



### Thought for the Week 7<sup>th</sup> March 2021

#### READING 1 John 5:5-12

<sup>1</sup> Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of him. <sup>2</sup> By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. <sup>3</sup> For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome. <sup>4</sup> For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. <sup>5</sup> Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

<sup>6</sup> This is he who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ; not by the water only but by the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the one who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth. <sup>7</sup> For there are three that testify: <sup>8</sup> the Spirit and the water and the blood; and these three agree. <sup>9</sup> If we receive the testimony of men, the testimony of God is greater, for this is the testimony of God that he has borne concerning his Son. <sup>10</sup> Whoever believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself. Whoever does not believe God has made him a liar, because he has not believed in the testimony that God has borne concerning his Son. <sup>11</sup> And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. <sup>12</sup> Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.

#### “Spirit, Water, Blood, Life”

Throughout his first letter John stresses two essentials--what we believe, and how we behave. Just like a human family, when we're born into the family of God by faith there ought to be a family resemblance. We see that as we become increasingly set apart from the non-believing world which mistakenly regards the Christian life as oppressive and rule-bound; in other words, no fun at all. In reality, nothing could be further from the truth. When people criticize our Presbyterian forebears for being joyless, it just reveals historical ignorance. Our obedience to God is not troublesome to us. As John reminds us it's because he first loved us, we love God and, as a result, we want to live for Jesus. As he tells us in Matthew 11.30 *“His yoke is easy, His burden light.”* In today's passage John starts by pointing out our conflict in a corrupted world, then goes on to the certainty of God's affirmation, and what all this means for us.

#### A Corrupted world, verses 1-5...

Verses 1-5 describe our corrupt, fallen world. Eugene Peterson calls this *“a pushing, shoving, intimidating, arrogant, antagonistic demanding world...but in prayer we leave the world of anxieties and enter a world of wonder. We leave an ego-centred world and enter a God-centred world. We leave a world of problems and enter a world of mystery.”* We may grow accustomed to this world, but it is not our true home. The world often responds to evil as though it is uncontrollable. What can we hope to do in the face of such wickedness in our world? John reminds us that we can look toward our ultimate triumph which God has won for us through Christ.

John assures us that we can overcome the world; faith gives us victory. The Greek word for “victory” is a familiar one to us, due to its use by a famous sportswear brand – Nike (Ni – Key). I suppose you could say that we're in a race, but we're wearing God's running shoes! Through faith we find the power to persevere and overcome the world. Our sovereign God has a plan, and the outcome has already been determined.

Do you ever watch “classic” sporting events on TV? They are interesting, but hardly nerve-wracking as you already know the final score. | John is encouraging us to live life that way, because ultimately we will end up winners. When asked to cheat, we play by the rules. When discouraged, we remember our destiny. Winston Churchill once observed, *“Success consists of going from failure to failure without loss of enthusiasm.”* The power of God is the measure of our hope and expectation. Let’s hold fast, trusting in the Captain of our team – Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

### Testimonies, verses 6-9...

Then in verse 6 John says of Jesus: *“<sup>6</sup> This is he who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ; not by the water only but by the water and the blood.”* Here we have one of the most perplexing verses in John’s letters. Theologians and commentators differ on what it might mean – it has been suggested that John referring to the sacraments of baptism and communion but the context does not really bear this out. Others have suggested that it is a reference to the blood and water that came from Jesus when the soldier pierced his side after he had died on the cross, which John tells us about in John 19:34.

However, the most likely explanation of this statement is that John is using it to sum up the whole of Jesus’ ministry on earth from baptism to crucifixion. Remember that there were some teachers who had infiltrated the churches that John mentored. They claimed to have new spiritual revelations denying that Jesus was fully human, but only appeared to be a man. They taught that Jesus’ baptism was the important thing for salvation rather than his death on the cross. John refutes this saying that “water” only was not enough – the shedding of Christ’s blood as an atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world was equally necessary. The bottom-line is that our Lord Jesus lived and died for us. If Jesus had been only a man and not fully God and fully man, His sacrificial death would not have satisfied divine justice. We are cleansed by His blood.

This is not just an end-of first century problem, it’s a modern-day one also. We are also facing some within the church who would deny the doctrine of the atonement which teaches the removal of guilt from sin by Christ’s sacrifice paying the penalty we deserved for our sin on our behalf. Some contemporary liberal academics have sought to demote the cross and re-imagine Christianity, emptied of sacrifice - a Christ without a Cross. They feel the world has grown beyond any use for atonement.

Steve Chalke was ordained as a Baptist Minister in Kent and became known as a religious broadcaster and community activist. However, he caused considerable controversy a few years ago by what he wrote in his book *“The Lost Message of Jesus.”*

He asks how we have *‘come to believe that at the cross this God of love suddenly decides to vent his anger and wrath on his own Son?’* Chalke considers this to be a mockery of Jesus’ teaching about refusing to repay evil with evil and a contradiction of the statement that God is love. He insists that the cross is not *‘a form of cosmic child abuse – a vengeful Father, punishing his Son for an offence he has not even committed.’* Instead, the cross is a symbol of love, a demonstration of how far God is willing to go to prove his love. Steve Chalke has said that penal substitution is *‘a theory rooted in violence and retributive notions of justice’* and is incompatible *‘at least as currently taught and understood, with any authentically Christian understanding of the character of God.’* He is unrepentant about referring to the doctrine as a version of *‘cosmic child abuse’* because he says, *‘it is a stark “unmasking” of the violent, pre-Christian thinking behind such a theology’.*

Others have said similar things, though perhaps more subtly. During my sabbatical a few years ago, I attended a Summer School on Worship in York. I remember the Precentor of York Minster, who is in charge of services and music, saying in one of the seminars that he did not feel comfortable singing the Townend/Getty song, *“In Christ alone,”* because of the lines that say: *“Till on that cross, as Jesus died, the wrath of God was satisfied: for every sin on Him was laid.”* He could not agree that the God of love could also be the God of wrath who punished human sin in Jesus.

As in John’s day we need to resist attempts to redefine our faith. We need to watch out for theological trends that would dilute the significance of the incarnation and the saving work of the cross. These are not minor

issues, they are central issues. If Jesus is not the Son of God who took on mortal flesh and died on a cross, then there is no hope for forgiveness and healing for us. Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross must remain central to all we are and all we preach.

If you're reading from the Authorised or even the New King James Version, verses 7 & 8 have a distinctly Trinitarian tone, in which God the Father is included with affirmation that the "Three are One." It is given as a footnote in the NIV. This is certainly orthodox theology, which is supported elsewhere in Scripture, but it is not found in the earliest manuscripts of First John. The King James translators were influenced by the Latin Vulgate, which added to the original Greek text and the error has persisted.

John then points out how courts of law respect human testimony. In a court trial the evidence either makes or breaks a case. The evidence is examined and the court decides what is true or false.

John presents us with the evidence. He stated in verses 1-5 that belief in Jesus' claim to be the Christ, the Son of God, makes humans the sons and daughters of God and overcomers of the world systems. According to Jewish law, there had to be corroborating evidence of 2 or 3 witnesses.

The Holy Spirit testifies in verse 6, the Father enters the courtroom in verse 9, and Jesus testifies on His own behalf with the evidence of His lifeblood. Lastly, there is within us an internal affirmation, verse 10. This testimony finds a place in our hearts.

### **Outcome, verses 10-12...**

The last witness that John calls is you in verses 10-12

A person may doubt historical evidence of Jesus, they may even doubt the testimony of the Father, but you cannot ignore what you know. Verse 10 tells us that we have a witness inside us if we are saved. Eph. 1:13-14 backs up this statement.

*<sup>13-14</sup> It's in Christ that you, once you heard the truth and believed it (this Message of your salvation), found yourselves home free — signed, sealed, and delivered by the Holy Spirit. He is the down payment from God is the first instalment on what's coming, a reminder that we'll get everything God has planned for us, a praising and glorious life.*

As we get into closer fellowship with God the Holy Spirit gives us more confidence of the facts of Jesus. As we grow and allow the Holy Spirit to work in us, the witness of the Spirit to our soul grows stronger and stronger, and we become a witness to Jesus reality, and our changed life witnesses also that all this is true.

So, let's be encouraged by John's exhortation to the first-century believers whose faith was being rocked by those who denied that Jesus was the Son of God who came in flesh to save us by his death on the cross.

Let's keep the cross of Christ central and not be swayed by anyone who would deny it's power, so that we can say with the hymnwriters Townend & Getty:

No guilt in life, no fear in death,  
This is the power of Christ in me  
From life's first cry to final breath,  
Jesus commands my destiny  
No power of hell, no scheme of man,  
Can ever pluck me from His hand  
Till He returns or calls me home  
Here in the power of Christ I'll stand.

## PCI "Let's Pray"

Monday 8 March

Diane Cusick (global mission worker in Zambia)

Pray for Diane as she continues to lead CCAP's Zambia Synod Early Childhood Development work, mainly from her home in Lusaka. Pray for teachers and children who are back in school, that they will be able to manage the health and safety guidelines and for good teaching.

Myanmar

Pray for Myanmar following the recent military coup. Pray for peace, for a fair and just government for all the people of the country. Pray too for the leaders and members of the Presbyterian Church of Myanmar.

Tuesday 9 March

Rev John Gilkinson (chaplain, Belfast Nightingale Hospital)

Pray for John and all healthcare chaplaincy staff. Pray for all those ill in hospital, for a full and quick recovery and that patients who don't have Covid-19 will be protected from it. Pray too for staff working in very challenging conditions and for families unable to visit.

Craigavon congregation

Praise God for the encouraging Community Bible Experience held online in January and February. Pray that those who have been reading the New Testament for the first time would come to know Jesus.

Wednesday 10 March

Edwin and Anne Kibathi (global mission workers to East Africans in the UK)

Pray for Edwin and Anne as they offer pastoral care and support to people affected by Covid-19 and hold church services and meetings online.

South Sudan

The UN has recently reported that the scale of violence there is now worse than in the five-year civil war which ended in 2018. Pray for peace and for those suffering due to violence, displacement and food insecurity. Pray for the Presbyterian Church of South Sudan's peace-building and humanitarian relief work.

Thursday 11 March

Rebecca Smyth (community outreach worker in West Kirk, Belfast)

Pray for Rebecca as she continues her work reaching out to and supporting women, whilst complying with all the ongoing restrictions.

Donegal and Stranorlar

In the past year they have been able to meet for public worship on only 15 Sundays – every other church activity has been even more limited. Thank God for the ability to meet online in various ways and pray for the sustaining of our faith, work and witness through very challenging times.

Friday 12 March

Social Witness

Pray for the Taking Care Office as it adjusts to new methods of working during the Covid-19 crisis. Pray for Jacqui Montgomery-Devlin as she oversees this important work and meets the daily challenges of her job. Give thanks that our church invests so much in the "Taking Care of All".

Legislation

Pray that new legislation proposed by Paul Givan MLA that seeks to provide protection for pre-born babies diagnosed with a fetal abnormality would receive a fair hearing in the Northern Ireland Assembly. Pray that women and their families who receive a pre-natal diagnosis of disability would receive the support and care that they need.

Saturday 13 March

General Council

Pray for the staff who work in the Financial Secretary's Department, led by Clive Knox, who keep this essential aspect of the work of the General Assembly moving forward. Give thanks for those who, in these most challenging days of lockdown, are able to keep providing our payroll, pension and general payments.

Council for Training in Ministry

The Council convener is Rev Nigel McCullough, minister of Hill Street, Lurgan. Pray for Nigel as he ministers there, and devotes the time needed to the work of the Council. Pray that the Lord will give him energy and wisdom, and that he will be filled with, and led by, the Holy Spirit in all that he does.