

# The Great Conflict

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[ 0 : 00 ] We're going to turn to the second of our readings, Revelation chapter 12. And I'm going to read with you from the beginning to verse 6, the first six verses.

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 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. She gave birth to a male child, one who is to rule, or rather that word rule means shepherd, one who is to shepherd all the nations with a rod of iron.

[ 1 : 20 ] 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 1,260 days.

One of the most famous scientists in Britain over the last 100 years was a Cambridge professor called Fred Hoyle.

In 1982, Fred Hoyle gave a lecture called Evolution from Space, in which he quite literally rocked and shocked the entire scientific world at that time.

Because in the lecture, he showed that in terms of both logic and probability, the popular theory of chance evolution was quite impossible.

For Fred Hoyle, there were simply too many missing links for the random process that we call evolution to be logically believable.

[ 2 : 51 ] Instead, he suggested that in order to explain what cannot be explained by random process, there must have been intelligence outside of the universe.

The interesting thing was that Hoyle, as far as we know, lived and died an atheist. But he was an uncomfortable atheist.

And one who could not bring himself to believe, with all his knowledge of mathematics and probability, he could not believe that this universe came into existence by simple random chance. He said it is utterly impossible. For him, there had to be intelligence outside of the universe. And he concluded this.

Listen. Listen. There is a coherent plan in the universe. Though I don't know what it's a plan for.

[ 4 : 09 ] That's what he said. There is a coherent plan in the universe. Though I don't know what it's a plan for. For that plan, we have to go to the Bible, which isn't a scientific book.

It doesn't tell us about mathematical probability. But it tells us what the plan is. And it tells us what the plan is for. And despite whatever objections that you might have to that plan, you might say, well, talking about a plan is all very well, but surely there are difficulties.

As soon as you begin to talk about a God and a plan, how do you explain the huge obstacles that there are to me believing in a good God and an evil world?

How can you expect me to believe in a God who allows suffering and war and earthquake and human tragedy? How can you explain? And I know that there are difficulties.

There are obstacles. It's not an easy thing to believe in a plan. And if I didn't believe that God is so great as to overcome whatever questions I have and whatever obstacles that there are, but there are also difficulties from within God's people.

[ 5 : 30 ] Even God's people themselves. There are times in history where they themselves say, I don't understand what God's plan is, and I don't understand where God is leading me in this world and where God's plan is going.

And that was the situation that John was in. And we have to remember that whatever our view is on Revelation, on the book of Revelation, you have to remember that the first and foremost purpose of Revelation was so that John would be given the word of God for his encouragement.

So that has your first question. Whenever we try and understand the book of Revelation, puzzling as it is, the first question we ask is, what's in it for John? Because he must have been surrounded with all kinds of questions as to what God was doing.

Why did God leave him after telling him in the person of Jesus Christ that he must go into all the world and make disciples of all nations? Why then leave him isolated, alone, on a lonely island in the middle of the Mediterranean?

Why? What was God's purpose in all of that? And why was it that he was hearing reports of the church, people that he knew and loved being killed and martyred and put to death and sent to the lions because they were doing God's will?

[ 6 : 51 ] Why was it? And here is God, amongst other things, and he's explaining to John, in pictorial form, he's explaining to John that though he does not understand and cannot understand what God is doing precisely at that moment in time, there is a plan, and he, John, has a part in that process, an important part in that process, despite his inability to understand.

And this is where Revelation is not just an intriguing book, but it's an encouraging book, because it tells us that we too have a part to play in God's process and God's plan, where he has started this world, and despite its fallenness and brokenness, God will bring it to completion one day, and one day Jesus will come again, and where the earth, as we know it, will fold and fade away, and where God will usher in his new kingdom, the new heavens and the new earth, which will never disappear, and which his people will dwell in perfection forevermore.

Now then, we've been studying this book of Revelation, we've been trying to make some sense out of a very difficult book, and you might expect me at this stage in time to recap, and to try and go back and say, well, in order to understand chapter 12, you have to understand chapter 11, so we have to recap.

We're not going to do that. And the reason we're not going to do that is because Revelation is a series of visions, and each one of those visions says the same thing.

It has the same message. It's God coming to John, and he's saying, here's one way of putting it. I want you to look at this. I want you to look at what you see. Tell me what you see. Write down what you see.

[ 8 : 40 ] But here is my plan for the world. And now I'm going to show you another vision. And now I'm going to show you a third vision. And each one of those visions is a different perspective on God's plan for the world and what really matters in this world.

And here in chapter 12, we have this incredibly frightening... This is the stuff of nightmares. The images in chapter 12, I'm sure you were aware of this, is the kind of thing you wish you hadn't brought your children to this service because you think they're going to be up all night thinking about dragons and babies and the wilderness and all the rest of the image.

But this is God's word. And this is how God has chosen to explain himself to John and to ourselves. And it's for us to come tonight with an open mind and an open heart asking what God is saying to each one of us in this vision.

Now, in the chapter, there are three separate visions. They're all related to one another, but they are three separate visions. The first vision, from one to six, it has three characters.

A woman, a pregnant woman, a dragon, and the child that she gives birth to. That's the first vision. The second vision is a war, a war in heaven.

[ 10 : 03 ] And we'll try next week to explain what that means. How can there be war in heaven? If heaven's a perfect and a place where God dwells, how can there possibly be war? Well, you'll have to come back next week to find out how there can possibly be war in heaven.

This time, there are two characters. Michael, we'll find out who he is next week, and the serpent. That's the second vision. The third vision, there are two characters again.

This time, we're down to the woman again, same woman as vision number one, and the dragon again. And this time, it's the continuing story of the woman and the dragon.

Three visions in the same chapter, three separate visions, telling separate things, but each one related to one another and there are three Sundays between now and our communion.

And that means that we have, that each vision neatly fits into these three Sundays. Let's look, first of all, verses one through six.

[ 11 : 08 ] And let's look at the first two characters in this vision. First of all, there is a dragon, a red dragon, who has every appearance of power and authority, and yet, he's an utter failure.

It doesn't matter how hard he tries, at the end of the day, he fails.

Now, don't get me wrong, he is capable of huge destruction. That's what it means when it tells us that his tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven.

He is capable of doing a massive amount of damage. Moreover, he has a huge amount of authority. We're told that he has ten horns. And we're told that he has seven diadems. Now, you remember what a diadem was, it's what you see the queen wearing every so on.

[ 12 : 15 ] It's a sign of royalty. It's a sign of authority. The horns were always in the Bible a sign or a symbol of power and strength and might, and ten being the complete number tells us that this is a force to be reckoned with.

It tells us also that he has seven diadems. This is a being with very great authority and power. And I could, if we had time tonight, to go back into the Old Testament to the book of Daniel and chapters 7 and 8 and to bring out what these things mean in a little bit more detail.

And if you want to study this a little bit more, you have to read the book of Daniel in chapter 7 and chapter 8. But we don't have time to do that tonight. The woman, she has every appearance of majesty and beauty and glory.

and yet at the same time she's vulnerable. And she's entirely dependent on God's help.

She can't look after herself. She's entirely dependent on the help and the deliverance that God is going to give her for her security.

[ 13 : 37 ] But the main character in this vision is not the dragon nor the woman. the main focus is the child.

Because the woman exists to give birth to the child. That's why she's there. It's not primarily the woman that the dragon is interested in.

It is the child that she's about to give birth to. And the focus of the chapter is whilst the woman is surrounded by glory and beauty and majesty the focus we're waiting for the child to be born.

And whilst the dragon is huge and is extensive and is power and is authority and ruthless and determined his focus is upon the child.

well then what do we know about the woman? She's clothed with the sun the moon is under her feet and a crown of twelve stars is on her head.

[ 14 : 44 ] Let's compare her with the dragon. He's red he has seven heads seven horns on his head seven diadems his tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and cast them to the earth.

How do these two images compare with one another? What do you think? It's quite clear isn't it? That the woman spells very clearly someone who is good and someone who is lovely not just in the eyes of history but in the eyes of God.

Someone who is upon the earth to do God's will who loves God and who lives for God. Someone who is dependent on God and who God is going to support with everything that he can bring together for her.

God loves this woman and she loves she's clothed with the sun the moon is under her feet and there's a crown of twelve stars on her head. There is by the way one remember I said way back at the very beginning that really in order to study the book properly you have to know your Old Testament and right now just as an aside you go back to the Old Testament I ask this question where is it that you have the sun the moon and twelve stars all together in the Old Testament where is it that you have the sun the moon and twelve stars in the Old Testament I could leave that question with you but I'm going to answer the question it's in the dream that Joseph had you remember the dream that Joseph had when he was a young man when he dreamt the dream that was so vile to his brothers his brothers hated him because of this dream because he dreamed that he saw the sun and the moon and twelve stars and he was one of the stars and the eleven stars all bowed down to him and remember what that dream meant that it meant that one day his father and his mother and his brothers would bow down to him that's exactly what happened but there's more to that dream than that because that dream was symbolic of the family into which Joseph was born and where that family stood in God's history and that's what we're reading about that's what's all important in this chapter and it was that family which was into which God sent his son Jesus Christ Israel and that's why tonight there's no question in my mind who this woman is the woman is simply this the people of God some people try to suggest it's Eve I don't believe it's Eve

specifically some people try to suggest it's the Virgin Mary I don't believe that either because we read later on about the offspring of the woman and we'll see that in a little bit in a little bit and the woman is the people of God now the people of God in the Old Testament their purpose their work was to be the people into whom God's son would come and be born that's exactly what we have here the woman is pregnant and she's about to give birth and when she does give birth she gives birth to a son now let's look at the dragon and what he does he first of all is capable of huge amounts of destruction he sweeps down a third of the stars of heaven and casts them to the earth and I believe what that means is that the destruction that the devil himself brought

[18:11] I think we have to and we'll look into this a few next week we'll look into in a little bit more detail what the Bible has to say about the character and the being of Satan because we don't believe simply in the forces of evil we believe the Bible teaches very clearly that behind the forces of evil are not just forces but they are a person the being of Satan the devil and he's given all kinds of different titles the accuser Lucifer and here the dragon so there's no question in my mind of who these two beings are the woman and the dragon but whilst the dragon has immense power to do huge amounts of damage in the world and you and I know the kind of damage that Satan is behind in this world all we have to do is read the carnage that goes on from place to place and time to time why is it that there is such extraordinary evil in the world do you believe that it's just well that's just bad luck on the part of people who are caught up in these things don't you believe that there is something behind someone behind why is it that evil is so personal and involves persons it involves the will and the mind it involves people people who decide to kill each other people who decide to bring such cruelty to one another why is it that evil and sin is so personal because behind evil is a person the bible makes that very clear and that's who is symbolized here in this chapter but besides the power that he has to wreak havoc on the world his real interest lies in this verse that's where his real focus is and his determination is to stand in front of this woman and wait for the time that she will give birth to her son why is it that of all the evil that he can do in this world why is it that this is his one particular purpose and aim because he hates not just the woman but the son he hates the woman because of the son she's about to give birth to he hates the son because this is no ordinary birth this is no general birth this is a specific birth of a specific person a person that was promised all throughout from the very beginning of the history of the world where God said to him at the very beginning this is what he said we read it in

Genesis chapter 3 after Satan had tempted Eve successfully to take the fruit that God had forbade Adam and Eve to take this is what God said to the serpent this is the same being the dragon because you have done this God said cursed are you above all livestock and above all beasts of the field on your belly you shall go and the dust you shall eat all the days of your life now here's the point I will put enmity between your seed between you and the woman and between your offspring and her offspring and he now listen to this he a male will bruise your head in other words he will destroy you a day will come where someone who is male will be born of a woman and he will destroy you he will crush your head and you will bruise his heel and I believe that from the moment you know so my cloud was talking about this this morning how much he could remember having been a child even back to when he's three years old there are some things no matter how bad our memories are there are some things where all of us were able to remember some things that happened to us or things that people said you know what I believe

I believe that no matter through the thousands of years no matter what Satan did ever after that moment in time there wasn't a day but he remembered those words he will crush your head and he knew that because they were God's words they were true words he knew that one day that God would send this male child into the world who would ultimately crush and destroy him and through whom the devil would the dragon would be destroyed but that doesn't affect Satan at all one of the characteristics we've got to think we've got to remember that Satan doesn't think rationally he doesn't listen to God despite what God said his purposes were the same and he was determined the more he remembered God's promise to him that this male would that this person would crush his head the more he was determined to stop the process and do you know I wonder if you've ever read the

Old Testament the whole of the Old Testament the history of God's people through whom God promised to send his son into the world is littered with conflict have you ever wondered why on so many occasions there is the most extraordinary war between God's people Israel and others and why on so many occasions God's people they're almost reduced to nothing for example Genesis

chapter 6 we read that it repented God that he had made the earth why was that because he saw that the inclination of the hearts of mankind were wicked at all times why was that because the sons of God saw that the daughters of men were beautiful and they intermarried and it looked as if God's people were going to be eliminated altogether except for what have you ever thought at the time of Noah the time of the flood God's people were reduced to one single family and so it goes on there are times in the Old Testament where it almost looks as if God's purpose God's promise in sending a son into the world is not going to happen and yet just at the last moment God intervenes and makes it happen so that at the very end even at the time of Jesus birth himself you remember how much conflict there was around about the time of birth as soon as Herod heard that the star had stopped over Bethlehem he sent out his men to eliminate every male child under the age of three so that Jesus came within a hair's breadth of losing his life if it wasn't that God had warned Joseph in a dream then it wouldn't have happened and it's extraordinary actually if you look through your

[ 25 : 29 ] Bible how many times this kind of thing happens and the idea is the force behind it the power behind such conflict is always the same being the dragon trying to put a stop to what God is going to do but he can't and he failed because we read that when the child was born we read that he was caught up to God and to his throne he was caught up to God and to his throne that's a very quick summary isn't it of the life of Jesus you might wonder well why why would God describe the life and the ministry and the death and the resurrection on Jesus in one sentence like that the child was caught up to God and to his throne because that's exactly what's being described in those words in those few words that are 33 years from Bethlehem to Calvary from the stable at

Bethlehem to the place where Jesus was lifted up to heaven once again these words encapsulate the entirety of the life of Jesus in a moment and I believe there's a very good reason why God is choosing to do that for the sake of John because John is feeling the time long on Patmos he's feeling the suffering of being away from his people he's so aware of the sorrow that he feels in being imprisoned and he's not able to do what he wants to do he feels isolated and he feels and he cannot understand why God has placed him in this particular place and I believe that God's answer to that is to look at Jesus to look at his life and that whilst Christ must have felt must have experienced the loneliness and the pain of suffering he was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief yet there came a time when it was all over a point in time when Christ had finished the work that God had given him to do where he laid down his life as the sacrifice for our sin where he was raised again on the third day and lifted up raised up to heaven once again forever to be on the throne of the universe and it was over in a minute was over in a minute and God is saying to John it will be over in a minute and you're suffering whatever suffering you're having to experience here and now it's all it all fits together in the master perfect plan by which

I am bringing my purpose to pass the apostle Paul put it in this way he said this we know he said that for this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal wink of glory beyond all comparison so this child who is born is none other than Jesus Christ and his life and his ministry and his death resurrection and his ascension are all just summed up in those very few words the child was caught up to God and to his throne which means first of all that it was over in a moment I've just said that it means secondly that God was constantly every moment in time in control there wasn't a single moment when God was not governing and ordering every event that took place and it means thirdly that the dragon failed he failed in every attempt that he had from the moment that Jesus was born in trying to through the instrument of Herod he failed when Jesus was led in the wilderness and for forty days he spent forty days being tempted in the wilderness and don't be under any illusion when Jesus was being tempted that really means he was thoroughly tempted by Satan by the dragon don't ever think for a moment that just because

Jesus was the son of God that somehow or other the temptation meant nothing to him and somehow it was like talking to a brick wall every suggestion that the devil made to Jesus was a suggestion that went straight through to him and we only get a glimpse of that in those three temptations that we have don't think for a moment that these weren't real temptations there were other times when the devil tried his best to put a stop to the life and the ministry of Jesus there were times when the devil used the Pharisees and the scribes and the religious leaders of the day to plot and to plan against him before he did anything and before he said anything the devil failed there were times when he even used his disciples his disciples themselves to try and tempt him away from going the way of the cross but never for a moment in time did Jesus flinch he set his face

towards Jerusalem and despite every determined attempt that the dragon made to bring his work to an end

Jesus persevered and accomplished our salvation by dying even when it came to the point where the dragon thought that he had won the victory finally and successfully when Jesus was nailed to the cross that very victory was God's it wasn't Satan's and he was taken and placed on the throne of God and of the universe meanwhile the woman fled into the desert isn't it strange that while God catches up the child the woman is left in the world while the child and while the son is taken up to heaven and to be on the throne of

[ 32 : 39 ] God the woman is left in a place of danger and vulnerability and there can only be one possible explanation why she should remain in the world and that is because God has a work for her to do and that's another encouragement to John I'm quite sure that John may have been tempted to pray that the Lord would take him away once and for all I know that God has prepared he heard Jesus in his own ear saying to them in John 14 I go to prepare a place for you so that where I am there you may be also John why don't you come now and take me to that place why leave me here in this place of isolation and loneliness and I'm sure many of the Lord's people say that in every age why leave me here I feel so useless I feel so unproductive I don't make sense of my circumstances but this vision shows John that there is a purpose for God's people in this world and that is the reason why she is left in this world

God does nothing for no reason even if she has to be hounded we're going to see next time she is hounded and hunted she comes within a hair's breadth of being destroyed altogether but she's kept safe because God keeps her safe but she has to flee she's a refugee because she has an enemy and there will never be a moment when she is in this world where she does not have that enemy imagine living the rest of your life and knowing that someone actually hates you isn't that a horrible thought I hope not many of us in here tonight have to live with that with the fact that someone actually hates you to the point where he would be do anything to see you destroy well if you're a Christian that's your life it seems to me that's one of the first things I tell someone when they're converted prepare for the conflict it's not a nice thing to say especially in a world that emphasizes respect and tolerance peace and tranquility and let's live and let live and all these kind of things in a world like this it's very very difficult to say look someone hates you and when I mean hate hate is what I mean because the bible tells us there's no point to pretend there's no easy way of saying it someone hates you if you love

Jesus someone hates you utterly that's why she flees she fled to the wilderness verse 6 where she has a place prepared by God in which she is to be nourished for 1260 days now those of you who are able to remember back to when we looked at chapter 11 will remember that the time 1260 days is 42 months or three and a half years and remember what we said we saw it in chapter 11 it's the time where God's people are expected and commanded to witness for him by sharing the gospel in this world but it's a time also when they are to experience opposition two things they are to witness for him and they are to experience opposition that's the 1260 days all right but she's in the wilderness now that will be interpreted very much depending on how we look how we think of the word wilderness we could think of it as a place of isolation a place of loneliness a place of dryness a place where there's nothing but if you read the old testament you'll discover that when God's people were led into the wilderness it was for a reason it was the place where God provided for his people and where God led them day by day it was the place where they didn't know from one day to the next where God was leading them which direction he was leading them they had to live by faith they had to live not knowing what God was going to do with them but knowing that ultimately God was going to lead them to the promised land meanwhile for 40 years they had to trust in him and they had to put their faith entirely in the Lord and that's what she's doing this woman and what you have here in this chapter is a vivid picture of the church being God's people in every age the church having been the place God's people having been the place into which Jesus has come for which Jesus has died and about which they preach and they make known the greatness of the good news of

Jesus Christ in this world but they have to be in this world there's no other place for us to be we can't be taken away there's no rescue until our time has come and until God comes for us meanwhile we are to do the work that God has given us to do we are to be faithful to him we are to become more like him we are to love him with all our heart and soul and mind and strength we are to share our faith we are to be his witnesses his living epistles we are to live for him so that when

others see us they can see the reality and the greatness of our faith the wilderness was a place of faith and a place where God provided for his people in other words if you weren't part of that those the people in the wilderness then you never experienced the provision of God the only way to enter into the promised land was to be in the wilderness with God's people and that's still the only way where God fed them and encouraged them and led them day by day and where you had to be in order to discover the ultimate promise of God there was one man

[ 39 : 28 ] Moses and he had a choice of either having riches authority and earthly power by staying in Egypt or by going into the wilderness with the people of God and he chose to leave behind everything that he lived for in this world because he discovered how great God was and how great it was to follow God by faith that's the only way to live the only way to live are you there are you with us looking to Jesus looking to him for help and for strength and for encouragement knowing that one day he will lead us home let's pray thank you to it is to to to be to point to