

The Woman and the Dragon | Morning Service

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[0 : 0 0] Our Father, we long for your presence and we pray that you'd give us the hunger and humility to hear your word. And we pray that you would secure our hearts against Satan. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

Well, if you would take out the Bible and turn to Revelation chapter 12, page 1034, that would be just wonderful. Revelation 12. This is a fantastic chapter.

Everyone with me? It's a huge send-up of Satan. Next week, we begin the season of Advent. So this is the last chapter we're going to do in Revelation for a little while, until the deep midwinter. But the key to understanding this passage is that it's a parody.

It's a satire. Despite the dreadful, horrible, evil and deadly intent of Satan, Revelation 12 sends up Satan mercilessly as a complete and absolute failure.

And he fails against a little tiny child. And he fails against the weakest institution in the world, the Christian church. It's very interesting.

[1 : 3 2] It's like the Apostle Paul at the end of that great chapter on the resurrection, 1 Corinthians 15, where he mocks death. He says, O death, where is your sting? O death, where is your victory?

O death, where is your victory? Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through Christ our Lord. Now, you don't mock Satan and death lightly. It is a very courageous thing to do.

You only mock powers greater than yourself from a position of certainty and security, right? You only mock the school bully if the school giant is your friend and standing right beside you.

And the problem for us is that most parody and satire that we see today is trivial and tasteless. Fake news is the big thing today.

But there's a noble tradition of courageous satire. Don Quixote, Animal Farm, Jonathan Swift, Charlie Chaplin's film impersonating Hitler in 1940.

[2 : 3 5] Each of them make a serious point and they make us think and they change our perspective. So Revelation 12 is not trying to trivialize or to terrorize us, but it's trying to expose the true weakness and defeat of evil.

It's not poking cheap fun, but it has a deadly serious purpose, and that is our joy. The devil has been utterly trounced, and despite his fury and wrath, he is overpowered and defeated, and that means that the Christian church walks in victory and walks in security.

And there's one main act, and it takes place in the first six verses, and here we meet the main plot line and the main characters, and it ends with two pictures of the defeat of Satan.

And in the rest of the chapter, those two pictures are replayed from different points of view. Those two defeats. And the first one is replayed as victory for the church, and the second is replayed as security for the church.

All with me so far? Say no, and I'll say it again. It might become clearer as we go through. So let's firstly have a look at the main act, verses 1 to 6.

[3 : 51] Verses 1 and 3, John sees two amazing characters, two signs in heaven, and although they are the key characters in this drama, they only take their significance from their relationship and connection to the child.

The woman is covered with glory, sun, moon, and stars. If you look in verse 1, she's pregnant, in distress, giving birth to the male child. And the red dragon is huge and gruesome and disgusting.

He's covered with blood, red blood, because, well, the one thing he wants to do is to devour the woman's child, and there is an immediate tension. Is he going to succeed in this very easy task, seemingly?

Not hard to work out who the characters are. The child, in verse 5, is described as the one who will rule all nations with a rod of iron. That's an Old Testament reference from Psalm 2 to Jesus Christ, who was raised by the Father and sat on the throne, given all rule and authority.

And the woman's not an individual. It's not a literal Mary, the mother of Jesus. She is the community of believers from whom the Messiah comes. She is faithful Israel in the Old Testament.

[5 : 14] And sun, moon, and stars are pictures from the Old Testament that describe her glory. Because the Old Testament people of God, like the New Testament people of God, have nothing terribly much to commend ourselves to God, and yet God elevates us and rescues us and loves us and cares for us as we are redeemed.

But the dragon is a shabby imitation. Again, Old Testament pictures of powers hostile to God in a dragon. Seven heads, ten horns means that he has real power and he is grotesque.

His macabre red exterior is the blood of innocence. He's the purveyor of death. He deals in death. And later he is clearly identified with the ancient serpent, as with Satan and the devil himself.

And his first move, you can see in verse 4, is to, with his tail, sweep down a third of the stars from heaven. And I haven't got a clue what that means.

I can tell you 12 different interpretations. But whatever it means, he's very big and he's very powerful and he's set on destroying what God has made. And in verse 4, he stands right face to face.

[6 : 32] He's in the presence of the woman. I wonder if you can picture it. Here is this woman crying out in the pangs of childbirth. And the word for her agony is literally the word torture.

And it's used in the rest of the book of Revelation for what Satan does, what demons do. Because Satan's work throughout the Old Testament was to torture and to derail Israel.

You know, all the disobedience and idolatry of God's people, all the suffering of Israel since the time of Abraham, was aimed at this one thing. It was to stop them from giving birth to the child.

All his work, verse 4, has this in mind. I want to eat that child. I want to devour, exterminate the child. He does not care a hoot for the community of faith.

Community of faith is utterly useless and harmless to Satan on their own. By themselves, we represent no threat to him. But only insofar as they bear Christ within them.

[7 : 36] And then the community of faith becomes a major threat to Satan. That's who Satan sees as the threat. It's the son of God. The son of God is going to come and steal the rule of the nations.

And it ought to be easy for this dragon just to gobble down this child, this defenseless child. And verse 5 and 6 reveal his two failures. Let me just read those verses, okay?

Verse 5. She gave birth to the male child, who is the one who is to rule all the nations with the rod of iron. You expect the child to be eaten.

But her child was caught up to God and to his throne. One failure. He fails to get the child. Six. And the woman fled into the wilderness where she has a place prepared by God in which she is to be nourished for 1260 days.

The same length of time we've met throughout Revelation is a year, two years, and a half year, three and a half years, time, times, and half a time. Does the devil get his dinner?

[8 : 40] He does not. He fails doubly. On the one hand, the child is snatched from his jaws. You would think in this drama the easiest thing in the world would be for this dragon to snatch up the child.

But the child is caught up to God, which means that there is a power that is greater than Satan's. He is robbed.

And this is an amazing view of Jesus' ministry. It leaves a huge gap in the middle. It just begins with his becoming a child and ends with him ascending and ruling.

But the point is the consummate protection of God and the child. And it doesn't matter what the devil does and doesn't matter what power he has, he cannot stop the child from entering into his rule.

And the second failure in verse 6 is not only the child, but the woman escapes for him, the Christian community. She fleers, she disappears, and she finds in the wilderness a place of protection.

[9 : 44] In the wilderness, she is protected by God for a certain time, and that means it's a double failure for the dragon. He fails to devour the child and he fails to devour the woman.

Now what does that mean for us? What does that mean practically for us? Well, you'll be pleased to know the chapter replays these two victories in a slightly different way in the next two sections.

In verses 7 to 11, it replays this as the victory of the church. In verses 12 to the end, the security of the church.

So in verses 7 onwards, the camera angle changes, and all of a sudden we are told that what happened with the child being swept out from under the devil's grasp causes a war in heaven.

So verse 7, when war arises in heaven, it's not separate from what's happening with the child. It's the same thing at the same time from a different point of view. Because although we cannot see it, our lives are caught up in this cosmic drama.

[10 : 54] We experience, I don't know about you, but I experience temptation and evil often in the most banal forms. And the Bible keeps saying all our decisions and all our actions and our thoughts and our hopes are engaged in this big drama of principalities and powers.

And I know it's above our pay grade, but we're simply told that there's a war in heaven. And Michael and his angels fight against the dragon and his angels, and the dragon is defeated.

And this word is a word of mockery. It means he's just not up for it. He's just not strong enough. And it's used of the Old Testament people of God when they're oppressed by satanic forces because we are not up for it.

The devil is stronger than us. And now the shoe is on the other foot. And what that means is that Satan is now thrown down to earth.

Six times we get this word, throw down, throw down. He is demoted in the most unflattering way. He's just flung out of heaven, down, down, down. Why?

[11 : 57] Because of what happened with the child on earth. And now he is a very angry dragon. And as he falls down in verse 9, some of his mask is pulled off.

And we learn that he is that ancient serpent, the snake that was in the garden. He is the devil, which is the word for slanderer. He's the king of defamation.

He's Satan. He's the enemy. He's the deceiver of the whole world. He traffics in lies and deception and darkness. And as this is pulled away, suddenly his fearsome costume looks a bit tattered and a bit in rags.

We see what he's trying to do. He just, he loves slander. And he loves to slander God's character. Remember in the Garden of Eden? He sidled up to Eve and he said, you know, did God really say, he doesn't, God doesn't really want your best.

He can't really mean for you to limit your freedom in some sort of way. It's your life. You decide. Besides that, you're not going to die. That's an empty threat. He's slandering the character of God.

[13 : 08] And we are so easily deceived about God and ourselves. We're so gullible about God. And we're told here that Satan holds every human in his deception.

And if you think you're immune from deception, you are most deceived. But what does that mean for us practically? Verses 10 and 11 tell us.

Practically, it means that Christ has broken the cycle of shame. Verses 10 and 11 celebrate the great victory for the church because Satan is defeated.

It says, salvation and power and kingdom and the authority of Christ have come. And if I, let me just read these words. Because the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before the throne of God.

And they have conquered. There's the victory word. But they've conquered him by the blood of the lamb and the word of their testimony. Because they love not their lives, even unto death. You see, it's the blood of the lamb.

[14 : 12] It's the death of Jesus Christ that breaks the cycle of blame. Satan is the master of blame and accusation and self-righteousness.

He invented blame shifting as the best way of self-protection and self-righteousness. You remember in the Garden of Eden, when God comes to Adam and says, what have you done?

He says, the woman you gave me, she did it. And then he goes to the woman, she says, the snake, he did it. And when we read it, we see these are desperate and futile attempts at self-justification and blame shifting.

And that's what we do all the time. We'll do anything to hide our true sense of failure. Protecting ourselves by deflecting blame onto others.

Whenever I cover up, it enables me to pretend that I'm better than you, at least not as bad as some of you. And it always bursts out in form of cruelty, of whispers and gossip and rumours.

[15 : 13] And we make ourselves feel better about ourselves and our difficulties by secretly denigrating others. And it causes divorce and it causes wars and it causes untold damage.

And it's a proven way to establish my own rightness. That's the blame cycle. And it's very human. And it's always the work of Satan.

And it happens in churches all the time. Another believer lets you down or hurts you or does something wrong. And rather than forgiving them or going to them and fixing it and by dealing with it, you wallow in self-pity or you begin the blame cycle.

And we feed the fiery of fury in our own hearts. And we think of better and better accusations. They're so delicious, they just have to spill out in conversation.

And we whisper and gossip about how we've been wronged. And it just leaves a little bit of toxic waste of bitterness. And you can tell you're in the blame cycle if you're unexplainably angry and just can't seem to get over it.

[16 : 22] It's the work of the devil. And if you're doing that, you know you should stop. But you can't stop unless someone breaks the cycle, right? Here is Satan and he loves accusation.

He does his own accusation. He does it day and night before God. So you know the voice that comes into your head and says, God couldn't possibly love you.

You're a terrible Christian. My sister, who's a fantastic person, whenever this voice starts speaking to her, I say, Oh, you're a terrible Christian. And she laughs because she sees it as the voice of Satan.

You're a terrible parent. You know, if anybody else in the church really knew your thoughts, you'd never be part of this. Your life means nothing. Your prayers mean nothing. These are all the accusations of Satan before God.

Day and night, day and night, day and night. And it looks like his great success. But this is the very point of his defeat. Jesus is the only one who was utterly innocent.

[17 : 25] And when he was put to death, he did not cry out in vengeance, but he cried out and prayed on the behalf of those who were oppressing him for their forgiveness. And he, in his death, broke the cycle of blame by taking our blame into himself.

It's by his death he has thrown the devil down. He has taken away the devil's right of accusation by taking responsibility for my sin and your sin and dying in our place.

So when Satan says to me, You've got absolutely no right to stand before God after what you've done. I say to him, You're absolutely right and you're absolutely wrong.

Because Christ Jesus has taken my sin and has died. Look at my white robe. I've washed it in the blood of the Lamb. This is the victory of the church.

We conquer Satan by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of our testimony because we keep preaching Jesus' words to ourselves so that whenever we're feeling utterly overwhelmed with this, we say, we preach to ourselves, There's no condemnation for anyone who is in Christ Jesus.

[18 : 37] That includes me. It's God who justifies. Who is there to condemn? Who can bring any charge against God's elect?

It's a terrible defeat for the devil. It's the victory of the church. And more briefly, the second defeat of Satan is now replayed as the security of the church.

Verses 12 to 17. Let me just read verse 12. And that simply means that the Christian life is filled with tension.

Two opposite realities. We rejoice and we weep at the same time. And since Satan can no longer touch the child, he directs his full fury at those who worship Jesus Christ.

I hope you know that. His destructive anger is fueled by his loss. He works harder and harder at accusing and deceiving and persecuting Christians.

[19 : 49] And the reason is because he's lost. You see. So when troubles come for Christians, it's not because evil is growing greater in the world or Satan is growing stronger.

It's because he has been beaten. So in verse 13, he pursues the woman and the word is literally, he persecutes the woman. Because persecution of Christians is never just an ideological issue.

You can never explain persecution just in sociological or economic or even personal terms. Every time Christians are persecuted, Satan stands behind it. But again, he fails.

Because God has prepared a place for his community in the wilderness. That is where we are. And the wilderness is a place of testing.

And in the wilderness, God nourishes us. This word is a very rich word. It's not just a food drop. It's what you do with children. You care for them. You nourish them. He teaches us to live not by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from his mouth.

[21 : 00] The wilderness is not just a place of testing. It's also the place of the honeymoon. In the Old Testament, God rescued his people from Egypt. He describes the time in the wilderness as a honeymoon.

He says in Jeremiah, I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness. So as the devil pursues the woman, who is now, I think, a picture of the Christian community, God's people are lifted up.

They mount up on wings as eagles, using the Exodus picture. And they are flown into the presence of God in the wilderness, where we are sustained for a time, for a short period of time, until Satan is done away with altogether at the end of time.

What does Satan do? One more strategy. In verse 15, seeing that they've escaped from him, verse 15, he throws out a river from his mouth to swallow up God's people.

It's a very clever picture, because when you're in the wilderness, what you really need is water. And I think Satan uses this perfectly good desire in an attempt to drown God's people.

[22 : 12] He uses our desires against us. He wants to flood our desires with false promises to overwhelm us with options and choices until we're just swept away.

He swamps us with the cares of this world, with the deceitfulness of riches, with the desires for other things.

He wants to wash us away from the word and wash the word away from us. But just as God used the earth to rescue his people from Pharaoh, now he uses the earth to rescue his people in the wilderness.

So what that means is that even when we are in the most vulnerable place in the wilderness, as his children, Satan fails. The flood of accusations he pours out against us.

The torrent of lies. They don't work. And they don't work because, verse 17, the people of God are those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus.

[23 : 19] And the stronger the flood, the stronger the push, the stronger the pull. It just drives God's people to hold more firmly to Jesus Christ and his words. And the key to the whole thing in this chapter is the child.

The child defeats the dragon who is enormously more powerful than we are. It is the child who gives victory to the people of God by absorbing the blame that we deserve.

The child removes any ground of accusation before God and creates a people who love their lives, love not their lives, even unto death.

Who become more and more like the child, become more and more like Christ as we suffer unjustly and trust our maker. And it's the child who is our security. And even in the wilderness when we're wandering around and don't know where our next meal comes from, when the flood sweeps us along, Christ takes us and he puts his feet upon a rock and as we hold on to that rock we discover that he has been holding onto us all along.

And the obvious thing to say by way of conclusion of how precious and how important the church of God is to God. It's why the child comes, it's why the child dies, it's why the child is raised, it's why he rules, he rules for us, the church.

[24 : 39] And in Jesus Christ he has given us victory and he has given us security and Satan has been thrown down. And that's Revelation 12.

So let's kneel and pray together.