

## Overcoming Through Christ.

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"Be of good cheer; I have overcome the world."—John xvi. 33.

So said Christ when within an hour of Gethsemane and a day of Calvary. It is a strange utterance for such a moment, and seemingly altogether contradicted by facts. If this were victory—to have failed in the effort to win men to goodness, to have spoken words of gentleness and truth which next to nobody cared to hear, and to have given counsels which no man regarded; to have been misunderstood, rejected, hated; to have lived a life of poverty and loneliness, and to die in the first flush of early manhood, unlamented save by a handful of bewildered apostates and two or three brave women; if that is victory, what would be defeat? And yet this calm utterance of triumph is our Lord's summing up of his whole life: Looking back he sees it as all one continuous victory; looking forward he sees the cross as already overcome, though yet to be endured, and in that apparently crushing defeat he recognizes crowning victory. If Jesus Christ was right, most men are wrong; if that life is a type of a victorious life, many of us need to revise our notions and revolutionize our practices.

Now these words suggest to me three questions, which I name here at the beginning that we may understand where we are going. (1) What is a victorious life? (2) Was there ever such a life? (3) If there was, what does it matter to me? And the answer to all three questions lies in this shout of victory from the Man who was within arm's length of his cross, "Be of good cheer; I have overcome the world."

(1) So then, let me ask you to think with me, to begin with, what in the light of this great saying we must believe to be a victorious life. "I have overcome the world." People say that in what they choose to call the Johannine writings there is a peculiar phraseology, which I take leave to think John learned from Jesus, and one of the characteristics of that phraseology is the meaning that is attached to that expression "the world." I do not need to spend your time in repeating over again what I suppose we all in a general way understand, namely, that by that phrase is not meant this great assemblage of wonder and beauty which God has spread around us, and set us to live in and to understand, but that it means two things: First, the whole mass and aggregate of visible and sensible things considered as apart from God; and next, substantially what you and I mean in our modern conventional phraseology when we talk about society—the aggregate of godless men. These two things—the material universe apart from God, and the men who make a unity because they are all apart from him—these two thoughts cover the ground which John and John's Master desired to include within this term.

Now, then, if that is the meaning of the phrase, let us take another step. What is it here for? Two things: First, for the same purpose as the leaping poles and bars and other things in a gymnasium are, to make muscle; to build character; by resistance to make us strong. And another thing, for the same purpose as the window is in the house, that through it we may look and see the blue and the sun; and just as a man may fix his eyes upon some bit of colored glass in the window and look at that, oblivious of the more glorious and diviner color laid on by no human brush beyond, so you and I by our weakness make the world—which is meant by its visibilities to show us the Invisible, even his eternal power and Godhead—an obstruction instead of a transparent medium. And just as men may fail rightly to use the the gymnastic apparatus, so we by reason of our weakness find that the world robs us of our strength instead of increasing our strength, seduces us instead of stimulating us, and drives us away from our true selves and the home of our hearts which is God himself. And so, dear friends, the world conquers us when we let it hinder us from doing our duty and living Christlike and God-pleasing lives; the world conquers us when it fills our affections and constitutes our aim; the world conquers us when its lets down its painted phantasms between us and the true realities, the things unseen and the eternal. And conversely, we conquer the world when nothing in it will turn our feet from the straight path, when all that is in it will exercise our muscles and build our character, and when, like some Jacob's ladder, with its foot upon the earth, we climb by its gradual rounds until we reach at last the summit, and gaze into the face that is above it—the face of our God. The one is to be beaten by the world; the other is to beat it. And when you put your foot on the animal that is in you; when you refuse to be deceived by the world's false promises or caught by its glittering baits; when you will not let its siren voices seduce you into ignoble content with its trivialities and transitorinesses, then you have conquered; otherwise you are conquered.

Now, all that is threadbare. Ay, and threadbare things need to be rung into men's ears over and over again until the threadbare things have become the sovereign laws of their lives; and there never was a time I suppose, when there was more need for our preaching what is the true type of a successful life and what is the true meaning of a life that is a failure than there is to-

day. Ah, there is many a rich man whom the hosannas of the Stock Exchange on Cornhill declare to be wonderfully successful, who from the highest point of view, the only true point of view, is a dead failure. He has gained all that he desired when he began as an office boy. Yes, and has he conquered the world, or has the world conquered him? Has it helped him to see God? Has it helped him to be a man? Or has it hid God from him and turned him into a money-bag? Success? Yes! A victorious life? Yes! Do you remember the old story about the soldier that shouted out that he had caught a prisoner, and the officer said, "Bring him along," and the answer was, "He won't come." "Then come yourself," and the answer was, "He won't let me." That is the kind of victory over the world that many of our successful people have got—so hampered and held in its chains that early noble visions have passed away and are smiled at now, and God and his angels are a great deal further off from the successful man than they were from the striving youth. Ah, the true prize may have been won by some poor old woman in a garret, or by some man who is regarded as having been an utter failure in the race, and who, having missed all the other prizes, has got this one—a spirit being moulded into the Christ likeness, and an eye which ever looks beyond the things seen and temporal to him that is himself eternal. Brethren, let us regulate our lives by these old-fashioned homely principles, and our lives will be very different from what they have ever been. If we will not let the world—either the aggregate of material things, or society with its maxims and ways—hinder us from the noble life; if we will not allow it to prevent, but use it to aid us in seeing God, in loving him, in doing our duty for his dear sake, then, however solitary or sad and unsuccessful my life may otherwise have been I have conquered, and all else is defeat. So that is the answer to my first question; and now for my second.

(2) Was there ever such a life? Jesus Christ in our text says that his was, and here is the odd thing, that nobody is revolted by the apparent self-complacency of the speech, and that the world takes Jesus Christ at his own valuation, and says, "Yes, it is true; thou hast overcome, and thou only." Now, if we look at the words from that point of view, notice how profound an insight they give us into the whole life of Jesus Christ as it mirrored itself in his memory and his consciousness. Don't let us be mealy-mouthed or afraid of marring the great doctrine of his divinity when we give the fullest meaning to that word "overcome." It was no sham fight, no dramatic spectacle exhibited for the edification of those that here heard of it, that he fought in the wilderness. True, there was no occasion for the temptation within, but, equally true, the temptation when it came to him did present what was a temptation to his humanity, and he resisted, and overcame. And you don't understand the wondrous beauty, the wondrous calm, the universal compassion, the undisturbed leisureliness, as it were, of that life if you don't see, beneath all the gentleness, the tenderness, the care for others, the open eye to everything that was fair and good, the stern and continual stress of one great purpose that was resisted by things around, but was ever borne onwards by its volition. I have seen in one of our Lancashire manufactories a machine by which a great solid block of indiarubber is pressed by a strong spring continually against a sharp cutting edge. That was like the life of Jesus Christ. The humanity conscious of all the pain and sorrow, and the unmoved will which was the result of an unchanging love, and had for its consequence and infinite sacrifice. The unmoved will bore up ever against the cutting edges, the sensitive heart of the Man of Sorrows. It was a real conquest, from the beginning to the end, none the less because through all the conflict there was calm, and at every round victory.

And that is the other thing that is here as mirrored in our Lord's consciousness in reference to his own individual life—an unbroken and continuous triumph. He never let one word pass from his lips to suggest even a momentary reverse in the conflict. Other men may press on in the main in the right line, but oh, the right line for the best of us is like the unsteady strokes that the child draws when it first gets a pen into his hand. Christ's life is unbending, one continuous straight line, ever, ever directed to the Cross, and seen through the gloom of the Cross, the throne that is beyond. And, as I said a moment ago, when he says, "I have overcome the world," nobody stands up and says, "It is a piece of insane presumption." Everybody—except some poor, sceptical people who want to make a reputation by not saying what anybody else ever said—all the world bows down before him, and says, thou art beautiful, thou art fair, one entire and perfect chrysolite, without a flaw. Did you ever think how strange it is that we make Jesus Christ, if I may so put it, say things about himself, without in the least degree detracting from the image of perfection that we carry in our minds, that we would never tolerate from anybody else? "I am meek and lowly in heart." Think of a man saying that! Why, if anybody else said it, the answer—and it would be a right answer—would be, "Meek and lowly are ye? if ye were, ye never would have said so." But when Jesus Christ says

it we accept it, and it does not, as I said, in the smallest degree detract from, but rather, it enhances the image of stainless loveliness and superhuman beauty which we all recognize in him. And so he looks back upon his life. But the words of my text have not only a retrospective but an immediate prospective aspect; for we cannot but suppose that they are what critics call the prophetic perfect. "I have overcome." There was the cross tomorrow. It was to be endured yet, but it was behind him in one aspect; for he had accepted it, and therefore he had overcome it. And let us take the lesson—though it is a digression from my present purpose—let us take the lesson: the way to overcome our troubles is to bear them; the way to conquer our crosses is willingly to lay them on the shoulders, and never stoop under them. The accepted sorrow is a painless arrow. He that will not allow the sharpest of the world's possible penalties to cause him to deflect one hair's-breadth from the path of duty, has overcome the penalty and the pain even before his flesh had to bear it.

But there is another thought here which I may just touch upon for a moment. I cannot discharge from these triumphant words, "I have overcome the world," a prophetic look into a more distant future than Calvary tomorrow. Christ's cross is the victory over the world. "Now is the judgment of this world; now shall the prince of this world be cast out." There all men may see what sin is, and what it leads to; there all men may learn the hollowness of the world; there all men may behold the sacrifice for the world's sins; there all men may find new motives and new powers for their own conflicts with their own world. And so, not only in reference to his own past life, nor in reference only to the immediate death upon the cross, but in reference to the ultimate results of that Passion, results which the world's history ever since, more and more, has been showing, are being fought out, and will be completely accomplished yet, Jesus Christ triumphantly declares, "I have overcome the world," and answered for us all the question, "Was ever such a life lived?"

(3) Now that brings me to my last point, and it is this question: If such a life has been lived, what does it matter to me? My text answers in a very remarkable collocation of phrases: "Be ye of good cheer; I have overcome." That is what it matters to us. That is altogether unlike what it would be possible for any other body to say, or if he did, he would lay himself open to a very damaging answer. "I have overcome the world," well, so much the better for you, but what good is that to me? Your example may stimulate me, it may lift me up when my life is low, and do me good in a hundred different ways, but it is not enough, not half enough for my necessities." Contrast with this saying of our Lord, a saying of his servant Paul's, which looks very like it, but is in reality infinitely different from it. "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith." So he said to Timothy, who wanted all the sort of heartening that he could get, for he was but a feeble kind of creature after all; but there is not a hint in Paul's mind that his completing the course and keeping the faith was of any good to Timothy, except as a bracing memory and a stimulating example. And Jesus comes to each of us, and says to us, You pluck up heart, for I have conquered. Ah, brethren, I know that there are many men who don't agree with us—I venture to say us—in our conceptions of Christ's nature or of Christ's work or of Christ's gifts to the world, and who yet, seeing no more in him than example, have been stimulated in manifold ways to nobler lives and imitation of his character. Thank God for imperfect apprehensions of the dear Lord, and for even imperfect following of his perfect precepts. But that is not enough for us. What more do we want? Look again at my text, at its immediate context, and notice just before our Lord has said this: "In the world ye shall have tribulation, in me ye shall have peace." Verily there are two spheres, if I may so say, in both of which the Christian man dwells, in the world, and in Christ; the one full of boisterous and troubles and afflictions and trials and temptations, the other like some sequestered dell in the midst of an island in the raging sea, where the wind never blows, and all is peace. In Christ, peace; in the world, tribulation. And if we overcome the world, it must be because Christ is more for us than an example, because in the depth of communion with him his spirit of life flows into our spirits, and we in him as well as by him are conquerors.

And the last word that I would say to you, dear friends, is that the answer to this final question, "What does it matter to me?" is still further supplied by words of the evangelist himself. Jesus has shown us how his victory is to be our triumph in the words that I have quoted, and John, long, long after, when old age had removed the Master far enough away to see him more clearly, supplemented and echoed the words of my text, when he said, "This is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith." You put your trust in him as the sacrifice for your sins, and as the spirit of your lives. You look to him, not only as example, not only as pattern, but as power. You think of him, not only as dying on the cross for you, but as living in you, to make you lords of the world and yourselves and flesh and time, and then you will find, as sure as he lives you will find, that he has conquered, and that his conquest is for you. He, if I may so say, has transfixed the dragon through its ugly head, and all the rest is but the lashings of its tail. He has seen the strong one, he has beaten the world and captured the central fortress, and the rest is an affair of outposts. So be of good cheer. You will have to fight—thank God for it!—you will have to fight; you will be beaten as sure as you live if you try to master the world without Jesus, but if you will lay your hands by faith on the head of that Lamb of God, and if you will open your hearts and your lives to the influences of his triumphant Spirit, then he will give you a share in his conflict, his conquest, and his royal repose, according to his own wonderful promise, "To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me on my throne, even as I also overcome, and am sat down with my father on his throne."—The British Weekly.

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