

CHRISTMAS AND THE COSMIC WAR **(Revelation 12:1-17)**

Today, we are going to look at a passage that carries a hint of the Christmas story. It involves the birth of a Child, and that Child is clearly Jesus. The images that are presented in this story, however, are so disturbing that they will never make their way into a Hallmark card. One of the characters is so frightening that you will never place him at the manger under your Christmas tree.

This story does not have the mother of Jesus cuddling her baby and quietly pondering these things in her heart. Instead:

- We see a woman shrieking in the pain of child-birth and cowering before a hideous dragon that is intent on devouring her baby as soon as He is born.
- Then, the story fast forwards to when her Child has already ascended back to heaven to assume His throne in glory, but the mother has to flee into the wilderness to a place of safety that God has prepared for her.
- Next, the story shifts to heaven where a war is raging between the dragon and his angels and with Michael and his angels.
- Finally, the scene switches back to earth where the dragon is pursuing the mother, and when he can't reach her, he makes war on the rest of her offspring.

This is a rather odd and even terrifying story to turn to at Christmas, but then again, we have pretty well sanitized the real Christmas story. We have removed the muck and the stench of the stable and replaced it with scented candles and baby-faced angels.

Correctly understood, Bethlehem was a beachhead, and the arrival of Jesus from heaven was an invasion into enemy occupied territory. This war started all the way back in the Book of Genesis when God said to the serpent who had successfully tempted Eve, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel." God was declaring war all the way back then. When Jesus came to this earth that first Christmas, this war got even more intense, but Jesus won the war when He rose from the grave. While the winner of the war is not in doubt, the conflict has not yet ended. It is still ongoing.

Turn with me to Revelation 12. I will read the entirety of this chapter, and then we will work our way through it. As you know, this is an apocalyptic book. By the way, the first word of the book, the first word of 1:1 is the Greek word from which we get our word *apocalypse*. Unlike how the word is often used, the word has nothing to do with the destruction of the world. The word simply means, *unveiling, revealing*. The purpose of this book is to reveal Jesus Christ to the reader. If you will simply read this book prayerfully and carefully, God will show you His Son, Jesus. You will see Him in His glory and His power and His majesty.

I have read the book. If you have not read the book but intend to, here is a spoiler alert. Cover your ears if you don't want to hear this. Here it is: Jesus wins! And those of us who are on His side, that means we win, too! The devil loses big time, and we win a

blowout victory. Jesus gets the Most Valuable Player Award. Instead of being invited to the White House for a photo of with the President, God invites us to His House, and He will host a dinner party for everybody on His team. This is going to be one party you do not want to miss.

Our opponent, however, doesn't fight fair. To change the analogy, Revelation 12 makes clear that we are not in a game. This is a war, and Satan doesn't abide by the rules of war nor does he recognize what was decided upon at the Geneva Convention. He doesn't give aid to the wounded nor protect civilians. He even tries to kill women, children, and babies. That is exactly what we find in Revelation 12.

As to the symbolism of this chapter, everyone agrees that the baby being born is Jesus and that the dragon is Satan. There is great disagreement as to the identity of the woman who is giving birth to the baby. Despite what the Catholic Church says, I do not think this is an allusion to Mary. While some may say the woman is the nation of Israel, I don't think so. I believe it is the chosen people of God in both the Old and New Testaments. We might use the word *Church*, but we must include the true followers of God who preceded the Church. God has always had His faithful remnant.

I want to point out four specific truths from our text about the people of God and this cosmic war, but before I do that, I want to talk to you about how I interpret Revelation. My view of Revelation is likely different than what most of you have read and heard through the years. I believe that John's primary purpose was not to prophesy what would happen in the distant future. His goal was to comfort and encourage those living in his day, those who were his original readers. Listen to Revelation 1:1, "The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to His servant's the things that must soon take place."

We are more than 1950 years past the writing of this letter. I don't think that qualifies as *soon*. I believe John wrote before AD 70, and that date is important because it was in AD 70 that the Roman army marched upon Jerusalem and utterly destroyed it. The army arrived at the time of the Passover celebration when Jerusalem's population had considerably swelled. What happened during the time of the siege was horrific. It is estimated that 1.1 million Jews were killed or died during that time. I believe that was the Great Tribulation we read about in Revelation.

Let me use a few verses from Revelation 13 to illustrate why I believe John was addressing what was going on in his day. Look at 13:1. I believe the heads and the horns refer to are Roman Emperors. Beginning with 44 BC when Julius Caesar declared himself the dictator for life and ending with AD 70, there were 10 Roman Emperors. They are the 10 horns, and all 10 are wearing a crown or a diadem. While there are 10 horns, there are 7 heads.

Look at v. 3. Nero was the 7th emperor from the 1st, Julius Caesar. Nero was mentally ill to put it politely. He was crazy, and he was unbelievably evil. He committed suicide by stabbing himself in the neck. When he died, he had no heir. Rome was plunged into chaos. Between Nero's death in AD 68 and when Vespasian took over in AD 69, there were 4 different Emperors. Vespasian was the one who consolidated control, re-established the peace, and returned Rome to health and glory. It was like a fatal wound

had been healed.

Look at 13:18. What is up with the number 666? In the Hebrew language, each letter had a corresponding, numerical value. When you add up the numbers in each letter that spell *Nero Caesar* in Hebrew, it equals 666. I think it is clear that Nero was the antichrist. By the way, the word *antichrist* does not appear in the Book of Revelation, not a single time. The text uses the word *beast* to describe both a single ruler (in this case Nero) and the Roman Empire led by its many emperors.

Look back at the end of 13:1. What is the meaning of the blasphemous names on its heads? The Emperors of Rome were considered to be and were worshiped as gods. Temples were built in which the Caesar was worshiped; Coins were minted with their image honoring them as gods, and the people were expected to say, "Caesar is Lord." The Christians wouldn't do so, and they were either persecuted or martyred.

Because of how I read Revelation, I'm not looking for the coming of the antichrist. I'm looking for the coming of Jesus Christ, and this last book of the Bible was written for the purpose of revealing Him and showing us His glory.

With all that as backdrop, let's go back to Revelation 12 and see what it has to say about the people of God.

The first thing I want you to notice is:

The People of God Are Threatened Because They Are a Threat

Satan hates God. Satan is at war with God, and so if you love God, if you are His child, Satan views you as an enemy. He will do everything He can to oppose you and destroy you. While that is true, there is one special category of believers whom Satan will leave alone. Satan will not waste time going after a Christian who is no threat to him and his plans. If you take yourself out of the battle and pose no threat to his side, Satan and his forces, for the most part, will leave you alone.

The minute, however, that you start serving the Lord and seeking to win others to Christ, watch out! You will have made yourself a target. The devil's side will start shooting at you. That is why Paul lists for us the spiritual armor we are to put on in Ephesians 6:10-20. We need to:

- Be strong in His strength.
- Put on the belt of truth.
- Put on the breastplate of righteousness.
- Put on the shoes of the gospel of peace.
- Take up the shield of faith.
- Put on the helmet of salvation.
- Take up the sword of the Spirit, the word of God.
- And pray, pray, pray in and with the Spirit.

Now, we need to take a moment to deal with the imagery in our text. Before I do, let me remind you that 2000 years ago, people did not have television to watch. They could

not stream video to hand-held devices. They did not walk around looking at a screen they were holding. Their entertainment was to look up to the heavens on a clear night and listen to stories based on the stars and the constellations.

Two of those constellations make their way into our text. The first is Virgo. The constellation Virgo is pictured as a woman. According to our text, this woman is clothed with the sun. That means, from our viewpoint, our sun is just in front of Virgo. And the moon is located at the bottom of where Virgo is standing. Above her head are 12 stars that form a crown. One commentary claims:

As we orbit the sun each year, the sun appears to move through the 12 constellations of the zodiac, spending about a month in each one. The month that the sun appears in Virgo is around the time of the autumnal equinox, from mid-September through late October (September 16th-October 30th). Nor is it unusual to find the moon near the feet of Virgo. The moon takes 27 1/3 days to orbit the earth with respect to the stars. Therefore, for a day or two each month, the moon appears near the feet of Virgo . . . Therefore, for a day or two each September or October, the sun appears in Virgo with the moon at her feet, so this is not that remarkable.

I don't know whether there are ever 12 stars that appear above Virgo, but John is using that imagery to identify this woman as being chosen by God. Just as His chosen nation had 12 tribes and His chosen Church has 12 apostles, this woman stands for the chosen people of God.

Then, there is another constellation that enters the scene. It is not one of the 12 constellations of the Zodiac, but it is a constellation, nonetheless. In fact, there are 88 constellations visible to the naked eye. One of those is Hydra.

Hydra is the largest of the 88 constellations. It is long and is viewed as a snake. Just as Satan entered the serpent in the Garden of Eden, here in our text, this Hydra Constellation appears in the sky and is said to be a dragon, symbolizing our enemy, the devil.

The devil wants to devour the Child. In other words, Satan wants to get rid of Jesus because He is a threat.

If you feel threatened by Satan, that is a good thing. That means he views you as a threat. One man said that when he wakes up in the morning, he wants Satan to groan, "Oh, no, he's up."

If you do feel threatened, the second point of this message is good news.

The People of God Are Protected Because God Is Their Shepherd

Revelation 12 skips over the life and ministry of Jesus. He goes from being born in v. 5 to being caught up to heaven and His throne by the end of the same verse. This alludes to Jesus' ascension into heaven 40 days after His resurrection. When He got back to heaven, Jesus sat down on His throne. Jesus is reigning right now over His Kingdom. The Kingdom is the King's domain. Wherever His people are, that is where Jesus is ruling supreme. The Kingdom was inaugurated 2000 years ago, and it will be fully

consummated when He returns, because when He comes back, every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Verse 6 tells us the woman, the people of God, fled into the wilderness to the place God had prepared, and God cared for them for 1,260 days. That is 42 months or 3 ½ years. This literally happened.

Some months ago, we studied the Gospel of Matthew, and when we got to Matthew 24-25, I stressed that many people interpret those chapters as they do Revelation. They think that Jesus was talking only about what would take place long into the future. In 24:34, however, Jesus said, “Truly, I say to you, **this generation** will not pass away until all these things take place.” Jesus was looking for a fulfillment of His words in the lifetime of His hearers. Within 40 years of His resurrection, Jerusalem was marched upon and destroyed by the Romans.

In 24:15-16 Jesus warned His hearers, basically, “When you see them coming, head for the hills. Don’t go back and pack your bags; just get going.”

Jesus’ followers remembered what Jesus said, and when the war between the Jewish people and the Roman army started, the Christians left Jerusalem, and they went to Pella in Perea, which is east of the Jordan River. It is wilderness. It is desert, but it was far from the fighting. The length of the war between Rome and the Jews was 3 ½ years. Those who went to Pella stayed safe. Large numbers of those who stayed in Jerusalem died either from starvation or from the sword. Many of those who tried to escape during the siege were captured and crucified right outside the wall of Jerusalem.

When you obey God and do what He says, He will take care of you. If God could provide for His people for 40 years in the wilderness between Egypt and the Promised Land, and if God could take care of His people for 3 ½ years in the wilderness during the middle of a war, God can take care of you during the cosmic war that is presently being waged.

Notice a third thing.

The People of God Are Victorious Because Jesus Is the Victor

Look again at vv. 7-12. What is John communicating to us in this passage? Is he speaking literally and physically? Are we to view this an actual war? What weapons are being employed? Are there casualties on both sides?

I think John is writing about a metaphorical war. I agree with Sam Storms who wrote:

This is not a description of a literal or spatial or geographical change in the devil’s dwelling place. Rather, we should understand that this is John’s way of describing the glorious fact that Satan’s power was broken through Christ’s atoning sacrifice on the cross and His bodily resurrection. The result is that Satan can no longer successfully bring accusations against God’s people.

Look at v. 11. We are victorious because Jesus is the Victor. He is the Lamb who took away our sin through the sacrifice He made on the cross. Our testimony has nothing to do with what we have accomplished or who are. We give testimony to what Jesus did and

who He is. Because we have won the victory through Jesus, we can give our lives in service to Him knowing that He has given us eternal life.

Let's look at one final truth.

The People of God Are Targeted Because Satan Has Been Defeated

Look at the end of v. 12. Satan realizes he is defeated, but he is going to do as much damage and take out as many people as he can. According to v. 13, he is going after the church. I love the imagery of v. 14. While the serpent is slithering across the ground, God gives His people wings. A snake on the ground cannot do much damage to a flying bird.

Again, we have the imagery of the place of safety in the wilderness. I believe the water being poured out in v. 15 is the Roman army that is marching through the land. And again, God miraculously protected His people.

What God did 1950-plus years ago, God can still do today. Satan is after Christians and the Church. He is attacking marriages, families, children, institutions, our culture's view of morality. Look at the filth that is being spewed out upon our land. He is wanting to drown us in garbage, but he is not going to win.

Quoting again from Sam Storms, "Satan only wins when we love our lives more than we love God . . . Satan wins whenever we treasure anything more than Jesus."

A few years ago, Russell Moore preached a sermon entitled, "Round yon Violence." He preached about the angel's announcement to Mary that she was going to be the mother of the Messiah. Moore argued that when God caused Mary to conceive His Son, He was declaring war—not on us but for us. Listen to how he ends his message:

Christmas is violent. Christmas is war. Christmas means that all of the enemies of God, including those of us who were once enemies of God, have been put down by the power of a new man, who has no biological father but who knows how to say, "Abba."

Perhaps what all of us need this holiday season is to be reminded of that dependence, to be reminded of the warfare going on all around us, to cry out with gratitude to a God who fought our enemy for us in a surprising and unexpected and upside-down kind of way. And say, "All I want for Christmas is a crushed snake skull." That's the gospel.

Jesus smashed the head of the serpent. He won the war, and because we have placed our faith in Him, we share in that victory.