

**Second Sunday in Easter**  
**April 3, 2005**  
**1 John 5:4-12**

*Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke*

**How Blessed to Believe!**

1. The content of our faith
2. The basis of our faith
3. The outcome of our faith

*<sup>NIV</sup> **1 John 5:4** This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. <sup>5</sup> Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God. <sup>6</sup> This is the one who came by water and blood-- Jesus Christ. He did not come by water only, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth. <sup>7</sup> For there are three that testify: <sup>8</sup> the Spirit, the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement. <sup>9</sup> We accept man's testimony, but God's testimony is greater because it is the testimony of God, which he has given about his Son. <sup>10</sup> Anyone who believes in the Son of God has this testimony in his heart. Anyone who does not believe God has made him out to be a liar, because he has not believed the testimony God has given about his Son. <sup>11</sup> And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. <sup>12</sup> He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.*

Brothers and Sisters in Christ Jesus, our living Savior,

In our Gospel lesson today we heard the familiar words Jesus spoke to Thomas after his resurrection: **"Because you have seen me you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."** (John 20:29) In the last part of that sentence, Jesus is referring to people like us. We didn't see Jesus after he rose from the dead. We weren't there in that locked room in Jerusalem where Jesus appeared to his startled disciples. We didn't get a chance to probe the nail marks in the Lord's hands or reach out and touch the wound on his side where the soldier pierced him with his spear. And yet...we believe. We confess with our mouths "Jesus is Lord" and we believe in our hearts that God raise him from the dead. So we are numbered among those believers whom Jesus calls "blessed."

In today's epistle lesson for the Sunday after Easter, the apostle John essentially picks up where Jesus left off with his statement to Thomas.

If those who believe are blessed, then we have to ask, "Those who believe *what* are blessed?" So we want to look today at the content of our faith. Then it's also important to ask *why* we believe these things. That is, what is the basis for our faith? And, finally, we want to see why Jesus says we're blessed to believe these things.

### **1. The content of our faith**

John begins this section by saying, "*This is the victory that overcomes the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world?*" he asks. "*Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.*" John tells us that he wrote his Gospel so that we would know that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing we might have eternal life in his name. Here in his first epistle he picks up the same point—Jesus is the Son of God—because it's critical. At the end of this section he says, "*He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.*" So this question, "Who is Jesus?" is a life or death matter.

Denying that Jesus is the Son of God is hardly a modern phenomenon. Already in John's time, in the decades after the resurrection of Jesus, there was a false teacher named Cerinthus who was saying that Jesus is not the Son of God. Cerinthus conceded that for a time, from the baptism of Jesus until just before his crucifixion, the Spirit of God came to rest on Jesus, but he believed that the Jesus who died on the cross was just a man, nothing more. There's a legend that the apostle John, while he was living in Ephesus, had gone to a local bathhouse. But while John was bathing he was informed that Cerinthus was using of the same facility. The legend says that John bolted from the bathhouse in a big hurry. He didn't even want to be in the same building, much less in the same bath, as someone who denied the deity of Christ Jesus.

It may be that the teaching of Cerinthus is in the background when John writes here, "*This is the one who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ. He did not come by water only, but by water and blood.*" Jesus came by water: he was baptized in the Jordan River. The Spirit of God descended on him. The Father said in a voice from heaven, "**This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.**" (Matt. 3:17) Was Jesus the Son of God, too, when he hung on the cross, suffering the death penalty for our sins? That is, did Jesus also come "by blood"? He did! The centurion on the crucifixion detail had it right when he exclaimed after the Good Friday earthquake, "**Surely he was the Son of God!**" (Matt. 27:54)

The resurrection of Jesus is significant for many reasons. By rising from the dead, Jesus assures us that our sins have been forgiven. The payment he made for our transgressions at the cross has erased our sin-debt. By his rising to life again Jesus gives us the hope of our own resurrection and eternal life with him in heaven. He said, **"Because I live, you also will live."** And there's also this: In the opening verses of Romans, St. Paul writes that Jesus **"was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead."** (Rom. 1:4) Jesus' words declare it: he's the Son of God. Jesus' works prove it: he is indeed the Son of God. Here's the content of our faith as Christians: Jesus, the Son of God, loves us, gave his life for us, and rose triumphant from the grave.

John says here, *"This is the victory that overcomes the world, even our faith."* But what is faith? According to some theologians, faith jumps. They talk about the leap of faith. But as you listen to St. John here, it becomes clear that faith isn't like blindly jumping off a cliff or like bailing out of an airplane in the dark of night. John defines faith instead as taking God at his Word. It's the sure and certain testimony of the Holy Spirit, rock-solid testimony of God the Father, that serves as the basis for faith.

## **2. The basis of our faith**

John says here, *"It is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth."* Before Jesus went to the cross, he promised his disciples, **"I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth."** (John 16:12-13) The Holy Spirit did come, just as promised. God the Father poured out the Spirit's fire on the apostles on the day of Pentecost and the Spirit proceeded to inspire both the apostles' teaching and writing from that day forward. What the apostles—like John—proclaimed was not the innovations of their own minds. It was the Spirit speaking through them and this testimony of the Holy Spirit served as the basis for faith. It's still true today: the Spirit's testimony in the Word of God is the basis for our faith.

Or you can call it God's testimony, as John does here. *"We accept man's testimony, but God's testimony is greater because it is the testimony of God, which he has given about his Son. Anyone who believes in the Son of God has this testimony in his heart."* God's testimony about his Son was heard at the Jordan River when Jesus was baptized. It was heard again on the mount of Transfiguration when Jesus appeared in his heavenly glory. Each time the Father said, **"This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."**

(Matt. 17:5) It's on account of this irrefutable testimony by God himself that John can say, *"Anyone who does not believe God has made him out to be a liar, because he has not believed the testimony God has given about his Son."* Now, if it's true that, for example, in a court of law we accept the testimony of human witnesses that we perceive to be truthful, isn't it even more plausible that we'd accept the testimony of God given to us? Faith, then, is not a leap into the darkness. It's taking God at his Word. It's saying, "God, I believe what you've told me here in your Word. I accept your testimony."

And there are two more witnesses, the water and the blood. The water witness is your baptism, where the Holy Spirit joined the Word with water to assure you that you are God's beloved child, clothed with the holiness of Jesus. The blood witness is the Lord's Supper, the assurance given to us individually that Jesus gave his body into death and shed his blood to obtain our forgiveness. Here, too, the Spirit is speaking. Here, again, the Father has taken the stand to testify and thus lead us to the conviction that Jesus is his Son and our Savior. Our faith is built on solid ground: the unerring testimony of our God as it comes to us in the Scriptures and the sacraments.

But I titled this message, "How Blessed to Believe," and I haven't yet explained to you the reasons for our blessedness. Those reasons can be seen in the outcome of our faith.

### **3. The outcome of our faith**

I want you to go back in time to the night that Jesus celebrated the Passover with his disciples for one last time, the night before his crucifixion. It was a very somber group of disciples that evening, because Jesus told them things that were hard for them to bear. Jesus had spoken of betrayal and hatred. He had told them that soon they would see him no more. Then Jesus summed it all up by saying, **"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."** (John 16:33)

The word "world" can refer to the planet we inhabit. Or it can refer to the people who live on this planet. But it can also refer to antithesis of God's kingdom—the fallen world, steeped in sin and alienated from God. That's the sense in which John uses "world" here. The world is nothing like God's kingdom. God's kingdom is holy; the world is impure. God's kingdom is eternal; the world is passing away. God's kingdom is founded on the sure and certain promises of God; the world is built on empty boasts. John had words of warning for

believers regarding the world earlier in this letter. He said, **“Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.”** (1 John 2:15) We’ve lavished our love on the world, but Jesus didn’t. His love for the Father was perfect, just like his obedience. Before he’d ever been to the cross, Jesus could speak with complete confidence about the outcome of his mission: **“I have overcome the world.”** And he did.

The blessed truth for believers is that Jesus has given us a share in his victory over the world. He says, *“This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith.”* Through faith, we are united with Jesus on the winning side. There have probably been times in all of our lives when it seemed that the world with its opposition to God was threatening to engulf us and swallow us up. But through faith in Jesus, our sinful cravings, our lusts, and boasting have all been forgiven. He has purified our hearts and enabled us to fix our eyes on him. Now we boast not emptily about ourselves but about our Savior and his cross. Joined to Jesus by faith, we’ve overcome the world.

At the end of this section, John says the same thing in a different way: *“And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son.”* How blessed it is to know that in this world of pain and death, we have the key to life. It’s God’s gift to us in his Son. The world’s culture is death—deadly beliefs, deadly practices, deadly acts. In its spiritual deadness the world is marching inexorably toward eternal death. We were in that death march once, when we didn’t believe. But then God’s testimony reached us. The testimony about his Son. It changed our hearts. It changed our lives. It changed our present and it changed our future. We have life now and life forever. That’s the outcome of our faith.

How blessed we are to believe! Here we are, a week after Easter, confessing, “I believe that Jesus is the Son of God. I believe that Jesus rose bodily from the grave.” This is nothing we arrived at on our own. It was revealed to us by our Father in heaven and by the Spirit he sent. But it makes all the difference. It means victory over the world and life that never ends. How blessed we are to believe! Amen.