

“The Victory of Faith”

a sermon by

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Text: “And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith” (I John 5:4).

One of the books that I keep in my house is William Manchester’s biography of Winston Churchill: *The Last Lion (The Wilderness Years: 1928-1940)*. From time to time, I find myself turning to the speeches of Churchill, particularly during those dark days of 1940 when it appeared that all of Europe had fallen to the Nazi powers.

When Winston Churchill died, his funeral was held in St. Paul’s Cathedral in London. As the service closed, a trumpet player at one end of the cathedral sounded the notes of “Taps,” while at the other end of the cathedral sounded the notes of “Reveille.” In many ways, those two tunes summarized the life of this great man. He had the conviction that one part of his life was ending and a new part was beginning.

I.

There is something compelling about a religious faith that furnishes power for positive living. Most of us in our work, in our homes, and in our personal lives face, on a daily basis, the rebuffs of fate and the blows of sorrow. In spite of all the things that may separate us this morning—race, creed, church, class—there is one fundamental thing that binds us together. We need the kind of religion that furnishes a person the power to sustain victorious living in the midst of many obstacles.

Now, the New Testament is certain that it has the key to that secret of power and the name of that key is faith. “This is the victory that conquers the world, even our faith,” writes the author of I John. That verse is not some isolated part of the New Testament. It is found throughout the pages of the New Testament.

Though faith is critical to understanding the New Testament, for the most part it is lived, not defined. Jesus never defined faith. He illustrated it. He gathered to himself a band of followers and through his death, transformed the world. He said that faith could move mountains. He called it so valuable that it was like a field with a treasure in it so priceless that a person would sell all that he or she had to possess the field.

The Apostle Paul never defined faith. He illustrated it with his life until you could see him grow from a hardened persecutor of the Christian faith to its most eloquent proponent. By his own life he demonstrated his words, “Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith.”

There is only one real attempt to define faith and it is found in the book of Hebrews, where the writer of that Epistle says, “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for; the conviction of things not seen.” As definitions go, that is a hard one to beat, but even the writer of Hebrews was not totally satisfied by it, for he goes on to describe faith not by what it is but in terms of what it does for a person. “By faith Abraham...By faith Moses...By faith Joseph.” That is really the only way that you can describe faith: in terms of what it does for a person’s life. And what it does for life is indispensable.

So this morning I want to deal with faith as it is understood by the writer of I John. It is the victory that overcomes the world.

II.

One of the ways that faith does this is by giving us a sense of direction and purpose in our lives. The Apostle Paul once said, “I must see Rome.” I wonder what made him say that. Certainly no one made him do that. But there was something inside of him that he could not deny. He believed that he had met the risen Christ on the road to Damascus and that Christ had set him apart as a missionary to the gentiles. He had to go to Rome because that was the seat of the Roman Empire.

Several years ago, when I was at Princeton Seminary, I spent some time with a man named Bill Harris who was the archivist at the seminary library. One day he showed me a copy of a famous painting that depicted Abraham Lincoln signing the Emancipation Proclamation. As Lincoln signed this document, he commented to his Secretary of State William Seward that he had made a promise to Almighty God that if he ever had the opportunity to free the slaves, he would do so and as he signed that proclamation, he observed that he had fulfilled a sacred promise.

As one reads the earliest documents of the New Testament—the letters of Paul to the churches in Galatia, Corinth, and Thessalonica—one becomes quite aware that something happened to the earliest disciples of Jesus. They were possessed by a sense of power and direction. Peter, who had betrayed Jesus, became the center of the church in Jerusalem. Paul, the hater of the Christian movement, became its finest spokesperson. In each case, these men were consumed by the spirit of Christ that allowed them to leave all that they had and to follow Christ.

III.

Faith does something else as well. It not only gives direction and purpose to our lives, it also gives us power. Reinhold Niebuhr once observed that God's grace is not only forgiveness, it is power as well.

In Martin Marty's little book *Martin Luther*, he has a chapter about Luther's appearance before the Germany Emperor, Charles V, at the town of Worms in Germany. Luther had been excommunicated from the church. He was now ordered to appear and give an account of himself. In his writings Luther noted his great fear. At worse, excommunication could lead to death and Luther was definitely the "worst case." But on that fateful day in April 1521, Luther appeared before the German emperor and the papal representative Alexander. On April 17th, he was shown a stack of books and asked if these were his books. "Yes," he said, "these are my books." He was then told that he had to recant the things he was written. Luther asked for one day to consider his reply.

On the next evening Luther reappeared and stood his ground. He said to the German Emperor, "Since your serene majesty and your lordship seeks a simple answer, I will give it in this manner, neither horned nor toothed. Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the Pope or in the councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything I have written, since it is neither safe nor right to go against one's conscience." And then he concluded. "Here I stand. I can do no other. So help me God."

Luther later reflected that the greatest battle he faced in his life was the battle between fear and faith. That is something all of us face. We are worried about our families. We are worried about our jobs. We are worried about our future. Fear imprisons life; faith liberates it. Fear paralyzes life; faith empowers it. Fear disheartens us. Faith encourages us.

Often, in the church, we are preoccupied by the things that divide us. But there is one thing that unites us that is far more important than whether a person is liberal or conservative, republican or democrat, rich or poor. It is our confidence that we are all children of God and that there is no problem, disappointment, or adversity that we face that cannot be overcome by God's grace.

That is the kind of faith that can move mountains and it is one we desperately need today.

IV.

There is something else that faith can do. It not only unifies and empowers life; it points us to God as well. Several years ago Thomas Torrance spoke at the Center of Theological Inquiry in Princeton on "Einstein and God." In his lecture, he observed that Einstein had a great respect for the universe. He did not believe it was an accident. "God does not play dice with the universe," Einstein once observed.

Genuine faith has a way of expanding the way we look at the world and not constricting it. Therefore, if one wanted to, he or she could expand the Eleventh Chapter of the Epistle of Hebrews on faith. By faith Copernicus observed that the planets revolved around the sun and not the sun around the earth. By faith Newton understood the law of gravity. By faith Einstein understood that at the speed of light time stands still.

Someone once observed that there are two kinds of prayer. One kind begins with the words "if only." If only I get the things I want, if only my children are successful, if only my health is good. It is a conditional prayer that makes God dependent on us.

But there is another kind of prayer. It is not conditional. It is affirmative. It does not beg but expresses a conviction.

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil, for thou art with me."

That is prayer.

"Therefore we will not fear though the earth be moved, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea. The Lord of hosts is with us. The God of Jacob is our refuge."

That is prayer.

"I am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day."

That is prayer. It carries a person beyond fear to the confidence of the soul's convictions that crowds out apprehension and fear. How do people live without that?

Several years ago I visited the city of Oxford, England. As we passed through the town square, I noticed a plaque that had been erected there in honor of Hugh Latimer, the great English reformer. Latimer had been captured and told to renounce his faith, which he refused to do. Because he would not recount his faith, he and his companion were burned at the stake in Oxford Square. Before his death Latimer turned to his friend and said, "Be of good comfort, Master Ridley and play the man; we shall this day light such a candle by God's grace in England, as, I trust, shall never be put out."

That is faith and it is a force that can overcome the world.

Next week we come to celebrate Dedication Sunday. My sincere hope is that we will complete our goal of an eight percent increase in our pledges for the New Year.

But there is something else at stake that goes far beyond any given amount of money. It is the faith and confidence that from this place God will light a candle that will never be put out.

Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen!