

# Down Goes The Dragon

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Preacher: Darrell Johnson

[ 0 : 00 ] In the first service, there was a woman who had come to church for the first time in a long, long time, maybe even for the first time, she'd been encouraged by her friends to go to church, and she gets this text.

And she said, what is going on? And then she said, I'll be back next week with others. Dear God, we believe that you inspired this passage, and you inspired it for our good.

And I pray in your mercy and grace, you would help us understand what that good is. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. May I pass on to you a principle for reading the Bible that helps me when reading any text, but especially when reading texts like this.

I don't know when I learned it, but it has served me well for many decades. The principle is this. First look for, first listen for any news in the text.

As a way to see and hear the message of the text for its first readers and for us, look first, listen first for any news the text announces.

[ 1 : 28 ] Before looking for or listening for any good advice the text gives, first look for the news, especially for good news.

When we do this, we are actually able to do the good advice the text gives us. We can do it in light of the good news the text gives us.

And we will be able to cope with any bad news the text has for us, in light of the good news the text has for us.

The Revelation of Jesus Christ, chapter 12. It turns out to be the theological center of the whole book. What is this text's good news?

I trust you saw and heard, as Andrea read the text, that there is a lot of good news. Yes, there is also troubling news.

[ 2 : 31 ] Sobering news. Very sobering news. Variations of which we see and hear every day of our lives. The troubling, sobering news due to the good news.

So what is the good news of Revelation, chapter 12? A child has been born.

A male child. A child whose birth literally has cosmic consequences. Implications for the whole cosmos.

All of the other good news of the text, and there is a lot, and all the troubling, sobering news of the text, and it can be very disturbing, is directly related to the news that a child has been born.

British composer Benjamin Britten captures the news best in his Christmas anthem, a ceremony of carols. This little babe, so few days old, is come to rifle Satan's fold.

[ 3 : 52 ] All hell doth at his presence quake, though he himself for cold do shake. Now remember that apocalyptic literature, like the kind of literature we have in the last book of the Bible, and like this text we have in the 12th chapter of the book, apocalyptic literature has two very practical purposes.

Two pastoral purposes. The human author of this book is a pastor. Yes, John is an apostle and he's a prophet, but for the first readers of the book, he was basically their pastor.

The whole book begins, John to the seven churches that are in Asia Minor, grace to you and peace. A pastoral letter. And what John calls the apocalypse of Jesus Christ has practical pastoral purposes.

The first is to set the present moment in light of the unseen realities of the future. I mean, talk about good news.

Jesus, who was crucified, Jesus, who was raised from a borrowed grave, is coming again. And he's bringing with him a city. A city magnificent beyond anything anyone has ever imagined.

[ 5 : 17 ] Look, says John at the beginning of the book, it's his one consistent command. Look, it's his one great good advice. Look, he's coming and every eye will see him.

So, the first pastoral, practical purpose of apocalyptic literature is to set the present moment in all of its uncertainty and confusion and upheaval in light of the unseen realities of the future.

The second practical pastoral purpose is to set the present moment in light of the unseen realities of the present.

I'm going to say that again. I've been emphasizing it all along the way and will again and again. The second practical purpose of apocalyptic literature is to set the present moment in light of the unseen realities of the present.

And as we have discovered, as we are making our way through the last book of the Bible, the greatest unseen reality of the present moment is a person. The greatest unseen reality of this moment is the crucified, risen, and reigning Jesus of Nazareth.

[ 6 : 29 ] The greatest unseen reality of the moment is the Lamb who was slain, now seated on the throne of the universe. The greatest unseen reality of the present moment is this child who has been born.

And because he was born, and because he died and rose again, and because he is alive and is on the throne, other things are also true of the present moment.

And that is what Revelation 12 is opening up for us and helping us understand the other unseen realities of the present moment.

So we hear the command again. John's consistent good advice. Look. Verse 3. Look. Look as in wake up and look.

Wake up and realize what is going on in the world. Revelation 12 is the opening scene of the third act of the five-act drama that is the Apocalypse of Jesus Christ.

[ 7 : 40 ] And like other acts, it too opens up with the verb open. 11.19 And the temple of God which is in heaven was opened.

The second act opened at 4.1 with the verb open. After these things I looked and look. A door open in heaven. The fourth act will open at 15.5 with the verb open.

After these things I looked and the temple of the tabernacle of testimony in heaven was opened.

And the fifth act will open in 19.11 with the verb open. And I saw heaven open.

So third act. And the temple of God which is in heaven was opened and the ark of his covenant appeared.

Now for John a lifelong Jew the ark of the covenant is the most sacred thing in the universe. A box layered in gold on either end of its cover two angelic figures.

[ 8 : 46 ] In the space between these two angelic figures between the seraphim God chose to meet humanity. It was in this space that God met Moses and met Aaron the high priest and many people after that.

The cover of the box is therefore the dwelling place of God. John looks and with amazement the temple in heaven is open.

And with amazement this ark appears. And with amazement he gets to look inside. Which means that in this third act we are being taken more deeply into the unseen realities of the present.

The ark appearing says that we are now going to be given even greater insight than we have already been given. Up to this point in the revelation of Jesus Christ we have seen the church under pressure to compromise.

under pressure to compromise loyalty to Jesus Christ as the true emperor and the true God. Now in this third act we are going to learn why this pressure is so intense.

[ 10 : 11 ] Now as you no doubt noticed when we read the text in Revelation 12 there are three major characters. A dragon a child and a woman.

And you might have noticed there are also three scenes in this act of the drama. Verses 1-6 verses 7-12 and verses 13-17.

Let us first make sure that we know who these three major characters are before we make our way through the three scenes. A dragon a child and a woman.

A great red dragon a male child and a woman through whom the child is birthed into the world.

John identifies the dragon for us. He identifies the dragon as the arch enemy of God. Verse 9 The great dragon the serpent of old who is called the devil and Satan.

[11:16] the phrase serpent of old takes us to the opening chapters of the Bible where the serpent enters the garden tempts humanity to make the choice to try to live independently of God.

A choice which then results in the ruin of creation. The term devil tells us that this dragon is a divider a deceiver a destroyer the various nuances of the word diabolos.

And the term Satan tells us that this dragon is a great accuser. That's what the term actually means. Accuser. Who delights to bring up and focus on our sins.

Who delights to accuse us before other human beings and especially to accuse us before God. the dragon hates God.

Why? Why would anything hate its creator? We are not told. What we do know is that he wants to be God.

[12:29] He wants to be in charge of his own destiny. He wants to control the world himself. And he experiences the living God as an obstacle to his great ends.

There by the way the serpent knows the truth. The dragon knows the truth. God is an obstacle to anyone who wants to live in control of their lives and make their own destiny.

He hates God. And he'll do anything to destroy God or at least to destroy what God makes. John also tells us who the child is.

verse 11. He is the lamb. Verse 17. He is Jesus. And he tells us that this child is the fulfillment of a promise God made.

Look at verse 5. She gave birth to a son, a male, who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron. To rule all the nations with a rod of iron.

[13:33] Here John is quoting from Psalm 2. The key psalm for understanding the rest of the book of Psalms. This is the psalm that the authors of the New Testament most frequently quote.

And the psalm is about one whom God installs as king of kings. God says to this one, you are my son, today I have begotten you.

Ask of me, and I will surely give the nations as your inheritance, the very ends of the earth as your possession, and you shall rule them with a rod of iron. This word rod probably refers to a shepherd's rod.

Psalm 23, thy rod and my staff, they have comforted me. The rod of iron suggests that this shepherd, this king, is very strong. Which is why some translators render the verb rule as shepherd and then translate the whole phrase as he shall shepherd all the nations with a rod of iron.

The child to be born to this woman in Revelation 12, is the son to whom God gives all the nations. He is the one who, when he grows to be an adult, will rule the world.

[14:48] And that's why the dragon hates him. Now, who's the woman? She is the people of God. She represents the whole people of God, the people of God before this child is born, and the people of God after this child is born.

How do we know this? Well, verse 1, a great sign appeared in heaven and a woman clothed with the sun and the moon under her feet and on her head a crown of twelve stars. Now, I think John realizes who this is right away because he's steeped in the Old Testament, which is the only Bible he has at the time.

Where in the Bible do we meet sun, moon, and stars together in this way? in a dream that Joseph the patriarch had in Genesis 37 9.

The sun turns out to be his father, the sun, the moon, his mother, and the eleven stars, his eleven brothers. A woman clothed with the sun, the moon beneath her feet, twelve stars on her head, points to Israel as embodied in Jacob and Rachel and Joseph and his brothers.

brothers. This woman is the people of God from whom the child comes, from whom the son who is king comes into the world.

[16:12] And she is the church. Verse 6, the woman flees into the wilderness, but, verse 13, the dragon pursues the woman for 1260 days.

This woman is not just a single individual, but representative of many others. She is the people of God giving birth to the Messiah in the world. Three major characters, dragon, the enemy of God and humanity, child, God's son and savior of humanity, and the woman, the people of God from whom the child was born.

Okay, now to the three scenes in which these three major characters interact. three overlapping apocalyptic scenes that help us set the present moment in light of the unseen realities of the present.

First scene, verses 1 to 6. The dragon hovers over this woman as she is in labor. Why? Because the dragon knows who she is giving birth to and he is wanting to kill him.

The dragon, the serpent, the devil, Satan, knows who the child is. And because he knows, he seeks to destroy him.

[ 17 : 45 ] Sobering news. Now here John is not only working with stories told in the Old Testament, he is working with stories told in Greek and Roman mythology.

All cultures have their stories, their myths, by which they try to make sense of reality. And John, wanting the churches living in Greek and Roman cultures to set the present moment in light of the unseen realities of the present, connects the gospel to these myths.

So for instance, not far from the island of Patmos, where John receives the apocalypse from Jesus, is the island of Delos. Delos is a sacred place to the Greeks because it was thought that this was the birthplace of the god Apollo, the son of Zeus.

When she was pregnant with Apollo, his mother Leto fled to Delos to escape the dragon Pythos. Python. Python wanted to kill this new son of Zeus.

It seems that all cultures have these stories about evil forces wanting to kill special human beings who have come from another place in order to overcome evil in the world.

[ 19 : 05 ] In Revelation 12, the great dragon, the red dragon, seeks to kill the child, Jesus of Nazareth, the long promised Messiah of Israel. Now, here's the key question to ask about this scene.

When did it happen? When does this central scene in the whole of the last book of the Bible happen? That is, when does the dragon first try to kill Jesus?

As soon as he was born. Herod the great hears this word about someone born to be the king of the Jews. The news is very disturbing. The news is very threatening to him.

And so he orders that all boys two years old and younger be murdered. I think you can see then that Revelation chapter 12 is a Christmas Eve text.

One which, in light of the massacre in Newtown, Connecticut, a week before Christmas, I thought about preaching Christmas Eve. I did not, for a number of reasons, chief among them, as I didn't think I had the emotional strength to do it.

[ 20 : 22 ] But had I preached it, I would have quoted from a very courageous essay posted by Russell Moore on his blog, More to the Point.

Steve Milos of our congregation was the first one to alert me to it. It is entitled, School Shootings and Spiritual Warfare, Friday, December 14, 2012.

And let me read from you just a part of this blog. The nation is watching with horror and disgust news reports out of Connecticut of a horrific act of violence against an elementary school filled with defenseless children.

While every act of murder ought to provoke outrage, there's something especially condemnable about the murder of children. And I think there's a reason for that. Throughout the history of the universe, evil has manifested a dark form of violence specifically toward children.

Not only did the Canaanite nations demand the blood of babies, but the Bible shows where at points of redemptive crisis, the powers of evil have lashed out at children. Pharaoh saw God's blessing of Israelite children as a curse and demanded they be snuffed out by the power of his armed thugs.

[ 21 : 33 ] And of course, the Christmas narrative we read together this time of year is overshadowed by an act of horrific mass murder of children. King Herod, seeing his throne threatened, demands the slaughter of innocent children.

Jesus was born not into a gauzy, sentimental, winter wonderland of sweetly singing angels and cute reindeer, nuzzling one another at the side of his manger. He was born into a war zone.

And at the very rumor of his coming, Herod vowed to see him dead, right along with thousands of his brothers. history in Bethlehem, as before and as now, is riddled with the bodies of murdered children.

Why? There are more factors that work here than just impersonal psychology and sociology. The course of this world, we're told, is driven along by the prince of the power of the air, Ephesians 2.2. And behind all of that is a bloody skirmish. Satan is, Jesus tells us, a murderer from the beginning because he hates life itself. And he hates the life of children in particular, because they picture something true about Jesus of Nazareth.

[ 22 : 39 ] Jesus showed his disciple John that behind the particulars of history, there's another darker story going on. Jesus showed the picture of a woman giving birth to a child with a dragon crouching before her to devour the baby.

When the woman and her child escaped, the dragon became furious with the woman and went out to make war on the rest of her offspring and has done so ever since. Satan hates children because he hates Jesus.

When evil destroys the least of these, the most vulnerable among us, he destroys a picture of Jesus himself, of the child delivered by the woman who crushes the head of the reptilian overlord.

The demonic powers know that the human race is saved and they're vanquished by a child born of a woman and so they hate the children who bear his nature. Violence against children is also peculiarly satanic because it destroys the very picture of newness of life and dependent trust that characterizes life in the kingdom of God.

Children are a blessing and that enrages the horrifying nature of those who seek only to kill and to destroy. The satanic powers want the kingdoms of the universe and a child uproots their reign.

[ 23 : 47 ] And he writes this. Let's not offer Pat easy answers to the grieving parents and communities in Connecticut. We don't fully understand the mystery of iniquity.

We don't know why God didn't stop this from happening. But we do know what this act is. It is satanic and we should say so.

And then he concludes. The mystery of evil is a declaration of war on the peace of God's creation. The war goes on but not for long. And sometimes the most warlike thing we can say in an inhuman murderous age like this one is it's beginning to look a lot like Christmas.

We're ahead of the story. Let's go back to the text. In the first scene the dragon tries to kill Jesus while just a child.

He tries many other times you know. Like after Jesus first sermon in Nazareth. We're having quoted from the prophet Isaiah. Jesus declares that he has come to set captives free and then says today this has been fulfilled in your hearing.

[ 25 : 09 ] The townspeople react in rage and take him to the brink of a cliff to throw him over to certain death. Or like that day on the Sea of Galilee.

When a violent wind churned up the waters and seasoned fishermen knew they were in trouble. Or like when religious leaders, furious that Jesus was unsettling their cherished religious traditions and institutions banded together to get rid of him.

Or like on Good Friday when politics and religion came together and delivered him up to the cruelty of crucifixion. But none of that worked.

Thank God. None of it has worked. In the first scene, John says, verse five, look at verse five. The woman's child was caught up to God and to the throne.

John collapses the whole life of Jesus of Nazareth down to his birth and his ascension. Why? Why does he leave out the other chapters of Jesus' life, like his teaching and healing ministry and crucifixion and resurrection?

[ 26 : 22 ] Why just she gave birth and he was taken up to the throne? Why jump from born in Bethlehem to installed on the throne of the universe?

Because being installed on the throne of the universe is the ultimate reason for which he was born. In his trial before Pilate, Jesus says to Pilate, you've said that I'm a king and you were right.

for this I was born. I was born in the world to be king. That's why Dorothy Sayers entitles her great play on the life of Jesus, born to be king.

And that's why the dragon hates him. And it's why the dragon has not and never will succeed in getting to him. He is the eternal king.

From the beginning of creation, this has been the plan that the man from Galilee was going to sit on the throne above every throne. And John says the woman fled into the wilderness for 1260 days.

[ 27 : 31 ] More on that in a moment. Scene 2, verses 7 to 12. War in heaven. John here is not shifting to a new story.

Rather, he is shifting to a new perspective on the story. He's saying that what is happening, beginning in the birth of this child, what is happening, beginning in Bethlehem, has implications for heaven.

Events on earth have implications for heaven. The war in heaven is between angelic forces, between Michael and the dragon, between an archangel and a fallen angel.

Now, in scripture, Michael is the guardian angel of Israel, which means that in declaring war on Michael, the dragon is declaring war on Israel.

This war has implications for the well-being of the people of God. The war in heaven is won in Michael's favor. But note this, Michael did not win the war.

[ 28 : 38 ] Michael and his forces and the people of God benefit from the war being won. But Michael and his forces and the people of God do not win the war. Then who won the war?

The child on earth. The war in heaven is won through the actions of this child on earth. Do you see that?

The war in heaven is won by the way this child lives his life on earth. The war in heaven is won by the way this child preaches and teaches. This war in heaven is won by the way the child goes to a Roman cross and absorbs all that the dragon can throw at him in apparent defeat.

The war in heaven is won by this child then being raised on the third day. The war in heaven is won by this child then being seated on the throne of the universe. Which is why heaven sings with a loud voice now.

Verse 10. Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come for the accuser of our brothers and sisters has been thrown down.

[ 29 : 44 ] You see now would be a good shorthand summary of the preaching of Jesus of Nazareth. Now the time is fulfilled.

The kingdom of God has come near. Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. Today salvation has come to this house. Today you will be with me in paradise. Now today the war has been won.

The battle goes on hence the third scene but the war in heaven has been won by actions on earth. So John then hears heaven celebrate down.

Verse 9. The great dragon has been thrown down. The verb literally means bounced. He's been bounced out of the bar. Thrown out of the bar.

Six times. John seems to love this word down. Six times in the text. Thrown down. Thrown down. Thrown down. Thrown down. Thrown down. Heaven rejoices and then laments for earth.

[ 30 : 46 ] Thanks a lot heaven. You get to celebrate. And we continue in the battle. So the third scene verses 13 to 17.

The dragon goes after the woman. Since he cannot get to her child. He goes after the woman. But she's been taken to a safe place.

Verse 6. The woman fled into the wilderness. So the dragon goes after her other offspring. Verse 17. The dragon was enraged with the woman and went off to make war with the rest of her offspring.

Now what is going on in this scene? And how does this set the present moment in light of the unseen realities of the present? Well at the end of the second scene in verse 12 we read.

The devil has come down having great wrath knowing that he has a short time. A short time. Oh thank God that in the larger scheme of things it's a short time.

[ 31 : 49 ] The dragon is very angry because he cannot get to the child. Satan is angry because he cannot destroy Jesus Christ. He knows that Jesus has won.

I want you to mark that. The devil knows the gospel. The devil knows that Jesus Christ has already won. The devil knows the gospel better than many in the church.

And so he's going to do as much as he possibly can to undo what Jesus has done. He's going to go after those whom Jesus loves. And in particular he keeps accusing us of our sins.

Jesus the lamb has forgiven our sins. Jesus enemy will keep throwing our sins into our face. Ever experience that?

Jesus has embraced us as our own. Jesus enemy is going to whisper in our ears you're not worthy to be his own. Jesus is at work making us whole delivering us from our addictions.

[ 32 : 53 ] Jesus enemy will keep tempting us to draw us back into those traps. Jesus is drawing us ever deeper into intimacy with him and his father and the spirit and Jesus enemy seeks to divert us to get us preoccupied with things that ultimately do not matter.

For times time and a half verse 14 for 1260 days verse 6 symbolic numbers of the time between Jesus coming.

The dragon will do his diabolical best to rest us from Jesus the whole time the church is in the world. And how do we handle this attack?

That is in light of the language of the last book of the Bible how do we overcome? Revelation 12 verse 11.

It is the central verse of the second scene. It turns out to be the central verse of all three scenes. It turns out to be the central verse of the whole book of Revelation.

[ 34 : 03 ] It is the fundamental discipleship text of the last book of the Bible. Revelation 12 verse 11. They overcame by the blood of the lamb by the word of their testimony and because they did not love their life unto death.

We overcome the dragon by claiming the saving power of the blood of the lamb. We say to the dragon you are right I am a sinner and you were right in and of myself I do I am not worthy to belong to Jesus Christ but you do not get it.

Jesus shed his blood to cover my sin and you do not get that get it that Jesus shed his blood to purchase me and to make me his own. You do not get it that nothing can separate me from the love of Jesus.

You do not get it that if you accuse me for Jesus before my sins before Jesus it won't matter because it doesn't matter to Jesus anymore. That's how you overcome. We overcome the lamb by testifying to the truth.

Our word of testimony. We say to the dragon Jesus is who he says he is. He is the son of God. He is the son of man. He is the true emperor and the true God.

[ 35 : 18 ] He is the bread of life. He alone can give living water. He alone has the keys of death. He alone can open the scroll of history. Every knee one day will bow to him. You keep telling the truth is how you overcome.

As Martin Luther puts it in the hymn we'll sing in a moment. Though this world with devils filled should threaten to undo us. We will not fear for God hath willed his truth to triumph through us. The prince of darkness grim. We tremble not for him. His rage we can endure for low. His doom is sure. One little word shall fell him. And that word is the word of testimony that Jesus is Lord and no one else is.

And we overcome by being willing to die for the truth. Sure, we may lose our lives as many have and as many are today.

But when we lose our lives, we do not lose. Just as when the lamb lost his life on the cross, he did not lose.

[ 36 : 31 ] Before I became one of the pastors here at First Baptist Church, I served the church as a guest preacher. Some of you know that like about 24 times over a number of years. That's the guest preacher.

And one Sunday, I was driving into the city across the Canby Street Bridge and I heard in my head, if you preach that sermon, I will kill you.

Boy, did it send shivers down my spine. I'll tell you, I was frightened. But the Holy Spirit gave me the sense to realize whose voice this was. And so I said, while driving across the Canby Bridge, I said to the dragon, go ahead.

For if you do, you lose. Because you know that every time you hurt someone who's held in the hands of the one who overcame you, you lose.

I was still nervous. But I wasn't afraid. Now we, in this part of the world, may not be threatened by death to follow Jesus.

[ 37 : 40 ] As I see it, the dragon works in our part of the world in another way. He gets us to feel embarrassed to name the name of Jesus.

He says to us, and boy, I hear this a lot in my head. He says to us, people are going to call you naive for following Jesus. People are going to call you unsophisticated for loving Jesus.

People are going to call you stupid. Oh, I hear that many Saturday mornings and Saturday nights, many times when I come across the bridge on Sunday morning. They're going to call you stupid. As I see it, that's the form of the pressure in our city.

Make us feel embarrassed about Jesus and his gospel. And we overcome him. We overcome him by being willing to be embarrassed.

We overcome him by being willing to be called naive and unsophisticated. We overcome him by being willing to be charged as unintelligent and uninformed.

[ 38 : 52 ] We say to the dragon, be that as it may, I will name the name of Jesus in this place and I will announce his good news.

Good news indeed. Good news for the whole cosmos. A child has been born and he has been installed on the throne of the universe.

And down goes the dragon.