

The Brand for Every Believer

Without a Doubt, Part 2

1 John 5:4-5

A number of years ago, when our children attended a magnate public elementary school for a couple of years – they came home with some interesting papers. Attached to them was a letter from the local board of education. It was the beginning of a new initiative called character education. I read one of the opening lines in the letter which, to my surprise, read – “...to help children understand the fundamental difference between right and wrong.”

By the way, if you do any research on this program now – 20 years later – any concept of right from wrong has been scrapped – in fact, if you type in the word “right” – you get pages of information on how children need to learn and respect human rights.

Another line in the letter caught my attention as it defined character education in relation to self-discipline. It read, “Self-discipline is being in proper control of your words, actions, impulses, and desires; choosing abstinence from pre-marital sex, drugs, alcohol, tobacco and other harmful substances and behaviors.”

20 years later that statement pretty much remains, except they’ve dropped the abstinence from pre-marital sex part out of the character development.

But still – 20 years ago – this material was obviously a radical interruption into the public mindset and I couldn’t believe this stuff had somehow made it to our children’s school room.

So I decided to make a couple of phone calls and finally got in touch with the Office of the Chairman of the School Board of Education. A secretary answered and I said, “My children just brought home some really interesting information on character development and I’d like to talk to the chairman about it.”

The secretary said, “Well, she’s in a meeting right now.” And I could tell from her tone that she was thinking, “Oh no, not another phone call from another irate parent.”

So I quickly said, “Oh no . . . my name is Stephen Davey and I pastor a church in the area and I just wanted to call your office and applaud you guys for what you’re doing.”

She breathed a sigh of relief and said, “Oh . . . well then, listen she’ll be in meetings all afternoon, but let me give you her *home phone number* – she’d really like to hear from you.”

I would call later but was only able to leave a message.

I said to this secretary, “Look, is there somebody I can talk to in the meantime and pass along my congratulations?” So she put me in touch with the Task Force Director of Character Education – and after talking to this brave woman for a couple of minutes I said, “You’re a Christian aren’t you?” She said, “I sure am.”

I said, “How in the world are you getting this material through the photocopiers of the school board – don’t they automatically jam when they read things like abstinence and character?”

She laughed and said, “Well, the truth is, we are getting a lot of phone calls and letters.” I said, “Really?” She said, “Oh listen, our chairwoman’s life has been threatened already several times already.”

I asked her to pass along my gratitude as well as my encouragement that they all stay the course.

Of course, the past 20 years has seen incredible onslaughts against the biblically defined virtues of genuine character and true wisdom.

This program I called to commend 20 years ago has now become diluted into self-help, human achievement, human rights, don’t offend anybody, be nice and don’t ever question political correctness – kind of terminology – which we should only expect.

While our culture continues to lose its sense of right and wrong – while it has successfully replaced the idea of personal virtues with personal values – which can be anything you want; the Christian can be encouraged and strengthened for whatever task God has called him to by traveling back to the context of the New Testament.

When the Apostle John was writing his first letter – which we’re studying – if you’re new around here – Jesus Christ had ascended some sixty years earlier; the Apostle John has witnessed the total destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman general Titus; Nero’s

persecution of the Christians has ignited the fires of tribulation in every corner of the Roman Empire.ⁱ

In spite of incredibly difficult circumstances, the church flourished. The gospel spread. Churches were springing up everywhere. The testimony of believers within Caesar's own household held the light of truth high (Phil. 4:22); even when the Apostles were all finally murdered – John being the very last to survive, the gospel of Christ had challenged the citadels of political correctness; immorality, the value of human life, false religions, and more.

Not by some strategic or united movement, but by the integrity of individual Christians and local churches . . . one at a time.

And it's still taking place 1900 years later as churches preach the word and disciple the believer and equip the saints and then the Christians take their testimony out into every arena of life – whether it's medicine or technology or politics or education or sales – they represent the unchanging virtues of right over wrong – truth over error – light over darkness.

They simply live and testify to the gospel in every arena of life.

I'll give you one recent example of a good testimony; I recently got a Chevy pickup truck; is that going to be a problem for you? I had driven a Ford pickup for years but finally decided to get back into a Chevy . . . people ask me about it and I just tell em' I got saved again.

The owner of the dealership is a member of Colonial – if you go over to his Chevy dealership on 401 and walk into his newly remodeled showroom and stand there and just listen, you'll hear throughout that complex speaker system, Christian music. I went over there the other day and a Casting Crowns song was just going to town. I talked to John – he's also one of our ushers – he's received compliments and criticism – but it doesn't matter, he owns the place, for one; but he's committed, by this simple decision, to make sure the gospel is heard.

By the way, what's playing on your computer? What's in your iTunes? What's on your radio? Do people who hang around you ever hear even the slightest breath of the gospel?

And by the way . . . there is an undercurrent to all that we do – an undercurrent that can easily be lost in any culture and in any generation.

It is – and should be – the undercurrent of ultimate victory.

No matter where our culture goes – the believer operates from a foundation of victory.

In First John chapter 5, the Apostle John is going to use the word for victory over and over again – 4 times in 2 verses.

Before we dive in, you need to know that in the Apostle John's day, victory just so happened to be the name of a goddess.

Her name was Nike – (νικη) – which we pronounce, Ni-kee. The Greek city, Nicopolos, was so named The City of Victory in honor of Caesar Augustus' victory in battle over the armies of Anthony and Cleopatra.ⁱⁱ

The Roman world lived for nika – for victory. It gloried in its world domination. It gloried in its successes; it basked in its power.

The slogan of the first century Roman world would have been something like “Rome Rules . . . Rome Wins.”

And yet, this is exactly the perspective of John the Apostle toward Christianity. Even though Christians are being marginalized and persecuted and John himself will soon be exiled toward the end of his life – John the Apostle almost audaciously selects this word to define the Christian *and* to define Christianity.

This would be surprisingly refreshing, encouraging and challenging news to the church in his generation who felt anything but victorious.

It can be equally refreshing and challenging to all of us today, as well.

First John 5 is where John will develop this thought – first of all, the principle of victory; then, the position of victory and finally, the pronouncement of victory.

1. The Principle of Victory: claiming the reality of what God has birthed.

Notice verse 4. And whatever is born of God overcomes the world.

John starts out with this comprehensive **principle of victory**

That word *overcomes* is from nika – (νικη); it's the verb nikaō (νικαω).

John will use a derivative of this word four times in these two verses. Underline them in your Bible

- overcomes the world (verse 4);
- twice in the next phrase in **verse 4** – **this is the victory** – there it is

- *that has overcome* – there it is again;
- then in *verse 5 – the one who overcomes the world* – there it is again.

It's tempting to draw a little Nike swoosh in the margin, isn't it?

Think about it – that really is the label for the believer. Nike is the verb – it's the brand – placed upon the life of every believer.

Can you imagine?

Maybe instead of shaking hands or waving at each other, we ought to just do the Nike swoosh when we walk by each other . . . okay, just kidding – sort of.

But think about it – in fact, never forget it . . . from now on, every time you see the Nike label – the Nike swoosh, the Nike brand – it's the most dominant brand in the athletic world today – every time you see, just smile to yourself – let it be a reminder that victory is ultimately yours. This is your verb – victory.

In John's day, the word belonged to Rome; but the Spirit of God through John's writing had the glorious audacity to claim it uniquely for the Christian.

And would you notice the original source of victory – it isn't a Roman goddess . . . *whatever is born of God overcomes the world.*

One translator puts it, "Whatsoever takes its origin from God just needs triumph over the world."ⁱⁱⁱ

Another Greek scholar references the neuter – whatever/whatsoever with the perfect-passive participle – whatsoever is born of God – to translate it this way – "the God-implanted new life is the dynamic that overcomes the world."^{iv}

Here is John's overarching statement – his overarching principle of promise – no matter what it looks like – in fact, John uses what must have been even more audacious to his first readers – he uses the present tense – God is currently – and even now – winning!

We are? It doesn't look like it!

How far out can you see?

No matter what's happening in any culture, in any generation, whether it's ancient Rome, or Communist China or North Korea or Vietnam or the Sudan or America – deliver the gospel to someone who is then brought to life by faith in Jesus Christ and – compared to that temporal empire, that transient culture that's here today and gone tomorrow along with all of its temporary stuff –

that's nothing compared to an eternal soul whose new life is a statement of true victory.

Now that's winning!

So who was really winning in Rome – Nero or Paul and John? Who's winning in China today? The underground believers or Communist leaders? Who's winning in America today? The revisionists who publish their new definitions of right and wrong, or the Christian who hold to the Bible?

John would say to us all – just as he did to the first century believers – it's time to refocus the lens of your spiritual vision.

God has – and is still today – winning.

Sounds odd doesn't it?

I don't know about you, but this text has arrived a time when I needed the reminder.

God – and everything belonging to Him – is actually winning.

It's all a matter of how you define real victory; genuine, true, lasting, satisfying, significant, victory.

No matter what it looks like, the cause of Christ is actually winning what matters most.

Like Paul we can say that there are times when *we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.* (2 Corinthians 4:8-9)

So John begins with this principle of victory – everything belonging to God is winning.

This is the believer's principle of victory.

Now notice the believer's position of victory.

2. Our position of victory: trusting the truth of what Christ has done.

John writes further in verse 4. And this is the victory that has overcome the world – our faith.

John changes the tense of the verb here to refer to victory based on, rooted in, some victory in the past.

John doesn't specify what that past event was. But it isn't difficult for the believer to know what it was – and that's probably why John didn't use any ink to fill in the blank.

The promise of God was that the Messiah would come – the seed of the woman – who would *crush the serpents head in victory.* (Genesis 3:15)

Paul would write to the Corinthians, "*Now I make known to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, by which also you are saved . . . you didn't believe in vain*" (1 Corinthians 15:1)

He goes on to declare not only the death and burial, but the resurrection of Jesus Christ – which all together represents the sum and substance of our faith.

In other words, you're not trusting in some dead guy.

In fact, even before He was crucified, Jesus Christ would say with utter confidence to His disciples, using this word *nike* – ***In the world you will have tribulation, but take courage, because I have overcome the world.*** (John 16:33)

At the time it didn't look like Jesus was overcoming anything. He was hounded and tracked all the way to the grave.

John says, just fast forward the tape three days . . . and while it had looked like sin had stung Christ to death – one author put it this way – it soon became clear that when death stung Christ it actually stung itself to death.

As the Getty's hymn so wonderfully puts it, "Death was crushed to death."

The Apostle Paul would sing it this way, "***O death where is your victory (your Nike – same word); o death where is your sting? (1 Corinthians 15:55)***

Look who had won all along.

And that isn't all.

John is about to deliver the most stunning news of all to these beleaguered first century Christians.

There is a principle of victory for the believer. There is a position of victory for the believer.

Finally, there is a pronouncement of victory by the believer.

3. Our pronouncement of victory: believing the truth of who Christ is

John writes in *verse 5*. ***And who is the one who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.***

John the Apostle shifts back to the present tense – who is the one who is at this very moment overcoming the world?

And no doubt, all of John's early readers would have been amazed that they also bore the name overcomer, along with Christ *the* overcomer.

You are an overcomer because of your belief in ***Jesus as the Son of God.***

By the way, John takes one more divinely inspired swipe at the false teachers in his generation – and in ours – in these opening four verses – Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ – that is,

the anointed Messiah – is born of God (5:1); and now here in *verse 5* – ***who is the overcomer but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.***

How many cults and isms are crushed by the literal exposition and belief in these inspired statements?

The Corinthian Gnostics in John's day didn't believe that Jesus was deity; and the Docetic Gnostics didn't believe that Christ was human.^v

John dismissed them all by these clear statements that Jesus is both ***the Christ (verse 1) and God the Son (verse 5).***

And who is the overcomer then? The one who believes these truths concerning Jesus Christ!

Listen, there are plenty of people who want God but don't want Jesus.

John doesn't allow that kind of separation.

Nor should he!

If you called up my home one day and said to my wife, "Listen, Marsha, we're having a few people over for Sunday dinner and we'd like you to come too." My wife would say, "Well, let me talk to Stephen and see what his schedule is and whether or not we can make it." And you say, "Oh, listen, we don't want Stephen to come over – after last Sunday's really bad sermon, we don't really want him to come over – just you." My wife would say, "Look, if he's not welcome, I'm not welcome . . . besides, he's never preached a bad sermon;" . . . I'm pretty sure that's what she'd say.

Let me turn it around – if you got a call from a neighbor who said, "Listen, we've got tickets to the game this weekend and we'd like everyone in your family to come except your son" what would you say . . . "That's a relief!" . . . "No, if he's not welcome, we're not welcome.

Listen if you can't even eat lunch or go to a game with somebody who rejects a member of your family, how in the world do you think you'll get into heaven by accepting God the Father while denying God the Son.

John is effectively saying that our victory comes when we understand that Father and Son are equally God – different in person, but the same in Divine essence; we believe both the incarnation of God in the Person of Jesus and the deity of Jesus as God the Son.

Those who believe in *that* One are those who overcome.

Let me stop here and make something else clear.

When John writes here about ***the one who overcomes*** isn't a special class of elite Christian –

some special category of believers. In the New Testament, and here in First John, John is using the word “overcomer” as a name for every true believer.^{vi}

This isn’t a special tag for the really consistent Christian who seems to have it all together. They get to wear Nike hats and shoes in heaven and the rest of us have to wear Converse or something else.

Listen, it isn’t the amount of your faith or the consistency of your faith that John is after here in this text – it’s the object of your faith.

He’s going to make that very clear in this context in the next phrase – we’ll get there in a minute.

Let me take you back to that earlier statement by Jesus to His disciples in *John 16*. He didn’t tell His disciples, “***In the world you will have tribulation, but take courage*** – you can overcome the world if you really give it your all.”

No, He said, “***but take courage, I have overcome the world.***”

Our belief isn’t in ourselves – it’s in Jesus Christ.^{vii}

Now there are plenty of verses that challenge us to live consistent, pure, passionate lives for Christ. There are plenty of texts delivering that truth. This isn’t one of those texts.

In fact, misunderstanding this text has led believers to think that they won’t be overcomers after all and so they’ll be a sort of second class citizen in heaven.

Every Christian has this position of victory – in Christ.

It is your faith in that past tense victory – at the cross and at the grave – which gives you a position of present tense victory. And your present tense victory is entirely bound to faith in not only what Jesus Christ did – but in who Jesus Christ is.

And that’s John’s third point in this progression; the privileged pronouncement of the believer.

In case anyone is confused or afraid they are left out of this triumphal procession of victory from earth to heaven, John adds this last line of clarification – ***5. And who is the one who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.***

The title “overcomer” belongs to all who truly believe that Jesus is the Son of God – and with that all the other titles of Jesus found in the New Testament – the King of Kings, Lord of Lords, our great God and Savior, the Chief Shepherd . . . and more.

Now based on your particular culture and your particular generation, it might not look like the Bride of Christ, the church, is making a triumphal march to heaven, but she is.

It might not look like God is winning, but He is.

It might not look like Satan, death and sin have already been defeated, but they are.

One author wrote, as a kid, I loved Mission Sundays, when missionaries on furlough brought special reports in place of a sermon . . . There is one visit I’ve never forgotten. The missionaries were a married couple stationed in what appeared to be a particularly steamy jungle. I’m sure they gave a full report on churches planted or commitments made or translations begun. I don’t remember much of that. What has always stayed with me is the story they shared about a snake.

One day, they told us, an enormous snake— somewhere between 10 and 15 feet long – slithered its way right through their front door and into the kitchen of their simple home. Terrified, the missionaries ran outside and searched frantically for a local who might know what to do. A machete-wielding neighbor came to the rescue, calmly marching into their house and decapitating the snake with one clean chop.

The neighbor reemerged triumphant and assured the missionaries that the serpent was out of commission. But there was a catch, he said: it was going to take a little while for the snake’s body to realize it was dead.

A snake’s neurology and blood flow, something akin to a chicken, meant that it would take some length of time for it to stop moving even after its head has been cut off.

Sure enough, for nearly an hour, the missionaries were forced to wait outside while that snake thrashed about, smashing furniture and flailing against walls and windows, wreaking havoc until its body finally understood, so to speak, that it no longer had a head.

Sweltering in the heat while they waited, this missionary couple had felt frustrated and a little sickened over the ordeal but also encouraged that the snake’s rampage would not last forever.

And at some point while they waited outside, the spiritual reality struck them. “Do you see it?” asked this missionary. “Satan is a lot like that snake; he’s already been defeated; he just doesn’t act like it yet. He’s going to do as much damage as he can . . . just don’t forget . . . he’s already a goner.”^{viii}

The head of the kingdom of darkness has been crushed – the head of the kingdom of light has already conquered.

Beloved, the victory for you has been won already – past tense – with our union in Christ’s death, burial and resurrection; and now we win

(present tense) by our refusal to deny Him as Savior and Lord.^{ix}

Nike just so happens to be the brand name for every true believer.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 9/22/2013 by Stephen Davey.

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i Roy Laurin, First John: Life at its Best (Kregel, 1987), p. 165

ii Herschel H. Hobbs, The Epistles of John (Thomas Nelson, 1983), p. 124

iii Hobbs, p. 123

iv D. Edmond Hiebert, The Epistles of John (BJU Press, 1991), p. 228

v Hobbs, p. 125

vi Warren W. Wiersbe, Be Real: First John (David C. Cook, 1972), p. 163

vii Ibid

viii Carolyn Arends, "Satan's a Goner: A lesson from a Headless Snake," *Christianity Today* (February, 2011)

ix David Walls and Max Anders, Holman New Testament Commentary: I & II Peter, I, II, III John, Jude (Holman, 1999), p. 223