

1 John 5 **Exercising Faith**

1 John is an encouraging letter. John the apostle repeatedly describes his readers as capable and accepted by God. In chapter 1, he stressed our spiritual connectedness as what makes life on earth worthwhile, and assured us that sin can be defeated, even when it doesn't seem like it all the time. In chapter 2 he reminds us that we already know the truth, that selflessness is the foundation of the law of God, and that despite the fact that deceivers are many, we are right to have confidence. In chapter 3, he impressed on us the action side of our connection with God: our faith, our sinlessness, our selflessness, and our confidence. Each of those concepts spurs us into doing something with our relationship with God and with one another. John used all of chapter 4 to give us specific reasons why our confidence is justified: (1) We can divide fact from fiction by the Spirit, (2) we love one another, (3) we have faith based on facts, and (4) we imitate Jesus. And in the last chapter, John gives us examples of how we can exercise this faith.

As the chapter opens, he lets us know that we exercise faith by overcoming the world. You will notice that, in the first 4 verses, John is reviewing concepts he has presented earlier in this letter so that he can arrive at this next conclusion (5:1 – 5):

“Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God [2:22, 4:2, 4:15], and everyone who loves Him who begot also loves him who is begotten of Him [2:10, 3:10 – 17, 4:20 – 21]. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep His commandments [2:3, 3:22 – 24, 4:21]. And His commandments are not burdensome. For whatever is born of God overcomes the world [this is the new part, based on the preceding]. And this is the victory that has overcome the world – our faith. Who is he who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?”

John has already told us what the non-burdensome commandments are [3:23]: trust the essential quality of Jesus and do what is best for one another.

How do these precursor ideas lead us to the conclusion that we can and will overcome the world? What is “the world.” John is referring to the unbelieving world – all of it lumped together. He is not just singling out the people everyone thinks are terrible, but rather all unbelievers as a group. What makes them unable to break free from the pressures of society whereas John announces that we, the faithful, can? The gospel makes some outrageous claims: that the faithful are truly free, that they are able to deal with reality without fear, that existence makes sense and has a purpose. And what does John say gives us that ability? Our faith (5:4). How does that work?

For God to be God, He must, as a matter of logical necessity, communicate with His creation. We cannot expect success if we go searching for God to obtain the meaning for life. We are not that smart. He must tell us. Among all the documents that make a claim to being from God, only one, the Bible stands up to close scrutiny. The Bible has overwhelming evidence that it has been transmitted to us accurately. The events and descriptions in the Bible match up with the geography and history of the times and places described. Predictions were documented well before the events described and 100% occurred as predicted. And, those who brought the communications were able to violate the laws of nature consistently, again surviving the closest scrutiny. That message from God lets us know what the purpose of God was when He created

the universe: to build an incubator for faith. Why? Because God has as a terminal objective: a big family that will last. That faith, that trusting the promises of God, is the primary and necessary characteristic of those whom God wants in His family forever. Looking at it from the negative side, if God were to include people who do not trust the other family members and do not trust God, they would quickly cause heaven to look a whole lot like earth, only longer.

We, the faithful, can overcome the broken societies in which we live, not be dragged down by them, because we trust the Creator and each other. And, we know what our purpose is: to spread that message. And, we have a consistent set of standards to follow that never fall apart when we need them most.

The outside world, on the other hand, tends not to stick with reality for long enough to find out if it is worth sticking with. The outside world gives up and becomes part of the problem because they have not been able to figure out what their purpose is. Instead, they guess. Then, when it starts falling apart, they either leap to another unproven guess, or make excuses why the failed guess is really OK. Do you see why those on the outside tend to settle for what may give them temporary comfort and don't think about reality too much. Facing reality is just too painful, confusing, or unpromising.

How much we are able to trust God (with His mountain of physical evidence) really is based on how selfless we are. The more self-centered a person is, the less they trust that God's ideas are better than their own.

That is likely why God gives the indwelling Spirit to all the faithful, whose first task is to deposit God's version of selflessness in each faithful person (Romans 5:5). With that trust in God's description of reality, we overcome the unreality in which outsiders live. God has given all the faithful the ability to overcome themselves and this broken world. The promises are easy to find in the New Testament. We just need the trust that they will actually work.

John goes on to his second way we exercise our faith: we have expectations based on evidence (5:5 – 13):

“This is He who came by water and blood – Jesus Christ; not only by water, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit who bears witness, because the Spirit is truth. For there are three who bear witness: the Spirit, the water, and the blood; and these three agree as one. If we receive the witness of men, the witness of God is greater; for this is the witness of God, that He has testified of His Son. He who believes in the Son of God has the witness in himself; he who does not believe God has made Him a liar, because He has not believed the testimony God has given of His Son. And this is the testimony: that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life.”

First, remember that God gave this message to John so that he could write it down for the ordinary person to read and understand. Because of the confusing and convoluted explanations from religious authority figures over the ages, much has been pulled out of this paragraph that God did not but in.

Here's the simple explanation.

First, the water. Both John the Baptist and Jesus' disciples baptized with water. The message was to repent and get prepared for the eternal, universal kingdom that had been predicted with increasing detail for at least 1500 years, unless we include the promises to

Abraham 500 years before that. The water reminded people of the immersions that had been performed to get people ready for the predictions of the prophets about this eternal, universal kingdom that was finally brought into the open in Acts 2.

We exercise our faith when we recall the message that Jesus brought. Be ready for this eternal, universal kingdom. For people in Bible times, it was a little harder, since the universal description was in progress, not a done deal. We have the advantage of looking back across almost 2000 years of church history. Although that history has some bumps and potholes, the universal kingdom is here. It operates on the teachings, the point of view, of Jesus. There is only one authority figure, Jesus, the king.

Jesus' execution, the shedding of His blood, was separate from the call to be ready for the kingdom. The blood, Jesus' sacrifice, was God's answer to the justice problem with which philosophers and rabbis had been wrestling, without success, for many centuries. God finally revealed how He had planned, since before the beginning, to handle that justice problem.

As a reminder, here's the problem. When we make a bad choice, we need to make it right. Under civil law, we may spend some time in jail or pay a fine. We say, "He paid his debt to society." But that's not true. Once that bad choice is out there, it ripples through everyone around, affecting an unknown number of people even if they were not involved directly in the event. We cannot pull the ripples back. The effects have already happened. So, God came to earth to pay the complete debt to justice for all people of all eras. It's called redemption. Once for all. Jesus offered His own blood in the tabernacle in heaven (Hebrews 9). One of the ten symbolisms built into immersion is that we are asserting to God that we actually accept that redemption, neither carrying guilt with us for those sins, nor trying to pay off through our own efforts what has already been paid.

And what about those ripples that we could not reel back in? God couldn't do that either, since He would need to undo people's memories and the impacts those events had. Instead, He gave all the faithful the ability to overcome, to get past the bad aftereffects of sin that have crashed into us.

Many people drag their pasts with them through life, preventing joy, destroying relationships, and casting a negative pall over life because they cannot get past their guilt, or, for that matter, the guilt of others. Jesus' blood lets us put all of that guilt and imprisonment behind us. The outside world is stuck with not knowing what to do with justice or guilt or leftover animosity.

The third facet of Jesus' time on earth was associated with the Spirit. This was separate from His message and separate from His sacrifice: His miracles, His power. Both Jesus and John the Baptist died because they made powerful people angry. Jesus and John the Baptist had similar messages, but only Jesus provided that redemption. But, they were very different in that John the Baptist did no miracle; Jesus did a lot.

Jesus displayed the power of God. His miracles validated His claims to being the promised Messiah, helped Him model the character of God, kept Him safe until the right time for His sacrifice, and brought Him back on the third day. The fact that Jesus' message and mission was validated by power over the laws of nature made Him unique. Down through history, only a few who claimed to bring the answer to the purpose of creation also claimed miraculous powers. At some point, all of their claims to miracles fell apart – except Jesus.

Because of this framework (the water, the blood, and the Spirit), we have a framework for our expectations, evidence for our faith, a confident expectation of eternal life with God. We get

to live in reality. Our expectations come with evidence. We just need to search it out and know the facts that have been publicly displayed in museums around the globe for centuries.

John goes on with his third way we exercise our faith: we pray confidently (5:14 – 17):

“Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him. If anyone sees his brother sinning a sin which does not lead to death, he will ask, and He will give him life for those who commit sin not leading to death. There is sin leading to death. I do not say that he should pray about that. All unrighteousness is sin, and there is sin not leading to death.”

At first, this paragraph about prayer can seem to be not very much help. How do we know that requests are “according to His will”? How do we know what is a “sin leading to death.” Remember, this was designed to be helpful, encouraging, and understandable by ordinary people.

“According to His will.” What is that? A quick look through the New Testament shows us that the concept is not so daunting as we might think. The “will” of God is not what God has foreordained to happen. The fatalistic crowd slipped that definition into a place it did not belong. The will of God means the desire of God, not the pronouncement of God. Take, for example, 1 Timothy 2:4 in which the same Greek word is used, “Who desires (wills) all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” We know that God is not going to get His desire on that one. Here are a few other examples of God’s will:

- 1 Peter 2:15 For this is the will (desire) of God, that by doing good you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men
- 1 Thessalonians 5:16 – 18 Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will (desire) of God in Christ Jesus for you
- 1 Thessalonians 4:3 For this is the will (desire) of God, your sanctification
- Matthew 7:21 Not everyone who says to me, “Lord, Lord,” shall enter the kingdom of heaven but he who does the will (desire) of My Father in heaven
- John 7:17 If anyone wills (desires) to do His will (desire), he will know concerning the doctrine

So, “if we ask anything according to His will,” in this letter would be “trust God, love the brethren.” If we keep those basic commands in the forefront, prayer works. “Trust God” means to actually act on His promises, which implies that you know what those promises are. There are hundreds. “Love the brethren” means to do what is best for another without regard to the effect on me. But, what is “best”? That takes some wisdom. Obviously, it is not to do whatever the other person wants, because what they want is probably not what they need. So, it takes some wisdom from God to figure out what they really need.

So, our prayers require some thought to become other-centered. Of course, our prayers can also include our requests, like in Philippians 4:6, “Be anxious for nothing, but with everything by prayer and supplication, upon thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God.” Build prayers on thanksgiving, be other-centered, and God promises to make stuff work out, although probably not in the way you thought it would. Rely on Romans 8:26, “Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession with groanings too deep for words.”

And, John lets us know that pointless prayers exist. His example is “sin leading to death.” I do not think that this refers to making a bad choice that might get you killed, but rather

rejecting faith leading to spiritual death. Praying for someone who takes unnecessary risks is probably a good idea. But those who decided that the gospel is no longer worth their time is beyond hope, not because God won't take them back, but because God came with His "A" game the first time. If someone decides that God's mountain of evidence is insufficient, God has nothing bigger or better to come with. God cannot forcefully change a person's thinking, or the concepts of faith and love are destroyed. Other than that, we are to be confident that God will work out our requests, as properly edited by the indwelling Spirit. Confidence in His promises is the key.

And, finally, John's fourth way we can exercise our faith, we get to live in reality (5:18 – 21):

"We know that whoever is born of God does not continue to sin; but he who has been born of God keeps him and the wicked one does not touch him. We know that we are of God, and the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one. And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us an understanding, that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life. Little children, keep yourselves from idols."

Over the centuries, various authority figures in Christianity have promoted the concept that the "wicked one" is behind every bush, waiting to ensnare you. Of course, we know from the prediction in Zechariah 13:2 and the confirmation in 2 Peter 2:4 and Jude 6, that Satan and his angels were locked up shortly before the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple which happened in 70 AD. But John was writing slightly before that, so Satan was busily wreaking havoc on earth at the time of this writing. Yet, John was not concerned for the faithful. He already mentioned it in 4:4, "He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world." Paul and James made similar comments. (Ephesians 6:11, James 4:7, 1 John 3:8, 4:4) So, even in those terrible times of wars and persecutions, the outsiders were under the control of their fears and worries. The evil one controlled them through deception and inuendo. The faithful overcame; they could see the reality of the situation. The devastation around them would be short-lived. Even if they suffered or even died, their lives on earth would be characterized by the joy that comes from selflessness, plus they knew that eternal life was theirs.

People in the world align themselves with a wide variety of myths. In America, a popular myth is that life should be comfortable. Millions, if not billions, of people want to come here to get a taste of that comfort. But it is a myth, not reality. In France, where our missionary kids and grandkids are, atheism is the official government position. Their myth is that the government knows best. The system will put you in your career, set the limits of how much you will make, and take care of your physical needs if you live long enough to get an appointment. In the Third World, superstition rules. Amazingly, well-educated people think that ju-ju is real. They lack confidence in absolutes, so right and wrong are fluid. The prophets in the Old Testament constantly ridiculed idolatry: belief that an inanimate object can influence the Fates in your favor. Yet, idolatry is the state religion of India. People we know have many of those same inclinations because unreality allows for nonsensical thinking.

If we have confidence in the Creator, based on that mountain of evidence, we get to live in reality, in a broken world that can get very messy, but we get to see through the scams and be connected to people whom we trust. As Jesus put it, we are the "blessed," above the cares of this life.