prison), which shows that he didn't regard victory in Christ the way so many do today. The man who proclaimed his complete triumph over the world as one seated in the heavenly places with the enthroned Messiah did so within the unspeakable filth and degradation of a Roman prison.

And so the "overcoming" the apostles celebrated was realized in and through the most profound suffering. And how could it be otherwise, since they were appointed to share in the triumph of the Messiah Himself? Jesus' victory over the world and its powers was achieved through His willing and loving submission to their hatred and fury. In the greatest possible irony, the absolute, everlasting triumph of the King of kings was bound up in His self-subjection to the abject humiliation and crushing agony and death of Calvary's cross. Jesus overcame the world in *that* way, and it is His victory that the Father's other children share in. How is it, then, that any Christian could claim – much less actually believe – that John had in mind a triumph that renders impotent "*the world forces of this darkness and the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly realm*" (ref. Ephesians 6:12)? John, as Paul and the other apostles, recognized that God's children have overcome the serpent and his minions, *but as not loving their lives even to the point of death* (Revelation 12:10-12). The triumph promised to the saints isn't deliverance *from* persecution, affliction and suffering, but triumph *in* and *through* them (cf. 2 Corinthians 1:1-2:14, 4:1-12; Galatians 6:14-17; Philippians 1:1-2:18, 3:1-11; 2 Timothy 3:10-12, 4:1-18; 1 Peter 4:1-19; etc).

But if the world powers continue to oppress, afflict and even slay the Father's children, in what sense have they *overcome* the world? One day they will be free of its onslaught, but in the present life they are entirely subject to it. John provided a hint at the answer by insisting that the children's *faith* is their victory over the world. This statement, too, is easily misunderstood when viewed through the lens of natural human religion. Again, religion is *magic*; its purpose is to facilitate interaction with the divine and achieve favorable outcomes for the worshipper. Viewed from this perspective, John's statement could seem to imply that faith is a kind of talisman by which a person can be delivered from difficulty in this world. In fact, this is precisely how many professing Christians understand faith and its role in the Christian life. The so-called "word of faith" movement is an excellent case in point. Its adherents argue that faith is a force and words are the container that carries that force. Hence words spoken in faith have the power to prevail with God; the "word of faith" uttered with firm conviction speaks into existence that which it articulates. Needless to say, this way of thinking reflects a perverse conception of faith and what it means that faith is the substance of things hoped for and the authentication of what is not seen (Hebrews 11:1).

Faith is not a spiritual force that brings things into existence by compelling God to act. Indeed, faith doesn't even direct itself to what God has promised, but rather to the God who gave the promise; faith has *God Himself* as its object, not things, circumstances or outcomes. Faith is the spiritual faculty by which a human being can know God in truth and hold fast to Him in confident, trusting devotion. Thus faith (faithfulness) is the essence of a right relationship with God; it concerns *who* and *how* a person is in relation to God, not what God can or should *do*. God Himself is the reward which faith grants (Hebrews 11:6).

- b. This is why faith is centered in the person of Jesus the Messiah (5:5); He is the full, embodied truth of the living God. Faith in God – i.e., a true knowledge of God and true relationship with Him – is thus faith in Jesus. God is known in Him, and it is in Him that God and human beings are intimately related. But, because faith is relationship according to the truth, faith in Jesus means knowing and embracing Him *as He actually is*. This has been a central theme in this epistle (cf. 1:1-7 with 2:7-8, 18-27, 3:23-24, 4:1-3, 13-15, 5:1), and here John reiterated that faith in Jesus involves embracing Him as the *Son of God*.

But this means more than acknowledging Jesus' deity. John has already emphasized that a true knowledge of the God who is love entails knowing Him as love *embodied* and *effectual* – knowing Him in the person and work of Jesus; knowing Him in terms of incarnation and propitiation (4:8-10). Here he reiterated that same pattern, associating faith in Jesus with knowing Him as the messianic Son who "*came in water and in blood*" (5:6). This expression will be addressed shortly, but the heart of John's point is that faith as "victory over the world" is faith in Jesus the Messiah. It is the victory of sharing in Jesus' triumph – sharing in His suffering, death and resurrection. And so it isn't a triumph that removes life's suffering, but one that *christifies* it (2 Corinthians 4; Philippians 3).