

The serpent crusher

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[0:00] Some of you. Who in the Bible had a vision of a ladder from earth to heaven?!

Okay, go on, Lillia. Yes, Jacob, that's right.! She was a lady who also had a vision of a ladder to heaven, but it was a rather different sort of ladder.

She wrote a diary, and her name was Perpetua. She lived in a city called Carthage in the Roman world. Now, a diary is interesting, actually.

Well, it's interesting in various ways. For one thing, it's probably the earliest surviving Christian document that was written by a woman. And we don't know of any early surviving document written by a woman.

But perhaps even more importantly of that, it's also one of the earliest and the most detailed testimonies of the early martyrs. So Perpetua, as I said, was a Roman noblewoman, and she lived in the great city of Carthage.

[1:20] She actually had an infant child. But she, together with her maidservant, Felicitas, who probably would have been a slave, but who was also apparently a friend and a friend.

And they were both converted to Christianity and baptised. And to cut a long story short, they were both, along with their spiritual mentor, Satyrus, killed in the arena in Carthage, probably in 203 AD, but it turns out that her father particularly was a man of wealth and influence.

And he wasn't able to prevent her martyrdom, but by a dint of a bit of bribery and influence, he was able to make sure that her imprisonment was not too barbaric.

And so, as a result of that, her diary is survived and was kept. And the extant document actually also, at the end of it, has a description of her actual martyrdom, which appears to have been written by an eyewitness.

But the main point of telling you this story is that while she was in prison, before she was martyred, she had a dream or a vision.

[2:45] It's not quite clear whether it was a dream or a waking vision, probably a dream, a vision in her dream. And she also saw a ladder up to heaven, but this was quite unlike Jacob's ladder.

Because this ladder was made up of swords and other weaponry, Roman weaponry. You can just about see it on that illustration there. Those rungs of the ladder are swords.

And at the bottom of the ladder, there was a dragon. And in her vision and in her dream, her mentor, Sutteris, climbed the ladder and then he turned back to his protegee and said, I'm waiting for you, but just make sure the dragon doesn't bite you.

And her reply was memorable. She replied, he will not hurt me in the name of Jesus Christ. And then in her vision, she trod on the serpent's head and ascended the ladder.

And when she woke up, she took this vision as a sign that she was indeed going to be martyred, she wasn't going to be released. As a daughter of Eve, however, she understood that the dragon would try to strike her and its head must be crushed.

[4:01] As Paul wrote, the God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. So that's what Perpetua found.

But as her testimony makes clear, the true serpent crusher, of course, is Jesus himself. So we're going to consider this topic of the serpent crusher, the curse of Genesis 3.15, that a daughter, an offspring of Eve, would crush the serpent's head.

And I'm going to do it under these three headings. It's not about snakes. The serpent crushed. And then keep on trampling. You'll see what I mean by that when I get there. And I'm not really going to do very much more than actually just trace the development of this prophecy through the scriptures, this curse through the scriptures, and see how it worked out and how it was understood by God's people.

Well, here's a word for you. Orphidophobia. I don't know if you've heard the word before, but you've probably heard the thing. Orphidophobia is the fear of snakes.

But this story, of course, is not really about snakes, although orphidophobia is quite common. I heard one statistic quoted as many as 70% of people have an irrational fear of snakes.

[5:37] But as Derek Kidner puts it in his commentary, this Genesis story is not a just-so story, just to tell you, explain why snakes don't have legs.

Surely it's something much more important and significant than that. For one thing, snakes are not particularly clever, and they certainly can't talk.

But the snake is... The serpent is described here as a serpent or a snake for good reasons, though. You can't form an empathic relationship with a snake, can you?

Like you can with a cat or a dog. We had a pet snake once, actually. And I can assure you, you wouldn't want to sort of put it on your knee and stroke it.

But it was a fascinating creature, and if you just saw it strike suddenly, it was lying there, and you'd think it was asleep. And what you had to do you had to sort of wiggle a dead mouse or rat in front of it.

[6:40] And suddenly, woof! It's really quite spectacular to watch a snake strike. We had a Kenyan student come and stayed with us, and to her, the idea of having a snake as a pet was bizarre.

But as I said, I don't think this passage in Genesis is really to adjust those stories about snakes. It's a metaphor, instead, for its dormancy in hiding and its speed and precision when it strikes.

And another thing about snakes is that when it's seized its prey, it can't let go. If you do get bitten by a snake, you have to push its mouth to be released if it gets hold of you, because it can't actually let go once it's bitten.

And so this snake here is used as a metaphor for the great serpent. And what a good one it is. A lion is dangerous, of course, but at least you can see a lion coming.

The reason why we find snakes so fearful is that a snake strikes when you don't expect it. A snake strikes from the ground where you can't see it, from hiding. And so these properties of snakes are a metaphor for a far more deadly enemy than any actual snake, the great serpent Satan himself.

[8:10] Well, as I say, I wanted to trace this idea through the scriptures to see how it was understood by God's people.

And how well it was understood by the Old Testament writers is not entirely clear, but we do find hints in the Old Testament. And so, for instance, in the book of Job, we find, this is Job 1, 6-7, One day the angels came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came with them.

The Lord said to Satan, Where have you come from? And Satan answered the Lord, From roaming through the earth and going to and fro in it. Although Satan is not specifically described as a serpent here, he's certainly the great enemy.

And later on in Job, Job 26, we read these words, By his breath, this is the breath of God, By his breath, the skies became fair, his hand pierced the gliding serpent.

We find a similar thing in Isaiah, which I put on the screen there, Isaiah 27, verse 1. In that day, in the day of the Lord, the Lord will punish with his sword, his fierce, great and powerful sword, Leviathan, the gliding serpent, Leviathan, the coiling serpent, who will slay the monster of the sea.

[9:44] Another interesting passage in Isaiah, of course we're all familiar with the famous passage about the mountain of the Lord, but let me just read one verse from that passage in Isaiah 66.

It says, The wolf and the lamb will feed together, the lion will eat straw like the ox, but dust will be the serpent's food. Alternative provision is made for the wolf and for the lion, but the serpent is still consigned to the dust.

We suggest that again, it's not really snakes that the Lord is worried about here that Isaiah is talking about, but the great serpent. Because even on the holy mountain, the serpent's curse is not

revoked.

And again, one more Old Testament scripture, Psalm 91, a messianic psalm about the Lord's servant. And we read in verse 13, You will tread upon the lion and the cobra.

You will trample the great lion and the serpent. So I think it was understood even by the Old Testament writers that the serpent here was really the great adversary, Satan himself.

[11:07] But if it's not entirely clear in the Old Testament, certainly the New Testament makes this very clear, based on the words of Jesus himself. When the disciples were sent out to preach the coming kingdom, they come back and explain that even demons had been submitted to them in the name of Jesus.

And note the context to that, it's important, because what does Jesus say? He says, I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy.

Nothing will harm you. And in Revelation, we read of the, or we already read, or Brenda read, of the defeat of the great serpent.

And it's a common idea in Revelation. In Revelation 20, verse 2, we read, he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years.

Without going into all the details of exactly what that means, it's clear that he's talking about here, the ancient serpent is the devil himself. So, it is prophesied that the offspring of Eve would crush the head of the serpent.

[12:36] But how this works in detail actually requires a little thought. It's not quite as simple as one might think, in fact. Hebrews is helpful. Hebrews, chapter 2, although it doesn't specifically mention the serpent, makes it clear who the serpent crusher is.

Since the children have flesh and blood, Christ too shared in their humanity, so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death, that is the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.

For surely it's not angels he helps, but Abraham's descendants. descendants. And who are Abraham's true descendants? Galatians 3, 16 says, The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed.

The scriptures does not say and to seeds, meaning many people, but to your seed, meaning one person who is Christ. Well, this word was spoken to, not of course to Abraham, but to Eve, but the same idea is there, that the offspring of Eve would crush the head of the serpent.

And in the ancient languages and in English as well, the word seed can be, seed is in the old English translations, offspring in the more modern translations, can be either singular or plural.

[14:10] It can mean either one offspring, one person, or all the offspring, all the children. And I think Paul quite deliberately in this passage we just read uses that ambiguity deliberately.

In a sense, there is just one offspring, there is just one serpent crusher, and that is Christ himself. But at the same time, all of God's people are included in those offspring, are the true children of Abraham, the true sons and daughters of Eve.

So, in a sense, the prophecy applies both to Jesus himself and to the church that he would create, the body of Christ on earth. But of course, on the cross, the serpent, who has the power of death, we're told, struck at Jesus when Jesus was on the cross.

But death couldn't hold on to its prey. And so, in the resurrection, Jesus broke the power of the serpent. And so, again, going back to Revelation, we read in Revelation 5, they sang a new song. You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals because you were slain. And with your blood, you purchased men for God, for every tribe and language and people and nation.

[15:33] you have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God and they will reign on the earth. Now, I feel, in one sense, I should spend more time on this because this is the key point that the serpent crusher is the one prophesied is Jesus himself.

But on the other hand, there's not much more to say about it. Having said that, the serpent was crushed when, the head of the serpent was crushed when Jesus went to the cross and was raised from the dead.

But again, we find out that's not quite the whole story. Because, turning again to Revelation, we read, 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.

And then notice the pronoun here, 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.

[17:06] The power of the dragon is broken, but it's not quite time for the street party. I think we've all seen the film, haven't we, at the end of the Second World War when there were parties going on in the streets.

Well, Revelation makes it clear that there will be a street party, but not yet. the devil is hurled down, his power is broken and yet he is not destroyed. I'm quoting again that verse from Romans 16 that Paul wrote.

The God of peace will soon crush Satan, note, under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ will be with you. So what does this mean to us?

Does it mean we should just be relaxed and say, okay, it's all over, time for a party? But no, that's not the way the scripture teaches it.

In fact, it's quite surprising that if you actually look at all these New Testament passages, it's actually the disciples who are described as doing the trampling.

[18:22] We saw that in Luke 10, didn't we? He replied, I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy.

Nothing will harm you. Of course, Perpetua found that in a sense the power of the enemy did harm her. She was killed and yet even in that death she had victory.

The serpent was not able to bite her. So as I say, the message of the New Testament is not that the war is done and dusted.

It's time for the street party. The dragon is cast out of heaven but his bite is still lethal. 2 Corinthians 11 verse 3 says, I'm afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ.

That was the advice of Perpetua's mentor wasn't it? Don't let the serpent bite you. Don't let the dragon bite you. Paul says the same thing. He will try and deceive you as he's always done.

[19:45] But how does that work in practice? Well the choice for Perpetua of course was stark but simple. recant, deny Jesus Christ or die.

I didn't tell you this but actually she was only 22 years old when she was martyred. So she faced a stark choice but in a sense a simple one.

Either she denied Jesus or she didn't. But for most of us in the West at least the issue is not quite as stark. Most of us are not threatened with immediate death but are more complex and longer lasting.

As Paul wrote to the Corinthians they weren't facing immediate death but this serpent was out to get them nonetheless. Perpetua faced the ravening beast but for most of us the beast just becomes an excuse doesn't it?

Proverbs says the sluggard says there's a lion outside or I'll be murdered in the streets. Fear just becomes an excuse for not acting.

[20:57] Proverbs 6, 9 to 11 says how long will you lie there you sluggard? When will you get up from your sleep? A little sleep a little slumber a little folding of the hands to rest.

We all say that sometimes don't we? But poverty will come on you like a bandit and scarcity like an armed man. That's true in the world of work.

It's even more true in the spiritual realm. This was the danger that Paul warned the Corinthians about. The lie to Eve that she should relax that everything will be okay.

That she shouldn't worry about what God had actually said. The Corinthians were the same way weren't they? They were too easy going and tolerant.

2 Corinthians 11 verse 4 says somebody comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received or a different gospel from the one you accepted you put up with it easily enough.

[22:07] 2 Corinthians 11 verse 4 the warning in revelation to the Ephesian church acknowledged that they were going through the motions of religion correctly.

You persevered and endured hardships for my name and not grown weary yet I hold this against you. You've forsaken your first love. love. So the challenge to this is that we keep our first love or to put it in another way we keep on trampling the head of the serpent and another image in revelation suggests that the beast has many heads.

I saw a beast coming out of the sea. He had ten horns and seven heads with ten crowns on his horns and on each head a blasphemous name. I think if you look at it that may not be actually Satan himself but the same concept is there.

The serpent has many heads that need to be trampled down. So the lesson of the serpent crusher is not as I say that it's all over time for the street party.

Quite the opposite. Satan's power is broken. But concerning our doctrine, our conduct, our integrity and particularly perhaps the integrity of our message which is so much challenged in the church nowadays.

[23:44] We were thinking in the SGP conference a week or two ago how the whole concept of man being made in the image of God is being undermined.

above all our love for Christ and his church we need to be on guard. The saying just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they're not out to get you.

In this case you're not being paranoid. The serpent is out to get you. So let me quote those as I come to a conclusion.

Let me quote these words of Charles Wesley. Leave no unguarded place, no weakness of the soul, take every virtue, every grace and fortify the whole.

Perpetua had to face death. We have to face in a sense life and a constant struggle. death. But as we've seen often in history, the easiest way to lose a war is to underestimate your enemy.

[24:56] We've seen this in Ukraine, haven't we? You despise your enemy so you think they're weak. But it's not so. Eve underestimated the serpent and so she let the enemy in.

But on the cross, her offspring Jesus survived the serpent's bite and bruised its head. But our job is now to live that victory out, to keep on trampling the head of the serpent.

The dream of perpetua is still crucial. Do not let that dragon bite you. Let me finish with those wise words of that woman. He will not hurt me in the name of Jesus Christ.

So that's the prophecy of the serpent crusher. The serpent is destroyed but he is still at work. So we're going to sing again now I believe.

You're going to come up and close.