

Content Page**First Sunday after Easter;****John 20:19-31****Thomas Delivered from His Unbelief**

1. John the Evangelist further writes that Thomas was not present when the Lord appeared the first time to his assembled disciples on Easter evening. Now that the Lord comes just at the time St. Thomas is the first time absent does not take place without a reason; for Christ could have easily chosen an hour when Thomas could have been found in company with the other apostles. But it took place for our instruction and consolation that the Lord's resurrection might receive more and stronger evidence and documentary testimony. Now, on Easter he appeared to the assembled eleven; one week later, that is today, he appeared to them again and at the same time also to Thomas for whose sake alone this appearance or revelation took place which is more beautiful and glorious than that of eight days before.

I. THE UNBELIEF OF THOMAS.

2. Here we see what a poor thing the human heart is when it begins to grow faint, that we cannot strengthen and comfort it again. Both the other disciples and Thomas did not only hear during the time they were with the Lord that he taught the people with great authority, and later also saw how he confirmed his doctrine by the great miracles performed on the blind, the lame, the lepers, the dumb etc., whom he cured; but also that he raised three persons from the dead, especially Lazarus who had been four days in his grave. And, as it appears, St. Thomas was the most fearless and courageous of all the disciples, in that he said when Christ wished to go again into Judea to Lazarus who was dead: "Let us also go, that we may die with him," Jn 11, 16. Such fine characters were the disciples of Christ and especially St. Thomas, who it appears had a more manly heart than the others, and besides had recently witnessed how Christ raised Lazarus who had been in the grave four days, and ate and drank with him; yet he could not believe that the Lord himself arose from the dead and was alive.

3. Moreover, we see in the apostles that we are truly nothing when Christ withdraws his hand and we are left to ourselves. The women, Mary Magdalene and the others, announced it, and now the disciples themselves proclaim that they had seen the risen Lord. Yet St. Thomas is stubborn and will not believe it; yea, and he will not be satisfied even if he see him, unless it be that he sees the print of the nails in his hands and puts his fingers into the print of the nails and his hand into his side. And the beloved disciple will thus himself also be lost and condemned, in that he will not believe. For there can be neither forgiveness of sins nor salvation if one believes not, since therein lies all the virtue and power of faith and eternal life, as St. Paul says: "And if Christ hath not been raised, then is our preaching vain, your faith is also vain; ye are yet in your sins. Then they also that are fallen asleep in Christ have perished," etc. I Cor 15, 14-18. To perdition will St. Thomas also go, he will not be saved but wills to be lost, because he will not believe that Christ is risen. And he would have perished and been condemned in his unbelief had not Christ rescued him from it by this revelation.

4. So the Holy Spirit illustrates and teaches now in this example that without faith we are simply blind and completely hardened, as we see everywhere in the holy Scriptures that the human heart is the hardest thing in the world, harder than steel and adamant. And on the other hand, if it be bashful, despondent and soft, there is no water nor oil so soft as the human heart.

5. You find many examples and narratives illustrating this in the Scripture. Pharaoh, before whom Moses performed so many terrible signs and wonders that he could not reply to them, yea, he had to admit that it was God's finger and therefore also confessed he had sinned against God and his people etc.: yet his heart became harder and more obdurate continually until the Lord drowned him with all his army in the sea. Likewise also the Jews; the more powerfully Christ proved both by word and deed that he was the one who was promised by their fathers that he should be a blessing to them and to the whole world, the more vehemently and bitterly they raged against him and their hatred, blasphemy and persecution knew no measure nor end until they condemned their Lord and God to the most ignominious death and crucified him between two malefactors, nothing could prevent it although Pilate the judge himself declared against them that he was innocent, creation acted differently than usual and thereby testified that its Lord and Creator hung there on the cross etc.; likewise the thief freely confessed publicly, although Christ truly hung there and died, yet he was a king who had an eternal heavenly kingdom; and the heathen centurion publicly cried: "*Truly this was the Son of God*" etc. Mt .27,54. This all, I say, helped nothing to bring about this conversion.

6. This is the way the godless, condemned world does: the more grace and kindness God shows it, the more unthankful and wicked it becomes. Now it is meet and right for us all to thank God from our hearts that he has revealed his holy Word so pure and clear before the day of judgment, from which we learn what inexpressible treasures he has given us in Christ, namely, that we are saved by him from sin and death, and shall now be righteous and blessed, etc. What is the attitude of the world to this? As its custom is, it does not know how to abuse, blaspheme and condemn this Word of grace and life enough, and wherever possible to persecute and destroy those who confess it, and although the world hears that God will severely punish such sin with hell-fire and eternal condemnation, it thinks little about it, goes ahead securely and obdurately, as if it were nothing, and enjoys its sport as we clearly see now in the pope and his following. And yet it is such horrible and dreadful wrath that all creatures are terrified by it. Therefore it is certainly true that no stone, steel, adamant, yea, nothing on earth is as hard as the impenitent heart of man.

7. On the other hand, if the heart loses courage and is terrified it is softer than water and oil, so that, as Scripture says, it is frightened at a rustling leaf. And when such a person is alone in a room and hears a little cracking of a rafter or a beam, he thinks thunder and lightning are striking him and he is in such anxiety and fear (as I have often seen), that no one can comfort or strengthen him, and all the preachers and all consoling proverbs are too few to calm him. So there is no moderation with the human heart; it is either entirely too hard like wood and stone, that it inquires about neither God nor Satan, or, on the other hand, is entirely too timid, fickle and despondent.

8. Thus the apostles are here too scared and terror stricken by the scandal they saw in their Lord being so ignominiously mocked, spit upon, scourged, pierced and finally crucified, so that they no longer had a heart in their bodies, who before while they had Christ among them were so bold and courageous, that James and John ventured to bid fire to come down from heaven and consume the Samaritans who would not receive Christ, Lk 9, 54. They also knew how gloriously to boast that the devils were in the name of Jesus subject unto them; and Thomas admonished the others and said: "Let us go that we may die with him;" and Peter, more impetuous than the others, smites with the sword among the crowd when they wished to seize and take Christ captive. But now they lie prostrate in great fear and terror, locked up, and will let no one come to them. For this reason they were also terrified at the Lord when he comes and greets them, and they still think (which is indeed a sign that they are completely overcome by fear and despair) they see a spirit or a ghost. So soon they had forgotten all the miracles, signs and words they had seen and heard from him, that the Lord had enough to do during the forty days after his resurrection before he separated from them, in his appearances and revelations in various ways, now to the women, then to the disciples, both individually and collectively,

besides eating and drinking with them; all, for the purpose that they might be assured that he is risen. Yet it is so hard for this truth to enter their hearts.

9. Likewise, when after forty days he spoke with them out of the Scriptures about the kingdom of God, which should now commence and be a kingdom in which should be proclaimed in his name repentance and the forgiveness of sins among all nations, they raise the cry and ask him when he was about to ascend from them in a cloud, and say: *"Lord, dost thou at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?"* they have entirely different thoughts of the kingdom of Christ than those he had been teaching them. Here you see how exceedingly difficult it is for bashful and despondent hearts to be comforted and strengthened, even after being rightly instructed, so that they know what kind of a king Christ is and what he has accomplished by his death and resurrection.

10. Thus both the obduracy and the bashfulness of the human heart are indescribable. When out of danger it is hard and obdurate beyond measure, so that it cares nothing for the wrath or the threatening of God. Although it hears for a long time that God will punish sin with eternal death and condemnation, yet it goes ahead and is drowned in pride, avarice, etc. On the other hand, when the heart begins to fear it becomes so despondent that it cannot be again reclaimed. It is indeed a great pity that we are such wicked people. If we are not in want we continue to live on in sin without the least fear or shame, yea, to grow stiff like a dead corpse; what is spoken to us is as if spoken to a rock. On the contrary, if there is a change in us that we feel our sins, we are terrified by death, God's wrath and judgment; we on the other hand grow stiff at the great anxiety and sorrow, so that no one can strengthen us; yea, we are even terrified before that which should comfort us, like the disciples were before Christ, who came to them for the very purpose that they might be comforted and made happy. Although he does not at once set them right he has to doctor them during the forty days, as I said. He takes and uses all kinds of comfort and medicine and still he can hardly strengthen them again, until he gives them the right strong drink, namely, the Holy Spirit, of which they drank and were comforted in the right way so that they are no more as before, bashful and terrified.

II. THOMAS SAVED FROM HIS UNBELIEF.

11. Finally, we have in St. Thomas an illustration of the power of Christ's resurrection. We just heard how firm and even stiff-necked he was in unbelief, that although the other disciples unitedly testified that they had seen the risen Lord, yet he simply will not believe it. He appears to have been a fine and brave character who had thoroughly concluded that he would not so soon believe the others. For he had seen that the Lord only three days before was put to death on the cross and the nails driven through his

hands and feet and the spear pierced his side. This picture was so indelibly and deeply impressed upon him that he simply could not in the least believe what the others told him, that Christ was risen. Therefore he promptly and defiantly says: "Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe." He thus utters a hyperbole, an exaggerated statement, that he will not believe his eyes alone, but will feel and grope about Christ's body with his hands. As if he would say: No one shall persuade me to believe, but I will stand so firmly upon no, that I will not believe even if I see him, as you say you saw him. But should I believe it, then he must come so near to me, that, if it were possible, I may touch his soul and put my hands into his eyes.

12. That is to be steeped very firmly and deeply in unbelief. And it is wonderful what he means by it that he at once proposes a thing absurd, to put his hand and finger into the openings of his wounds. For he had always been so smart as to think: Since Christ was again alive, had conquered death and was rid of all the bruises from the scourging and the crown of thorns, he would surely have healed and removed also the five wounds.

13. Now, this has happened for our example and consolation, that the great apostle also had to fail and stumble, in which we see how Christ shows and conducts himself toward his weak disciples, that he can tolerate also such who are still as hard and stubborn as St. Thomas is here, and that he will not on that account condemn and disown them, if only in other respects they sincerely wish to continue to be his disciples, and not maliciously blaspheme him and become his enemies; and by this he teaches us that we should become neither offended nor despondent because of that; but in harmony with this his example gently go on with them, serve their weakness, with our strength until they become established and grow strong.

14. But it serves more to the end, as I began to say, that the resurrection of the Lord is not only clearly shown and proved by this unbelieving and stubborn Thomas, who persevered for eight days in his unbelief, and he lay there grown almost stiff; but also that the power of the resurrection becomes known, and is of benefit to us; as appears in Thomas who thereby was brought from unbelief to faith, from doubt to certain knowledge and to a beautiful and glorious confession.

15. Now it happens, says the Evangelist, first on the eighth day after his resurrection, when Thomas had established himself in his unbelief in the face of the testimony of all the others, and by this time he is dead and no one hopes he will show himself in a special manner to Thomas. Just then Christ comes and shows him the same scars and wounds, as fresh as he had shown them to the other disciples eight days before, and tells him to reach

hither his finger and hand and place them into the prints of the nails and into his side. Christ yields to Thomas so much that he not only sees as others did, but he also seizes him and feels, as he had said: "Except I shall see in his hands," etc., and he says in addition: "*Be not faithless, but believing.*"

16. Here you see Christ is not satisfied to stop with the narrative; but he is concerned only that Thomas becomes believing and is resurrected from his stubborn unbelief and sin. This follows in a powerful way in that St. Thomas soon begins and says to Christ: "My Lord and my God!" There is at once a different man, not the old Thomas Didymus (which means in English a twin, not a doubter, as has been wrongly interpreted from this text), as just before, when he was so cold and stiff and dead in his unbelief, that he would not believe unless he puts his finger into his wounds; but he commenced suddenly to deliver a glorious confession and sermon about Christ, the equal of which no apostle to that time had yet preached, namely, that the person, the risen one, is true God and man. For they are admirable words he utters: "My Lord and my God!" He is not drunken, he is not jesting nor mocking; he does not mean a false God; therefore he certainly does not tell a lie. Besides he is not here chastised by Christ, but his faith is confirmed, and it must be the truth and sincere.

17. It is now the power of the resurrection of Christ that St. Thomas, who was so deep and obdurate in unbelief, even more than any other disciple, was so suddenly changed, becomes an entirely different man, who publicly and freely confesses that he not only believes that Christ is risen but is also enlightened by the power of Christ's resurrection so that he firmly believes and confesses that he, his Lord, is true God and man, through whom, as he is now resurrected from unbelief, the fountain of all sin; so he will also arise from the dead at the judgment day and live forever with him in indescribable glory and blessedness. And not only he, but all who believe thus, as Christ himself further says to him: "*Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed.*"

18. Finally, that Thomas puts his finger into the wounds. I will not argue whether Christ always after his resurrection retained the wounds and prints of the nails; yet I argue they did not appear hideous, as otherwise they might, but fresh and comforting. And whether they were still fresh, open and red as artists paint them, I will leave for others to decide. Otherwise it is a fine idea to picture them before the ordinary person so that he has a memorial and a picture that will remind and admonish him of the sufferings and wounds of Christ. It is possible that he retained the same signs or marks which will likely enlighten much more beautifully and gloriously at the day of judgment his whole body and he will show them before the whole world, as the Scriptures say: "*They shall look*

unto me whom they have pierced,” Zech 12, 10. This I would commend to every devotional exercise for consideration.

19. The leading thought, however, for us to learn and retain from this Gospel is, that we believe that Christ's resurrection is sure and that it works in us so that we be resurrected both from sin and death; as St. Paul richly and consolingly speaks of it, and Christ himself here, when he says: *”Blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed,”* and St. John concluding this Gospel teaches and admonishes about the use and benefit of the resurrection: *”These are written, that ye may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and believing ye may have life in his name.”*

20. This is indeed a powerful and clear passage, which highly praises faith and gives the testimony that we certainly have eternal life through the same; and that this faith is not an empty, dead thought on the history about Christ, but that which concludes and is sure that he is the Christ, that is, the promised King and Saviour, God's Son, through whom we all are delivered from sin and eternal death; for which purpose he also died and rose again; and that we alone for his sake acquire eternal life, in a way that is called in his name, not in Moses' nor in our nor any other man's name, that is, not because of the law, nor of our worthiness and doings, but alone on account of Christ's merits, as Peter says in Acts 4, 12: *”There is none other name among men, wherein we must be saved,”* etc.

SUNDAY AFTER EASTER

1 JOHN 5:4-12

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For whatsoever is begotten of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that hath overcome the world, even our faith. And who is he that overcometh the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God? This is he that came by water and blood, even Jesus Christ; not with the water only, but with the water and with the blood. And it is the Spirit that beareth witness, because the Spirit is the truth. For there are three who bear witness, the Spirit, and the water, and the blood: and the three agree in one. If we receive the witness of men, the witness of God is greater: for the witness of God is this, that he hath borne witness concerning his Son. He that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness in him: he that believeth not God hath made him a liar; because he hath not believed in the witness that God hath borne concerning his Son. And the witness is this, that God gave unto us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He that hath the Son hath the life; he that hath not the Son of God hath not the life.

VICTORIOUS FAITH

1. This epistle selection was primarily arranged for this particular Sunday because it treats of baptism and of the new birth of the believing Christian. It was in former time customary in the Church to baptize immediately after Easter those who had accepted the Christian faith and had been instructed in its precepts. This day is also called “Dominicam in albis,” and by us Germans “Weiszer Sonntag” (White Sunday), because the candidates for baptism were clad in white linen as indicative of their cleansing and new birth; just as today children to be baptized are arrayed in a white christening-robe.

THE NEW BIRTH

2. While this lesson does not treat of the resurrection of Christ, it has reference to its fruits: faith, the very essence of Christianity, here expressed as being born of God; and the evidence of the Holy Spirit, received through baptism, which assures us we are children of God and have, through Christ, eternal life and all blessings.

3. Though John's language is, as usual, plain and simple, yet, in the ears of men generally, it is unusual and unintelligible. The world estimates it as similar to the prattle of children or fools. What, according to the world's construction, is implied by the statement, "Whatsoever is begotten [born] of God overcometh the world?" Overcoming the world, the unconverted would understand to mean bringing into subjection to oneself every earthly thing and assuming the position of sovereign of the world. Yet more absurd in the ears of this class is the saying that we must be born of God. "Did one ever hear of such a thing," they might exclaim, "as children born of God? It would be less ridiculous to say we must be born of stones, after the idea of the heathen poets." To the world there is no birth but physical birth. Hence such doctrine as our lesson sets forth will ever be strange, unintelligible, incomprehensible, to all but Christians. But the latter speak with new tongues, as Christ in the last chapter of Mark (verse 17) says they shall, for they are taught and enlightened by the Holy Spirit.

4. Clearly, then, when the Scriptures speak of being born of God, it is not in a human sense; the reference is not to the conditions of our temporal lives, but to those exalted ones of a future existence. To say we must be born of God is equivalent to saying that if man is to be redeemed from sin and eternal death, to enter into the kingdom of God and into happiness, his physical birth will not suffice; all which nature, reason, free-will and human endeavor may afford is inadequate. Physical birth, it is true, answers for everything in the way of temporal possession and achievement, everything great, powerful, noble, rich, wise, learned; in short, every exalted and desirable thing of earth. But all such possession and achievement serves only the physical existence; it is swept away by death, to which event it is ever subject. Hence becomes necessary a new and different birth, a birth more significant than that of the natural man even in the case of emperors, kings, or the wisest and most influential of earth. For as Isaiah says (ch. 40:6): "All flesh is grass, and all the goodliness thereof is as the flower of the field. The grass withereth, the flower fadeth." The demand is for a divine birth, a birth in which parentage is wholly of God; a birth signifying the operation of God's divine power in man, a power achieving something beyond the attainment of his natural capacities and effecting in him new understanding and a new heart.

5. The process is this: When the individual hears the Gospel message of Christ – a message revealed and proclaimed not by the wisdom and will of man, but through the Holy Spirit – and sincerely believes it, he is justly recognized as conceived and born of God. John in his gospel (ch. 1:12) says: "As many as received him, to them gave he the right to become children of God, even to them that believe on his name." And in the first verse of the chapter including our text, he tells us: "Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the

Christ is begotten of God.” Through that faith, for the sake of his Son, God accepts us as his children, pleasing to him and heirs of eternal life; and the Holy Spirit will be sent into our hearts, as is explained later.

6. This doctrine condemns those arrogant teachers who presumptuously expect to be justified before God by their own merits and works. They imagine that their wisdom, learning, good judgment, intelligence, fair reputation and morality entitle them, because of the good they are thus enabled to do, to the favor of God and to reception up into heaven. But the Scriptures clearly teach the very reverse, that all these things are nothing in the eyes of God. It is sheer human effort; it is not being born of God. However wise and powerful you might be, if even the noblest, most beautiful, fruit human nature can produce, you could not see the kingdom of God unless you became a wholly different person, unless you were born anew, according to Christ’s words in John 3:3. And this is something impossible to your natural powers. You certainly cannot make yourself of other parentage than you are. God must begin the work in you, communicating his seed – his Word – by virtue of which the Holy Spirit operates in you, enabling you, by faith, to cling to the promise, as said before.

7. Now, he who is thus born of God, John declares, overcomes the world. Verily, this is a significant and forcible assertion the Holy Spirit makes; it represents a tremendous power, a great work. The child of God must, indeed, attempt and accomplish great things. The birth effected through the Word and faith makes men true sovereigns, above all earthly rulers; it gives them power even to overcome the world, something impossible to any Roman or Turkish potentate. They effect not their victory by physical force or temporal power, but by the spiritual birth, through faith. As John says immediately after the clause we are discussing, “This is the victory that hath overcome the world, even our faith.” Here is his own explanation of what he means by being born of God.

THE TWO KINGDOMS

8. Now, in order to understand the nature of the spiritual victory and how it is effected, we must know just what John means by the term “world.” The reference is not to dominion over territory, to property or money. He implies the existence of two kingdoms. In one, the kingdom of God, the heavenly kingdom of Christ, is included, first, the angels in heaven, who are the chief lords, the inner circle of counselors; second, the entire Christian Church on earth, under one head, Christ the Lord and King. In the other kingdom, the hellish kingdom, the devil is prince, and his mighty counselors and servants are the angels who with him fell from heaven; it also includes the world, those on earth who teach, believe and live contrary to Christ, who represent the heathen, the Jews, the

Turks and false Christians. By the heavenly kingdom of God we must understand, not only spiritual life and godly people, but the lord and regent of that kingdom – Christ with his angels, and his saints both living and dead. Thus, too, the kingdom of the world represents not only the earthly life with its worldly interests, but particularly its lord and regent – the devil and his angels, and all unchristian, godless, wicked people on earth. So, when John says, “*Whatsoever is begotten of God overcometh the world,*” he means by “world” the devil and his whole earthly dominion.

9. Now, the workings of these two kingdoms are plainly evident, though the leaders – Christ the Lord, and the devil – are not visible to mortal eyes. Christ rules direct and effectually, in his own power, through the Word and through the Holy Spirit in the hearts of believers, maintaining them in the faith and in the knowledge of his Word, and protecting from the devil’s wrath and subtlety; further, he rules through his angels, who guard his followers; again, he rules through his people themselves, who exercise authority one over another in loving service, each teaching, instructing, comforting and admonishing a noble little band of godly, obedient, patient, chaste, kind, tractable, benevolent souls. The nature of the devil’s kingdom, the manner of life the world leads, is easily apparent. This kingdom is simply a huge booth filled with faithless, shameless, wicked individuals, impelled by their god to every sort of disobedience, ingratitude and contempt of God and his Word; to idolatry, false doctrine, persecution of Christians and the practice of all wantonness, mischief, wickedness and vice.

10. These two kingdoms are opposed. They continually contend for the crown; they war with each other for supremacy. Christians are brought into the conflict to hold the field against God’s enemy, whose rule of the world is one of falsehood and murder; they must contend with the enemy’s servants, his horde of factious spirits and basely wicked individuals, in an effort to restrain evil and promote good. Christians must be equipped for the fray; they must know how to meet and successfully resist the enemy, how to carry the field unto victory, and hold it.

FAITH THE VICTOR

11. Therefore, when John says, “*Whatsoever is begotten of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that hath overcome the world, even our faith,*” his purpose is to admonish Christians that believers must manifest the power and working of faith in life and deed. In fact, his chief aim in writing this text was to reprove false Christians who are pleased to hear the doctrine that we are saved through Christ alone, our works and merits not earning our salvation; and who imagine the hearing of this doctrine constitutes them Christians and that there is no necessity for any effort or contention on their part. They

forget that they must, through faith, become new persons fitted to overcome the world and the devil.

12. Victory over the devil is the sign of the true Christian. Thereby we may know men are born of God, may distinguish them from the false children who enjoy but the semblance of God's Word and never experience its power. Such are mere "mondkinder" (moon-children) – still-born, destitute of real divine life, or divine power. It cannot be said we have been born of God when we continue in our old dead and worldly course, and as before lie and live in sin at the devil's pleasure. No, as children of God we must resist the devil and his entire kingdom. If, then, instead of overcoming the world you allow it to overcome you, then, boast as you may of faith and Christ, your own conduct testifies that you are not a child of God. To illustrate, beginning with some of the lower and grosser sins: If you boast of being a child of God, but still live in fornication, adultery, and such vices, the devil has already overcome you and wrested you from the kingdom of God. If you are miserly, injuring your neighbor by usury, by overcharging, by false wares and fraudulent business, you have permitted the world and your own flesh to overcome you for a penny. If you entertain envy and hatred toward your neighbor, you are at once thereby a captive servant of the devil. The same principle holds in the case of sins more subtle and refined, where the malicious knavery of the devil must be resisted. For instance, the devil deceives with misleading doctrines, impelling men to idolatry, false faith, presumption, despair, blasphemy, and so on. Now, if you yield to him, suffering yourself to be seduced, what will it profit you to boast of the Gospel faith? for you have not properly grasped God's Word, you have not rightly recognized God in Christ, but continue in error, in false fancies, captivated and deceived by the devil.

13. It requires something more than mere human wisdom and skill, more than human power, to withstand and overcome an enemy so formidable as the devil. As said before, the Christian must be fortified with the knowledge of how to guard against his wiles and deceptions and how to withstand him. Hence a Christian is called a person who is born of God. He must be different from an intelligent heathen and a skillful worldling to rightly understand God's Word and apprehend Christ through faith, and must use such knowledge as weapons of offense and defense in the conflict. Thus will he be able to withstand the devil and the world and to gain the victory. God's Word and faith are the power which will bring him through; he cannot be overcome so long as he adheres to them. In this connection are John's words immediately preceding our text: "*This is the love of God, that we keep his commandments; and his commandments are not grievous.*" Then he goes on, "*For whatsoever is begotten of God overcometh the world,*" etc. Such is the power represented by genuine new birth, that therein the devil,

the world and all evil are overcome. Just as, in physical birth, a normal child fully born into the world may overcome a slight offensive disease, while an abnormal or still-born child perishes of its own weakness.

14. For example, if I have faith and am born of God, I will not pollute myself with unchastity and fornication, I will not bring disgrace upon another's spouse or child. The new birth will indeed teach me not to reject shamefully the treasure I have in Christ, not to lose it willingly, and not to drive from me the indwelling Holy Spirit. Faith, if it truly dwells in me, will not permit me to do ought in violation of my conscience and of the Word and the will of God. Should I be tempted by avarice to deceive and defraud my neighbor, or to close my hand when I should give him aid, if I am a Christian and born anew my faith will protest and turn me from such action. Can I injure my neighbor or permit him to suffer want when I might contribute to his relief, if I am aware that Christ has given his body and shed his blood for me? How can there enter into the heart of the Christian who believes he has received ineffable and eternal treasures through the Son of God, the inclination to permit his neighbor to suffer a trivial want when he can easily extend relief? Much less would it be possible for the Christian to injure or to do injustice to his neighbor for the sake of shamefully gaining some small advantage. Rather he would reflect: "If I am, through Christ, a child of God and an heir of heaven, the sum of this world's goods is far too insignificant to induce me, for the sake of a penny, to deceive or defraud anyone." Then, too, if the devil tempt you by his tyrannical, factious spirits, or even by your own thoughts, to forsake your pure doctrine for his deceptions, you as a Christian are to resist the temptation, remembering the blessings you have through faith received from Christ in the Gospel; you have been liberated from darkness, blindness and error; have learned rightly to know God; and have obtained the sure consolation of grace and salvation, being aware upon what you must depend in life and death. Why, then, yield to the devil, allowing yourself to be robbed of salvation and eternal life? Why not much rather let go every earthly thing than to deny the Word of God or to permit this blessed consolation to be perverted, falsified and wrested from you?

15. So, then, John says, "This is the victory that hath overcome the world, even our faith." It is, indeed, saying very much for the Christian faith to attribute to it such power over the devil and the world – a power transcending all human ability. It requires an agency greater and higher than human strength to triumph over the devil, especially in the perplexing conflicts of conscience, when he vexes and tortures the heart with terror of God's wrath in the attempt to drive us to despair. At such times all our works must immediately sink out of sight, leaving no help or victory except the faith that clings to the word of Christ the Lord, believing that, for the sake of his beloved Son, God will be merciful and will not condemn us for our sins and unworthiness if we believe in him.

Such faith as this stands fast and gains the victory; neither the devil nor the gates of hell can prevail against it.

16. The same is true in all temptations. Before we can resist and overcome, we must have faith to believe that through Christ we have remission of sins and the favor of God; that God gives us help and strength to enable us to stand in the conflict and successfully resist the devil, the world, the flesh and death; that we obtain the victory by the divine power of the Holy Spirit, lacking whose help we all would be far too weak to win. Without faith, we are under the power of the devil and sin, being subject to them by natural birth. We can be liberated in no other way than through faith in Christ.

17. That John has reference to faith in Christ is plainly evident from his query, “Who is he that overcometh the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God?” The apostle’s purpose therein is to make plain just what the true Scriptural faith is and what it implies. For there are other beliefs which the world calls faith. The Jews, the Turks, the Papists, claim they also believe in God who created heaven and earth. That such belief is not the true faith, however, is proved by the fact of its ineffectiveness. It does not contend and overcome, and it permits the believer to remain as he is, in his natural birth and under the power of the devil and sin. But the faith which believes Jesus is the Son of God is the true, triumphant sort. It is an invincible power wrought in the hearts of Christians by the Holy Spirit. It is a sure knowledge, that does not gaze and vacillate hither and thither according to its own thoughts. It apprehends God in Christ the Son sent from heaven, through whom God reveals his will and his love and transfers us from sin to grace, from death to a new and eternal life; a refuge and trust that relies not upon its own merit or worthiness, but upon Christ the Son of God, and in his might and power battles against the world and the devil. Therefore, the Christian faith is not the cold, ineffective, empty, lifeless conception which Papists and others imagine it to be; no, it is a living, active power, ever followed by victories and other appropriate fruits. Where such fruits are lacking, faith and the new birth are not there.

THE SOURCE OF FAITH

18. Thus we have the first part of our sermon on the new birth and faith. For the second part, John shows whence and by what means comes the faith productive of victory; he says: *“This is he that came by water and blood, even Jesus Christ; not with the water only, but with the water and with the blood. And it is the Spirit that beareth witness, because the Spirit is the truth. For there are three who bear witness [in earth], the Spirit, and the water, and the blood,”* etc.

19. John speaks of Christ's kingdom, and of the office the Holy Spirit bears outwardly and visibly in the Christian Church, represented in the ministerial office and the sacraments. He says: "*There are three who bear witness [in earth].*" John, as usual, employs the word "witness" in connection with the thought of preaching; it is a word he frequently uses. For instance, in the beginning of his gospel, where he speaks of John the Baptist, he says (ch. 1:7): "The same came for a witness, that he might bear witness of the light." So, in his use of the phrase "*witness*" or "*bearing witness*," we are to understand simply the public preaching of God's Word. Again, Christ says (John 16:9-14), that the Holy Spirit shall bear witness of him; that is, he shall publicly fill the ministerial office. This is God's own witness to his Son. And here John tells us we have the victory over the devil and the world, through faith, for the sake of Christ the Son of God.

20. This witness Christ himself ordains shall ever go forth, and remain, in the Church. To this end Christ sent the Holy Spirit; to this end Christ himself called and gave the Holy Spirit to the apostles and their successors, ministers, preachers and teachers, as Paul tells us (Ephesians 4:11-13), who are to exercise the Word, that the Word may resound always and everywhere in the world, reaching to children's children, and on down to future generations. Were the witness not in the Church, the pulpit – in fact, the entire outward administration of the Church – would be useless, for every man could read the Scriptures for himself. But for the sake of the uninstructed masses and the constantly rising young who, as yet in ignorance of the Word, need admonition – for the sake of these, the Spirit must bear public witness or administer the preaching office that they, too, may learn to know the grace of God manifest and given to us through Christ, and that God's wondrous works may be publicly recognized and extolled by us in opposition to the devil and the world.

21. Wherever such witness is borne, there certainly will be some fruit. The witness never fails of effect. Some surely will be reached; some will accept and believe it. Since it is the witness of the Holy Spirit, and the apostle says here, the Spirit beareth witness, he will be effective, producing in us that to which John refers when he says we are children of God, and have the victory and eternal life. So the Word – the Gospel message accompanied by the witness of the Spirit – and faith are vitally related. In the last analysis they are inseparable. Without faith, preaching will be fruitless; and faith has origin in the Word alone. Therefore, we should gladly hear and handle the Word. Where it is, there is also the Holy Spirit; and where the Spirit is, there must be at least some believers. Even if you have already heard the Word and obtained faith, it will always continue to strengthen you as you hear it. One knows not at what hour God may touch and illumine his or another's heart. It may be in a time when we least look for it, or in the individual of whom we have

least expectation. For the Spirit, as Christ says, breathes where he will, and touches hearts when and where he knows them to be receptive.

22. It is relative to the power and energy wrought by the Holy Spirit that John speaks, indicating the source and means of the power of this witness, when he says of Christ, “This is he that came by water and blood,” etc. In this sentence is included all we possess in the kingdom of Christ, and here is extolled the efficacy of our beloved baptism and the blood or sufferings of Christ. Here John unites all the elements in one bundle, so to speak, making a triune witness. They bear joint witness to our faith and confirm it – these three: the water, the blood and the Spirit.

BAPTISM BY WATER AND BLOOD

23. Christ comes, first, “by water”; that is, by holy baptism. He employs baptism as an outward sign of his work in the new birth of man and in man’s sanctification. This water by which Christ comes cannot be a mere, empty sign; for he comes not merely to cleanse or bathe the body with water, but to purify the whole man from all pollution and blemishes inherent in him from Adam. Christ has instituted a cleansing wholly unlike the Mosaic ablutions under the Old Testament dispensation. Moses came with various laws relating to washings and purifications, but they were only cleansings of the body or of the flesh and had daily to be repeated. Now, since these ceremonials contributed nothing to man’s purification in God’s sight – a thing to be effected by nothing short of a new birth – Christ came with a new order of cleansing, namely, baptism, which is not a mere external ablution from physical impurities, but a washing effective in man’s purification from the inward pollution of his old sinful birth and from an evil conscience, and bringing remission of sin and a good conscience toward God, as Peter says. 1 Peter 3:21. Paul, also (Titus 3:5), calls baptism the “*washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit.*”

24. Christ first instituted baptism through John the Baptist. To distinguish it from the Mosaic baptism, the old Jewish rite of washings, Christ styles it “a baptism unto repentance and the remission of sins.” He designs that therein man shall perceive his inner impurities and know them to be, in God’s sight, beyond the power of outward Mosaic ablutions to reach; shall know also that purification of the conscience and remission of sins must be sought and obtained through the power of Christ the Lord, who instituted baptism.

25. Secondly, that this cleansing of sin may be effected in us through baptism, something more than mere water must be present. Mere water could effect no more than do ordinary

washings, and no more than Jewish and Turkish baptisms and washings effect. There must be a power and force accompanying the water effective to work inward purification, the purification of the soul. Therefore, John says, Christ came, not by water alone, but also by blood; not the blood of bulls, or of calves, or of goats, those Old Testament sacrifices, but his own blood, as Paul declares. Hebrews 9:12. He comes through the preaching office of the New Testament, which is his rule upon earth, imparts to us the effective power of his shed blood, his sacrifice for our sins, and thus applies to us the treasure wherewith he purchased our redemption.

26. Hence there is now in baptism this efficacy of the blood of Christ. That is the true caustic soap which not only removes the uncleanness of the outer man, but penetrates to the inner nature, consuming its impurities and cleansing them away, that the heart may become pure in God's sight. Thus, the blood of Christ is so effectively mingled with the baptismal water that we must not regard it as mere water, but water beautifully dyed with the precious crimson blood of our dear Savior, Christ. Baptism, then, cannot rightly be regarded a physical cleansing, like the Mosaic ablutions, or like the cleansing the bathhouse affords; it is a healing baptism, a baptism or washing with blood, instituted by none but Christ, the Son of God, and that through his own death.

27. In the record of Christ's passion, careful note is made of the fact that blood and water flowed immediately from the spear-thrust in Christ's side as he hung upon the cross; it is pointed out as a special miracle. The design there is to teach that Christ's shed blood is not without significance, but stands for a washing or bath whose efficacy is present in the baptism with water; and that from the slain body of Christ issues an unceasing stream of water and blood, flowing on down through the entire Christian Church, wherein we must all be cleansed from our sins. What makes baptism so precious, so holy and essential is the mingling and union of the water with the blood of Christ; to be baptized into Christ with water is really to be washed and cleansed with the blood of Christ.

THE SPIRIT

28. To these two John adds a third witness, "the Spirit." The Spirit bears witness with the water and the blood; in fact, through these other two he operates. It is the Holy Spirit himself; not as he is invisible up in heaven in his divine essence, but the Spirit who publicly manifests himself through his external office and permits himself to be heard through his Word. As John here asserts, the Spirit bears witness on earth with both the water and the blood.

29. Neither Moses nor any other teacher in his doctrines of personal effort and external purifications, his washings and his sprinklings of the blood of sheep and goats – no such teacher brings and gives the Spirit. With them is no Spirit, no divine power, no regeneration of man. Any unbelieving, spiritless, wicked knave can exercise human effort and practice physical cleansing. But Christ alone brings with him the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, who sanctifies us through the blood and water issuing from the divine side. The Spirit makes us partakers of its cleansing influence through the external office of preaching and through the sacraments, which are called the office and gifts of the Holy Spirit. Through these the Spirit works in the Christian Church just as he did at first, among the apostles on the Day of Pentecost, and will continue to do in the whole world, unto the last day. Without his ministration we would never obtain, nor know anything about, the saving power of Christ's blood in baptism.

30. Such is the kingdom Christ unceasingly develops through the Christian Church. In him we have eternal purification when to the water is added the Spirit, who through the Word enkindles the heart and purifies it, not with the cleansing qualities of the water alone, but with the healing efficacy of the blood of Christ, whereby sins are exterminated and God's wrath appeased. Although the work of our redemption was wrought once for all in Christ's blood shed upon the cross and is sufficient to cancel the sins of the entire world, yet Christ so instituted it that the same efficacy should remain forever, and be daily distributed and offered to us through the Holy Spirit.

31. This work of the Holy Spirit is neither received nor perceived except through faith in this witness, the preached word of Christ – when with the heart man grasps it and confidently believes it is fulfilled in himself as the Word declares. Thus is the heart really cleansed, the individual born anew, through the Holy Spirit present in the sacred cleansing of water and of the blood of Christ. Peter (1 Peter 1:2) speaks of the sanctification of Christians as the “*sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ*” upon us by the Holy Spirit through the public preaching of the Gospel. This sprinkling radically differs from the Jewish sprinkling of water, or of the ashes of a red heifer, or of the blood of a dead lamb or goat, round about the altar and upon the applicants for purification. In the sanctification of Christians, the true consecrated water and the sprinkled blood of Christ are combined; that is, the message concerning the shed blood of our Lord Jesus Christ is “sprinkled,” so to speak, upon the soul, and wherever that Word touches the soul it is effective. The blood in this case is not the ineffective, lifeless blood of a slain animal, but the potent, living blood of the Son of God. Under its application the soul cannot remain impure. Christ's blood purifies and heals from sin and death; it strikes at their very foundation, and entirely releases us from their power and grants us eternal life for soul and body.

32. Note, this text is a grand sermon on the witness Christians have here on earth, which the apostle in concluding explains and extols in beautiful and comforting words. He calls it a witness that God himself bears to his Son and that serves to assure us of being the children of God and possessors of eternal life. For he says: “And the witness is this, that God gave unto us eternal life,” etc. This is indeed an excellent witness, which God himself witnesses and declares to you, and the Holy Spirit brings and reveals to you. God cannot lie nor deceive, he is the eternal, unchangeable truth, as already mentioned. If you believe this witness, you certainly have received and possess it, as John again says: “*He that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness in him.*”

FAITH TO BE IMPLICIT

33. The true, saving doctrine of the Christian faith is this: There must be witness and confidence of heart so absolute as to leave no room for doubt that, through Christ, we are God’s children and have remission of sins and eternal life. By way of showing us how God earnestly enjoins such faith upon us and forbids us to have any doubts on the subject, John says, “*He that believeth not God hath made him a liar; because he hath not believed in the witness that God hath borne concerning his Son.*”

34. This passage annihilates the pernicious, damnable, diabolical doctrine of the Papists, who shamelessly claim it is right to doubt and that a Christian should doubt his title to grace. This doctrine is equivalent to teaching the propriety of disbelieving the testimony of God. It is charging God with falsehood, dishonoring and blaspheming the Lord Christ, openly affronting the Holy Spirit, knowingly plunging people into unpardonable sins and blasphemies and consequently sending them to the devil without hope or comfort of salvation.

35. Such is the beautiful fruit of papistical doctrine; such is papistical holiness. This is what they who would be the Christian Church recommend to us. They would have us, with them, openly and fearlessly charge God with falsehood, trample his Word under foot and worship the devil in his stead. Further, they require us to praise and honor them and render them thanks, rejoicing to be offered their stipulated terms of friendship. At the same time they have not in a single instance repented of their abominable idolatry or acknowledged their error; rather they plume themselves on having in their purity taught no wrong. If we will not accede to their demands, we must be persecuted, put to death, exterminated everywhere in the world with fire and sword. But the devil and death may accede in our stead. Let the godly Christian desire and pray that God may hurl such

accursed doctrine into the abyss of hell and punish as they deserve the impenitent blasphemers since they will not cease. And let all the people say, Amen, amen.

36. Note particularly the consolation of Paul's concluding words. Here he embraces in one clear word the whole substance of the Gospel when he says: "*He that hath the Son hath the life; he that hath not the Son of God hath not the life.*" How could he speak plainer and more forcibly? What is the need of further inquiry and investigation or discussion of this theme? Do you wish to have assurance of eternal life? According to this verse, you have it truly if you possess Christ the Sort of God; and you have Christ when you believe this witness and preaching as John says, and you should confidently rely upon it in life and in death as the divine, eternal truth. But if you believe not, you have not life; and all effort and suffering on your part, yes, combined with the effort and suffering of the whole world, will profit you nothing. You have not the Son of God if you do not believe God's witness of him but charge God with falsehood.



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