

The Plight of Man and the Power of God

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Well, as we come to God's word this morning, those of you that have been with us know that we've been going through the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5 through 7 and we're almost through that entire great section of Scripture. Today with the weather and also still in the middle of the holiday season, I knew that attendance would be different, that we would have some with us visiting and others that would be away that would normally be here, so I want to go to a passage for a one-time message, go back to a text that we kind of glossed over a little bit when we were dealing with it several years ago, and spend a little more time there in the book of 1 John, and I invite you to turn to 1 John for a special message this morning under the title "The Plight of Man and the Power of God." 1 John 5, and we're going to look at verses 1 through 4 together this morning. I'm very delighted that you're here with us because this is a very foundational passage that teaches us so many things about the way that we should think about the nature of our salvation and what it is that God has done for us in saving us from sin, speaking as true believers in Jesus Christ.

Let's look at those first four verses here as we begin this morning in 1 John 5.

1 Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and whoever loves the Father loves the child born of Him. 2 By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and observe His commandments. 3 For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome. 4 For whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that has overcome the world--our faith.

You know, one of the ongoing burdens of my heart in pulpit ministry is to try to do whatever I can by whatever strength God gives me to elevate Christ in your eyes and to elevate a sense of the wonder of the greatness of the salvation that we have in our Lord Jesus. It's so easy to lose sight of that when things are taught superficially, when our own struggles make it seem like there is not much power at work in our lives because we struggle with the same things from day-to-day, it's easy to lose sight of the magnificence of what has happened to us when God worked in our lives and saved us. And along with that, as we talk in that realm, we also need to have a clear sense of understanding of the desperate spiritual straits that natural man is in, that all of us are born into by nature, that

we are not born into the family of God. No one is born as a Christian contrary to what I had friends try to tell me in the past, as people have told me in the past, "Well, I was born a Christian." Listen, no one was born a Christian. You were born a reprobate. You were born a sinful soul from birth. David said, "In sin my mother conceived me."

So we were born into sin and we inherited sin from our forefathers and we are sinners by choice and by action and by thought and word and deed, and that's no small thing. Scripture describes us as slaves of sin. Scripture describes us as dead in our trespasses and sins. Scripture describes us as slaves of Satan, those who have Satan as their father, those who are under the wrath of God for the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, and that's not a superficial thing. And so in my pulpit ministry, what I want to do again and again and again is to bring you to an appreciation of the depth of the work of God in your life, if you're a Christian, which involves understanding something of the measure of the depth of the lostness that you were in.

You know, my friend, if you're here and you're not a Christian or listening over the live stream, you chose the warmth of your living room over coming out, that's okay, not as a pattern but it's very very cold today. I get that. We like having you here so we look forward to seeing you next Sunday. But Scripture describes us as deeply deeply lost from multiple facets and only when you understand the depth of sin and the depth of your depravity can you begin to truly appreciate the greatness of the work that God did in saving you and the magnificent power that it must have taken for him to save you. You know, Ephesians 1, Paul prays that you would understand, prays for his readers at the time and by extension shows us what we need to understand as well, that we would understand that the power that saved us was no less than the same power that raised Jesus Christ from the dead. Resurrection power. New life breathed into that which was dead. Well, that's the way it was for you before you were a Christian, you were a spiritual corpse as we are going to see, and that required a miraculous work of resurrection power from God in your soul before you could ever come to Christ and be saved. So were staggered at the recognition of how deeply, darkly lost we were and yet as we see that and we are here in Christ, we recognize how magnificent the grace and power of God must be that delivered us from such a condition.

So today we're going to look, first of all, at the plight of man and, secondly, at the power of God. Here is the ultimate point of this, and if I can tie into what Dane was saying about the futility of New Year's resolutions, which if you've lived any time you know something of the futility of that by personal experience, right? We don't need to go into that, but the futility of our New Year's resolutions shows us the lack of spiritual strength and power that we have. You know, we try things, we get started and we fail again and again and again, and yet in the spiritual realm for Christians, in this passage that I just read, Scripture tells us that those that God has saved are overcomers. In verse 4, he says, "whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that has overcome the world--our faith"; that Christians are those who ultimately overcome, that ultimately achieve victory.

Well, how is it that that could be true? Well, when you understand the plight of man in sin, you realize that it could only be by power outside of us that that could ever be made true, and that's what we want to see, and there is a great pastoral point ultimately in this, a point of great encouragement for each one of us: if we are in Christ, it is because God has done a great work of power in our lives, a powerful, mighty, dynamic work that saved us from sin and Satan. That has implications. If that is true of you now, the logic of Scripture and the force of what that means is this: the God who initially saved you will most certainly complete the work that he has begun. Having overcome every obstacle to your salvation initially, he will overcome them all so that you certainly overcome and achieve the victory in the end, the victory ultimately being arriving safe in heaven to experience the presence of God forever and ever, no longer taunted by sin, no longer taunted by sin, delivered completely and made perfect and glorified in the end, and that will be true because the God who first saved us will certainly complete what he began and there is no hindrance to his power in order to achieve that. Beloved, here's the thing. Here's the thing: you can only appreciate his power fully when you understand what he overcame to save you.

So first of all, we want to look at the plight of man in sin. What is it that God overcame? Well, here's the thing, we'll just talk kind of generically today in this first point about man in general. What we say about man in general was true of you in particular, but we'll just talk about the condition of mankind. Mankind, contrary to his self-congratulatory spirit and his continual, endless, wearisome praise of himself, the truth of the matter is that man was in a miserable condition and is in a miserable condition apart from Jesus Christ. Scripture teaches that man as a race, that men individually, are headed for judgment before God and as severe as that is, the reality is multiplied worse because even in that condition, even when it is called to his attention, man is unable and he is unwilling to prepare himself for that inevitable verdict. He is blinded to his spiritual condition and he is indifferent to that which should be the uppermost concern of his soul. The greatest concern of a man's heart should be, "What is going to happen to me when I die?" The piercing, controlling thought of a man's life until he finds his peace with God should be, "What will become of me when I stand before God in judgment?" But you know and I know that very few people want to think about that. Very few people want to think about that. They deny it. They push it off. They are indifferent. They prefer their pleasures of the day over the purpose of their soul for all of eternity. That's miserable, miserable in the sense not just that it's painful, but that is such a colossal waste of an eternal soul, and it is such a colossal miss, a colossal strikeout, a colossal failure of man to understand his purpose and the nobility of what it means to be created in the image of God. Scripture sums it up by saying man loves darkness more than he loves the light, John 3:19.

Well, how is it that he's in this predicament? What is the condition of man in sin? Well, first of all, we can put it this way, we've got two major points each with three sub points here this morning. The plight of man in sin, what can we say about man? Man blends into his hostile environment. That's the first sub point. He blends into his hostile environment, and drawing everything that we say today from the book of 1 John, here's what we want to say: man lives in the world, duh, right? I came all this way to hear that? Man lives in the world. Well, there is more to it than just saying, we're saying more than just the fact

that man lives on this earth and sod, that he lives on this globe that spins around the sun. He lives in an environment that is hostile to his spiritual well-being, is what we're saying, because the world system is supposed to Christ and to Christianity.

Look at chapter 2, verse 15 of 1 John. We start to piece together the condition of man in sin. He lives in a world that is hostile to the only thing that can save his soul. 1 John 2:15 says, "Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. The world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever." And look over at chapter 3, verse 1 when John says at the end of the verse, he says, "the world does not know us, because it did not know Him."

Here's the situation, beloved: men and women, boys and girls, live in an environment that is dead to God and that is dead to Christ, and not only dead and unresponsive to the stimulus of his word, not only dead and unresponsive to the positive aspects of that, but the world environment in which man lives stimulates him toward sin as it appeals to his pride, appeals to the lust of his flesh, as it appeals to the lust of his eyes. There is nothing in our political climate, there is nothing in our entertainment, there is nothing in our culture, there is nothing in the world system whatsoever that would point a man to Christ, that would point him to Christ as the only Savior of his soul. The whole philosophy is anti-God. It is devoid of God. And to take it even further and perhaps to offend a few people with the illustration, even in something that seems as harmless as the whole world of Disney. Look, we've been to Disneyland, we've watched Disney movies, I'm not overreacting in what I'm saying here. What I want you to think is that even in such a seemingly harmless environment as that, there is nothing in that seemingly innocent entertainment that would point a man to Christ. It is godless. There is nothing in it that would prompt a man to contemplate his eternal soul; have him contemplate himself in sin, his need for a Savior; that would glorify Christ to him. And that's what we're talking about, there is nothing in the world to point a man to Christ. Indeed, when you think of the philosophies of man, they all are designed to drive him away from any serious contemplation of truth. It attacks the Scriptures. It denies Christ. It affirms man as someone who is basically good. This is a completely hostile environment to someone who needs to be saved because it gives him a false sense of security. It gives him a false sense that there is nothing wrong when, to the contrary, Scripture speaks that everything is wrong and judgment is coming. To be dead to God and to be indifferent to spiritual things in that environment is hostile to the good of a man's soul.

Not only that, the world in which we live is filled with false teachers, false prophets who obscure the Gospel and lead a man to think the truth is one thing when actually it is something different. Look at chapter 4, verse 1 of 1 John. Verse 1, even when a man looks for spiritual instruction in this world, if you pull back the veil you find that it's filled with false teachers and he is simply a blind man following a blind guide where both will end up in the pit. Chapter 4, verse 1, John tells his readers, "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world." Now, imagine this, get the picture that John

presents. Here is man dead in sin and under the wrath of God waiting for the final revelation of it at the end of time. This is very bad. This is very desperate. This is a plight. This is a danger that the man finds himself in, and he goes about in a world environment that does nothing to stimulate him or point him to Christ. Picture a man saying, "Oh, I would like something religious. I need something else in my life." So he goes out looking for spiritual help from those that offer it to him, and the reality is he steps into a spiritual world and finds that the truth of the matter is that there are false prophets and false teachers that still do not give him the true Gospel, and he's in a desperately bad situation. This is a position of great vulnerability.

So what can he do? He's in a hostile environment and he fits in there and look at 1 John 3:13. It can be summed up when it comes to true believers, John says, "Do not be surprised, brethren, if the world hates you." It hated Christ and it crucified him. Those of us that follow Christ are also on the receiving end of its hostility. So the world is hostile to truth. The world is hostile to Christ. Man is under judgment and here's the summary point here: everything about the world pushes him away from Christ, sucks him into a different system that would drive him away from Christ and drive him away from the only hope for his soul. Now, that's a hostile environment. That is not good and here we see the human race living in this adverse situation with nothing about the world designed to bring help to his soul.

This is desperate. This is very bad. But it goes further than that. It's not just that he blends into his hostile environment, he's also blinded by a hostile enemy. He is blinded by a hostile enemy that Scripture describes as Satan, the devil, the adversary. You see, it's bad enough if we only looked at it in that horizontal level of the world environment that we lived in, that would be bad enough for us to see that man is in desperate danger, but there is another realm that is at work in this, a supernatural enemy who keeps man in darkness, and Scripture describes this adversary as Satan who obscures the saving Gospel by stimulating sin, by stimulating false philosophies, by enabling false teachers to carry out their wicked work.

Look at 1 John 3:8, actually we could look at verse 7 just to pick up the full sentence, and you see the warnings that John gives in the midst of this about the call to spiritual care, to spiritual alertness. He says in verse 7, "Little children, make sure no one deceives you; the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous; the one who practices sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning." The sinner is someone who is rightly described as of the devil. He belongs to the realm of the devil. He has the devil as his father. This supernatural enemy of souls is the one to whom he belongs. Scripture describes sinners, those unsaved, as being in the realm of darkness. Look at chapter 4, verse 3, if you would, "every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God; this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world." In chapter 5, verse 19, "We know that we are of God, and that the whole world lies in the power of the evil one."

So, beloved, if we could kind of step back and look sympathetically at the human race and what Scripture describes about the situation, here is this world environment that is

anti-God and we realize that ruling over it in the power and what energizes the world is an adversary of our souls with supernatural power to carry out his wicked designs. That's what man is up against, a hostile environment and a supernatural enemy that blinds him to the only truth that could save his soul. 2 Corinthians 4:3-4 says this, the "gospel is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ ."

Beloved, there should be a sense of urgency coming upon you as you hear these things. There should be a sense of a dawning realization, a dawning recognition that this situation is desperate; that this is very dark; that this is very bad; that this is very dangerous, that the entire human race is in a position of great vulnerability; that there is a world and there is an adversary that is hostile to the well-being of souls and man does not have the power to escape it on his own anymore than a fish could jump out of the sea and live on land, anymore than a person born blind can open their own eyes. It's not possible. It is beyond the realm of human ability to escape that miserable condition.

Man is captive to this wicked foe, he is captive to his world environment but, beloved, the news is even worse, man is in an even worse plight because, the third subpoint here, he is also bound to his own hostile essence. His own hostile essence. He's in a hostile environment, he has a hostile enemy, and he has a hostile essence in and of himself. Here's the thing: man himself is hostile to God. Now, he knows how to dress it up, the hostility isn't always open, defiant rebellion and blatant flaming atheism, is it? It's enough for a man to be hostile to God to be satisfied with himself, to be satisfied with his own goodness, to be disinterested, uninterested in the revelation of God; to have no sense, no acknowledgment of sin; to have no sense, no acknowledgment of his need for Christ; to have no love for Christ; to have no love for his word. All of those symptoms are born out of a common root in the heart of every man even though they manifest themselves differently. It's all born out of a hostility and an indifference to the reality of the one true living God and the place where he has revealed himself in Jesus Christ and in the 66 books of the Bible. That indifference is a mark of an underlying hostility that says, "I don't need you. I will not give thanks to you. I will not acknowledge a Creator who has prerogative over my soul. I will not acknowledge a God to whom I give final account." So he does not seek God and he cannot come to God through his own power or wisdom.

Look at 1 John 2:9 and 11. It says, "The one who says he is in the Light and yet hates his brother is in the darkness until now." He's not a Christian. He is in darkness. Verse 11, "the one who hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going because the darkness has blinded his eyes." He's like a blind, black cat in a black room with no lights and no way out. He can't see anything. All he can do is mindlessly bang his head against the walls of his existence and not find his way out. With no lights in the room to turn on, with no mind to assess his situation, this is the plight of man in sin. 1 Corinthians 2:14 says, "a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised."

Beloved, one of the things that Scripture teaches us about our race, one of the things that it teaches about us individually as we were before we were in Christ, is it describes us as being spiritually dead and unable to respond to the Gospel, and not only unable, unwilling, and not even having the capacity to understand the Gospel properly when it is presented to us. You see, it is not simply a matter of intellectual apprehension that keeps a man from Christ. It's not simply a matter that a man needs more information or if you could bring just exactly the right perfect argument to him, that he will inevitably come to Christ. That's not true. That is not true. There is a famous teacher on the West Coast who said one time that if he simply knew what the felt need of every man was, he could inevitably lead them to Christ. That's a man who doesn't understand the Gospel, who has no sense of the plight of men in sin, because it is not that simple. It is not simply a matter of making a horizontal intellectual presentation or manipulating someone emotionally. Man is dead. Man is in darkness. Man is captive to a hostile supernatural enemy who doesn't willingly give up his prey.

So we're left with this plight of man. He blends into a world that is hostile to God, Satan has supernaturally blinded him, he rejects Christ, and he does not have the capacity to understand truth in himself. This is desperate. This is desperate and, beloved, in one way or another, every one of you has a point of connection with what I just described. If you are not a Christian here this morning, I have just described who you really are, someone lost in sin, lost in your world environment under the domination of a hostile adversary who has supernaturally blinded you to the truth. For those of us that are in Christ, we just saw in a rearview mirror what you used to be. This used to be true of you. As you are now in Christ, you look back and say, "That's where I was. I was in the world. I was blind to Christ. I was under the domination of the devil."

Now, we're gathered together here today in the name of Christ. We're gathered together as those who are believers in Christ and when you look at it from that perspective, it begs a question to be asked and answered. It demands, it incites an urgent inquiry to be made. How is it possible that if all of those things are true, how is it possible that any one of us ever came to Christ? How was it that any one of us ever escaped that awful condition into which we were born and which marked our lives, some of you for decades? How did we ever get out of that? Shouldn't it be obvious to you, whatever the answer to that question is, shouldn't it be obvious to you that it was not an attainment that you did by your own efforts, by your own wisdom, by your own cleverness? That it's not something that you did for yourself? That it's not something that you did, that you broke your own chains of slavery to sin, you broke your own chains of slavery to Satan, you opened your own spiritual eyes? Isn't it obvious that it could not be that? Isn't that obvious? How is it that you now believe in Christ? How can it be, my friends, speaking to you who are Christians now, how can it possibly be that you are now saved, that you now belong to Christ, that sin no longer is your master, that Satan is no longer your Lord, that you are now separate from the world? How can that be? Isn't it obvious that whatever the answer is, it's not attributed to your own power, your own wisdom, your own intellect, anything that you did? How can you be saved when men have no power to come to God on their own? How can that be?

That brings us to our second major point here for this morning. We've seen the plight of man in sin, now we're going to see the power of God in salvation. The power of God in salvation. Given the miserable plight of man in sin, it should be obvious to you who are redeemed here this morning, that if salvation has occurred in your life, God must have done it. God must have intervened. If any man is going to be saved from this miserable plight, God must act on his own initiative in order to impart life. It must be something that comes from outside of you. It must be someone acting outside of you and independent of your ability; someone that can rescue you; someone that can deliver you from that from which you cannot deliver yourself. This must be crystal clear in your mind if you are to grow in Christ. This must be crystal clear in your mind if you are to give proper glory to God. This is the way forward in spiritual life is to understand this, is to deny any claim to an ability, any claim to a goodness, any claim to anything that you did to save yourself. It couldn't be because your world didn't help you, Satan didn't help you, and you couldn't save yourself.

So we are humbled completely as we come to this second point. If salvation is to occur, God must act and that's what we see in 1 John 5:1. Turn there with me, if you would, in this opening clause. I love this. 1 John 5:1, "Whoever," meaning anyone, anyone who believes in Christ, "Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God." Stop right there. Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God. We're going to focus on that phrase here for most of the remainder of our time here because what is described here, he's talking about true Christians. That's what he means when he says, "Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ, that Jesus is the Messiah." He says, "Whoever is like that, something is true of him, and what is true of him is that he has somehow been born of God; that he has had a birth that has come from a divine origin not of himself." That's what we want to look at and we're going to look at this in three sub points as well, so there is a nice parallel to the points here today.

The power of God in salvation, first of all, let's look at the substance of the belief. The substance of the belief. "Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God." He believes something. A Christian is someone who believes something. He's not, first of all, somebody who has gone out and decided to turn a new leaf; he's not somebody that's decided to take up a new religion. At the cornerstone of it is that there is something that he believes about a person named Jesus Christ. "Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God," John is talking about what is the content of saving faith. If someone believes in Christ, if you are here today, this is really a sweet thought, if you are here today as a Christian, it means something, it means that God has given birth to you. If someone believes in Christ, God has given birth in a way that the world would never do because the world is hostile to Christ. Satan certainly wouldn't do it. You couldn't give birth to yourself spiritually or physically, for that matter. So for a person to recognize Jesus is the Christ, we're going to talk about what that means in just a moment, if a person has been separated from the world, separated from Satan, separated from his own sinful essence and now gives honor and preeminence to Christ, it had to come from someplace outside of him, someplace above him. Scripture says if someone believes that, he has been born of God.

Now, to believe that Jesus is the Christ is to believe this: it's to believe that Jesus of Nazareth who lived 2,000 years ago, born, lived, crucified, resurrected, that Jesus revealed in Scripture to us today, that that Jesus is the divine Messiah sent to save sinners in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. That's what it means to believe that Jesus is the Christ. He is the one that God has alone appointed to be the Savior of the world; the one who alone can save sinners; the one who was predicted in centuries gone by that prepared the way for his coming when he was born on earth and there is a theological content to that as it pertains to man lost in his sin. These things are so sweet, sometimes I like to just stop and let the silence set our minds for a recognition that something significant is being said. To believe that Jesus is the Christ is to believe that he was born, crucified and resurrected so that his shed blood could be the payment for your sins; that he could accomplish an atonement in his death that would reconcile you completely to God.

Look at 1 John 4:9, "By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins." Now mark this carefully, beloved: when John says in chapter 5, verse 1, "Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God," well, he's basing that belief in Christ, what that means is informed by what he had said earlier in the letter. What he had said earlier in the letter is that Christ was sent by God into the world; that Christ was sent as an act of initiating love by God in order to save sinners; and that when he died on the cross, he was giving himself as a propitiation, as that which would turn away the wrath of God from our sins, and that that is who this Christ is. We don't have the prerogative to say, "Well, I think Jesus is such and such." You believe in Christ based on who God has revealed him to be and what the purpose of his coming was, and Scripture makes it clear that God sent him into the world to be the Savior of sinners through his shed blood on the cross. To believe that Jesus is the Christ is to believe that the Father sent him, Christ suffered, bled and died for sinners just like you, and to say, "I believe that about Christ. I believe that about Jesus, that he had this supreme, theological, godly mission that he was sent to accomplish."

So I ask you: is that what you believe about Christ? Is that what you believe about him? Do you see the connection between his coming and your lost estate? That you could not save yourself and therefore someone had to come in order to save you? Someone had to come and do something for you that you could not do for yourself? You had to be saved by an outside power, an outside person? Someone had to do something for you that you could not do on your own? Scripture says while we were still helpless, Christ died for sinners. Is that what you believe about Christ? That's the cornerstone of what it means to be a Christian.

Look at verse 14 of chapter 4, "We have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son to be the Savior of the world." It should be clear in your mind if you're Christian, that whatever else you say about Christ, whether you can articulate the more difficult aspects of theology that pertain to his being, whether you can talk about the hypostatic union or not, for you to have this fundamental understanding, "Here's what I believe about Jesus, I believe that he is the one that God sent into the world to be the Savior; that he is the one

appointed by God alone where sinners can find salvation from their sin and lost estate," that's fundamental to being a Christian. That is what God puts in the heart of every true Christian. If you believe that, if you savingly believe that, Scripture says you've been born of God.

And here's the thing, put it in other terms. Sometimes I just get overwhelmed at the eternal significance of the things that God's word teaches us. It overwhelms me. To believe this about Jesus, to have a saving faith in Christ as this, is in light of the world, in light of Satan, in light of your own sinful essence, you do this, you respond to Christ, you respond to that message of Christ in this way: you stake your eternal destiny on him alone because you know that you cannot save yourself. You say, "I am resting, I believe, I accept the Lord Jesus Christ as my only Savior because I know that I can't save myself. I am helpless before a holy God. I am guilty before my Judge. I cannot fix that on my own. And therefore having heard the message of how this Savior came from heaven in order to give his life for sinners like me, I believe that and I entrust my eternal destiny to him. I trust him to take away my sin and reconcile me to a holy God. Everything about me rests on him and nothing of myself in a way that if I am to be saved, Christ gets all the glory and I get zero, zip, nada in it because all I did in coming to Christ was brought my guilt and sin and shame to him." That's the substance of the belief that represents the power of God in salvation.

Now, in light of our plight, that rhymes, doesn't it? In light of our plight, where do we get such faith? Where would you get that faith? There are a lot of teachers that would tell you that you have to work that faith up on your own. You've got to come up with it on your own. Christ died, you have to supply the faith. How could that possibly be true? How could that be true if you're dead? If the world has you encased in a tomb and Satan is guarding your grave, how could it possibly be that you could rise up out of your own spiritual grave under those circumstances and rise to the faith that would save your own soul? How could that be? That's irrational. No, if you have a belief like that, we need to see this second point, we need the source of the belief. The source of the belief. The plight of man in sin means that he cannot even believe on his own power. He cannot come up with the faith that is necessary to save his soul. He cannot come up with that in his own ability, by his own thinking, by his own effort, by his own will. He is dead. He's a captive in chains. He's in a tomb and there are chains around his casket. He cannot get out by exercising faith in his own spiritual coffin.

Where then is the source of this belief? Well, look at 1 John 5:1 and we'll spend a little bit of time here. 1 John 5:1 says, "Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God." You could translate that as "has been born of God." It's the perfect tense in Greek. It indicates a past event with continuing consequences and what he's saying is this: the consequence, the symptom, what has happened is you are believing in Christ. And what he is doing in chapter 5, verse 1, is he's showing you where that belief came from and he says this, he says that belief came from a prior act of God when God gave birth to you. God did a work in your heart and imparted to you something that you did not have on your own and that you could not attain through your own self-effort. It indicates the past event of what theologians call regeneration. God, when a person is saved, God imparts

new life to them. God out of his own goodness, out of his own power and out of his own decision, by his own ability with no contribution from man, imparts to that man a new principle of spiritual life and that prior act of God produces the belief that is necessary to be saved. What it means is this for you, beloved: God initiated your salvation. You believed in Christ only because God did a work in your heart to enable you to do that. You did not believe in your own power. It took the power of God for you to believe something like that. Look at 1 John 4:19, "We love, because He first loved us."

And beloved, to state it in theological terms that are hotly debated but in my judgment there is no disputing what I'm about to say: God's work of regeneration produces faith in those who believe, it is not faith that produces regeneration. God did not – let's put it this way – God did not make you a new creation because you believed in Christ, you believed in Christ because God made you a new creation. It's a total flip of the way that these things work. And think about it this way: in the physical realm, a woman gives birth to a baby and that baby begins to breathe. He doesn't breathe inside the womb. In the spiritual realm, spiritual birth precedes the act of believing. God gives birth and the person believes as a response.

This has enormous implications and I want you to be convinced by it. You can see this from other parallel passages right here in 1 John. The idea is that if you believe in Christ, it's because God has given birth to you. Look at verse 1, "Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God." Now watch what happens in other parts of 1 John. 1 John 3:9, when you put these three passages together, this is unmistakable. 1 John 3:9 says, "No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God." It's the exact same construction. John said in 1 John 5:1, "Whoever believes is born of God." In 1 John 3:9, exact same construction, he says, "he cannot sin, because he is born of God." Now listen, just think with me here: what is the sequence in 1 John 3:9 that produces the spiritual change of a new relationship to sin? Did you stop sinning and then you were born again? No. That wasn't the sequence. That would be salvation by works. "God, if I just stop sinning, you will cause me to be born again." We know that's not true. We're saved by grace through faith, and that not of yourselves, not a result of works lest any man should boast. God causes a man to be born again and that man changes in his life relationship to sin as a result. The exact same construction.

Look at 1 John 4:7. 1 John 4:7 says, "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and," here's the clause, "everyone who loves is born of God." Now beloved, can you make God save you by going out and loving other people? You can't. That's not how it works. You don't start loving Christians and then God saves you in response to your act of loving. Loving others did not cause you to be born again. Love toward other Christians flowed from your life based on the prior work of God to save you. He saved you and then you started loving Christians, then you started having a new relationship to sin. Your life changed because there was a moment in time where God caused you to be born again and love flowed out of your life, and a new love for obedience and a new spiritual life flowed out of that. God didn't save you because you did those things first and he said, "Hey, that's a pretty good job. I'm going to say that woman. Look at her loving. I'll save her

now. Look at that person, he stopped sinning. I'll save him now." You know that that's not true. By everything that you read in the New Testament, you know that that's not true; that that is not the way salvation works. Salvation produces a change in you, the change does not produce salvation.

Now, you can't reverse the sequence of that without teaching a false Gospel. You can't reverse the sequence of that without teaching salvation by works. Loving others did not cause you to be born again. Stopping sinning did not cause you to be born again. You were born again and then you changed your relationship to sin. You were born again and then you started loving God's people and started to say, "I have an affinity with these people that I didn't know before." It's the exact same construction: chapter 3, verse 9; chapter 4, verse 7; and now chapter 5, verse 1. Look at chapter 5, verse 1 now, "Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God." Your belief – oh, beloved, understand this – your belief, it is not that you believed and that forced God's hand and caused him to give you eternal life. God imparted life to you. God took out your stony cold heart and gave you a new heart and you believed in connection with that.

Look at Acts 16. You can see this in the response of Lydia to the Gospel. Acts 16:14, "A woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple fabrics, a worshiper of God, was listening; and the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul." That's what happens in everyone who believes. You are under the sound of the Gospel either verbally or in some kind of written form, and you hear these things about Christ that I was describing earlier, maybe you've heard them a thousand times before and it just bounced off like rubber against a concrete wall, never mattered to you. Why is it on the 1,001 time that you believed? Is it because you had new information? Was it because you had new knowledge? Was it because you tried harder? No, beloved, that's not it. What happened in that moment of time of your conversion was God opened the door to your heart. Speaking somewhat metaphorically, God reached in from outside and opened the door so that the light could shine in. You couldn't open the door from inside, it was locked. God did a work on your heart and that is what enabled you to respond to the Gospel and to believe. So it is the power of God that did a work in your heart that enabled you to believe despite your prior plight in sin. So we say it again: God did not make you a new creation because you believed, you believed because God made you a new creation.

Now, why is that so important? It's important for a lot of reasons. We'll focus on one here. Why is that so important? Why is it so important for you to know that your belief in Christ came from God himself and was not something that you independently and apart from the help of the Holy Spirit added to the process? Why is it important for you to know that you've been born of God and that the origin of your spiritual life came from him and not something of your own self-effort? Why is that so important? Here's why: it's because where faith comes from determines its outcome. The origin of faith determines the way it comes out and that leads us to the third and final point, sub point here of the power of God in salvation: it goes to the security of the belief. The security of the belief. Now we're going to take two minutes to just pull all of this together in a way that should

hit your hearts with really great power and bring you to a point of great rejoicing, confidence and security in Christ when you put all of this together.

For God to save you, for God to impart spiritual life to you means this: it means that he overcame the world in order to accomplish your salvation. It means that Jesus Christ overcame the power of your adversary, Satan, in order to accomplish your salvation. It means that he overcame your own sinful hostility against him in order to achieve your salvation. At every point, the power of God answered everything that opposed your spiritual well-being in Christ; that opposed and kept you from coming to salvation. He blew away the power of the world. He blew away the power of Satan. He blew away the power of your own sin and said, "That one will be mine." And you are on the receiving end of a great act of God that Scripture describes as new birth. Jesus said, "Lest a man is born again, he cannot enter the kingdom of heaven." He has to be born from above. You have to receive something from heaven that you have no control over. What does that mean? It means that if you're in Christ today – this is the reason we say these things – it means that you are secure. God overcame your plight to bring you to salvation and, beloved, if he had the power to do that, to bring you into Christ now, do you know what he has? He has the power to finish what he began.

Look at chapter 5, verse 4, "whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that has overcome the world--our faith." If you are here and you have been born again, you have overcome the world in a way that cannot be reversed. God has given you a victory that cannot be taken away. God has given you a faith that is indestructible, that cannot fail. This is why this is so important. The reason we know it cannot fail is because it came from heaven above and therefore it is guaranteed to us by the power of God and that means your faith won't fail even when you stagger, even when you stumble, even when you feel like it seems like you're hanging by a thread, humanly speaking, maybe you are. Divinely speaking, vertically speaking, no; there is an indestructible, unbreakable, spiritual cord that binds you to the kingdom of God that cannot be broken. If the world, Satan and your own sin couldn't keep you from God, they are not going to get you back because salvation belongs to the Lord, salvation is the power of God, and the God who saved you is the God who is going to keep you and there is nothing in the invisible or visible realm, the world or in the realm of principalities, there is nothing that can separate you from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Read Romans 8 and see what I mean.

God, Christian friend, started your salvation with supernatural power and now he keeps you by that same supernatural power, the same power that raised Christ from the dead, and one day God by that same supernatural power will complete our salvation. He will either receive us to himself when we die or Christ will come from heaven and we will be with him when he makes himself visible. But nothing can separate you from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus your Lord, and your security, your confidence in that is realizing that the originating source of the power, the idea, it was all God's and brought to you in grace by Christ. He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus. Nothing can hinder the power of God to achieve his purposes and so, beloved, when life collapses around you and you are met with tsunami after tsunami of

sorrow, you are still in the powerful hand of God. Nothing has changed. When friends betray you, when Christians fail, let you down, disappoint you, you are still in the powerful hand of God. The God who overcame the world, Satan and your own rebellion, is able, willing and most certainly will complete it in the end. The origin of your faith determines the outcome of your faith. If the origin was in you, it could fail, and it would fail. If the origin is in God, the outcome is secure.

So it is enough for you to be in the hands of the God who saved you. That is why we can look forward to a new year with joy and confidence and an expectation of blessing whether the life brings earthly sorrow or joy, whether it brings posterity or poverty and all points in between. We take a deep breath and say, "God has saved me in Christ. He will finish the work. It comes out well for me in the end. Bless his name."

Father, may you accomplish and fulfill and complete what you have begun in us, and may those who are here apart from Christ find their own heart opened like Lydia was to leave behind sin, to rise, to come forth and to follow Christ to receive him by faith for their eternal salvation. May you be pleased to multiply the outworking of your saving purposes in our midst today and in the coming year, we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.

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