

Our First Priority

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[0 : 00] Turn with me to the last book of the Bible, Revelation chapter 12. Three episodes.

The first one, verse 1 to 6, describes a woman about to give birth to a child. And the dragon, the red dragon, who hates the child and wants to destroy the child.

But before he's able to do so, the child is caught up to God and to his throne. The second episode is a war in heaven. A war between Michael, the angel, and the dragon, in which the dragon is thrown down to earth.

And we spoke last time about how this was a consequence of what the child did. The child we identified as none other than Jesus Christ. And as a consequence of his death and what his death secured and what his death did in setting people free from the guilt of sin.

The dragon was thrown down to the earth from heaven. And there was this huge voice, this huge anthem of praise. Now the salvation and power and the kingdom of God and the authority of his Christ have come.

[1 : 31] Verse 13 to the end of the chapter is the third episode. And that tells us what happens to the woman, or at least the continuing story of the woman and the dragon who has been thrown down to earth.

Verse 13, when the dragon saw that he had been thrown down to earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male 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 like a river like a river like a flood. But the earth came to the aid 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. The last episode tells us how the dragon pursues the woman, but before he can reach her, she's given two wings of the great eagle so that she might fly to the wilderness.

[3 : 07] Then the serpent opened his mouth and a great torrent, a huge flood of water poured out and appeared as if to destroy the woman completely.

Then the earth opened its mouth and came to the help of the woman by swallowing the water that had come out of the dragon's mouth. And once more, the dragon, despite his determination and power and rage, has failed.

In fact, that's what we've been seeing all along. In the first instance, between one and six, he tries to catch the child. He's unable to do so. In the second instance, between seven and twelve, there is war in heaven.

What happens? The dragon fails and he's thrown down to earth. Here, and it's almost as if the dragon, I believe the dragon's getting more and more furious as the chapter goes on.

Here, the dragon in great fury, knowing that his time is short, he takes his rage and his wrath out on the woman by pursuing her in the earth.

[4 : 20] And yet, despite all that he tries to do, he once more fails. And that, again, is a tremendous encouragement to John. All he saw was persecution against the church.

All he saw was his own loneliness and what was happening in the church and what was happening to the gospel. And yet, God is saying to him, despite what you see around you, though heaven and earth pass away, said Jesus, my words will never pass away.

And it reminds us of that other saying of Jesus when he said, I will build my church on this rock and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

I believe this chapter is an illustration. It's simply up in picture language, an illustration of precisely these words. Jesus promised, I will build my church.

Now, always remember, the church is the people, the people of God, the people who follow Jesus. It's nothing to do with buildings or denominations or anything like that. The church is the people who love Jesus and who trust in him as their savior.

[5 : 28] That is the church of Jesus Christ. And he promises, I will build my church. And the gates of hell, these are the gates of hell, the dragon, the serpent, the wrath and the rage and the fury with which he tries to destroy them, they will not prevail against it.

And we need to hear that message time and time again. We need to know that whatever this world, whatever changes there are in this world, that God's words will never, ever fall.

Now, let's look at this last episode then. And let's look at it just perhaps a little bit more deeply. And we're going to ask, well, why, why is it that the dragon so relentlessly pursues the woman?

And there's no question in my mind, the answer to that question, because he hates the woman.

Why does he hate the woman? He hates the woman because of the child which the woman gave birth to.

The child we identified as the Lord Jesus Christ. He hated the child. He hates the woman because she is connected to the child. She loves the child who's now become a man and the child who was born into the world as the son of God and who gave his life at Calvary for sin.

[6 : 42] That's why he hates the woman, because she is connected by faith to the child. He hates the woman because she is the people of God, the church.

And she is still united to the child. But despite all his hatred and every attempt he makes to pursue this woman, the woman is ultimately safe.

Now, that doesn't mean that she won't be touched by anything. It doesn't mean that individual people amongst God's people will not be affected by the warfare and the conflict that we're reading about here.

We're going to see in a few moments time that many, many people had to forfeit their own lives because of their love for Jesus. And yet, the message that comes across in this chapter, loud and clear, is that despite everything that is done against the church and the message that the church brings, that nothing will destroy God's purpose on earth.

Now, let's look then at this last episode and the 20 minutes or so that remains. And let's look at three things, first of all, which are all tied together. First of all, I want us to see the place to where this woman, to which this woman is taken.

[7 : 59] And it's described here as the wilderness. That's the first thing, the place that this woman is taken to. Now, I want you to notice, too, that the transportation upon which she is taken.

We read that the woman is given two wings of a great eagle. Thirdly, I want us to look at the length of time. Now, we've seen this before, and I hope I'm not going to repeat myself.

I'm going to look at it in just perhaps slightly different lights in each time. The length of time that the woman is in the desert. We find that in verse 14. To the place which is to be nourished for a time, times, and half a time.

So there's three things then, three pieces of information which tell us about this woman. The woman who we identified as the people of God or the church.

She's taken to the wilderness. Now, I'm going to say this again. In order to understand this chapter, as well as the rest of the book of Revelation, you have to know your Old Testament. In order to understand what's being said here, you have to know a particular part of the Old Testament.

[9 : 07] And that's the part we read earlier on in Exodus chapter 19. And I'm sure that we all know the story really well of how the Israelites had been in Egypt and how they had been suffering under the hand of the Egyptians, the cruelty of the Egyptians, and how under Moses, God had led the people out of Egypt and into the wilderness.

And how for 40 years, God led his people from day to day, week to week, year to year, year after year. And there, they experienced what it meant to live by faith and trust in God.

Here, God is separate. He separated his people. And for them, it was a time when they had to discover what the Lord was, who the Lord was, and how to worship him, and how to serve him, and how to put him first.

You could even entitle it like this. The reason God brought his people out of Egypt was not just to save them from the hand of the Egyptians.

It was to bring them to himself. To experience him and to discover him and to live in the light of his presence. To establish that relationship in which they lived every day by faith.

[10 : 32] And that's a picture of our relationship if we belong to Jesus. If you belong to Jesus, your life is a life of faith in which you trust in God by day by day.

And in which God has promised to take care of you and to lead you. We've just been singing. He leads me by the Spirit. The Lord is my shepherd. Only a Christian can say that.

You can only say that by coming to Jesus Christ and knowing him as your Savior and as your Lord. And no matter how much these words might mean something to you because you've been brought up, they mean nothing at all if you're not in Christ.

Would you not love to be able to sing those words tonight with all your heart? The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. He makes me lighter.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death. For thou I will fear no evil. For thou art with me. And thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me. Would you not love to be in such a relationship with God?

[11 : 33] And is it not true tonight that if you're not a believer, then there's something, there's a barrier between you and singing these words. You know that they're the right words. And you know that God has opened the door for you to discover what these words mean.

And that relationship in which you walk and live by faith in him. And yet you're not there because you haven't taken that step. You haven't listened to his voice and taken that step of faith in which you lay hold upon Jesus and trust in him.

Trust in him with all your heart. Why is it? What is it that's kept you back from that point? And I wonder if it is the fact that you have to, in order to live by faith, you have to leave Egypt.

And it wasn't easy for the Israelites to leave Egypt. You might think it was, but it actually wasn't. There were times when they said to Moses, we want to go back to Egypt.

But there's either one or the other. You were either in the wilderness where God led you day by day. Now, which was better? Or to be in Egypt where you had everything under the sun and yet you were lost.

[12 : 47] Now, you tell me which is better. To be with God in the presence of God and to be able to say the Lord is my shepherd. Or to be back in Egypt where you had everything and ultimately you had nothing because you were lost.

Well, that's either or tonight. Now, which is it to be? Which is it to be? The Lord is freely. He's speaking to you through his word this evening.

Even this bizarre passage. And I admit it's bizarre. It's bizarre to read. It's bizarre to study. And it's bizarre to preach this passage. And yet, in the most mysterious way, God speaks through every part of his word.

And he gets to us, doesn't he? He gets home to your heart. And he tells you, this is my voice you're listening to. And perhaps it's only because we're talking about dragons.

And the most amazing images that you're listening tonight. Well, that's the occasion when God will use, which God will use to break into your heart. And we pray that he'll do that.

[13 : 51] That he'll finally, once and for all, bring you into his kingdom by showing you once again that if you don't have Christ, you have nothing. You can have everything in this world. If you don't have Jesus, you have nothing.

Now, are you with the people of God tonight? That's where the woman is. She's with the people of God. She's in the wilderness. And it's like, it's so closely resembled, it's so closely similar to the story of the Israelites as they're going, let me prove it to you.

She's in the wilderness. The people of Israel were in the wilderness. All right? But there's more than that. She was taken there on the wings of eagles.

You know, I heard somebody this week, I tried to listen to other people's views of Revelation. I tried to listen on the internet because the internet is such a marvelous tool. You can listen to any kind of sermon or any kind of teaching you want.

You just dial in the right things and all it comes up. You can listen to thousands, thousands of sermons on the internet. And the way people, you know, I heard something this week.

[14:54] I was trying to prepare for this. I thought, right, I'll try and figure out what other people believe. I heard somebody saying that the wings of eagles was to do with America. And you know how America has the eagle as their emblem?

As their symbol? They were trying to suggest that this somehow or other was God bringing America into Revelation and somehow or other predicting that America would have such a great part. And that's just such nonsense. What did America mean to John? John didn't even know where America was. It hadn't even been invented in John's time.

It was so long ago. How was it going to, how was John going to make, John knew his Old Testament. And God is using Old Testament language. Now, when you know your Old Testament, all of a sudden the book of Revelation begins to make a little more sense.

It doesn't make complete sense, but it makes more sense. But it certainly doesn't mean America. Now, what does it mean then? It means it's going back once again to what God said about the people of Israel.

[15:56] Here is what he said. Verse 4, chapter 19, Exodus. You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians. How, listen to this, how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.

You see the tie-up? You see the connection? God is using Old Testament children of Israel, wilderness language, in order to describe where you and I are in the world today, in the wilderness. Having borne them on eagles' wings. And this was his way of saying how miraculously he had delivered and saved and rescued his people. And that's exactly what he did for this woman. Now, the third thing is the length of time which she's there.

She's there for times. Time and half a time. Remember we said last time that was the time between the first coming of Jesus and the second coming of Jesus. And it's put in this symbolic language of time, times, and half a time.

Three and a half years or, now listen to this. This is so interesting. Or 42 months. 42 months. Where's the number 42?

[17:04] Well, I didn't know this until recently. But if you read Exodus, sorry, Numbers chapter 33. You can do this study at home. Numbers chapter 33. Go home and read chapter number. I pretty much guarantee you've never read the chapter.

And if you've read it, you've skimmed through it. Because it's one of these chapters that just gives wee bits of detail after another. And I pretty much guarantee you haven't really studied it. Nor had I until very recently. Okay? It's the most fascinating chapter.

Because it's a diary of every single place the Israelites stopped at through the wilderness as they made their way from Egypt to the Promised Land. Every single place is recorded.

But it's logged in this diary. Numbers chapter 33. And they're every stage. Stage one. Stage two. Stage three. And they left this place to go to the next place. They stopped there. They left that place to go to the next place.

They stopped there. They left that place to go to the next place. It's quite fascinating. If you knew on a map where all these places were, you could trace. And the reason you can't do that is because we're not quite sure where these places were.

[18:02] In any case, guess how many stages there were in the wilderness. Guess how many? 42. 42. Here we have one more piece of evidence in which God is describing his church just like the Israelites going through the wilderness.

And he's saying that's where the church is. That's where my people are. But it's, in other words, he's saying this, they're in the world and yet they're separated from the world.

That was the whole point of the children of Israel in the wilderness was that they were in the world and yet they were separated from it. And that's the way we have to be as well. We are in the world. That's what the Bible tells us. We are in the world and yet we are separated from it. And you know, you can learn a huge amount about the Christian life by reading about the Israelites in the wilderness.

And how they learned and trusted and how they failed and fell. And how they stumbled and how they came back and how they learned day by day to trust in the Lord and listen to him and obey him.

[19:13] That's the woman in the wilderness. That's where we are today. Constantly learning, constantly discovering, constantly following, constantly listening to God's voice.

And constantly falling and failing and coming back to him and learning all the time how to trust the Lord. And God is saying to us, I bore you on eagle's wings and brought you to myself. That's where we are. Now then. Next. Next. The method of the dragon's attack. The method of the dragon's attack. The serpent, verse 15, poured water like a river out of his mouth after the woman. To sweep her. There's no question about what he's trying to do. He's trying to destroy the woman. And he will not be satisfied until he destroys the woman. And the method he uses is that he opens his mouth and there's this deluge.

[20 : 20] Now I guarantee you, you will not appreciate this until you have either seen or been in a flood. We had floods this summer. And having seen it for myself. We were in holiday in Evesham at the time.

Having seen for myself the damage, the carnage that a flood can do. I'll never read these words in the same light again.

You have to see it for yourself to realize the power of water. This is a torrent of water. It's not just a trickle. It's not just a wee river. It's a torrent of water that comes gushing. And comes thundering and rushing after this woman. And if nothing happens, it's going to sweep her away. What does that mean? It means that the ultimate aim of the dragon is to destroy the woman.

And he does so to destroy the message of the child. There's only one reason he wants to destroy the woman. Because he knows that the more people come into contact with her, then the more people will join her and listen to the voice of God.

[21 : 29] And with every person that comes into the kingdom of God and joins the woman will be a person lost to himself. And that will be one more step of weakness in his kingdom.

One more chink in his armor. And one more reminder to him that his kingdom is going to be ultimately destroyed. And so, with the fury and the time that he's left, he tries to destroy the woman. How does he do that? Well, he does that, first of all, by persecution. And John knew all about what persecution meant in his day. His church was being persecuted at the time. The emperor, Roman Emperor Nero, had just committed suicide. Before that time, he had launched this incredible attack on Christians. He was going to do that, he was going to do that. He blamed them for their faith. He blamed them for a fire. And he put thousands of them to death. He hated Christians.

[22 : 31] And in fact, you know, when you think about it, John was probably the only disciple, in fact, he was the only disciple that actually didn't die a martyr's death. He was the only one who died a natural death. The rest were killed on account of their being disciples.

It was part of the course of things in those days that if you became a Christian, the likelihood was that you would be arrested if they saw you meeting with other Christians, or if you shared your faith with anyone, they would catch you, they would arrest you, they would put you to jail, they would take you away from your family, and they would probably feed you to the lions or the gladiators. It was as simple as that. And that's quite a thought, isn't it? It's a world of difference in Stornoway when we think about becoming converted. It's a world of difference to thinking about going out, coming to church here on a Sunday, and knowing perfectly well that whatever else happens to us, we're not going to suffer for our faith in that kind of way.

It really, really gives you a thought, though, if you lived in a part of the world or a time in history when by being converted you were signing your own death certificate. That was the day in which John lived.

But after Nero, it didn't get any better. There were people, Roman emperors like Domitian and Trajan, and who, again, they hated Christians and did everything that they could to put them to death.

[24 : 02] And it wasn't until hundreds of years later when Constantine came to the throne that there was final peace and where Christianity was recognized as a religion, as a legitimate religion, and the persecution stopped.

But that didn't stop. It didn't stop after the Roman Empire. And at various times in human history, you find the most incredible onslaught, the most incredible hatred in an attempt to destroy the gospel of the world.

And there, of course, are accounts written of various persecutions of various times in history and in various places. How about this? As an example.

An evangelist in the North Indian state of Madhya Pradesh, killed by Hindu priests, suspected of seeking human sacrifices for a Hindu goddess in the latest of a series of attacks against Christians in the country.

He was shot dead near a village in Madhya Pradesh. He was working as a shepherd in his spare time. He left home to a nearby mountain to graze his sheep.

[25 : 20] There was a temple there. And there were people, Hindu priests came, and they shot him after torturing him. That's an example of the kind of persecution, the kind of violence that there has been.

Towards Christians. Except that that happened last month. It didn't happen in the 16th century. It happened in November. You go to Open Doors website, they'll give you a list of 50 countries in the world where it's dangerous to be a Christian. 50 countries in the world where in some form or another you're taking your life in your hands when you're converted.

How about this one? The manager of a Christian bookstore in the Gaza Strip found dead last weekend. That's in October this year. A couple of months ago. First publicly beaten and tortured by Islamic gunmen, accusing him of spreading Christianity, according to witnesses and Palestinian security officials, speaking to whatever news they...

I'm not being political, by the way. This has nothing to do with politics. Nothing. And I'm not being prejudiced either. Just stating a fact. The man ran a Christian bookstore in the Gaza Strip and they didn't like it.

[26 : 46] They hated him for it. And they put him to death. Last month. Last month. 50 countries where it is dangerous to be a Christian.

There are more subtle ways in which attempts are made to destroy the Christian gospel. I was reading recently Cumberland County, North Carolina and a complaint was made about schools issuing Bibles.

They took the Bibles out of the schools. Bibles in hotels by the Gideons. 18%. There's been an 18% reduction in America of Bibles being put in hotels. It doesn't matter even if you say, but these Bibles sometimes were the means where people turned away from suicide.

They were such help to people. The Gideons will tell you. The Gideons will tell you of story after story of people who wrote to them afterwards and said, you've no idea how much help and comfort and strength I got from just that Bible in the hotel.

It doesn't matter. 18% reduction because there's a movement against the gospel. There always was. There's nothing new about this.

[28 : 00] People say, oh well look at what's happening today. There's nothing new about what's happening today. It's not just today that it's happening. It's only just that we're discovering what's been happening all along.

We shouldn't be surprised. Jesus tells his disciples, don't be surprised when you find that the world is against you. If it hated me, it will hate you also.

And it'll hate you in all kinds of subtle ways. And if the dragon cannot get what he want by destroying, by literally destroying people, he will get what he want.

He will try to get what he wants by persuading people. Don't you feel the mood, the atmosphere in today's world as a Christian?

Don't you feel the pressure and the temptation to take another course? And you don't have to stop and say, I no longer believe Jesus. You just have to just, just not do anything.

[28 : 58] Don't you feel the pressure when you're in amongst your friends? When you're in a conversation with your friends and somebody says to you, well you go to church, don't you? What do you believe? And you feel, well I just go to church.

You want to say the minimum. You don't want to use the opportunity because it's because like Tony Blair said, the moment you mention religion, you're a nutter. Well you are. You are a nutter and I am a nutter as well.

And I'm really disappointed in how in how an opportunity, opportunities were lost simply for fear of being labeled as a nutter.

but don't you feel the pressure just to conform and to blend into the world that you and I live in? It's the easiest thing in the world and we're confronted by living an uncomfortable life if we live in

obedience.

If you live in obedience and put God first and live a life that's glorifying to Him, it's not going to be a comfortable life because there will be times in your life when you'll have to stand up for Him and standing up means standing alone and it means being uncomfortable.

[30 : 09] It's the easy, and then on the other hand, there's this, there's the other alternative which is just to do what everybody else does, live as everybody else does, live like a nice guy, live amongst everyone, don't say a thing, be a secret disciple.

Well that's one way, that's one way in which the flood comes and tries to sweep the gospel away. and I wonder if instead of persecution, if what the dragon can't do by persecution, he does by persuasion.

What hope is there in a world full of sexual images for young Christians today? What hope is there to remain pure and to remain godly and to live as Jesus lived?

What hope is there when there's the lure of all kinds of temptations and all kinds of wealth and easy living? And there will be times in your lives when, times in our lives when we'll have to make a choice between doing the easy thing and doing the hard thing.

God challenges us when he brings these choices to us as to who we serve. who do you serve?

What I'm trying to say tonight is that it's not just by persecution that the flood comes.

[31 : 36] There's a whole, a whole world of ways in which the dragon tries to destroy.

And by the way, he's not interested in whether you and I live or die. He's only interested in how effective we are for Jesus. If he can get you to shut up, if he can get you to live like everyone else, well, he's happy enough with that.

He's not going to persecute you if you live like everyone else and you don't say anything about the Lord and you don't make out, don't make it known that you're a Christian and you don't just, you just live an easy life, then that's fine.

But that's not the life that the disciples lived at all. And that's not the kind of life that will get Christ noticed. And that's not the kind of life that will give you the opportunity to speak about Christ because we've got to know also that God will use where we are willing to live for him, he will use his people and he will do great things through his people.

He has already and he will continue to do so as time goes on. The earth opened up and swallowed the water. What does that mean?

[32 : 53] Well, I simply mean, I simply believe it. There's all kinds of theories as to what this means. I simply believe it's this, that before the flood gets to destroy the woman, God has diverted the water away so that on every attempt to destroy the church, the dragon fails.

I also believe it's something like this, that, you know, whatever temptations there are and whatever persecutions there are today, they'll come to an end before God's people are destroyed because we've got this promise on my church.

I will build my church on this rock and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. But the story isn't finished, you'll notice.

Even after the flood has been consumed by the earth itself, the dragon became furious with the woman, even more so than he has so far, and goes off to make war on the rest of her offspring. That's you and I. You and I are the rest of our offspring. And I believe there are three things, very briefly, the time has gone, there are three things, very briefly, that describe the people of God.

[34 : 16] First of all, the people of God are family. We are the rest of her offspring. That's the kind of, that's the kind of terminology that's always used to describe followers of Jesus.

Remember what Jesus himself said? He said, who are my mother and my brothers, those who do the will of God? They are my brother and my sister and my mother. Jesus regarded his disciples as his own family.

And then Peter said this, or rather John, he said, behold what manner of love the Father has given to us that we should be called the sons of God. God has brought us into family relationship with himself.

That's a great privilege that we have as God's people today. We are the rest of her offspring. But there's two other things in which we're, in which the people of God are described. First of all, we are to keep those who, the people of God are those who keep the commandments of God and those who hold to the testimony of Jesus.

Again, a description of the Old Testament people of Israel where in the middle of the Old Testament people were the commandments of God. And the great challenge that they faced every day was where are they going to keep the commandments of God?

[35 : 36] Now it's the same with ourselves. Are we going to listen to his word? Are we going to please him? You see, I'm not saying, I'm not suggesting that we keep the commandments of God in order for God to love us.

That's not the Bible's message at all. But the person who has been changed by God will want to serve God and live for him and hear his word and put his word into practice.

Now when you do that, you will be noticed in this world. And that's where the challenge lies. It's when you don't do that, it's when you fail to do that, that you blend into the background and become like everyone else.

But when you're determined to live for God, to live for your saviour, then you live as the offspring of the woman and you become exposed to the dragon.

And what's more, we hold to the testimony of Jesus. once again, we're reminded of why it is the people of God live in this world and what our first priority is.

[36 : 44] Go into all the world and make disciples of all nations. That's the opportunity and that's the priority that each one of us has. And God would never, Jesus would never have given his disciples that commandment if there weren't people of whom to make disciples.

People all around them. Look at what happened in the New Testament church. As the disciples went out with the gospel, they simply gossiped the gospel. They shared the gospel in their own way. They told others what God had done for them in their own way and sure enough, even though there were people who wrote them off as nutters, and there will be today, there will be others who will listen.

Maybe one, maybe two, maybe three, maybe only a few, but they're there. Those who need to hear the one message which will transform their lives through the power of God.

Imagine God had someone for you tonight, someone who you know and who desperately needs to hear what you have. and imagine you keep quiet about it, and they don't hear.

What a tragedy. You hold the testimony of Jesus. Jesus. we'll finish at that.

[38 : 24] Let us pray. Let us pray. our gracious and eternal God, we pray that you will forgive us for where we have gone wrong, and give thanks that you are a gracious God that we can come to and confess how much we have failed to live as we ought to have lived, and yet there is opportunity, yet there is time, yet there are more who need to hear the gospel.

You are the God who restores our soul and makes us to walk in the paths of righteousness. Bless, Lord, your word to us this evening. Forgive us and strengthen us and encourage us as we go out into another week, as we go out to meet the dragon who will be waiting for us, waiting with a flood to destroy.

Prepare as we pray. In Jesus' name, Amen.