

## *Faith That Overcomes • 1 John 5:1–5*

Of all the many creatures in God’s creation it seems to me that one of the most fascinating has to be the Pacific salmon. Here is a fish that is born high up in the shallow waters of a stream where the mother fish has gone and hollowed out something of a nest in the gravel of the shallow fresh water while the father stands guard. The eggs are then laid and fertilized. They sink down into the gravel where they then grow until the salmon is born several months later. It grows to maturity over a period of up to several years.

After it matures, it begins an extraordinary journey down the stream and rivers, through the tributaries, and eventually to the ocean. While most fish are either fresh water fish or salt water fish, the salmon lives in both. Having reached the ocean, the salt water, the fish then lives there for a period of at least six months, but upwards to five years.

Then, in an even more extraordinary migration, the salmon reverses the trip. The salmon may travel as far as two thousand miles back across the ocean to the river from which it originally came. It then swims up that river taking all of the right turns at the appropriate places - the tributaries the streams - back to the very place where that fish was born years before, and there it spawns. This is the conclusion of its long and amazing journey, a journey that fights the upstream battle against the downstream currents. A battle that at times requires the salmon to jump as much as ten feet in the air in order to scale waterfalls that are going the wrong direction for its journey. It is a journey that distinguishes the salmon from all other fish.

I remember one time while on vacation in Oregon we went to a place to see and learn about the salmon. I discovered that it really isn’t too hard to tell the spawning salmon from other fish. It’s a very simple and memorable test. If it’s going down stream, it’s either not a salmon or it’s dead. If it’s going upstream, it is a salmon because when spawning they swim up against the current.

By human standards of intelligence, salmon really aren’t all that bright. So how do they do it? How do they find their way across the ocean? How do they know which river, which tributary, which stream to swim up? How do they know when to turn right and when to turn left when they’ve only been there once before?

Biologists have all sorts of answers. Some speculate that it has to do with the smell that every stream and every current has, and the fish sense it. Lots of different theories have been offered. There are lots of explanations on how they can so oppose the current and how they can leap so high into the air, but the ultimate answer is that that’s the way God made them. That’s the way they were born, and that’s the nature that they have.

Just as God gave a certain nature from birth to salmon, so he also gave a certain nature from birth to Christians. Just as salmon have certain characteristics that distinguish them from all other fish, likewise there are certain characteristics that enable Christians to swim upstream, to fight against the current and to make it to the destination, to be victorious. So much so that you can look at all the high-pressure currents and the swirling rapids of the world in which we live, and you can see the Christians. Christians are those who fight against the current, who go upstream when all others seem to be going the opposite direction, who make it to the destination of God’s choice.

Listen to a description that was written long ago about what the victorious someone who has faith or

belief, and the object of that faith or belief is Jesus Christ. Christian is like. It’s in the New Testament book of I John, chapter 5.

*A Christian is someone who has faith or belief, and the object of that faith or belief is Jesus Christ.*

*Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves the father loves his child as well. This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands. This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome, for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.*

The first characteristic of Christians is belief. A Christian is someone who believes, someone who has faith. But that must be rightly understood.

Do you remember in junior high English class when the teacher explained the difference between a transitive and an intransitive verb? A transitive verb

is a verb that takes an object. A transitive verb cannot normally stand alone. An object must be either stated or implied.

Take, for example, the verb kill. I may say, "I killed a mosquito," or, "I killed a man." There is an object that makes sense of it all. If you simply say, "I killed," it doesn't make any sense. Or I might say, "I kissed." And again there must be an object or the verb doesn't really make any sense. Some thing or some one must be kissed. Another way of putting it is that unless there is a kissee there is no kisser!

Belief and faith are always transitive. They always require an object. Some people don't understand that. Every now and then you'll hear someone say, "I'm convinced that I'll go to heaven when I die because I believe." Believe what? Or you'll hear someone say, "She is convinced that she will make it through this great difficulty because she has faith." Faith in what? Belief and faith always require an object.

A Christian then is someone who believes that Jesus is the Christ. A Christian is someone who has faith or belief, and the object of that faith or belief is Jesus Christ. A Christian believes that Jesus is the Son of God, that he became human, that he died on the cross for our sins, that he was buried and that he rose again. Faith must have the right object. It is not just faith by itself. There is a huge difference between killing a mosquito and killing a man. There's a big difference between whether I kiss my wife or I kiss your wife. And so there's a big difference between having faith in Jesus Christ and having faith in oneself or having faith in some other alleged deity or some other religion. A Christian is someone who believes in Jesus.

A second characteristic of Christians is birth. Birth determines nature. If you are born a salmon then you have the nature of a salmon. If you are born a scorpion, you have the nature of a scorpion. Salmon live in water and salmon swim. Scorpions live on land and scorpions sting. Understand that salmon don't sting and scorpions don't swim.

Christians are those who have been born of God. They have the nature of Christians and not the nature of non-Christians. It is something that happens from the point of spiritual birth. Occasionally we hear people say, "I have always been a Christian." That is an impossibility, for while physical birth gives someone a physical life and physical nature, it is possible to have a spiritual life and a spiritual nature from God only when one has a spiritual birth. The Bible calls that the second birth, and we have the common ex-

pression of someone being born again. It refers to the result of what happens when we exercise belief in Jesus Christ. So belief brings birth: we are born again and we then have the nature of God. Those two characteristics come together in I John 5:1 where it says that "everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God."

There's a third characteristic that cannot be separated from these first two and that is behavior. All behavior is a result of either belief or birth or both. A Christian's behavior is the result of what we as Christians believe, and that we as Christians have been born again. It's explained in I John 5 that "everyone who loves the father loves his child as well. This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands. This is love for God: to obey his commands." So there's belief and there's birth and there's behavior.

Actually there are two behaviors. The first of them is love: we love God and we love one another. In our study of I John we have often been told that Christians are those who love God and who love one another. But there is an interesting change that appears here. Always before it has stated that we love God and that is shown by the way we love others. This time the order is reversed. It says that Christians love others and that is shown by the way we love God. Another way of saying it is that the two are so essentially intertwined that they are absolutely inseparable.

You may be able to take two pieces of paper and write out the two different concepts of loving God and loving other people. You may be able to academically and theoretically separate them, but in real life it can't be done. In real life, love for God and love for each other are so intertwined that you cannot possibly get them apart. It's a package deal. It's part of being the family of God. You love the father, so you also love the father's children.

The second part of the behavior that is characteristic of Christians who believe and have received the second birth is obedience. Christians obey. If they don't obey, they're not Christians. If salmon don't swim, if scorpions don't sting, then they're not salmon, they're not scorpions. If Christians don't obey, then they're not Christians. It's all a product of belief and birth.

What do Christians obey? Christians obey the Bible because that's the best statement that we have of God's commands. Sometimes people come up with a list of extraneous and extra Biblical do's and don'ts that says that to be a Christian you have to behave in

a certain fashion. What often goes with that is an overlooking of what God has clearly commanded within his book. We have to be careful that we understand that as Christians our belief and our birth result in obedience to the commands that are clearly stated within the Bible.

For example, the Bible tells us that we are to tell the truth. So a Christian obeys that command even though the pressure may be to lie. There may be all types of streams and currents putting the pressure on to tell a lie. But a Christian's behavior from birth and belief insists on obeying the commandment of God for truth.

The commandment of God is for fidelity within life-long marriage. While that may be a difficult thing under certain circumstances, that is the clear command of God. So a Christian obeys that command.

The clear command of God is that his name be honored and revered. And yet we live in a world where there are people who pepper every second and third sentence with obscenities and profanities, many of which are the name of Jesus Christ or of God or the Holy Spirit or some combination of all of them. But a Christian is someone whose words and vocabulary reflect the belief and the birth of what it means to be a Christian.

Christians are amazing people. Christians are amazing because of belief in Jesus Christ, because of birth that gives us supernatural nature from God and because of behavior that is love and is obedience.

Such statements of characteristics, for many Christians, raise all kinds of concerns. So much so that some people quit reading the Bible, they quit going to church and they quit listening to God. They feel it's just too much; it's too overwhelming. It's too hard to be so different from a world that is full of lies and immorality and selfishness and sins. It's too tough to abstain from sex outside of marriage. It's impossible to be honest in a competitive business where most of the others are dishonest.

Others say, "My situation is different. My marriage, my job, my neighborhood, my family, my circumstances - they're different from everybody else's. So God's commands really don't apply to me. I'm different from all the others. It would be unfair to expect me to go along with what God has asked me to do."

How does God answer the allegation that his commands are simply too much, that he's expecting more

than he ought to expect, that he's being unreasonable? It's explained in I John 5:3 that his commands are not burdensome. But you say, "Wait a minute. How can you say that? They are burdensome. They're heavy; they're hard; they're tough."

Are they? Commands aren't burdensome when you love someone. Do you know the old story of an English schoolboy who walked a long distance to school each day with a young boy on his back? A tourist was visiting the area and for some weeks saw him coming and going each day. One day his curiosity could be restrained no longer. He went up to the schoolboy and said, "How do you do it? How can you carry such a burden on your back for such great distances everyday?" The boy replied, "That's not a

burden, that's my brother!" You see he loved him and so he didn't think of him as a burden at all.

I've seen people do extraordinary things

for those that they love. I've seen wives care over long periods of time for dying husbands. They perform tasks on a repeated basis that under other circumstances they would find revolting and disgusting, and yet they do it. And when asked, "How do you do it?" the answer is, "It's no burden. Not for someone you love. In fact, it's a privilege."

I've seen parents make sacrifices for their children that I would consider unreasonable. Parents have given up vacations, jobs, houses, sometimes given up life savings, in order to meet some need for a child. Even a casual observer wants to say, "How can you make that kind of sacrifice for someone else?" And the parent says, "I never thought of it as a sacrifice before. That's an interesting word to use. I'm just helping my daughter, my son. I'm glad that I can do it."

God's commands are not burdensome to those who love him. I suspect that those who think that his commands are burdensome have perhaps spent their time weighing the commands instead of measuring the love. God's commands are not burdensome, not only because we love God as Christians, but also because God always gives to us the resources necessary to meet whatever expectations he gives us. Isn't that wonderful? If God calls on us do to something, he will always give to us whatever we need to accomplish the task. He may ask us to be honest in a business context that is largely dishonest. He may ask us to be faithful in a marriage that is a hard marriage to

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stay in. He may ask us to behave in a loving way towards people that are very hard to love. He may ask us to be decent in our speech when all the speech around us is indecent. But he will always give us the resources to obey his commands and to meet his expectations. That is not to say that it will be easy. It is not to say that swimming upstream and hurdling over ten foot barriers is a simple thing to do. But it is not burdensome because we are doing it for the God we love who promises to give to us the resources that we need.

There are others who say, "I have a different concern. My concern is that as I try to live the Christian life in a context that is largely non-Christian, where the pressures are absolutely oppressive, it is like swimming against a firehose. It's like fighting against an ocean current. I feel like I'm going to be overwhelmed. It's hard when everyone else is cheating in school. I feel like I'm going to be overwhelmed because lust is laid on us continually by the media. I'm not sure that I can continue in my neighborhood or in this family or in this marriage. It's hard to make it financially when other people are cheating on their taxes and I'm expected to compete on uneven ground. I'm weary and tired. I just don't feel I can hang in there any longer. I'm afraid that I'm going to be overcome by the world and all that's in it."

To this God says, "This is the victory that overcomes the world, even our faith." God offers victory no matter what the odds. He offers victory no matter how hard the fight. The key to that victory is faith. But it's not just faith. It is faith that has an object - the right object.

Imagine that there are one hundred of us standing on a huge battlefield. We are facing an opposing army of all the Roman Empire, a million strong, clad for battle and led by their greatest strategist, someone like Julius Caesar or Mark Antony. They are attacking. You can hear the beat of the horses' hoofs. You can see the reflection off the soldiers' armor. The sound is like thunder coming at us. And I stand there - and sort of yawn. You turn to me and say, "Do you see what I see?" And I answer, "Don't worry. We're going to win." "They have to be a million strong," is your response, but I say, "There are a hundred of us."

They are getting closer and closer. You ask, "How can you be so calm?" "I have faith," I say. And you say, "Faith in what?" I point out that squadron of MIG 23s and US Phantoms flying over carrying our colors. I mention to you that all those cruise missiles, some with tactical nuclear warheads, are connected to this little pad of buttons that I have in my

hand. I mention that some of our 100 are operating those state of the art tanks and behind them are the heavy artillery ready to fire. I explain to you that we have more than enough firepower to destroy an army of millions. And you're impressed. In fact, you agree that we're going to win, not because of my little faith, but because of the big object of my faith. "This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God."

Jesus Christ, the Son of God, has greater power and weaponry than all human armies of all of history combined. And while we would collapse and die if we were dependent upon our own resources, we shall be invariably and inevitably victorious because of Jesus Christ. It's true that sometimes the battle is hard, but that victory is guaranteed and guaranteed in advance.

It seems to me that such extraordinary truth from God demands some kind of response from us. Perhaps someone says, "I need to be birthed by God. I need to believe in Jesus Christ so that my behavior will be changed." Someone else may say, "When I look at what God here says, it gives me a totally different perspective on my job, on my neighborhood, on my marriage, on my language, on my life. I'm going to live differently now with that perspective."

I invite you to listen again to God's words and then ask God what he's saying to you. Then say 'yes' back to him.

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Father, what do you have to say to us? We listen, and we ask you to listen for us as we say 'yes.' In Jesus' name. Amen.

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