

## THE VICTORY THAT CONQUERS THE WORLD

In 1 John 5:1–5 we read of the victory that conquers the world:

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the parent loves the child. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome, for whatever is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith. Who is it that conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

Here the victory that conquers the world is a love of God and a keeping of His commandments—a righteousness born from God (vv. 3–4a). It is our faith, which has been born of God, that conquers the world (v. 4). And we, who are born of God and believe that Jesus is the Son of God, are the ones who conquer the world (vv. 1, 5). It may seem strange to us that the victory that conquers the world is something so apparently puny as our faith. Yet we have seen that faith has more to do with the One in whom faith is placed than it does with those who have faith. Our faith is that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, the Saviour of the world, sent by God into the world to be the atoning sacrifice, the propitiation, for our sins (see also 1 John 4:9–10, 14). ‘So we have known and believe the love that God has for us’ (1 John 4:16). This is a gift of faith that is ‘born of God’, not from ourselves. Nevertheless, it is this faith of ours, in action, that actually conquers the world.

### **‘Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great’**

What is this ‘world’ that is conquered by our God-given faith? In Revelation 17 and 18 it is called Babylon, and there we see its demise under the judgment of God:

And the kings of the earth, who committed fornication and lived in luxury with her, will weep and wail over her when they see the smoke of her burning; they will stand far off, in fear of her torment, and say, ‘Alas, alas, the great city, Babylon, the mighty city! For in one hour your judgment has come.’ And the merchants of the earth weep and mourn for her, since no one buys their cargo anymore, cargo of gold, silver, jewels and pearls, fine linen, purple, silk and scarlet, all kinds of scented wood, all articles of ivory, all articles of costly wood, bronze, iron, and marble, cinnamon, spice, incense, myrrh, frankincense, wine, olive oil, choice flour and wheat, cattle and sheep, horses and chariots, slaves—and human lives. ‘The fruit for which your soul longed has gone from you, and all your dainties and your splendour are lost to you, never to be found again!’ The merchants of these wares, who gained wealth from her, will stand far off, in fear of her torment, weeping and mourning aloud, ‘Alas, alas, the great city, clothed in fine linen, in purple and scarlet, adorned with gold, with jewels, and with pearls! For in one hour all this wealth has been laid waste!’ And all shipmasters and seafarers, sailors and all whose trade is on the sea, stood far off and cried out as they saw the smoke of her burning, ‘What city was like the great city?’ And they threw dust on their heads, as they wept and mourned, crying out, ‘Alas, alas, the great city, where all who had ships at sea grew rich by her wealth! For in one hour she has been laid waste Rev. 18:9–19).

The reaction of the kings, the merchants, the shipmasters, seafarers, sailors and traders is one of utter dismay at the fall of Babylon. For them she has been ‘the great city’, full of dainties, splendour and wealth. In her they have invested their all. Now it all has been taken from them in Babylon’s collapse. They now stand far off with nothing. No wonder they are dismayed!

They are not the only ones. Music-makers, artisans, food processors, and even newly-weds—a sample of all that we might consider entertaining, enjoyable or pleasurable in this world—will no longer be found there:

Then a mighty angel took up a stone like a great millstone and threw it into the sea, saying, ‘With such violence Babylon the great city will be thrown down, and will be found no more; and the sound of harpists and minstrels and of flutists and trumpeters will be heard in you no more; and an artisan of any trade will be found in you no more; and the sound of the millstone will be heard in you no more; and the light of a lamp will shine in you no more; and the voice of bridegroom and bride will be heard in you no more; for your merchants were the magnates of the earth, and all nations were deceived by your sorcery’ (Rev. 18:21–23).

We ourselves may feel pangs of loss and disappointment just hearing this. For we, no less than others, have invested so much of our lives in this world that the throwing down of Babylon strikes at our own hearts as well. I remember when, as a young man, I first read these chapters, my breath was taken away.

For this ‘Babylon’ world has an allurements and enticement that none of us are immune to. The apostle John, when he is first shown the vision of this great Babylon—even though at that point she is called ‘mother of whores and of earth’s abominations’—when John sees her, even he is carried away in amazement. John has to be pulled up by the angel: ‘Why are you amazed?’ Such amazement at the greatness of Babylon and at the beast that carries her is only for those whose names have not been written in the book of life (see Rev. 17:1–8). Those whose names are in the book of life should know better.

Alluring as this Babylon-world is, we are shown in this vision that she is actually quite foul, and vicious. She is ‘holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her fornication’ (Rev. 17:4). She is ‘drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the witnesses to Jesus’ (Rev. 17:6). We wonder why she should have such horrible wickedness attributed to her and, this being so, we wonder what is so attractive about her that so many are taken in by her.

### **Whose portion in life is in this world**

Then other night I was reading Psalm 17:8–15 in the New King James Version. In verse 8 are these words:

Keep me as the apple of Your eye;  
Hide me under the shadow of Your wings.

Those words tell us where this person is, or wants to be, with regard to God—and they are beautiful! The ‘apple’ of your eye is the pupil, the dot in the middle, the bit you see through. It is one of the most tender and most vulnerable parts of your body, the bit you guard and protect most zealously—from bright light, from grit, or from impact. This person is saying, ‘God, I want You to treat me as if I were the apple of Your eye: intimately part of You, vulnerable, shielded, essential—and I know that is how You want to be with regard to me’. As I read recently in Psalm 18:19: ‘He delivered me because He delighted in me’. And also in Psalm 17:8: ‘Hide me under the shadow of Your wings’. It is like what God said to Israel at Sinai: ‘I bore you on eagle’s wings and brought you to myself’ (Exod. 19:4). This is where this person’s heart is with regard to God.

Beautiful and intimate as this is, there is a reason why the person is praying in this way. Something has brought him to it, as we find when we read on:

Keep me as the apple of Your eye;  
Hide me under the shadow of Your wings,  
From the wicked who oppress me,  
From my deadly enemies who surround me (Psa. 17:8–9).

This one is surrounded by deadly enemies, wicked oppressors, and it is they who have driven this person to seek refuge in this relationship with God. Who are these enemies? What are they like?

They have closed up their fat hearts;  
With their mouths they speak proudly (Psa. 17:10).

These enemies are fat, which means that they are very well off, and they are ‘closed up’ to being fat, which means that they are self-sufficient in their possessions, and keep them to themselves. And they ‘speak proudly’—they come across as being very confident; they are satisfied with themselves, and a bit arrogant with it. What do these enemies do?

They have now surrounded us in our steps;  
They have set their eyes, crouching down to the earth,  
As a lion is eager to tear his prey,  
And like a young lion lurking in secret places (Psa. 17:11–12).

They are out to get us—they are ready to tear us to pieces.

Why are they like that? What is their great sin that has made them that way? Verse 14 gives us the answer:

Arise, O LORD,  
Confront him, cast him down;  
Deliver my life from the wicked with Your sword,  
With Your hand from men, O LORD,  
From *men of the world who have their portion in this life* (Psa. 17:13–14).

That is what makes them the way they are: they are ‘men of the world who have their portion in this life’. What is wrong with that? Isn’t that where we all are—in this life? Yes, it is, but how are we to be in this life? How are we to relate to this life? What are we to live for? Where are we to live from?

If we have our ‘portion in this life’, then we have decided to live *for* this life, and *from* this life. This life—the way things are in this world—will be the whole of our life. We will be looking to this life to supply all that we want and need, and we will be looking to make our way and advance ourselves in this life. Which is what a lot of people are doing, pretty much all the time.

### **The breath of life from God**

Now, is that the way things really are, and is that the way we are structured to live as human beings? What does God say about the way He created us to be, and what He created us for? In Genesis 2:7 God gives us a picture of the way we really are:

the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life;  
and the man became a living being.

So what are we made of? Dust from the ground—the stuff of this physical creation—we are of this earth, and we are part of it. Where does our life come from? It does not come from the dust, or from this earth, or from anywhere in this physical creation. Our life, or our living, comes from God. We live by God breathing into us the breath of life. That does not mean that we have a ‘spiritual’ part of us, alongside the physical, or that we are a mixture of the two. It does not mean we have a bit of God in us—a spark of the divine encased in human clay. It means that, according to the way God made us, in His own image, the whole of the life we

live here on earth, in this world, in this flesh, we are to live every moment from God. Another way of saying that is that we live every moment by faith. Anything that is not that, is not true human living. Any living that we try to do from ourselves or from this earth or from the things of this world—in other words, being of this world and having our portion in this life—any living that is not directly from God who made us will be less than human living as it is meant to be, and will fail. And will do great damage along the way. It is actually sinful.

What are we made for? We hear in Genesis 1 that God blessed us and told us to ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion’ over all the creatures (Gen. 1:28). In other words, to fill and care for and rule over the earth with a community of people who live in the blessing of God. So that the life of God is manifest in every part of the earth and in what happens there. So that the earth will be filled with the glory of God and with the knowledge of the glory of God as the waters cover the sea (see Num. 14:21; Hab. 2:14). So that all will reflect the righteousness of God. Indeed we are told that there will be a whole renewed heavens and earth in which righteousness dwells at home (see 2 Pet. 3:13). All of that we are denying and rejecting and despising when we settle for having our portion in this life, for living from or for ourselves, or this earth, or the things of this world, instead of from and for God who made us.

### **For this life only?**

Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 wrote of people who do not believe in the resurrection of the dead. That is, they believe that this life, and the things that make it up, are all that there is, and so they live ‘for this life only’ (see 1 Cor. 15:12–19). So they say things like: ‘Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die’ (1 Cor. 15:32). They have no reference to all things coming from God, and all things coming to reflect the righteousness of God, and so they become amoral and immoral, and Paul calls them ‘Bad company’ that ‘ruins good morals’ (1 Cor. 15:33).

On the surface it looks so innocuous and appealing. Enjoy the good things of this life! The New King James version of Psalm 17 goes on to say about those whose portion in life is in this world:

whose belly You fill with Your hidden treasure. They are satisfied with children, **A**nd leave the rest of their *possession* for their babes (Psa. 17:14).

What can be wrong with that—being filled with God’s good gifts, and being satisfied with children, and leaving an inheritance to your grandchildren—isn’t that something that preoccupies many of us most of the time? The point is, these enemies are saying: that’s all there is, and that is what we live for, and that is what gives us life. And the moment we are in that place, then we are at each other’s throats, because it will be me and my family over against others. And, if need be, at the expense of others, because it will be me and my family even if others then have to miss out. Which is why the Babylon-world’s golden cup is full of abominations and impurities. And woe betide anyone who tries to say that what we are living for and living from is empty or wrong. Which is why the Babylon-world is drunk with the blood of the saints—those who persist in testifying to the righteous purpose of God, over against those whose portion is in this life. And around that cluster all the evil forces that have chosen to be opposed to the righteous purpose of God. Which is why the Babylon-world

has become a dwelling place of demons, a haunt of every foul spirit, a haunt of every foul bird, a haunt of every foul and hateful beast (Rev 18:2).

And so:

her sins are heaped high as heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities (Rev. 18:5).

We asked what is this world that is conquered by our faith, and here it is. Like Babylon's golden cup—so innocuous-looking and attractive on the outside; so evil and deadly on the inside.

### **Flee from the wrath to come**

And so the Babylon-world is marked for destruction. Let me read for you from the beginning of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*:

As I walked through the wilderness of this world, I lighted on a certain place where was a den, and laid me down in that place to sleep; and as I slept, I dreamed a dream. I dreamed, and behold, I saw a man clothed with rags, standing in a certain place, with his face from his own house, a book in his hand, and a great burden upon his back. I looked and saw him open the book, and read therein; and as he read, he wept and trembled; and not being able longer to contain, he brake out with a lamentable cry, saying, 'What shall I do?'

In this plight, therefore, he went home, and restrained himself as long as he could, that his wife and children should not perceive his distress; but he could not be silent long, because that his trouble increased. Wherefore at length he brake his mind to his wife and children; and thus he began to talk to them: 'O, my dear wife,' said he, 'and you the children of my bowels, I, your dear friend, am in myself undone by reason of a burden that lieth hard upon me; moreover, I am certainly informed that this our city will be burnt with fire from heaven; in which fearful overthrow, both myself, with thee my wife, and you my sweet babes, shall miserably come to ruin, except (the which yet I see not) some way of escape can be found whereby we may be delivered.' At this his relations were sore amazed; not for that they believed that what he had said to them was true, but because they thought that some frenzy distemper had got into his head!

So they mock him and give him a hard time, and later he meets a man called Evangelist who, among other things

gave him a parchment roll, and there was written within, 'Fly from the wrath to come.'

The man therefore read it, and looking upon Evangelist very carefully, said, 'Whither must I fly?' Then said Evangelist, (pointing with his finger over a very wide field,) 'Do you see yonder wicket-gate?' The man said, 'No.' Then said the other, 'Do you see yonder shining light?' He said, 'I think I do.' Then said Evangelist, 'Keep that light in your eye, and go up directly thereto, so shalt thou see the gate; at which, when thou knockest, it shall be told thee what thou shalt do.' So I saw in my dream that the man began to run. Now he had not run far from his own door when his wife and children, perceiving it, began to cry after him to return; but the man put his fingers in his ears, and ran on crying, Life! life! eternal life!<sup>1</sup>

So he goes. And in Part Two his wife and children follow.

Jesus gave warning of the same thing in Luke 17:

Just as it was in the days of Noah, so too it will be in the days of the Son of Man. They were eating and drinking, and marrying and being given in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed all of them. Likewise, just as it was in the days of Lot: they were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building, but on the day that Lot left Sodom, it rained fire and sulfur from heaven and destroyed all of them—it will be like that on the day that the Son of Man is revealed. On that day, anyone on the housetop who has belongings in the house must not come down to take them away; and likewise anyone in the field must not turn back. Remember Lot's wife. Those who try to make their life secure will lose it, but those who lose their life will keep it (Luke 17:26–33).

That is, those who seek their security in this life will lose it.

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<sup>1</sup> John Bunyan. *The Pilgrim's Progress*, 1678, 1684. Text from [www.ccel.org/ccel/bunyan/pilgrim.html](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/bunyan/pilgrim.html).

I said that the New King James version of Psalm 17 translates verse 14, about those of the world who have their portion in this life, as having their belly filled with God's hidden treasure, being satisfied with children, and having something to leave to their grandchildren. Other translations, such as the New Revised Standard Version, translate this as a judgment from God:

May their bellies be filled with what you have stored up for them;  
 may their children have more than enough;  
 may they leave something over to their little ones.

This is a case of giving people over to what they have opted for, and burdening them with it. Derek Kidner comments: 'To have everything but God, is judgment enough'.<sup>2</sup>

### **I shall behold your face in righteousness**

The person in Psalm 17 knew something better. We have already seen where he wants to be with God:

Keep me as the apple of Your eye;  
 Hide me under the shadow of Your wings (Psa. 17:8).

This is what he says in the end:

As for me, I will see Your face in righteousness;  
 I shall be satisfied when I awake in Your likeness (Psa. 17:15 *NKJV*)

Do we see where this person is? What is his hope? To see God's face in the righteousness that is God's, that will fill the new heavens and the earth, and to participate in that righteousness of God, in God's likeness! Where is he living from, and what is he living for? Not from this world, or anything in this world, but from God, and for God.

### **In this world, but not of it**

But still in this world. Some commentators take 'when I awake' to mean 'when I rise from the dead in the resurrection'.<sup>3</sup> We may take it that way ourselves, and it will certainly be true that when we rise from the dead at the revelation of Christ 'we will be like him, for we will see him as he is' (1 John 3:2). But other commentators say that the Hebrew words make better sense if he is talking about when I wake up tomorrow morning!<sup>4</sup> And we must take that seriously too. Jesus prayed to His Father for his disciples:

I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves. I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world (John 17:13–18).

In the world is where we are. That includes the Babylon-world—that God so loved that He sent his only Son, so that whoever believes in him should not perish with the Babylon-world but have eternal life. And we are in this world, not just for a little while, before we are

<sup>2</sup> Derek Kidner. *Psalms 1–72*, Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester, 1973, p. 89.

<sup>3</sup> Derek Kinder, op. cit. p. 90.

<sup>4</sup> Artur Weiser. *The Psalms: A Commentary*, SCM, London, 1962, p. 182.

whisked out of it. It is this earth that is going to be filled with the glory of God. In much of Christian history believers have looked to be taken out of this world into some ethereal realm. Even Jonathan Edwards, the great American theologian, for all his brilliance, pictured us ending up on something like another planet. Eternal life will be in the new heavens and the new earth, which are not another place, but these heavens and this earth totally renewed. We will wake up in the resurrection to see God's face and be like Him, but we can equally by faith see God's face in righteousness when we wake up tomorrow morning, and live accordingly! In fact, to live any other way is doomed to destruction, and to live that way will bear wonderful fruit in the new heavens and the new earth, that God is fabricating even now out of the deeds of love that we do each day in the power of the Holy Spirit by grace through faith.<sup>5</sup> Which is why Paul ends his great discourse on the resurrection of the dead with the words:

Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labour is not in vain (1 Cor. 15:58).

Lord Shaftesbury, who worked in the hard world of British politics in the nineteenth century—did he make a difference in this world? You bet he did: children out of the mines, factory working conditions vastly improved. How did that happen? He woke up every morning beholding the face of God in righteousness, in sure faith and hope of the world to come that will be full only of God's righteousness, and he lived accordingly here and now in this world. What did he say towards the end of his life? 'I do not think that in the last forty years I have lived one conscious moment that was not influenced by the thought of our Lord's return'. He lived in this world, and he lived from God and for God. It's what human beings are designed for.

### **The Man from heaven**

So how does our faith conquer the world—the world of Babylon? We make a choice, first of all, not to get sucked in by the Babylon-world. The apostle John said in his first letter:

Do not love the world or the things in the world. The love of the Father is not in those who love the world; for all that is in the world—the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches—comes not from the Father but from the world. And the world and its desire are passing away, but those who do the will of God live forever (1 John 2:15–17).

So we settle our minds that way. But it doesn't happen as simply as that. We are able to do that because something has happened to us that had happened to the ones John was writing to. A human person has appeared on earth, who is called 'the man from heaven' (1 Cor. 15:47–49). He is human flesh and blood—he is 'of the dust' as much as we are—and he lives from God. He lives the life of heaven here on earth—all of the righteousness of God living here in human flesh. When he appeared in this Babylon-world, this world hated him, and killed him. As part of this Babylon-world, that is what we did to him. We hated him and we killed him. He died on account of our sin. And yet, at the same time, we have been shown that he was there in God's love for us. He was taking the death that would be ours when the Babylon-world that we have invested our heart and soul in comes to its rightful doom. It's our death he has died there. We have been crucified with him, and rightly so.

From the moment we were born, we have been out for ourselves, and so we were part of this Babylon-world. But all of that was brought to a stop when Jesus died on that cross, and

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<sup>5</sup> See the title essay and poem in Geoffrey Bingham, *This Building Fair*, NCPI, Coromandel East, 1988, pp. 139, 143.

took us there with him, and put us to death. The moment Jesus died on the cross—that was when Babylon fell. This whole mean self-serving system met its doom and collapsed when Jesus laid down his life for us. Because that was the moment when his love, the love of the man from heaven, the love of God in him, prevailed against all odds—against the Babylon-world, against our sinful flesh, against the devil. What did Jesus say when he was about to go to the cross?

‘Now is the judgment of *this world*; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.’ He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die (John 12:31–33).

So the apostle Paul said:

I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me (Gal. 2:19–20).

What else did Paul say in that letter to the Galatians?

May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which [*or through whom*] the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world (Gal. 6:14).

That is when our linkage with this Babylon world was broken. That is the victory that conquers the world as far as we are concerned. From then on, we are spoilt for this life, as far as living from or living for the things of this life only is concerned. We can’t keep it up. Nothing is more pathetic now than a church, or a Christian, that is trying to use the world’s ways to impress the world. We can’t get away with it any more—it doesn’t work for us. We might fool ourselves, for a while. But not for long. We certainly won’t fool the world. They will suss us out, and they will smell us a mile off. And they’ll give us a hard time, as Babylon always does to the saints. Jesus said:

If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you. If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world—therefore the world hates you (John 15:18–19).

That is where the ‘enemies’ of Psalm 17 do us good service. They keep on reminding us in no uncertain terms that we are a crucified people, as far as this world is concerned.

### **The holy city**

The person in Psalm 17 knew something much better:

Keep me as the apple of Your eye; Hide me under the shadow of Your wings.

As for me, I will see Your face in righteousness; I shall be satisfied when I awake in Your likeness (Psa. 17:8, 15 *NKJV*)

With the apostle John, what have we seen, that we now live for, and live from?

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband (Rev. 21:1–2).



That's us! And our husband, that we are joined to forever, is the Lamb that was slaughtered for us, our Lord Jesus. Charles Wesley wrote a hymn about Mary of Bethany sitting at Jesus' feet, to hear his every word:

O Love Divine, how sweet Thou art!  
When shall I find my willing heart  
All taken up by Thee?  
I thirst, I faint, I die to prove  
The greatness of redeeming love,  
The love of Christ for me.

Stronger His love than death or hell;  
Its riches are unsearchable;  
The first-born sons of light [that is, the angels]  
Desire in vain its depths to see;  
They cannot plumb the mystery,  
The length, and breadth, and height.

God only knows the love of God;  
O that it now were shed abroad  
In this poor stony heart!  
For love I sigh, for love I pine;  
This only portion, Lord, be mine,  
Be mine this better part.

For ever would I take my seat  
With Mary at the Master's feet;  
Be this my happy choice;  
My only care, delight, and bliss,  
My joy, my heaven on earth be this,  
To hear the Bridegroom's voice.<sup>6</sup>

Not, 'My joy, my heaven in heaven be this', but, 'My joy, *my heaven on earth* be this, To hear the Bridegroom's voice'—now, tomorrow morning when we awake, every day, unto the ages of ages. Let this be our eagerness and our prayer, now and always.

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<sup>6</sup> *Hymns Ancient and Modern*, William Clowes and Sons, London, 1939, number 195.