

The Woman and the Dragon

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[0 : 00] Please open your church Bibles on page 866 for today's first reading.

From Ezekiel 29, verse 1. That's on page 866. In the tenth year, in the tenth month, on the twelfth day of the month, the word of the Lord came to me.

Son of man, set your face against Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and prophesy against him and against all Egypt. Speak and say, thus says the Lord God.

Behold, I am against you, Pharaoh, king of Egypt, the great dragon that lies in the midst of his streams, that says, my Nile is my own, and I made it for myself.

I will put hooks in your jaws and make the fish of your streams stick to your scales, and I will draw you up out of the midst of your streams with all the fish of your streams that stick to your scales, and I will cast you out into the wilderness, you and all the fish of your streams.

[1 : 20] You shall fall on the open field and not be brought together or gathered. To the beasts of the earth and to the birds of the heavens I give you as food.

Then all the inhabitants of Egypt shall know that I am the Lord. The second reading this morning will be taken from the book of Revelation, chapter 12, verses 1 to 17, and that can be found on page 1243 on the Bibles on your terrace.

That's page 1240. And a great sign appeared in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun and with the moon under her feet, and 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 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.

[2 : 35] 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 to the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God in which she has to be nourished for 1260 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.

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.

And 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 God.

And 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.

[3 : 45] But woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows his time is short. And when the dragon saw that he had been thrown down to earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the child.

But the woman was given the two wings of the great eagle, so that 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. 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 up its mouth and swallowed the river that the dragon had poured from it in 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 the testimony of Jesus. And he stood on the sand of the sea.

What has caused the church her greatest suffering during the past few decades? Of course, your answer to that question might vary depending on where you are in the world today.

[4 : 55] In China, for example, Marxist totalitarianism has led to the repression of the Christian church. By contrast, in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa, the church has been affected by tribalism and the endless petty wars, but have often degenerated into bloodshed.

And then there is the rise of militant Islam in places like Sudan, Nigeria, and Eritrea. Here in the West, material prosperity for many discourages any kind of reliance on God.

In addition, the pressures of our increasingly secular society allows for a privatized religious faith. Provided, of course, we don't become too zealous, or worse still, radicalized.

Add to this apathy, prayerlessness, moral and theological indifference, and it's not hard to see why the church here in the West is and has been struggling.

But notice these problems can be categorized as sociological, historical, economic, and so on and so on. Now, it may be that you are not a Christian here this morning, and if that's the case, it's great that you are here.

[6 : 17] But whatever the situation, I want to challenge your view of reality here this morning. One of the dangers of our very rationalistic Western mindset is that, apart from people like Myra Hindley and Ian Brady, we discount all too easily the spiritual or supernatural dimension to life.

And with it, the very existence of evil. In the 1995 crime thriller, *The Usual Suspects*, there is a line in the movie which goes like this.

The greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn't exist. Chapters 1 to 11 of the book of Revelation depict evil in terms of an age-long conflict between the church and the world, between Christians and the culture around them.

As we enter the second major division of the book of Revelation, that is chapters 12 to chapter 22, its great concern is to show us that this historical struggle is but the outward manifestation of the behind-the-scenes conflict being fought between the Lord Jesus Christ and the devil or Satan.

John in Revelation chapter 12 wants us to understand that we will never truly understand what is happening in the church today if in our thinking we have no category that can accommodate the existence of the devil and with him very real and pure evil.

[8 : 04] The devil is very much in the details of much of the hostility and suffering of the Christian church in the world today and down the ages.

In verses 1 to 6 of chapter 12 of the book of Revelation, John gives us what I've called a brief history of time. I'll come back to this idea in a few moments, but first, to help us understand this history, curiously enough, he introduces us to just three of its characters.

The first is a woman, verse 1. And this woman is pregnant according to verse 2, and so the second character is the male child she gives birth to in verse 5.

The third character is an enormous red dragon, verse 3. But the woman and the dragon are described as signs in verse 1 and in verse 3.

In other words, they point to spiritually significant realities beyond themselves. From verse 5, it is clear that the child the woman gives birth to is Jesus the Christ, God's one true and only king.

[9 : 27] And so some, for example, the Roman Catholic Church, maintain that the woman must be Mary, the mother of Jesus. However, in verse 1, this woman, she is described in gloriously radiant terms that seem to far exceed any mere description of Mary.

In fact, the picture of this woman in verse 1 is based on Genesis chapter 37. Joseph, an earthly ancestor of the Lord Jesus, had a dream in which metaphorically, his father Jacob was the sun, his wife Rachel was the moon, and Joseph's 11 brothers, the stars.

Also notice in verse 17 that this woman has other offspring who are described as those who keep God's commands while holding fast to the testimony about Jesus.

So obviously, this cannot simply be a reference to Mary, the mother of Jesus. No, she appears to be symbolic of the Old Testament covenant community that is Old Israel that eventually gives birth to Jesus the Christ.

Verse 2. But after the events of verse 5, this messianic community continues to give, by giving birth to offspring who obey God and testify about Jesus.

[10:59] Verse 17. In other words, Christians. The woman, therefore, seems to represent both the Old and the New Testament covenant communities.

The gloriously radiant church of Jesus Christ, both of the Old and the New Testament. Now, what are we to make of the second character?

The enormous red dragon of verse 3. Well, in the Old Testament, the dragon is the sea monster used to symbolize wicked kingdoms that oppress God's people.

So interestingly, in a passage that was read earlier on from Ezekiel 29, Pharaoh, king of Egypt, is described as a great dragon. Notice, this dragon in Revelation 12, verse 3, has seven heads with seven crowns, which suggests it has very real or complete, the number seven often symbolizes completeness in Revelation, complete kingly authority.

This being an illusion back to Daniel chapter 7 in the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, horns are also symbolic of strength. So this dragon with its ten horns also has very real strength.

[12:26] It is powerful. Hence, it is depicted as this hideous looking monster. In verse 3. Clearly, then, there is more to this dragon than meets the eye.

So, since in verse 9, he is identified as the ancient serpent that deceived Eve in the Garden of Eden, leading the whole world astray, bringing death to the entire human race.

Perhaps it is read for that very reason. It has the blood of humanity on its hands, as it were. And the names given to the dragon in verse 9 give us a further insight into its character.

Today, to call a person a serpent or a snake is another way of saying they are full of cunning and deceit. Don't trust that person.

In the first century, there were well-known and much-hated paid informers who made a living out of accusing people before the authorities.

[13:31] Well, the name devil means slanderer. And, of course, it is a small step to go from accusing someone to slandering them. This is often the devil's tactics.

But he also goes by the name Satan, which means adversary. So, let's be clear. There is nothing remotely nice, friendly, or truthful about our enemy.

Now, you may remember that in Genesis chapter 3, this Satan was told that one day one of the woman's offspring will deliver a fatal wound to his head.

So, for Satan, every woman ever since has been a sign of his eventual downfall. This helps us to understand the grotesque stance adopted by the dragon in verse 4.

He has been standing over the woman that is the Old Testament covenant community waiting to devour her child as soon as he is born. But why doesn't he just destroy the woman before she gives birth?

[14:47] I hear you say. A bit like Arnold Schwarzenegger's Terminator, sent back in time to kill Sarah Connor, the mother of the future leader of the resistance. Well, that is to miss the point of these two signs.

Verses 1 to 4 of Revelation 12 are here to give us insight into the source of the evil struggle and hostilities faced by God's people in the Old Covenant.

Ever since the Garden of Eden, Satan has been looking to destroy the line of that serpent crusher, Jesus. So he was delighted when ungodly Cain murdered his godly brother Abel.

He just had not bargained on the godly line continuing through Adam's other son, Seth. Then instead of being wiped out by the oppressive Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, God's people are rescued by his mighty hand such that the line of the serpent crusher is miraculously preserved through what came to be known as the Passover.

Then in the time of Queen Esther, if you know your Old Testament, there is an evil, there I say, satanic plot to wipe out the entire Jewish remnant living in exile in Persia.

[16:09] But the decree of the Persian King Xerxes could not thwart the ancient promise made by the king of all kings. So the line of the serpent crusher remained intact as God's people are saved from extinction through the bravery of one orphan girl who rose to be queen in Persia, Esther.

Then as you open the first few pages of the New Testament, finally we read of the birth of the child who will grow up to crush the serpent's head. the Messiah child, the Christ child, Jesus, verse 5.

But unsurprisingly, we find that Satan working through King Herod makes two desperate but unsuccessful attempts to devour the woman's child. He is desperate, of course, because he knows his defeat is near and time is running out.

But why have I called verses 1-6 a brief history of time? Neither Stephen Hawkins nor in Eddie Redmayne gets a mention, does a guest appearance anywhere in these verses? Well, it is because these verses contain the theory of everything. You and I need to know if we are to truly understand the history of our church.

[17 : 31] What I mean is verses 1-4 describe the time before and leading up to the birth of Jesus Christ, our King. Then in just one verse, verse 5, John describes the incarnation.

He only mentions the birth and ascension of Jesus because his focus here is on the church. But the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus is clearly implied as we'll see in just a moment.

Then in verse 6, John describes the period from the first to the second coming of Jesus. Verse 6 should remind us of God's people after they left Egypt where they were led into the wilderness and there they were protected, provided, and cared for by the Lord himself.

Therefore, verse 6 is saying that in a similar way, God will protect the New Testament church during her time of mission and witness in the world.

Look at verse 6, the woman fled into the wilderness to a place prepared for her by God where she might be taken care of for 1,260 days.

[18 : 46] Now, 1,260 days is the same as 42 months, which is the same as three and a half years. We first come across these numbers back in chapter 11 of the book of Revelation.

This time period corresponds to the time the prophet Elijah spoke God's word to a hostile nation during the time of the ungodly King Haab in 1 Kings chapter 17 and 18.

John is using 1,260 days here in verse 6 in a stylized way common to this style of writing to represent the gospel age that you and I as the church of Jesus Christ now occupy.

In other words, a bit like Elijah back then, we, the church of Jesus Christ, are called upon to speak God's word to a hostile world under his judgment.

Just like Elijah. And verse 6 is saying that during this period God will protect, provide, and care for us as we carry out our mission and witness in his world.

[20 : 07] The wilderness years of God's people in the Old Testament was a difficult and testing time full of trials and temptations and judgment. And the New Testament church, we are in a similar position, are we not?

Perhaps a few lines from a great, great old hymn is enough to remind us of this fact. Guide me, O great, my great redeemer, pilgrim through this barren land.

I am weak, but you are mighty. Hold me with your powerful hand. Lead me all my journey through. Bid my anxious fears subside.

Land me safe. come inside. Verse 6 should be a great encouragement to us. But verses 1 to 6 should be an even greater encouragement because even though there are no big banks, no event horizons or black holes, in this brief history of time, John has given us a profound framework for understanding the history of the church.

He has helped us to understand that Satan is a very real, a very powerful and deceitful enemy who hates and opposes and slanders God's people and will stop at nothing to destroy us.

[21 : 28] So know your enemy and the spiritual battle you are in right now as you sit here as a Christian here this morning today.

That's the first thing I want us to note, our brief history of time. Having given us a handle on the historical conflict between the Lord Jesus Christ and the Satan and its impact on the church, John wants you and me to understand that despite the Satan, the dragon seemingly possessing kingly authority and great strength, real strength, he is nevertheless very much a defeated foe.

The second thing to note is this, our enemy is a defeated foe. Never, ever, ever forget that, no matter what happens. Our enemy is a defeated foe.

We are given another picture in verses 7 to 9 of a war that arose in heaven where a group of good angels led by the archangel Michael fought the dragon Satan and his bad angels or demons.

Notice from verses 8 and 9 that despite his strength and authority, Satan was not strong enough and so was thrown down out of heaven to the earth along with the demons that he led into battle.

[22 : 52] Notice also that four times in this chapter we are told that the Satan was thrown down to earth. Look at them with me, verse 9. And the great dragon was thrown down.

That ancient serpent who was called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world, he was thrown down to the earth and these angels were thrown down with him. And I heard a loud voice in heaven saying, now the salvation and the power and the authority of God and the authority of his

Christ has come because the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down.

Who accuses them day and night before our God. Verse 13. And when the dragon saw that he had been thrown down to the earth, he pursued the woman who had been given, who had given birth to the male child.

Now in my ignorance some years ago, I used to think that this heavenly war depicted in verses 7 to 9 was something that literally happened. I've since repented of that because I now see that rather it is symbolic picture language of a profound spiritual reality.

And the reason I say this is because of what the loud voice in heaven declares in verse 10. Look at it. salvation has come, we are told. Verse 10.

[24 : 13] The power of God's kingdom has come, we are told. Verse 10. And with them, the authority of God's Christ or king has come, we are told. But notice in the rest of the verse how or why this is so.

For, because the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God.

To put that slightly differently, verses 7 to 9 are here to mirror the events of verse 5. In other words, the life, the death, the resurrection and ascension of Jesus led to the coming of salvation, verse 10, the kingdom of God and the reign of Jesus the Christ.

in and through these events, Satan has been thrown down out of heaven and has fallen to the earth.

It's as if he no longer can go to God and slander or accuse God's people like we see in the opening chapters of the book of Job. In Luke 10, verse 17, some of Jesus' disciples, returning from preaching the gospel, full of joy because the demons submitted to them, Jesus replied to them while on his way to Jerusalem, anticipates the effect of his finished work when he says to them in the next verse, Luke 10, verse 18, these words, I, Jesus, saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven.

[25 : 56] Folks, because of Jesus' life, death, resurrection and ascension, Satan has no basis whatsoever for slandering or accusing you or me.

He has been thrown down. He's been KO'd by the death of Jesus. He's been defeated, counted out. One, two, nine, ten, you're out, Satan.

Finished. If you're still not convinced, notice that those Satan accuses, verse 10, are able to conquer him, verse 11, but notice how.

We are told by or on the ground of the blood of the lamb. You see? If you are a Christian here this morning, all the blessings you enjoy are on the basis of or by the blood of the lamb.

Do you know that you are accepted by God into his family? It is by the blood of the lamb, Jesus. Do you know the power of God the Holy Spirit at work in your heart and your life?

[27 : 13] If so, it is only by the blood of the lamb, Jesus. Are you actively involved in loving your fellow believers? It is only possible by the blood of the lamb, Jesus.

Do you find yourself renouncing ungodliness and worldly passions, however ineffectively you feel in your life? Well, when you do so, it is only by the blood of the lamb, Jesus, that you're able to even begin to do such.

If you are not a Christian, as you sit here this morning, you can only become one by trusting in the blood of the lamb, Jesus. According to verse 11, Satan is thrown down, defeated, or conquered, not by you or me performing exorcisms upon the demons we see under every stone, like in some church settings, nor by marching around buildings, claiming back territory from him, again, like some feel the need to do, but rather through the blood of Jesus Christ.

And, verse 11, by testifying to who Jesus is and what he has done by dying on the cross in my place, taking the punishment my sins deserve.

See that in verse 11? And by being willing, again in verse 11, to die for what you believe in. If here in the West, Christians could but grasp the three things, those three things in verse 11, we might start to have an impact for the gospel for good in England in 2017.

[28 : 59] Tell me, when was the last time you testified about Jesus to another person? Last week? Last month? Last year?

Never? Well, what's stopping you? Fear? Embarrassment? Indifference? Cowardice?

Well, isn't that a far cry from the days when Christians would write books on how to die well for their King Jesus? Perhaps you've forgotten that in the end, Jesus wins.

Because your enemy is very much a defeated foe. Second, our enemy is therefore an angry foe. There's no need to be too cocky.

Having been defeated on the cross of Jesus and hurled out of heaven, Satan has been defeated but not yet completely destroyed. In fact, Satan's fear of operation is now limited to this earth, as it were.

[30 : 04] But let's not be intimidated by Satan's fury. Listen to the way the great preacher, writer, and scholar Don Carson puts it. Satan is full of rage, not because he is so spectacularly strong, but because he knows that he is defeated.

His end is in sight. The range of his operations is curtailed, and he is furious. He knows that in principle, he's already undone.

During the first Gulf War, when the Allied forces turned up with quarter of a million troops and some of the most sophisticated weaponry the world has ever seen, you did not need to be a military strategist to know that the Gulf War was all but over.

And yet, did Saddam Hussein come to his senses admit defeat and surrender? Hell no. Not at all. In fact, his reaction was not only irrational, but typical of many a defeated despot or dictator ousted from his capital city.

Instead of surrender, he sent thousands of his troops to their deaths, without good reason, and set fire to many Kuwaiti oil fields on his way out of the country. Such can be the vengeful rage of the defeated despot, and Satan is no different.

[31 : 28] Look at verse 13 with me. 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.

Verse 17. The dragon became furious with the woman and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commands of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus.

See, verses 13 to 17 is simply an expedition of verse 6. It's going over the same ground, but in slightly greater detail. Satan's attack on and God's protection of his church in these verses is couched in the language of the Old Testament book of Exodus.

Remember last week I said, Revelation is full of Old Testament quotations and allusions. Verse 14 should remind us of Exodus 19 and how the Lord described his rescue of the Israelites as him carrying them on eagle's wings to himself.

In other words, he will protect and care for his church during this our gospel age. A period referred to as a time, times, and half a time.

[32 : 51] Or one year plus two years plus half a year. In other words, this is just another way of saying 1,260 days or 42 months or three and a half years.

All numbers symbolic of the gospel age in which you and I now live. Verse 15 is very likely a reference to Exodus 1 and 2 where Satan used Pharaoh to try and destroy the Israelites and therefore the line of a serpent crusher by throwing, remember, every male child into the river Nile. Can you imagine some of those beautiful toddlers that were here earlier on being thrown into the river Nile to grab? And that's what Pharaoh ordered back in Exodus chapters 1 and 2.

In other words, in this our gospel age, Satan will attempt to destroy the godly line that is the church. You and me. Just as he did back in the Old Testament.

But verse 16, God's providence will not allow even Satan to prevail against his church. Yet according to verse 17, Satan does not give up.

[34 : 03] His rage, his fury, his pride will not let him. So it's important that you and I get to grips with this because the current conflict we as the church face in secular Britain today must be understood in terms of Satan's anger at having been defeated by our great king, King Jesus.

This is the world that you and I live in and breathe and have our being. A place where the devil, like a roaring lion, seeks to devour us individually, verse 17.

Because we are the offspring of the woman. We are the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. And he does not like you. Did you know that in the last 150 years, more people have become Christians than in the previous 1800 years?

Did you know that? Yet also, did you know that in the last 150 years, there have been more Christian martyrs than the previous 1800 years? Did you know that? Our enemy is defeated.

But an angry foe who is yet to be totally destroyed. Our time has gone. Let me close by saying a couple of things by way of application.

[35 : 19] First, understand that you are in a spiritual battle. The problems you face as a group of Christians in Dulwich are not simply sociological, historical, or economic.

They are spiritual. You have an enemy working against you called Satan. At the heart of people's resistance to the truth, or even your unwillingness to share the truth, is a spiritual battle that you fight daily.

You have an enemy working against you, often using your own fears and weaknesses against you. Understand you're in a spiritual battle. Know your enemy.

And pray to the Lord for the help you need to continue struggling in that battle. That's the first thing. Second, understand that the way you first conquered Satan is the way you will continue to conquer Satan.

By the blood of the Lamb, Jesus. There is nothing more precious than the blood of Jesus. By being willing to speak the gospel wherever and whenever you get the chance.

[36 : 31] By being men and women who retain their courage and integrity in the face of opposition. Because it is coming. By standing firm when you are called bigots, narrow-minded, intolerant, homophobic, transphobic, intellectually naive, or foolish for taking so seriously a book like the Bible.

By remembering that in the gospel, Satan has been thrown down and can no longer accuse you because Jesus has secured your victory.

And in the end, we win because Jesus wins. If you're not a Christian here this morning, I'd love to talk to you about how you can get yourself on this winning side.

Let's pause for a moment and think about what we've heard before we sing our next song, which reminds us of that old rugged cross where our salvation was won, where your love was poured out over me.

Amen.