

The Woman and The Dragon

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[0 : 00] Revelation chapter 12. And a great sign appeared in heaven. A woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, on her head a crown of twelve stars.

She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pains and the agony of giving birth. And another sign appeared in heaven. Behold, a great red dragon with seven heads and ten horns, and on his head seven diadems.

His tails swept down a third of the stars of heaven and cast them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she bore her child he might devour it. She gave birth to a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron. But her child was caught up to God and to his throne, and the woman fled into the wilderness where she has a place prepared by God in which she is to be nourished for one thousand two hundred and sixty days.

Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon. And the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was defeated and there was no longer any place for them in heaven.

[1 : 19] And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world. He was thrown down to heaven, and his angels were thrown down with him.

I heard a loud voice in heaven saying, 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 has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God.

They have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they love not their lives even unto death. Therefore rejoice, O heavens, and you who dwell in them.

But woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short. And when the dragon saw that he had been thrown down to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child.

But the woman who was given the two wings of the great eagle so she might fly from the serpent into the wilderness, to the place where she is to be nourished for a time and times and half a time.

[2 : 29] The serpent poured water like a river out of his mouth after the woman to sweep her away with a flood. But the earth came to the help of the woman, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed the river that the dragon had poured from his mouth.

Then the dragon became furious with the woman and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God, and hold to the testimony of Jesus. And he stood on the sand of the sea.

Well, perhaps you can imagine some of the conversations that those with young children have been having over the last 15, 16 months or so. We can't go to the playground because of coronavirus.

You can't go to that party because Boris Johnson says you can't go. You can't go and see granny and grandpa because of lockdown. We can't go on holiday because they won't let us travel.

And then perhaps imagine some of the responses. What's coronavirus? What's lockdown? I don't like Boris Johnson. When can we go and see granny and grandpa?

[3 : 42] In other words, there's a whole dimension of life that little people struggle to grasp. Once they're a bit older, once they've grasped it, it will help them to understand and navigate life much, much better.

Well, the book of Revelation acts in a very similar way. It's so easy for us simply to live life on the horizontal, if you like.

What we see and experience each day as we go through life, work, home, news stories, conversations. And yet that is a very blinkered way of looking at life and our existence.

Because there is far more to life than the horizontal. It's why I've called this series in Revelation, Understanding Reality. Because Revelation helps us to understand the vertical dimension of life. The stuff that's going on in our world that we can't see. And I've tried to reflect that in the headings of this talk. Revelation chapter 12 shows us not only events on earth, but also their corresponding events in heaven.

[4 : 58] And just like with the small child, once we've grasped that bigger picture, it will help us to navigate life, whether we're followers of Jesus already, or whether we're looking in on the Christian faith.

So much better. Now Revelation has a reputation for being a complicated book of the Bible, but actually it is very simple.

It has one message. Jesus wins. And those who belong to him are on the winning side. Now I think one of the reasons it appears complicated is because so much of it is written in picture language.

The language of apocalyptic is the technical term for it. But think for a moment of the difference between looking at a photograph with all the kind of detail and enjoying the detail, and going to the National Gallery and looking at some of those impressionists, Monet and Pissarro and so on.

All those paintings, which they're just splodges, aren't they? Just kind of coloured dots. Now get up to a photograph close and you can enjoy all the detail and you can see things, which as you stand further back, you sort of miss.

[6 : 16] Try doing that with an impressionist painting and you just see a red dot and a green dot and a yellow dot. There you have to stand back to get the big picture.

And that is very much the way in which Revelation works. We need to keep our eye on the big picture rather than getting too bogged down in the details.

Now the last couple of summits, we've looked at the first half of the book, if you've been with us Sunday by Sunday. Chapter 11, verse 19 introduces a new section.

As the Apostle John says, then God's temple in heaven was opened. It's a section which goes on to chapter 15, verse 5, which is then the next section marker.

After this I looked and the sanctuary of the tent of witness in heaven was opened. So this first part of the series, we're going to be in that section and the issue of that section is spiritual conflict.

[7 : 18] Spiritual conflict. Our first heading then, on earth, the birth of a child. On earth, the birth of a child.

The birth of Jesus. Now we're introduced to two signs. The first is there in verses 1 and 2. And a great sign appeared in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of 12 stars.

She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pains and the agony of giving birth. A woman about to give birth. Like much of Revelation, her description is full of symbolism.

And the key to understanding the symbols is the Old Testament. She's a symbol of God's people. She wears the crown because God's people share his rule, with the 12 stars in the crown representing the 12 tribes of Israel.

The second sign is in verses 3 and 4. And another sign appeared in heaven. Behold, a great red dragon with seven heads and ten horns, and on his head seven diadems.

[8 : 34] His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and cast them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she bore her child, he might devour it.

Now that is a grotesque image, isn't it? Seven heads and ten horns, symbols again of power and authority, waiting to devour this child once it has been born.

But helpfully, the dragon is identified for us in verse 9. And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world.

His false claims of authority, challenging the authority of God. Well, back to verse 5, where the child is born.

She gave birth to a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron. But her child was caught up to God and to his throne.

[9 : 40] Now the clue to his identity is in the description there in verse 5, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron. And I wonder if that rings any bells with us.

Turn back to Psalm 2. Psalm 2. Psalm 2. Once upon a time, I was able to say that's on page, whatever it is.

But I guess we've all got different versions. But if you've got mine, it's 537. That's probably not much help. But anyway. Psalm 2. Now in the history of God's people, Psalm 2 is the coronation psalm. It's sung at the coronation of Israel's kings, just as we have Zadok the priest play during our coronation services. The setting of the psalm is the universal rebellion of mankind and their rulers against God's rule.

Verse 1. Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves and the rulers take counsel together against the Lord and against his anointed.

[10:56] How does God respond? Well, in verse 4 he laughs. He holds opposition to him in derision. In verse 6 he then proclaims the enthronement of his king, the one who, verse 7, is his son.

And it's to him that he then says, in verses 8 and 9, ask of me and I'll make the nations your heritage and the ends of the earth your possession.

You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel. He's going to rule the nations. He's going to destroy God's enemies.

He is God's appointed judge. It's no wonder, is it, that back in Revelation chapter 12, verse 5, that Satan wants to destroy this child at birth.

In fact, just think of Christmas and the nativity story. The edict of King Herod that all children aged 2 and under should be killed. Just think of the start of Jesus' ministry and the temptations in the wilderness as Satan seeks to derail him, to fall down and worship him rather than to accomplish God's purposes.

[12:18] Or just think of the apostle Peter when Jesus tells him that the Son of Man is going to be rejected and killed and when Peter rebukes him, the idea of a Messiah who's going to suffer is an anathema to him.

And Jesus replies, get behind me, Satan. Satan failed to destroy God's king at his birth. He failed to derail him throughout his ministry during his lifetime.

As verse 5 says, the child was caught up to God and his throne. It's an extraordinary sort of concertina, isn't it, of the life of Jesus. So his life, his ministry, his death, his resurrection and ascension all squished into that one verse.

He is now enthroned in heaven just as Psalm 2 said he would be. But in order to see the real significance of those events, we need to look at the next scene, verses 7 to 12, which is the heavenly counterpart to verses 1 to 6.

I guess it's the kind of thing which we're familiar with. Perhaps if you've ever watched the Lord Mayor's New Year firework display up in the centre of London, if you've ever watched it on television rather than actually going up there in person, then, I don't know, perhaps one moment you see a whole crowd of revellers in Trafalgar Square and then you see fireworks going off over the River Thames lighting up the night sky and then suddenly there's a complete switch to Big Ben and Big Ben counting down and the gong going and suddenly it's midnight and the new year has arrived.

[14:11] And that camera angle on Big Ben is explaining the significance of why it is the fireworks are going off and the revellers are gathering in Trafalgar Square. Well, likewise, we need to understand the heavenly angle to grasp the true significance of these events on earth.

So, secondly, in heaven, the defeat of Satan, verses 7 to 12. Have a look at verse 7. Now, war arose in heaven.

Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon and the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was defeated and there was no longer any place for them in heaven.

And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world. He was thrown down to the earth and his angels were thrown down with him.

In the book of Daniel in the Old Testament, Michael is the angel who champions God's people and fights for them. The dragon, Satan, is thrown down and here in verse 10, salvation, God's salvation, his kingdom authority are then proclaimed.

[15:30] Verse 10, now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come. the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down who accuses them day and night before our God.

Indeed, in the Hebrew language which the Old Testament was written in, the name Satan means the accuser. I guess you and I are meant to imagine the heavenly courtroom scene. God is the judge, Satan is the prosecuting barrister and you, if you are trusting in Jesus, you are in the dock.

I guess it's a scene any of us who have been in a courtroom will be familiar with. And Satan, the prosecuting barrister, hurling his charges. This person isn't fit for heaven.

Yes, I know they were in church on Sunday. I know they say they're following Jesus but do you realize what they are actually like? Ambitious, self-centered, with scant regard for God's kingdom and his glory.

[16:51] There's the gossip that comes out of their mouths. There's the lust that comes out of their heart. There's the anger that erupts so quickly. It is an open and shut case.

They are guilty. And of course they are because all those accusations are true.

You're not fit for heaven nor am I. None of us have the right to belong to God's people as his people and to enjoy eternity with him in the new creation.

By the way, it's just worth saying in passing that if we're looking on the Christian faith we mustn't make the mistake that so many people do of thinking that Christianity is all about keeping the ten commandments as a means of getting to heaven because actually no one can.

In fact, the very purpose of God's law is to demonstrate our guilt before him. All of us. So that's the first clue.

[17:59] Satan is described as the accuser. The second clue is in verse 11. And they've conquered him by the blood of the lamb and by the word of their testimony for they love not their lives even unto death.

Now verse 11 takes us back to Revelation chapter 5 where the risen Jesus is described as looking like a lamb who has been slain. It's just what Jesus said his death would achieve the defeat of Satan.

I've put John chapter 12 verse 31 there on the outline the words of Jesus just before his arrest and crucifixion. Now is the judgment of this world. Now will the ruler of this world be cast out.

Jesus died on the cross to pay the penalty for our sin a sacrifice so that those who are guilty might go free be forgiven the slate wiped clean and stand before God acquitted in that court of law.

And therefore you see as Satan hurls his accusations in court at those who belong to Jesus the judge simply replies the penalty has been paid case dismissed.

[19:22] the result Satan is powerless defeated cast down in summary verse 11 they've conquered him by the blood of the lamb in other words through trusting in the death of Jesus for their sins on the cross and by the words of their testimony which doesn't mean they gave their testimony a lot they gave their testimony a lot but rather that they held on to the death of Jesus and kept trusting in him and they did so even to the point of death for they loved not their lives even to death.

It's no wonder is it that this section closes with rejoicing verse 12 therefore rejoice O heavens and you who dwell in them.

but it's not all rejoicing but woe to you O earth and sea for the devil has come down to you in great wrath because he knows that his time is short.

well that brings us to our third point on earth war on the church because as a result of his death Satan is now furious he can no longer wreak havoc in heaven and so instead he focuses his attention on earth and he pursues the woman God's people verse 13 when the dragon saw that he'd been thrown down to the earth he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child indeed he makes war on the church verse 17 then the dragon became furious with the woman and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring on those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus and he stood on the sand of the sea notice he does so not because he's powerful not because he's going to win but because he knows he's defeated this is exactly what happened during the

Gulf War if you're able to cast your mind back 25 years ago or so after Iraq invaded Kuwait once the Americans and other nations had arrived with a quarter of a million soldiers and plane loads of military equipment and sophisticated weaponry that Saddam Hussein the leader of Iraq couldn't possibly match anyone with half a brain knew that the war was effectively over yes of course there would be twists and turns it was uncertain how bloody the conflict would be but it was over now did that mean that Saddam Hussein quit no he ordered his troops to fight they were killed and captured

in their thousands he set light to the oil wells of Kuwait as he retreated Saddam Hussein did the most vengeful things when it was clear he had already lost well likewise

[22 : 34] Satan has been defeated and yet in his fury he makes war on the church now once again these verses are full of Old Testament echoes so in verse 14 the woman is given two wings of an eagle just as God's people were brought out of Egypt and rescued from Egypt on eagle's wings she then flies to the wilderness where she is nourished just as God's people having been rescued from Egypt God took them to the wilderness the deserts and he nourished them there with manna and quail and water from the rock now Satan's war on the church here in verses 13 to 17 is clearly symbolic language but that makes it no less real you know we're not to kind of confuse this with a children's story book it is simply revealing truth to us in picture form and yet of course the idea of Satan making war on the church and perhaps even as we're hearing it and I'm speaking we're thinking that just sounds a million miles away from my experience and living in South London well

I think that was something of my experience this week in my preparation until I realised that actually Revelation chapters 2 and 3 and the letter there that is written to the seven churches shows us at ground level what this spiritual warfare looks like I'm going to give us some of the some of the highlights of that but I'd love us this afternoon or perhaps tomorrow morning to read through Revelation chapters 2 and 3 and specifically be asking ourselves the question what do those two chapters say about what spiritual warfare looks like actually on the ground so things like false teaching churches which compromise on the truth and conform to the world sexual immorality church leaders who say what people want them to say and what people want to hear rather than teaching the

Bible spiritual lukewarmness and half heartedness a lack of love for Jesus a lack of repentance persecution opposition imprisonment even death now I don't know about you but it seems to me that suddenly Satan's war against the church feels much much closer to home and uncomfortably so so we need to remember it is a sign of his weakness not his strength as one commentator explains the serpent begins to battle against their bodies only after he has lost the battle over their souls so what's the big idea of revelation 12 the devil's been defeated those who belong to Jesus are secure and yet until Jesus returns Satan will make war on the church now I want to finish just by asking three questions just to help us to ground some of this as we enter another week first how do you see and process life in other words do you just kind of look at life on the horizontal level at the level of what you can see and experience every day you know like the small child you can only think about the birthday party she's missing and she has no idea there's a far bigger picture of a global pandemic which is the reason why she's having to miss the party now in due time she will grow up and understand similarly one of the hallmarks of Christian maturity is that we think about life and Christian experience not simply on the horizontal level but on the vertical level as well second question how do you see and process

Jesus victory how do you see and process Jesus victory through his death on the cross Jesus has defeated the devil now that is true however contrary it may at times feel in our experience some of us may be facing very difficult circumstances in our own lives at the moment or know those who are while worldwide of course Christians often face the most terrible persecution and opposition or simply apathy as we do largely speaking in the UK as we seek to make the message of Jesus known and yet Jesus is victorious in a moment we're going to sing before the throne of God above I have a strong a perfect plea a great high priest whose name is love whoever lives and pleads for me my name is written in his hands my name is hidden in his heart

[28 : 20] I know that while in heaven he stands no power can force me to depart now when we sing that I'd love us to change the eyes to we's so not I have a strong a perfect plea I'd love us to sing we have a strong a perfect plea because I'm short changing myself if I leave this morning simply rejoicing that if I put my trust in Jesus I am safe because Satan is defeated now that of course is the glorious thing to rejoice in personal assurance of where we stand before God but the point of Revelation chapter 12 is that the church is safe it's a far far bigger thing to rejoice in than simply that I am safe the church is safe so let's leave rejoicing in that all those who have put their trust in Jesus throughout history throughout the world are safe third question how do you see and process the fact that

Satan is committed to making war on the church it's possible to look at the problems churches face and the problems Christians face simply on the horizontal level completely blind to the war that Satan is waging as you read about the persecution of Christians in China Satan is making war on

the church as you hear about a church changing its beliefs to reflect changes in society Satan is making war on the church as Christians drown in materialism and live half-heartedly for Jesus Satan is making war on the church as you hear of a Christian being harassed for their faith at work Satan is making war on his church we're not to be terrified of him but we must be alert and sober minded to the harm that he intends to do let's spend a moment in reflection and then I'll lead us in prayer now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down heavenly father we praise you for the victory of the Lord Jesus for his death on the cross for our sins thank you for full forgiveness for those who trust in him and we thank you too for this warning about Satan's fury and his war on your church throughout history and we pray therefore please would you help us as we look at life and navigate life to think not simply of the horizontal but the vertical and please would you help us to be alert to the warfare that Satan is waging and to stand firm in it and we ask it in Jesus name Amen fortune to how do our Picin and way