

# **1 JOHN**

Part 10: “How We Overcome”

1 John 5:1–12

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## **Summary**

1 John 5:1–12 is a mystifying passage. But, in Scripture, wherever there is mystery, there is often great reward. As we plumb the depths of this section of Scripture, we will learn how it is possible to keep going and endure when the powers of this world seem insurmountable. The Apostle John teaches us “How We Overcome” by resting the promise of God’s victory, receiving the testimony that Jesus is the Christ, and being renewed by the practice of the sacraments.

## **Scripture Reading**

*“Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of him. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome. For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God? This is he who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ; not by the water only but by the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the one who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth. For there are three that testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood; and these three agree. If we receive the testimony of men, the testimony of God is greater, for this is the testimony of God that he has borne concerning his Son. Whoever believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself. Whoever does not believe God has made him a liar, because he has not believed in the testimony that God has borne concerning his Son. And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life” (1 John 5:1–12).*

## **Introduction**

For the last several months, our church has been slowly walking through 1 John. Today, as we begin the fifth and final chapter of this New Testament book, you can begin sensing that the Apostle John is bringing his message to a close.

We haven’t landed the plane just yet, but you can imagine that the captain’s voice has come on the intercom and announced that we have begun our downward descent and

that it is time to throw away any spare trash, bring your seat back up, and put your tray table in an upright and locked position.

However, I have to warn you. The final chapter of 1 John includes both turbulence and a bumpy landing.

In fact, chapter 5 is perhaps the most challenging part of this book to understand at a practical level. The section of Scripture today starts off easily enough. We are reminded of some of the big themes we have encountered throughout this book: John talks about the fundamental importance of Christian love, Christian obedience, and Christian faith.

But then things get weird. John starts talking about the testimony of water and blood and Spirit, and it is unclear exactly what in the world he is talking about and how it all fits together.

So, you read that and said to yourself, *“Wow, I have no idea what that means, I wonder what he is going to do with that.”* You are not alone. In fact, exactly one week ago, I reread this same text and said to myself, *“Wow, I have no idea what that means, I wonder what I am going to do with that.”* I just probably said it more nervously than you did.

In other words, this is a mystifying passage that we will need to work hard to unravel. But in Scripture, wherever there is mystery, there is often great reward (cf. Prov 25:2). And as we plumb the depths of today's Scripture reading, we discover a profoundly helpful truth for the Christian life.

We will learn how it is possible to keep going and endure even when the powers of this world seem insurmountable. Today, the Apostle John will show us **“How We Overcome.”**

## **Exposition**

### **1.) We Rest in the Promise of God's Victory**

By the time John writes this letter, he has witnessed the church of Jesus Christ grow exponentially. Once a movement that barely numbered over a hundred people in Judea, as the first century draws to a close, the Christian movement now numbers in the thousands. Small communities of Christians—called churches—have now spread into many of the major cities in the Greco-Roman world.

Despite this massive growth, the Christian movement is still very much a minority in the vast Roman Empire. However, the Church has grown enough that it is beginning to meet resistance and even abuse at the hands of the Powers-That-Be.

Christ-followers live with the conviction that Jesus is Lord and king. And this conviction puts them on a collision course with the Roman Imperial Cult that asserts that Caesar is Lord and that his empire is worthy of the highest allegiance.

In other words, John knows and the early Christians know that persecution is on the horizon. Soon it will be very costly to follow Jesus. They can feel the power of the world stacking against them, and the power of the world—in the form of the brutal Roman Empire—looks invincible. At this moment, it would be tempting for the relatively small and politically powerless Christian communities to feel afraid, alienated, and alone.

And for that reason, John will yet again state the fundamental truths that he wants his readers to cling to. They are the same central truths that he has been expounding on and weaving throughout this letter. He writes: *“Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of him. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome”* (1 John 5:1–3).

John is saying when the world feels too much and too overwhelming, remember that, if you believe that Jesus is the Christ, you have been born of God! You have been given new and eternal spiritual life. You have been grafted into the family of God, and you have access to the supernatural love that flows from God to one another, and from one another back to God.

Moreover, obeying God’s commandments and keeping God’s word is no longer a begrudging burden. In Christ, we have been given a new spiritual power to delight in God’s will and walk in his ways to the glory of his name.

All of these truths flow from the love of God, which is why John has repeatedly circled back to these themes again and again. They are meant to remind us of the promise that John will state next: *“For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world”* (1 John 5:4a).

John is saying, *“People of God, when the evil and the hardship and the sorrow and suffering and injustice of this world may seem like all you can see, do not lose hope. For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. When the powers of the world stand against you and oppose you, do not lose heart. For the far greater power of God’s kingdom is at hand.”*

It’s hard to overstate how counterintuitive this conviction is because it’s hard to overstate how overwhelming and invulnerable the Roman Empire seemed at this moment of history.

But now, that old empire lies in ruins. Yet the church of Jesus endures. Since that time, many beastly empires have risen and fallen. Yet the victory of Christ will last into eternity.

But how can we practically access and experience the truth of God's promise of victory? John's answer is simple—it all comes back to faith in Christ. He writes, *“And this is the*

*victory that has overcome the world—our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?” (1 John 5: 4b–5 ).*

Our victory is not that we have overcome the world in our own strength. Our victory is that *Christ* has overcome the world.

Once, the cross was a symbol of the power of this world. It was a symbol of the power of death. But because the Son of God died on the cross for our sin and rose again for our salvation, the cross is now a symbol of the power of God and victory of life over death. The cross is symbol that Christ has *won*.

And we have access to an undefeatable hope when we remember and rest in the promise of God's victory in Christ. That process of remembering and resting in the promise of God is what we call “*faith*.”

Faith is knowing, believing, and trusting in the promise that Christ has overcome. And faith is trusting that—in Christ—we have overcome as well.

## **2.) We Receive the Testimony That Jesus is the Christ**

It must be admitted, the gospel of Jesus Christ is an astonishing and audacious claim. The gospel reveals that Jesus of Nazareth was not just an inspired Jewish rabbi who lived in the first century. He is the long-awaited Messiah; the anointed-liberator king of God's people. He is the fulfillment of all Old Testament prophecy and hope. He is the Son of God and God in human flesh!

The Apostle John knows very well that this gospel is an extraordinary assertion of truth that requires some type of confirmation. John also knows that, according to Jewish Old Testament law, a claim must be validated by two or three witnesses in order to be considered valid evidence (cf. Deut 19:15).

And so John lists three witnesses—the water, the blood, and the Spirit. He writes, “*This is he who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ; not by the water only but by the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the one who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth. For there are three that testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood; and these three agree*” (1 John 5:6–8).

Now, again, this is the part of today's passage that may seem cryptic at first glance. But we can solve the mystery of meaning when we closely look into the language that John uses in this passage.

Firstly, we should notice how often John uses the word “testify” or “testimony.” In a mere five verses, John uses some variant of this word eight times! In the original Greek language, these words derive from the root “*martus*” (μαρτυς), which means to attest,

confirm, or provide witness.<sup>1</sup> In fact, elsewhere in John's biblical writings, the word "martus" (μαρτυς) is most often translated in English as "to bear witness."

Secondly, we should look for those other instances where John uses the word "martus" throughout his writings and see if there are any moments when the word "martus" is used in connection with the words like "water" and "blood" and "Spirit."

And when we do that little exercise, we will discover that there are precisely two scenes—both from the gospel according to John—that use this exact language. Those scenes are the baptism of Jesus at the beginning of John's gospel and the crucifixion of Jesus at the end of John's gospel.

The gospel according to John begins with the ministry of another man named John—John the Baptist. John the Baptist preaches in the wilderness, calling God's people to repent of their sins and be baptized into the water. Just then, Jesus comes before John [show [The Baptism of Christ](#)], and John immediately recognizes Jesus for who he really is.

Jesus does not need to be washed with the waters of baptism, for Jesus is already perfect and clean. Nevertheless, Jesus must be baptized to fulfill all righteousness. His baptism is a visible sign that he has identified himself fully with humanity and will take the sins of humanity upon himself. He has come to submit to the will of his father, even if that means he must be plunged into death itself.

But look how the gospel of John describes this passage in the same language as today's passage in 1 John 5. The gospel of John, chapter 1 reads: "***And John bore witness [martus]: 'I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' And I have seen and have borne witness [martus] that this is the Son of God'***" (John 1:32–34).

The baptism of Jesus, in other words, was not just a religious ritual. It was a public declaration of the identity of Jesus. Through the waters of baptism, the Spirit of God has borne witness and testified that Jesus is the Christ and the Son of God. But this is not the only moment where such testimony is provided. This same exact language is used as John describes the death of Jesus on the cross.

Of all the disciples and all the gospel writers, the Apostle John is the only one who was a direct eyewitness to the death of Christ on the cross [show [The Piercing of Christ](#)]. He personally witnessed Jesus as he was betrayed, beaten, falsely accused, and crucified. He personally witnessed Jesus as he bore the penalty for all sin, cried out that "*It is finished,*" and breathed his last. And John also personally witnessed the moment that

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<sup>1</sup> William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 617.

Christ's death was confirmed, as a Roman soldier pierced the side of Christ with a spear as he hung on the cross.

Now, interestingly, John is the only gospel writer who mentions how Jesus's body was pierced with a Roman spear. And notice the language John uses when describing this unique moment—it is the same language he uses in 1 John 5. John writes, *“But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out **blood and water**. He who saw it has **borne witness [martus]**—his **testimony [martus]** is true, and he knows that he is telling the truth—that you also may believe”* (John 19:34–35).

The baptism of Jesus and the death of Jesus—this is the witness of the water and the blood that John wants us to remember and receive. John wants us to know that our faith in Jesus is not faith in a phantom. Nor is our faith a matter of blind irrationality or wishful thinking. The Christian faith rests on a firm foundation that is rooted in the reality of human history and the testimony of God himself.

The Spirit of God testifies to the identity of Christ through the water of Christ's baptism and the blood of his cross. That same Spirit vindicated Christ as he rose again from the grave (cf. Rom 1:4). And now, that same Spirit bears witness to the people of God the truth of Jesus Christ.

This testimony forever stands to remind us that we cannot earn or merit salvation. We cannot work our way to God with our best white-knuckled efforts. But we can simply believe what God has revealed to be true concerning his Son, and with the empty hands of faith, we can receive the gift of life that is found only in Christ.

John writes: *“Whoever believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself. Whoever does not believe God has made him a liar, because he has not believed in the testimony that God has borne concerning his Son. And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life”* (1 John 5:10–12).

But, we might ask, how can we, who live in such a distracted age, attune our hearts to the voice of the Spirit as he proclaims the truth of Christ? How can we remain ever centered on Christ, faithful to Christ, near to Christ in the throes and challenges of everyday life?

That leads us to our third and final point.

### **3.) We Are Renewed by the Practice of the Sacraments**

One of the major themes that John has emphasized throughout this letter is the physical reality of Jesus Christ. As an eyewitness to Christ, he has reminded his readers that Jesus is the word of God who has become flesh and dwelt among us (cf. John 1:14). When John proclaims the gospel, he is not just sharing an abstract spiritual truth—he is



proclaiming a truth his own eyes have seen, his own ears have heard, and his own hands have touched (cf. 1 John 1:1).

John hasn't just believed in the truth of Jesus Christ—he has *experienced* the truth of Jesus Christ. And he wants us to experience Christ as well.

But unlike John, we do not have the opportunity to see Jesus with our physical eyes or hear his voice with our physical ears. So how can the truth of the gospel become tangible to us? And how might this passage help us to that end?

Here again, we return to the work of the Holy Spirit who testifies through the water and the blood. Now, you might say, “Wait a minute. I thought we already know that the water and the blood refer historical events of Christ’s baptism and death on the cross?” Yes, that’s true, but it is not the *whole* truth. The water and the blood are also deeply connected to the sacraments of the church.

The water is a witness not only to Christ’s baptism, it is a witness to *our baptism*. Christian baptism is not just a spiritual ritual. It is a testimony that as we have been immersed into the waters of baptism, we have been united with Christ in his death. So too, as we have been lifted from the waters of baptism, we will certainly be raised with Christ in the power of his resurrection (cf. Rom 4:3–5).

It is crucial for Christians to *receive* baptism, and it is crucial for baptized Christians to *remember* their baptism. In fact, the protestant reformer Martin Luther encouraged his parishioners to make the memory of their baptism their first conscious thought when they first awoke in the morning. He encouraged them to cross themselves in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as they sat up in their beds, and to again remind themselves of their baptism as they washed their hands or face throughout the day.

In remembering our baptism, we remember that the powers of sin and death have no dominion over Christ. And because we are united with Christ, the power of sin and death no longer has a claim on us (cf. Rom 6:9–11).

As the Apostle Paul writes in the book of Romans, “*Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life*” (Rom 6:3–4).

In this way, baptism is not just a public testimony to God that we believe in him; it is a public testimony of God to the church that he has saved his people.

Likewise, as the water is connected to the sacrament of baptism, the blood is connected to another sacrament. Week after week, the church gathers to hear the proclamation of the word of God from Scripture and to receive the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper (also known as Holy Communion or the Eucharist).

When we receive the Lord's Supper together, we not only remember that Christ's blood was shed on the cross. We remember that our debt has been canceled, that our penalty has been paid, that our sins have been atoned for, and that we have been made clean and righteous before our God!

When we receive the bread and drink the fruit of the vine, we are tasting the truth that there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (cf. Rom 8:1). There is no condemnation for, at the cross, Christ has taken all our condemnation so that we might receive all of his righteousness.

This is why we practice the Lord's Supper every time we gather in worship. As Paul writes elsewhere, *"For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes"* (1 Cor 11:26).

And here is the thing about the sacraments. They are physical and tangible, yet they impart the deepest spiritual truths of the gospel. They are composed of some of the most common and perishable materials: water, bread, and wine. Yet, they proclaim an extraordinary and eternal reality.

The physicality of the sacraments is a testimony to the physicality of Christ. They help us taste and see that our God is good (cf. Ps 34:8). And in this way, the sacraments are designed as means of grace and spiritual practices that refresh and restore us. They form and re-form our faith in Christ.

We need the sacraments and the spiritual nourishment they give to our souls. The shared sacramental life of the church is one of the few things that cannot be reproduced on a podcast, video, or worship album. It can only be experienced in corporate worship.

When we are weak and weary, we need to lean into our times of corporate worship. We need to hear the truth of the gospel proclaimed, we need to receive the gift of the Lord's Supper, we need to remember the truth of our baptism. For it is in these witnesses that the Spirit of God is uniquely at work within us as individuals and as a community. It is through these means of grace that we personalize the story of God within our hearts that we might participate in the story of God in our lives and together proclaim the story of God with our lips.

We are constantly pressed again and pushed on by competing stories of the world. From pundits to politicians to power brokers, there are lot of voices that would lead our hearts to a constant state of fear and rage or sorrow. There are voices in this world that solicit our hope and our allegiance.

And against those false narratives and false hopes of the world, we need counter-witness of the church. We need to be regularly reminded—in word and sacrament—of the testimony of Jesus and the true life that is found only in him.



## **Conclusion**

I told you earlier that the Greek word for “testimony” and “witness” is the word “martus” (μαρτυς). Coincidentally, that is also the word from which we derive the term “martyr.”

That is because many of the early Christians who embraced the call to bear witness to Christ were willing to do so, even if it cost them their very lives.

Why would they do this? Why would they be willing to endure suffering, loss, powerless, and even death for the sake of Christ?

They were willing to suffer the pain of this world because they were confident in God’s ultimate victory over the world. They were confident in the testimony of the Holy Spirit. They were confident in the power of the gospel proclaimed by the church through word and sacrament. They were confident that even death is not the end of the story.

As John himself later wrote in the book of Revelation, *“And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death”* (Rev 12:11).

So too, Redeemer Christian Church, may we remember our union with Christ in our baptism that is even more powerful than death. May we taste the truth of our pardon made possible by the blood of the Lamb. May we receive the witness of the Spirit within our hearts so that we may bear witness to Christ with our lives.

And when we feel weak and disheartened, and the world around us seems undefeatable and overwhelming, may we remember that—in Christ—we have a power that is far greater than any power in this world. And it by that power that we will overcome.

AMEN.

## **Discussion Starters for Gospel Communities**

- 1. Read 1 John 5:1–12 out loud. Have someone from your group rephrase what this passage is saying in their own words.*
- 2. What does this passage reveal about God, Jesus, and God’s plan?*
- 3. What does this passage reveal about humanity?*
- 4. As you look back on this passage, what are the truths that we should apply to our own lives? In other words, what are you doing well, and what do you need to change?*
- 5. When you think about what you have learned from this portion of Scripture, can you think of someone you should pray for or share this with?*