

Exercise Your Faith

John began his letter to those early Christians, living near Ephesus, in what is now Asia Minor, by saying, *“These things we write ...”* Then closing his letter, he says, *“These things I have written to you...”* that you may know with a fuller and stronger assurance that you have eternal life. *“Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves the father loves his child as well,”* 1 John 5:1. God, the Eternal One, is the author of life and in Him we have eternal life.

So faith is the first and last point of St. John’s letter. Faith has its foundation in who God is: the One who first loved us, even in all our unloveliness. Our proper response is the return our love to God. *“This is love for God: to obey his commands.”* As John Wesley said, “... his commandments are not grievous - To any that are born of God.” (*Explanatory Notes On The New Testament*, 1 John 5:3).

And faith is not simply a way of thinking, but an active living. We have faith in God and so want to love Him, and loving God always involves loving his children. Every one who loves God, who gives new life, also loves those who are born anew of God. Shared spiritual birth means shared spiritual heritage. Everyone who belongs to Jesus belongs also to me. John tells us that those who belong to God will have a natural affection for all born of Him.

An Overcoming Faith

Like the word love, faith is a word we hear a lot but perhaps do not often consider what it means. Sometimes the word refers to an entire religious system, such as Christianity or Islam or Judaism. In some cases it may mean a body of doctrine or beliefs with exhortations to be steadfast in those beliefs – “keep the faith.” We use the word faith sometimes when it has nothing to do with religion, but rather a relationship with another person. We say we have “faith” in someone when we trust him or can count on him to be consistent, honest, and reliable.

This brings us to the most common meaning of “faith” in the Christian context. It’s our personal response to God. The “faith” the Bible so often talks about is not a religion or a set of doctrines, but rather our daily, moment-by-moment trust in God. When our faith in God is put to work, when it is active and not passive, it releases God’s power in us and through us.

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Just as love leads to obedience, so faith leads to overcoming. We don't need more faith. We need to exercise the faith we already have.

"... for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith," 1 John 5:4. This day-to-day faith conquers whatever lays in the way, either to allure or to frighten the children of God from keeping his commandments; even as Jesus reminds us, "... with God all things are possible," Mark 10:27. Those who believe that Jesus is the Son of God will overcome the spiritual darkness of this world. Our faith in Christ will be victorious over the sin of this world and give us strength to resist temptation.

The terms "victory" and "overcoming" remind us that faith wins the battle but not without a daily fight. These military terms teach us that the Christian life is a fight, not a picnic. Through faith we may win against the sinful patterns of the world, but it will not happen without a struggle, not without a battle. Victory comes but only at a high cost. Faith is not a guarantee but an enablement.

Faith's Foundation: True Testimony

John and the other apostles testify to what they have seen and heard and know of Jesus – the Son of the living God - and they are believable, and so we can believe what they teach of the real person of Jesus. Their witness is to the immovable foundation of the faith that Jesus is the Son of God. Yet not only that, there is also the steadfast testimony of God. This verse, *"For there are three that testify..."* 1 John 5:7, is a brief recapitulation of all which John has taught us concerning the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. The foundation of our faith, is Jesus Christ, and He is attested by these three witnesses.

By water was Jesus baptized, *"And a voice came from heaven: 'You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.'"* Mark 1:11. He not only undertook at his baptism *"to fulfill all righteousness,"* (Matt. 3:15) but on the cross He accomplished what he had undertaken: for when all was finished, *"... one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water,"* John 19:34. This signifies that He had finished the work his Father had given him to do: by his blood and death he paid the price for all sin.

Likewise the Spirit, inspiring the prophets of the Old Testament who foretold of Jesus' coming, testifies to Jesus Christ. Isaiah said it, *"... he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed,"* Isaiah 53:5. In a similar fashion, John the Baptist announced His arrival saying, *"Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"* John 1:29. Against the testimony of the Spirit there can be no exception, because the Spirit is truth - The very God of truth. (Wesley's *Explanatory Notes On The New Testament*, 1 John 5:6)

When John then writes *"... the testimony of God is greater,"* he means God's witness is greater still than the witness of the apostles. God the Father clearly testified to Jesus, both at his baptism and at his transfiguration *"... a voice out of the cloud said, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to Him!'"* Matt. 17:5. God the Son testified to himself on many occasions, while he was on earth. His healing miracles and his calming of the wind and the waves demonstrated his testimony to himself as he said, *"I and the Father are one,"* John 10:30. God the Spirit testifies to Jesus, Son of God. *"When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father—the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father—he will testify about me,"* John 15:26. When St. Peter was brought before the Sanhedrin for disobeying orders to stop preaching about Jesus he boldly spoke of all that Jesus had done and of his resurrection saying, *"We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him"* Acts 5:32.

1. Water – signifying His baptism and the testimony of the Father.
2. Blood – signifying the Cross and His acts that testify to himself.
3. The Spirit – The Advocate or Counselor that Jesus promised, who leads us into all truth.

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, these three are one. They are one in essence, in knowledge, in will, and in their testimony. And the Bible is consistent in reporting all of this.

John Wesley further elaborated on these verses by tying them to the life and experience of Christian people, and we too might gain wisdom and inspiration in a similar manner. The Spirit witnesses to our Savior's healing power – from illness and from sin, while transforming our character – and His wisdom, comfort and strength to follow all He has commanded. The water of our baptism, in which we are dedicated to the Father, Son, and Spirit, witnesses to His spotless purity, and the inward purifying of our nature. And likewise the blood, represented in the Lord's Supper, and applied to the consciences of believer. These three are in harmony, bearing the same testimony - that Jesus Christ is the divine, the complete, the only Savior of the world. (See Wesley's *Explanatory Notes On The New Testament*, 1 John 5:8-15).

The Spirit, and the water, and the blood testify: Jesus is the Christ, who takes away the sins of the world. How true is *our* testimony to who Jesus Christ really is?

Praying Like the Children of God

John sums up his exhortation by assuring believers that in genuine love for, and faith in God, we can be assured that God hears us. *"This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us,"* 1 John 5:14. Praying in God's will means to pray in accordance with God's revealed will in Scripture. God's commandments are not

burdensome. Praying in God's will especially means praying for help to obey his commands. Here are three prayers God will always answer:

- 1. "Father, forgive me for Jesus' sake."**
- 2. "Thy will be done."**
- 3. "Give me strength to obey your commands."**

So, it's more than just ending our prayers saying, "in Jesus name." Rather, when we're abiding in Christ, walking by His light, obeying His commands, then our prayers will be in Him as well. And, *"... whatever we ask – we know that we have what we asked of him,"* 1 John 5:15. Faith anticipates the blessings, trusting that what we have asked according to His revealed will come to pass, and we will recognize it as answer to our prayer, when it arrives.

Weaving together again and again themes of obedience and love, John reminds us that a *living* faith in Jesus overcomes the world and all its sinfulness. Our faith will enable us to keep God's commandments, enable us to pray according to His will, and give us assurance of eternal life.

***"I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life"* 1 John 5:13.**