

A Conquering Faith

1 John 4:2-3, 13-17; 5:4-5

² By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, ³ and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. And this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming; and now it is already in the world. . . .

¹³ By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. ¹⁴ And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. ¹⁵ God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. ¹⁶ So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. ¹⁷ Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. . . .

Chapter 5

⁴ For whatever is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith. ⁵ Who is it that conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

Theme Statement

We have received the love of God described in 1 John and are amazed at its various expressions in our lives. We respond by loving others with Christlike love.

Exploring the Word

Who can you trust? The followers of Jesus were hearing narratives that sounded almost like that proclaimed by the apostles, but with subtle differences that proved to be inaccuracies. The writer of 1 John wanted to help them sort through the options and discern the truth.

1 John 4:2-3 No Jesus, you don't know Jesus

The letters of 1, 2, and 3 John are among the five books of the Christian scriptures attributed to the Johannine tradition in the early church. John and his brother James were among the first disciples called by Jesus. Known as the "Sons of Thunder," they were bold and confident. John spent three years with Jesus. He was there at the crucifixion and the resurrection. It is commonly thought that in the Gospel of John, he was "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (John 21:7).

Believers were hearing alternative stories about Jesus. To help them sort out the authentic storytellers, the writer of 1 John stressed that only those inspired by the Holy Spirit would proclaim that Jesus Christ had come in the flesh. Jesus had a body, flesh and blood. The Nicene Creed describes it this way: "He . . . was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary and became truly human." Christ, the Messiah, was "true God from true God, begotten, not made" (ELW, p. 104). And both human and divine natures were found in Jesus Christ.

Early forms of Gnosticism had begun to appear in the Jesus communities. One line of thought was Docetism,

that it only seemed that Jesus had a body. Another, Cerinthianism, asserted that the divine Christ joined Jesus at baptism and left him before he died. The incarnation of God in Jesus was important because in it, God completely identifies with humans, demonstrating that God knows human experience intimately. Hebrews 4:15 says, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin."

1 John 4:13-17 Abide in love, abide in God

Discerning the validity of teachers and their teaching was important to the faith communities whom the writer of 1 John addressed. No less important was how relationships were shaped by the indwelling Spirit of God. Earlier, in 3:11, the writer says, "For this is the message you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another." The defining characteristic of God is love (4:7). The writer of 1 John focuses on building confidence in his audience that they have heard the gospel accurately, and he encourages them to examine their lives for signs of their relationship with Christ.

The prevailing sign of that relationship is love. The section of scripture that follows these verses, 4:18-21, spells out the love that comes from God. That love is possible toward others because God first loved us. No one who hates others can at the same time love God.

1 John 5:4-5 Faith overcomes the world

For those who follow Christ, now equipped with the litmus test to confirm orthodox teaching about Jesus and empowered by the love of God, faith conquers the world. Christ's followers recognize the world's antagonism toward God and the disparity between what God values and what the world values. It can cause mental anguish for people of faith. But trusting in Christ, we experience God's victory.

This is not a political achievement, but rather a spiritual reality of overcoming the temptations and pressures to abandon trust in the Son of God, Jesus Christ. Those temptations are ever present for the Christian. Martin Luther, in his explanation of the Lord's Prayer, described their sources as "the world, the devil, and our flesh" (Luther's Small Catechism, *ELW*, pp. 1163-1164). In Jesus Christ, the believer is victorious over them.

The Word Today

When people learn that I am a pastor, it is not uncommon that they tell me they don't believe in God. I have learned to respond by inviting more conversation. "Tell me about the God you don't believe in," I ask.

Often, they tell me about an untimely loss of someone they loved. Attributing the tragedy to God is their way of making sense of an overwhelming experience. It is frequently compounded by well-meaning people telling them that "God must have needed another angel in heaven" or "God wanted to spare them of something difficult in their future."

It's human nature to try to figure out why things happen. When situations are beyond our control, we want to attribute them to something more powerful than ourselves. We look for a God who prevents catastrophe, not one who is present and strengthens us in it.

Early Gnosticism was a way to rationalize the Jesus story from a human perspective. Lacking the illumination by the Holy Spirit, it told a narrative that limited God's understanding of what it meant to live life in a body of flesh, bone, and blood. It kept God from fully entering human reality.

Ultimately, the only way to explain the incarnation is by faith. To do this with intentional consistency, the early church held councils to articulate what the church believes and teaches. We still use those articulations today in the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds.

The early Christians in the Johannine tradition traced their lineage of faith to the apostle John, who knew Jesus face-to-face. They held fast to the fact of the incarnation, that Jesus Christ was God in the flesh, and to the character of God expressed in human relationships. That characteristic is love, the writer of 1 John tells us. Faith in a God who lived with us as one of us and a lifestyle that reflects the nature of that God will conquer anything the world may try to do to diminish it.

Questions for Discussion

Beginnings

1. Have you ever believed someone who was telling a lie? How did you finally determine it was not the truth?
 2. On the scale of 1 to 10 below, with 1 low and 10 high, indicate how much you trust what you read on the internet (I) and what you hear on television news (T).
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- 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
3. What is the consequence of believing something that is not true?

Exploring the Word

1. What do you think the writer of 1 John means by "confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh" (4:2)?

- John wrote frequently about love. Read the following scriptures and create a statement on the relationship between faith in God and love of others: 1 John 4:8, 9-10, 16, 18; 5:2-3.
- How does John 8:31-32 amplify this session's focus verses from 1 John?
- Which attributes of conquerors do you think the writer of 1 John would have included in 5:4-5?

bold	adversarial	overcomer
proud	masterful	victorious
afraid	winner	other:
confident	strong	_____
helpful	forceful	

- The writer of 1 John makes a statement in 5:4-5, then asks a question that is answered by that first statement. Why do you think he did this for these verses in particular?

The Word Today

- How might we help people see a picture of a powerful God who lovingly accompanies us in tragedy instead of preventing it?
- In what ways does the incarnation strengthen us to face uncertainty from a perspective of love?

Closing Prayer

*Make me to know your ways, O LORD;
teach me your paths.*

*Lead me in your truth, and teach me,
for you are the God of my salvation;
for you I wait all day long. Psalm 25:4-5*

Further Study

1 Peter 1:22-23

Daily Readings

M. Deuteronomy 13:1-4

T. John 14:15-24

W. 1 John 4:1, 4-6

T. 1 John 4:7-12

F. 1 John 5:1-3

S. 1 John 5:6-12

S. 1 John 4:2-3, 13-17; 5:4-5

Memorization

1 John 4:16b

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God,
and God abides in them.