

THE DRAGON, THE WOMAN, AND HER SEED

Revelation 12

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Revelation 12:1-17 (NIV)

“A great and wondrous sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth. Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on his heads. His tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth. The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that he might devour her child the moment it was born. She gave birth to a son, a male child, who will rule all the nations with an iron scepter. And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne. The woman fled into the desert to a place prepared for her by God, where she might be taken care of for 1,260 days.

And there was war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven.

The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him.

Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say: ‘Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ. For the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down. They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death. Therefore rejoice, you heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to the earth and

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the sea, because the devil has gone down to you! He is filled with fury, because he knows that his time is short.’

When the dragon saw that he had been hurled to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child. The woman was given the two wings of a great eagle, so that she might fly to the place prepared for her in the desert, where she would be taken care of for a time, times and half a time, out of the serpent's reach. Then from his mouth the serpent spewed water like a river, to overtake the woman and sweep her away with the torrent. But the earth helped the woman by opening its mouth and swallowing the river that the dragon had spewed out of his mouth. Then the dragon was enraged at the woman and went off to make war against the rest of her offspring—those who obey God's commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus.”

That’s a fascinating passage of Scripture. We keep seeing different ways that the battle is fought but the ultimate conclusion is the dragon loses, the dragon is slain. In fact in Revelation now, this is the third time we have been through the paces of the battle. The third time the story ends. For Revelation 12:14 is the third way of looking at the end of time. We saw the end of the age in Revelation 6 with the breaking of the sixth and seventh seals; the ending of the age with the seven trumpets; and the ending of the age here again. But each time we see the scenario unfold before us we get new details and we gain fresh perspectives. If indeed we must, as Jesus says, become like children to enter the kingdom of God, then I think we can reckon of having the joy of a healthy child whose games always show that the good wins. God wants us as His children to know the reality of Satan’s defeat and because it seems that he is always so strong we may be tempted to forget so God chooses to remind us again and again of this great truth.

The Holy Spirit wants God’s children’s ears to pick up when they hear the mention of the dragon, the woman, and her seed, for these characters as well are in a drama. Only in *Star Wars*

it is fantasies. In Revelation it is reality. In *Star Wars* one only watched the drama. In Revelation we are in it.

The three characters in today's scripture, the three persons—the woman, the dragon and the woman's seed.

I. Verses 1–6 speak of the woman, who she is and what she does.

Her dress gives her away in verse 1. She is an unusual woman clothed in the sun; the moon is under her feet. And on her head is a royal crown of twelve stars. That is some garb. Many times you can tell a woman by her dress. In Revelation, dress is very important for there are two key women in the Book of Revelation: the woman that is being described in Revelation 12 and the woman who is the harlot of Babylon who is given away by her saucy dress. Here is a woman in Revelation 12 who has the garment of the universe about her. The sun is clothed around her. She has the moon at her feet and the twelve stars as her royal diadem.

What is of course being described to the biblically alert ear is a borrowing of the phraseology of Joseph's dream in Genesis 37:9 where he tells his father and his brothers that he has seen a dream of the sun and the moon and eleven stars bowing down to him. This was a model of the fact that in Joseph's time in Egypt his family would come looking to him for help. The Spirit inspires John to take this figure of the sun, the moon, and the twelve stars to represent Israel, spiritual Israel, not simply physical Israel, but spiritual Israel as being pregnant with the Messiah. Israel is clothed with the sun. The spiritual Israel is the community of God, the faithful, because God himself is clothed with the garment of light. The world may despise the true people of God but in God's eyes His people are a radiant bride. The moon is under her feet, expressing the community of the people of God. And twelve stars as a crown expresses the royalty of God's people. The mission of Israel is very clear from verse 2. She is in anguish for delivery, at pangs

of birth. Here we know that there's a difference between spiritual Israel and physical Israel. For physical Israel, much of it was not in anguish for the birth of the Messiah. John here is speaking in spiritual terms that say the faithful people. And at Christmas time our minds go back to people like Zechariah and Elizabeth, to Joseph and to Mary, to Anna and Simeon. The faithful want the Messiah to be born and are in anguish until the Messiah is born.

Isaiah the prophet, speaking of the pregnancy of Israel in 26:17–18, laments that Israel under its own efforts has been unable to bring the world deliverance. He records, “Like a woman with child who writhes and cries out of her pangs when she is near her time, so we were because of Thee, O Lord. We were with child. We writhed. We have, as it were, brought forth wind. We have wrought no deliverance in the earth.”

Now as contrast to the statement of Isaiah that Israel was in anguish but gave no birth, now we see she is ready to give birth to the Messiah. But in the pangs of her pregnancy the opposition appears.

II. Verses 3 and 4 identify the opposition as a great red dragon.

In Scripture, Satan comes across depicted in many terms. One of them, a favorite in the Book of Revelation, is the term “dragon.” Scriptures make a case out of how there is in the deep a Leviathan, a monster, who can be spiritually represented as simply the enemy of God. He could take different forms. At times according to Ezekiel 29 he could represent Pharaoh. In Isaiah 27 he could represent Assyria and Babylon. But the figure of speech is to give one the impression of a huge monster-like being who is God's enemy and the people of God's enemy. The fact that he is colored red stands for something very unusual. It symbolizes violence. Even as green flags waved at a bull don't appear to produce much result, a red flag does. Somehow red connotes that kind of idea of violence.

This dragon has seven heads and ten horns. A many headed monster. Perhaps the spirit is causing John to use imagery found in Daniel 7. We know from the figure of seven heads that what is being expressed is great intelligence. The figure of ten horns like horns on a bull, not like you blow, expresses power. Horns are a symbol of strength. The fact that there's seven and ten shows complete power. And the imagery involved the fact that it's seven-headed means that if you cut off one of its heads it still has six left, meaning that you have a rough time dealing with him. No sooner do you stop him here than he breaks out in another place. One generation thinks they may have him beat, but he crops out in the next to come. He is many-headed and he appears to give the appearance of reigning.

The dragon is also seen as responsible for a third of the stars falling from heaven. Many have associated this with the fall of the angels of heaven, and perhaps there is legitimacy to this. The Scriptures do not explicitly give us the details of Satan's fall, but there are intimations throughout the Scripture of his fall. Isaiah 14:12-14 speaks of Babylon and yet reaches beyond Babylon, I think, to describe Satan. It says, "How you have fallen from heaven, O morning star, son of the dawn! You have been cast down to the earth, you who once laid low the nations! You said in your heart, 'I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly, on the utmost heights of the sacred mountain. I will ascend above the tops of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High'" (NIV).

The spirit of pride is coming out of him. Pride is identified in the New Testament as the problem with Satan and the problem with people who follow him. Timothy is counseled by Paul in 1 Timothy 3 that a minister must not be a recent convert for he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil, that is, get on with the devil's way of doing things. And Jude 6 says the angels did not keep their own position but left their proper dwelling. There

was an attempt to exercise power over God or to be equal to God. So in this dramatic scenario in the heavens Satan has had an initial fall; that's the teaching of Revelation 12:3–4.

Satan is cast down to earth and attempts to devour the child. Satan is well aware of the fact that the whole ball game is whether or not he gets the child. If Satan fails to get Jesus when he is born and when he lives on earth, Satan has lost the whole game. This explains the suffering of the babies of Bethlehem. The dragon readies to pounce on the innocents. It explains the Lord's flight into Egypt. By the way, except for passing references to Satan in Revelation 2 and 3, incidental references, the first time Satan is introduced in the Book of Revelation is right here in Revelation 12. He's introduced in a critical moment. The critical moment is his opposition to the birth and the life of Jesus Christ.

As we quickly see from verse 5, Christ successfully eludes him. In fact this strange Scripture "She [the woman] brought forth a male child one who is to shepherd all the nations with a rod of iron, but her child was caught up to God and to his throne." The whole ministry of Jesus is described simply that he was born and caught up to his throne. Nothing is said about His life. Nothing is said about his death. Nothing is said about His resurrection. Just simply birth and ascension all condensed into one. He was born and Satan missed. The Child is caught up to His throne. Notice He has not yet begun to rule. Nothing is said about that, simply that He is caught up to His throne. That's a brilliant summary the Spirit inspired John to write. In other words, Satan missed. How he missed of course is told to us in the Gospels.

Perhaps this story may explain the nature of his miss. A certain man had a beautiful estate upon which were some magnificent trees in which he took great pride. It was this man's custom to walk among the trees and to gaze at their beauty. This man had an enemy who hated him sorely. The enemy was always seeking ways of getting even with the owner of the estate. At last the

enemy conceived a plan that he thought would wound the heart of the owner. He decided to go to the estate in the dark of night and cut down one of the most beautiful of the trees. He laid his plans well. He took with him an ax and saw and began to work. All night long he worked until his muscles were sore and his hands were blistered. As morning dawned, he saw the owner riding with a companion coming toward the trees where he had been toiling. He redoubled his efforts and the great tree began to totter. As it gained full momentum in the fall, the enemy began to shout in triumph. One of the branches, however, came toward him and pinned him to the ground. His hatred was strong, and he jeered at the owner who approached him. The owner of the estate called his companion to him and said to the enemy, “You sought to do me a great harm. But I want to show you what you have done. This man with me is the architect of the beautiful home I intend to build here in the midst of these trees. In order to make room for the house, it was necessary to cut down that tree. Look at this plan! The tree on which you have toiled all the night and which is the cause of your death is the tree that must be cut down to make way for my house. You have worked for me without knowing it.”

Satan missed his chance. Jesus was born and caught up to the throne. But the woman is still left on earth. The people of God are still left on earth. Jesus is reigning in heaven but His people are here. So she must fly into the wilderness.

III. When Revelation uses the term “wilderness,” we must not think of a forest, nor should we think of a desert area.

The term “wilderness” is as symbolic as the word “heaven.” Just as in reality the people of God are not literally in heaven in chapter 12:1 but it is a symbolism applied to the fact that the purposes of people of God are born in heaven, so one need not take the fact that when the people of God flee into the wilderness it means that the people of God in times of trouble must always

get out in open spaces. Or tree spaces. It simply means that the wilderness is where God provides for His people. It is a word that is used to describe the Exodus when the people of God came out of the possession of Pharaoh out of Egypt. They were sustained by God in the wilderness. And the wilderness sometimes, by the way, can be the enemy of the people of God. But in this sense here it means that God provides for His people.

God's people have often been in flight: Israel in the Exodus; Elijah fleeing from Jezebel; Mary and Joseph fleeing from Herod—but in the midst of their flight God is going to keep the woman and preserve His people.

IV. Now, we are set for an introduction to the dragon again, verses 7–17.

We are told in this passage who the dragon is and what he does. By the way, something striking about this passage is that a great deal of the time John is speaking about events that have not yet happened. Yet he is using present and past tenses so certain is he that the events will occur that he can already describe it as having happened.

John describes, first of all, the dragon's defeat in heaven and his being thrown down to the earth. By looking a little bit at other parts of Scripture we gain a perception of Satan's present position. From the book of Job 1:6–12 we see that Satan has access to God as the accuser of the people of God. He wants to lay a finger on Job. Ephesians 2:2 identifies him as the prince of the power of the air speaking of his authority in the spiritual realm. Ephesians 6:12 says “we wrestle not against flesh and blood but against spiritual powers and hosts of wickedness in heavenly places.” And, by the way, these spiritual hosts of wickedness have a captain: the dragon.

In Jude 9, we see the enemy of the people of God struggling with Michael for the body of Moses, an accuser against the people of God. He's all of these things. There may be some mystery here. I'm not so certain that Revelation is so much concerned with tracing the geography of where

Satan is, as the theology of what's going on. The fact is that our accuser in the heavens is Satan. He is identified in verses 7–10 by names like the dragon, the ancient serpent, which brings us back to the Genesis story. “Devil” is a Greek word that means “deceiver” or “slanderer,” and “Satan” is a Hebrew word meaning an “adversary” or “foe.” Having tripped us, which is his role as devil, he then slanders or accuses us which is his role as adversary. He seeks to lodge charges against us in the heavens.

I think Paul is meditating upon this in Romans 8 when he says, “Who will bring any charge against God’s elect?” And he answers “ Will Jesus Christ? No. If Jesus Christ won’t bring a charge then who is left to bring one?” So imagine if you will the scene: Satan trying to lodge a charge against us as the people of God. He is pleading in both courts. He is telling us what a wretch we are and why we don’t deserve God’s grace. And he’s smearing us before God all the time. And not a charge sticks, according to Romans 8, because of the blood of Jesus Christ.

In fact we already, in Revelation 12:11, are seen as presently defeating him. We are conquering him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of our testimony. That testimony, by the way, is a full-powered one only when the testimony is commitment to follow Jesus Christ to the end.

Notice what verse 11 says “They have conquered him by the blood of the lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death.” In other words, their testimony—which is the Greek word for “martyr” or “witness—is they loved not their lives even unto death. In other words, they followed Jesus Christ from a commitment of the heart that says, “I am following Him no matter what.” That is the kind of commitment that conquers Satan. A commitment which is a commitment to Jesus Christ that says “I’ll follow You for a while if You’ll make things work for me” is not a testimony. And it is one guarantee not to have God triumph in your life. But to make a commitment that says, “No matter what, I’m following Jesus”

is to add to the testimony of the blood of the Lamb and to ensure the fact of the dragon's defeat in our life.

Verse 7 speaks of the dragon's expulsion from heaven and there are many views on this as to whether this is a past event, accomplished in the cross and resurrection of Jesus, or whether this is yet a future event. I personally hold it to be a still future event. The Scriptures are speaking in the present realm of Satan being in the heavenly places and having access to God as our accuser. But, when the end of the age begins, when the last seven-year countdown begins, it is going to begin as a result of an occasion of God's action in heaven ordering his archangel Michael to go and throw the dragon down to earth and further limit his role. By the way, there's a subtle thing going on here in Scripture, a huge insult to the dragon, to Satan. We think he's so powerful. But the Scripture is saying he's not that powerful. It only takes a big angel to get him. C. S. Lewis has put it so well when he's reminded us that we tend to think in terms of opposites. The opposite of light is darkness. The opposite of heat is cold. The opposite of God is Satan. Not so at all. There is no opposite to God! There is no one but God. He cannot have an opposite. The opposite of Satan is an angel, a good angel, not God. Therefore his power is limited and Michael takes out after him. Michael is typically represented as the defender of the people of God. Satan is thrown down to the earth. And he is angry. In fact there's a woe pronounced from heaven in Revelation 12:12: "Rejoice O heaven but woe to the earth for the devil has come down to you in great wrath because he knows his time is short." The term "wrath" has been used quite a few times in the Book of Revelation. It's used in reference to the wrath of God at the very end of the age. In the Greek language there are two words that are possible to use for the word wrath. There's a real difference between the two words. Anger that can be described as really getting ticked off. Some people have a quick flash point. They tend to walk around a little bit mad and it

only takes one thing to make them go off and they can almost be insane with anger. It's not a rational anger, not a controlled anger.

Then there's the controlled and long-lasting anger. It's sort of the difference between Charles Manson and the judge who presided over Manson's trial. Charles Manson goes off in a crazy rage. But the judge throws the book at him, only within the limits of the law. The judge acts legally and expresses wrath in a righteous kind of way.

The same difference between Manson and his judge is the difference between God and Satan. Satan is thrashing around in his anger. God, when he exercises judgment, exercises it within the confines of law. Satan is angry. He is cast out of heaven. His work is further limited and he lands on earth clawing and spitting and ready to fight. Yet his fight is not a fight that is coming from any prospect of winning. He knows he can't win. He's simply out to be mean for meanness sake. He is aware that he has nothing to lose.

The most active period of a chicken's life is when he has been decapitated. When that happens there are violent spasms and flopping and jerking around. Sometimes we use the expression "like a chicken with its head cut off."

All this is Satan. During the end time in which we live, we see the tantrums growing evermore wild and reckless. It is not an indicator that evil is gaining in strength and about to take over. Quite the contrary. It's evidence that the dragon has been decapitated and can't last much longer. We look at the terrible tragedies in shock and many people say, "What is the age coming to? Is evil going to win? Is there going to be a massive outbreak of perversion and violence?" I'm sure that there will be, but if there is it's not a sign that evil is going to win. It's the end spasm.

V. Verses 13–17 speak of the dragon having been cast down and pursuing the woman and her offspring.

It's clear that the woman has given birth to two groups of people. The seed, the Messiah, is her offspring and so are those who make up allegiance to Jesus Christ from the Jewish community and those who are allegiant to Jesus Christ from the Gentile community. Having failed to snatch Jesus, the dragon now chases God's people. This is not a word which guarantees the physical safety of all of God's people, for the woman here represents an entity, the people of God. Not every person specifically. What is being promised is that the people of God as an entity will be preserved. Satan will never extinguish the people of God from earth. When God chooses to bring His people home He will make that choice. That is not in Satan's hand.

Phrases like "wings of an eagle to fly into the wilderness" is a reference back to the Exodus when the Israelites' flight from Egypt is described as being borne on the wings of an eagle. The reference to the flood issuing from the dragon's mouth should, I think, be understood poetically in the same sense we use Isaiah 43:2: "When you pass through the waters I will be with you and through the rivers they shall not overwhelm you." I've quoted that Scripture when I've gone through trouble. I haven't physically waded through a flood. There is a sense that no matter what the dragon pours out upon the people of God, he can't drown them and he can't take them. In final desperation because he can't finish the job off by himself, Satan stands on the sea looking for the beast to arise out of the sea.

VI. He can't finish the job himself; he needs a henchman. Out of it comes the Antichrist.

Let's look for a moment at the sea. You and I are the sea. We are of the woman here in this passage of Scripture. What lessons do we learn from the conflict? What lessons can we apply to our lives now? One of them is certainly is "I do not exist without the people of God." There is a sense in which none of us would have been saved if someone had not been praying for us, if someone had not been pregnant with anticipation of our birth into the kingdom of God. I may not

be aware. I think most of us are aware specifically of the persons or person who prayed that we would be saved. Maybe you're not but I'm sure that somewhere our salvation has its roots in the people of God or a person of God praying for us. The people of God want Jesus to be born.

Whether it is Israel in the Old Testament or whether it's spiritual Israel the church of the living God now. We want Jesus to be born and we are in agony until Jesus is born into a life. So I must even in this Scripture get away from the viewpoint that my experience with Jesus Christ is solitary thing, that I can tell the people of God and the church, "Go your own way. I'll live my own way. And not have fellowship with anyone else." The people of God are a living entity that grows together over time.

I think there is this truth also coming from this passage of Scripture: That from the day Christ was born in me, Satan plotted his snatch. If Satan wanted to get Jesus when He was born you can be sure he wants to get me and you. In fact, Jesus said, "What's the first reaction when the farmer sows his seed upon the ground?" The birds come and eat it.

What's that?

That's the attack of Satan.

So expect when you make commitment to Jesus Christ that Satan is going to be very displeased and he's going to attempt to snatch it. But God makes provision for you.

I think there's the truth also that by the Lamb's blood I am a winner. There's the combination that they are saved by the blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony. This raises the question as we look at Jesus whether we are with him or against him.

We look also at the perspective of Satan. When we become a Christian, Satan accuses us. None of his charges stick but he goes on accusing us. When we are not a Christians he excuses us. All the time he's saying, "That's no big deal. Don't worry about that." The minute you become a

Christian what's he do? "That's a big deal! You'd better worry about that!" he changes his strategy.

Are you committed to following Jesus Christ? To the extent that you could say with Job, "Though he slay me yet will I trust him"? What the Book of Revelation is saying to a martyred church in the first century and to the church now is "Are you willing to follow me all the way? Is your commitment to me simply based on convenience or is it a radical commitment, a commitment which sticks and lasts?" Jesus is saying to us through this Scripture who has the ultimate control. Know for certainty whose side you're on.

Closing Prayer

We do thank You, Father, that through Jesus Christ we always have the victory. That the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of His Christ has come. We praise you that as we watch the signs of this age that we recognize that they are the spasms of a defeated foe and that Christ reigns supreme. As we look at our own lives and examine them today in communion, I ask, Lord Jesus, that we would renew our dedication and commitments to You. That the persons here who have never made a personal commitment to You would this day open their lives to You and invite You as Lord into their life. You who will one day rule the nations we ask to rule our hearts now. By the love of Jesus Christ, Lord, we seek Your presence and the gifts of Your spirit as we worship now around the table. Through Jesus Christ our Lord Amen.