

One of the battles in the Old Testament that captures every young boy’s attention is the battle of Gideon and his three hundred men against the army of Midian (see Judges 6–7). The Midianites were a nomadic people from “the east” who traced their lineage to Abraham through his wife Keturah (Genesis 25:2, 6). By the time of the Judges, after Israel had entered the Promised Land, the Midianites became a scourge to Israel—one brought on by their own sinfulness:

Then the sons of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD; and the LORD gave them into the hands of Midian seven years. The power of Midian prevailed against Israel. . . . For they would come up with their livestock and their tents, they would come in like locusts for number, both they and their camels were innumerable; and they came into the land to devastate it. So Israel was brought very low because of Midian, and the sons of Israel cried to the Lord. (Judges 6:1–2a, 5–6)

In response to Israel’s cries for deliverance against the Midianites, the Lord raised up Gideon:

The angel of the LORD appeared to him and said to him, “The Lord is with you, O valiant warrior.” Then Gideon said to him, “O my lord, if the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all His miracles which our fathers told us about, saying, ‘Did not the Lord bring us up from Egypt?’ But now the Lord has abandoned us and given us into the hand of Midian.” The Lord looked at him and said, “Go in this your strength and deliver Israel from the hand of Midian. Have I not sent you?” He said to Him, “O Lord, how shall I deliver Israel? Behold, my family is the least in Manasseh, and I am the youngest in my father’s house.” But the Lord said to him, “Surely I will be with you, and you shall defeat Midian as one man.” (6:12–16)

But where the story really becomes intriguing is when God tells Gideon about how to prepare Israel for battle. The Midianites numbered well over 135,000 soldiers. To defend their land, Israel had amassed only 32,000. Of those, all who were afraid were told to go home, leaving only 10,000 Israelites left for battle (7:1–3). But for the LORD, this number was still too high. So, through a highly unusual screening process (see 7:4–6), the LORD brought the size of Gideon’s army down to a mere *three hundred men!* When the time for battle came, these three hundred men carried only torches and trumpets into battle. Through divinely-inspired confusion, the Midianites used their own swords against each other (7:16–22). All told, some 135,000 Midianites were slaughtered (8:10).

What captures the attention in this story is the theme of the victorious *underdog*. The underdog is that person, team, or army that is expected to lose the struggle. They are the weaker party because they appear to have far less power, far less skill, or far fewer resources compared to the opponent. But the underdog *overcomes* immense odds and adversity to pull out a shocking victory in the end. We love these stories.

But the story of Gideon’s defeat of the Midianite masses is not unusual in Scripture. In fact, it’s a dominant theme. God typically uses the weak to shame the strong. He regularly brings victory to those whom the world counts as least likely to succeed. He commonly uses unexpected and disregarded means to bring victory to His people (1 Corinthians 1:18–31). To sum up in the words of the Lord to the apostle Paul, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9).

We have this very theme put before us in 1 John 5:1–5. Even though the circumstances which precipitated the apostle John’s writing of this letter were exceedingly challenging, John himself never lacked confidence in ultimate triumph.

The audience to which John writes had been severely troubled by the *secessionists*—a group of false believers who raucously seceded from the church, claiming to have discovered a theology that was superior to that of the apostles. They argued that the apostles’ doctrine of Christ was deviant, that their message of salvation was mistaken, and that their system of ethics was silly. Naturally, the genuine believers who remained in the church were shaken. They felt weak. Having been told by these false professors that their faith was destined to fail, they needed encouragement that they would not be put to shame, but that their faith would prevail.

1 John 5:1–5 – “Assurance and the Triumph of Faith”

The apostle John writes to provide just that—*encouragement*. In response to the secessionists’ claim that they had the better, more sophisticated, superior knowledge, John writes to provide his readers with assurance that their faith, as simple as it was, would not fail. They were the underdog according to the standards of their opponents, but their faith would achieve the ultimate victory:

Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and whoever loves the Father loves the *child* born of Him. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and observe His commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome. For whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. Who is the one who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God? (1 John 5:1–5)

In this section, the apostle John writes to affirm to his readers that they had the right faith—the *faith that overcomes*. That their faith would prove triumphant is demonstrated by the fact that it was: (1) *divine in origin* (v. 1); (2) *transformative in nature* (vv. 2–3); and (3) *victorious by design* (vv. 4–5).

I. True faith triumphs because it is divine in origin (5:1).

The first reason why John’s readers could take courage is that their faith was not man-made. It was not the product of intuition, experience, or reason. Instead, it originated from God Himself: **“Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and whoever loves the Father loves the *child* born of Him”** (v. 1).

With the words, **“Whoever believes,”** John indicates that what follows is a universal truth. He breaks it down to the most basic level by expressing this truth at the *individual* level. The verb **“believes”** is one of John’s favorites. He uses it almost one hundred times in his Gospel, and it is found five times in 1 John 5:1–10. The kind of *belief* or *faith* that John speaks of here is not a mere assent to or awareness of historical facts, but an embrace of those facts as true, binding, and necessary *for the individual himself* (see 1 John 4:16; John 20:30–31). It is the kind of faith that embraces facts like his soul depends on them. Theologian John Murray expressed it well: **“Faith is knowledge passing into conviction, and it is conviction passing into confidence.”** Furthermore, through his use of the present tense verb “believes,” John indicates that this faith is not the fickle, spurious kind of faith that comes and goes (like it was for the secessionists), but a faith marked by *staying power*.

The content of this faith is expressed by the simple clause, **“that Jesus is the Christ.”** Those with this triumphant faith didn’t just “believe” in vague, religious sentiments. They “believed” particular facts, particular doctrines. Specifically, they believed that the historical person named **“Jesus”** was **“the Christ.”** Belief in “Jesus” was belief in His *human nature*, because “Jesus” was His human name. But belief in the historicity of Jesus was not the real test of orthodoxy. The real test was whether one believed Him to be “the Christ.” Affirmation of that title affirmed Jesus’ identity as the promised “anointed One”—the One through whom the Father would bring redemption to sinners. It was this association of “Jesus” with “the Christ” that the false teachers had come to deny. They rejected the apostolic testimony summarized in 1 John 1:1–3. Their early gnostic tendencies either led them to believe that Jesus only *appeared* to be divine but was not, or that He only *appeared* to be human but was not. (For more on this, see 1 John 2:22–23; 4:1–6; 2 John 7–9.)

But the apostle John provides steadfast assurance to his readers by asserting that the one who believes that Jesus is the Christ **“is born of God.”** John states it as *a settled fact*. Expressed as a perfect passive verb, the word **“is born”** emphasizes a decisive act that resulted in a new state of existence. This “birth” analogy is chosen by John specifically to highlight the one-sided nature of the act. *Spiritual birth* or *regeneration* is clearly *monergistic* in nature—it is the work of God alone—and not *synergistic*—the work of God and men. In other words, this is a miracle done *to us* and not *by us* (for more on this, see John 1:12–13; 3:1–8). John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue describe this well when they write,

At the most fundamental level, regeneration is the divine impartation of eternal spiritual life into the spiritually dead sinner. . . . Regeneration is the sovereign act of God, by the Holy Spirit and through the preached gospel,

whereby he instantaneously imparts spiritual life to a sinner, bringing him out of spiritual death and into spiritual life. (*Biblical Doctrine*, 580)

Ultimately, it is this *new birth* (the decisive act) that brings about the *life of belief* (the new state of existence).



John follows up this first assertion with a second assertion: **“and whoever loves the Father loves the *child born of Him*” (v. 1b)**. The language here is powerful. Literally, this clause can be translated as “whoever loves the One who begat also loves the one begotten from Him.” John assumes something here. The standard experience is that children *love* their parents. The same is true about the children of God. As those truly brought from death to life, they automatically *love the Father*, the architect of their redemption. John simply assumes this to be true. But John then takes it further. Anyone who loves the Father who *spiritually begat* him will automatically love all others who are also *spiritually begotten* by Him.

This isn’t the first time that John has made this connection. In fact, he asserted this same truth in the previous paragraph (4:19–21), and a substantial amount of his writing has already been devoted to this topic of loving those born of God (see 2:7–11; 3:11–24; 4:7–21). But here again in 5:1b, John asserts that love for one’s brother is a distinguishing mark of saving faith. You can’t have one without the other. Moreover, this explains *why* Christians love the way they do. It is not because other brothers in Christ are inherently worthy of such affection and sacrifice. Rather, we love because of *shared paternity*. We recognize each other as family members, all brought to life by the same God. As D. Edmond Hiebert states, “The born-again believer, conscious that he has received new life from God, loves the one who gave him birth and also feels inspired to love the one in whom he sees that new life in operation” (*Epistles of John*, 225).

II. True faith triumphs because it is transformative in nature (5:2–3)

The second reason why John’s readers could take courage is that their faith was not impotent. It was not powerless to change the mind, will, and affections of the one who believes. To the contrary, true faith shows that it will triumph by the fact that it changes the regenerated one’s fundamental dispositions. Once a rebel, the child of God is now one who *loves* and *obeys*. John writes, **“By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and observe His commandments” (5:2)**.

In stating **“By this we know,”** John indicates he is about to give another proof for the assurance of salvation (compare with 5:13). But he describes salvation in an unusual way. For example, we might expect him to say, “By this we know that we love God,” or “By this we know that we have come to know God.” Instead, he describes salvation as synonymous with *love for the children of God*: “By this we know that we love the children of God.” Of course, the statement makes sense in light of what John has just said at the end of v. 1. But it also shows that in John’s mind, these concepts are interchangeable: *love for God* and *love for the children of God*. They both describe the life of saving faith.

And that is just what John goes on to state. The proof, then, that we love the children of God, is that we **“love God and observe His commandments.”** All three concepts, then, are interchangeable: *love for God*, *love for the children of God*, and *observing God’s commandments*. All three are distinguishing marks of saving faith, and thus, all three are sources from which we are to draw assurance—despite what others like the secessionists might say. All three point to the transforming power of the new birth.

Shedding further light on this truth, John adds: **“For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome” (5:3)**. It is highly likely that the secessionists, or at least some of them, claimed that the true way of salvation they claimed to have discovered removed all ethical duties from believers. They were *free* from “commandments.” They needn’t feel any sense of obligation or responsibility. But John counters this claim. The triumphant nature of faith is such that it transforms the sinner’s view of God’s commandments. Not only are they true, right, and good, but they are now delightful. Like the psalmist, the true believer exclaims, “I shall delight in Your statutes; I shall not forget Your word” (Ps 119:16). Agreeing with Jesus, the true believer acknowledges that His “yoke is easy” and His “burden is light” (Matt 11:29–30).

III. True faith triumphs because it is victorious by design (5:4–5)

The third reason why John’s readers could take courage is that their faith was intended by God from the very beginning to be victorious. Though expressed in weakness, such faith was designed for glory: **“For whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith” (5:4).**

John again echoes the analogy of “birth” that he brought to the forefront in v. 1 by stating a truth that is apparent on its own merits: **“Whatever is born of God overcomes the world.”** God cannot be frustrated. His plans are never rendered null and void. What He decrees always comes to pass. What He does always achieves its purpose—and the same is true of *regeneration*.

What this regeneration leads to John states as a settled fact: it **“overcomes the world.”** The verb “overcome” is powerful; it means “to be victorious over, to vanquish.” John already used it back in 2:13 and 4:4. He uses it now repeatedly in vv. 4–5. That which is vanquished is **“the world”**—that is, the entire system of that which stands opposed to God (see 2:15–17). As such, John depicts the life of the believer in this present world as a life of unavoidable struggle. We must fight against the evil of this present age (2:15–17), and we must do so as those who have not yet arrived at perfect Christlikeness (see 2:28; 3:2–3). But the outcome is guaranteed.

In fact, John states, **“and this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith.”** The language is literally rendered as “and this is the victory which is victorious” or “this is the triumph that is triumphant.” John again describes the outcome as secure. And what proves this is **“our faith,”** which John places at the end of the sentence for the sake of emphasis. The phrase is profound. John does not say it is “the faith” as if pointing to the objective truth of the gospel. He writes “our faith,” pointing to the faith we—including John—express in Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God. Yet as he’s stated already, this faith is not produced by us. It is gifted to us as a product of the new life God creates in us.

John ends the section with a statement that connects back to verse 1: **“Who is the one who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?” (5:5).** Ultimately, it all comes back to a *person* who must be believed—*the Lord Jesus Christ*. When He is the object and content of knowledge, conviction, and confidence, triumph is guaranteed. He is our Captain, who Himself overcame the world (John 16:33).

For Discussion

1. Describe “saving faith.” Review the definition given by John Murray (middle of pg. 2). How does saving faith differ from the “belief” of demons described in James 2:19.
2. Review the appendix in the MacArthur Study Bible entitled “The Character of Genuine Saving Faith.” Describe the contents of each of the main points in this appendix in your own words.
3. In 1 John 5:1 and 5:5, John connects confidence in the triumphant nature of our faith to orthodox belief in the identity of Jesus. How should this emphasis affect evangelism? The way you tell your testimony?
4. Saving faith is transformative in nature. How has this transformation affected you? Do you see this transformation in the areas mentioned by John in 1 John 5:2–3. How?

For Further Study

1. **Memorize** 1 John 5:4–5.
2. **Sing** “He Will Hold Me Fast” (*Hymns of Grace* #388) and “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” (*Hymns of Grace* #58).
3. **Listen to** the two-part sermon series by John MacArthur: “How to Recognize an Overcomer, Part 1” (<https://www.gty.org/sermons/62-36/how-to-recognize-an-overcomer-part-1>); and “How to Recognize an Overcomer, Part 2” (<https://www.gty.org/sermons/62-37/how-to-recognize-an-overcomer-part-2>).

Audio, video, and handouts for this session are available at www.gracechurch.org/motw.

Next meeting: April 29 – 7pm – “Assurance and the Reception of God’s Word, 1 John 5:6–12” (Brad Klassen)