

Christmas from the Book of Revelation - The Lamb and the Dragon

Sign Title: The Lamb and the Dragon

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Jesus, we thank you for the book of Revelation where we see you as the conquering king. We know that while the book of Revelation is used powerfully by you in countries where Christians are persecuted, but for us in the West, it is a book that is bizarre and puzzling. It is a book that has become a source of division among your people rather than a source of encouragement. We ask this morning for the ability to understand your Holy Spirit inspired. We believe every word of this book is inerrant and infallible and when we see things that don't make sense, we ask you to open our eyes so we can understand what you have written. I especially pray for those among us this morning who have not bowed the knee to Jesus, the lion who conquered by being the lamb who was slain. I ask that you would melt their resistance and open their eyes to the identity of Christ as we study what is one of the most complex and demanding chapters of the entire Bible this morning. Amen.

This morning we finish our three week series called, *Christmas from the Book of Revelation*. If you are a guest, I want to welcome you. As I mentioned in my prayer, we are about to dive into one of the most challenging chapters in one of the most challenging books of our Bible. It is a chapter that focuses on the intense, ongoing battle between Christ and Satan. It is a chapter that pulls back the heavenly curtain to give us a glimpse of what is happening in the spiritual world around us. Practically, this chapter will help us understand why there is so much evil and suffering in this world and why evil and suffering is so much a part of the Christian life. Revelation 12 is a chapter that, summons us to courageously hold on to our faith and the victory of the lamb no matter what we are facing in our marriage, with our finances, at work, at school or with our friends. Let's begin by reading the chapter together.

Revelation 12

In the previous messages of this series I began them by giving you interpretive grids for the book of Revelation. Like the Benjamin Franklin glasses from the movie, *National Treasure*, these are important things we need to keep in mind if we are going to learn what God wants us to learn from the book of Revelation. Because many of you are new and because these interpretive grids are so important, let's begin by briefly reviewing some of them.

Background on Revelation

- 1. Revelation was written to first-century believers under attack.** This is important to remember. It was written to Asian believers living under Roman brutality. The men were wondering if their wives would be taken from them while they were at work. They wondered if their children would mysteriously disappear one day at school. Life was not a party. This book was intended to help these Christians pursue holiness in a culture that was actively fighting against them. For us in the west, we think this book is primarily about end-times. While Revelation talks about end-times, it is primarily a book that unveils the identity of Christ and calls us to worship him. It is a book that gives struggling Christians, who have everything fighting against them, a picture of the spiritual reality around them so they know all hope is not lost. It is a book that keeps them pledging allegiance to the lamb of God even when life is hard. It is a book that reminds us there is a whole lot more going on than we see with our naked eye.
- 2. Revelation only makes sense in light of the Old Testament.** Revelation is not a book you can pick up and expect to make sense of if you don't know your

Old Testament. The book is packed with Old Testament allusions and themes. It outnumbers other New Testament books this way on an order of ten to one. We will see how important this is in our study this morning.

3. **Revelation is a letter and an apocalypse.** The first three chapters start out as a letter to seven churches, then from the fourth chapter to the end, it is an apocalypse. If you aren't familiar with apocalyptic writing, it will really throw you off. There are dream sequences and visions and monsters with multiple heads and lots of eyes so they look really scary. You will wonder what John sprinkled on his breakfast cereal when you read about these weird looking, science fiction creatures. That is the style of apocalyptic writing. Last week, we looked at the importance of numbers in apocalyptic literature and why creatures have weird birth defects in this book. For example, the lamb who was slain had seven horns and seven eyes. Seven is the number of completeness in Revelation, horns deal with power and eyes deal with knowledge. The lion who is the lamb that was slain was a lamb with complete power and knowledge.

Does anybody remember the theme of apocalyptic literature? A hero is coming! A hero is coming who will smash Satan, to restore and vastly improve God's creation.

Those are some of the interpretive grids we need to study this text. Revelation 12 is a very demanding chapter. We are not going to dodge it. I'm not infallible when it comes to understanding this, and neither are you. Keeping humility in front of us, let's dive in.

The Woman and the Dragon - 12:1-6

We have two visions. There is a vision of a woman and a dragon. Let's walk our way through this.

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. Revelation 12:1–2 (ESV)

This picture of a woman is based on Joseph's dream in Genesis 37. It doesn't quote Genesis 37, but that is where the imagery comes from. The sun, moon and stars are a reference to Israel. It is not unusual to understand the sun moon and stars as Israel. Isaiah does this and so do other rabbinic writings. Who is the woman? Roman Catholic theologians say she is Mary. The text clues us in that she is Israel, rather than Mary. Later in this chapter, she is shown to be more than just national Israel. 12:17 says she represents all who keep the commandments of God. So anytime you see the woman mentioned in this chapter think, *People of God*.

Secondly, she cries out in pain because she is going to give birth. What sex is the child she will give birth to? Male. So through national Israel a male child will be born. In v.5 it says this child will rule the nations with a rod of iron. Who do you think this child is? It refers to Jesus. This is a quote from Psalm 2:9 not from the original Hebrew but from the Greek Septuagint translation where it says *the Lord's anointed will rule the nations with a rod of iron*. Let's look at the second sign in this section.

And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads 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 all the nations with a rod of iron, but her child was caught up to God and to his throne, and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, in which she is to be nourished for 1,260 days. Revelation 12:3–6 (ESV)

The dragon is Satan. As we learned last week, numbers are significant in Revelation. He has seven heads, ten horns and seven crowns. Some really weird looking birth defects. They tie back to the book of Daniel. Most scholars believe the seven heads represents a claim of complete wisdom, the ten horns represent the vastness of his power, since ten and multiples of ten in apocalyptic literature represent vastness. The seven crowns show the idea of completeness in reigning. So since the fall, Satan is the one who claims to rule this world.

Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out. John 12:31 (ESV)

It looks like Satan has all the wisdom, vast power and is reigning over everything. He even demonstrates his power. His tail sweeps a third of the stars of heaven to earth. Some think this is a reference to Satan taking a third of the angels with him in his ancient rebellion. I used to think that but after studying it this week, I don't think that is what is happening. It think it is a simple demonstration of Satan's power. Satan is flexing his muscle.

Satan, mister all powerful and all controlling, is facing opposition to his rule on earth that will come through the birth of a baby from ethnic Israel. That sounds like an easy threat for Satan to conquer. He thinks he has it under control. He will just gobble him up as soon as he is born. Guess what happens. Satan's plan backfires and the male child is caught up to God and now sits on

God the Father's throne, which is the position Satan wanted from day one. Let's analyze this before we go any further.

One of the first things we notice is John forgot a whole bunch of material about Jesus' life. Jesus didn't go from his birth directly to his exaltation in heaven. What about his life on earth and crucifixion? What John is doing is something called *prophetic telescoping*. In other words, we all know the story. He doesn't need to tell the whole story again, just the beginning and end points. Jesus was born. Satan tried to kill him while on earth. Satan thought he succeeded with the cross, but it backfired. Instead of Jesus being conquered by death, he conquered the power of death. Because of Jesus' humility, obedience and work, Philippians 2 says God the father gave him the position of super-exaltation.

Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Philippians 2:9–11 (ESV)

In other words, Satan, wanted to sit on the throne of God the Father. He doesn't want to serve God but to be worshipped as God. He tried to get it by rebellion. Jesus humbled himself to carry out the father's plan. He became a man, lived a sinless life, died in our place - for our sin. The Father was so pleased with him that he exalted Jesus to the throne of God so Jesus is worshipped with the Father. The very thing Satan wanted, he lost to Jesus, who conquered him.

What are we to think about the woman, who represents the people of God, fleeing to the wilderness where she is nourished for 1,260 days? Some scholars

believe this deals with God's spiritual protection during the great tribulation. The verdict is still up in the air for me on this one. To not bend your brain to the point of snapping, we are not diving into the answer to that question this morning.

Michael and the Dragon - 12:7-12

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 our God. And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death. Therefore, rejoice, O heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!” Revelation 12:7–12 (ESV)

Now we change stages. We move from the stage of earth to the stage of heaven. We get a chance to peer behind the curtain and see what is happening in the spiritual world. Christ's enthronement does not usher in a period of peace and tranquility, but it becomes the catalyst for an epic battle in heaven. Let's begin by looking at Michael who led the angelic armies. The Bible doesn't tell us much about Michael the angel. We know that he is an arch angel. Daniel 10:13,21 tell us he is the angelic “prince” who defeats the powers that oppose God's people. Daniel 12:1 tells us he is the heavenly protector of God's people and Jude 9 tells us he is the opponent of the devil. Michael is a powerful angel. He leads the armies of heaven in an angelic war in which Satan and his fallen angels are defeated and cast out of heaven. Since Satan is banished from heaven, he must restrict his operations to earth. This is not a battle that took

place when Satan fell at the beginning of time. It is a battle that took place when Jesus conquered by his death, resurrection and ascension to God's right hand. Satan has lost a massive amount of territory. He is really angry because he is hemmed in to earth.

What should we learn from this?

First, Satan's expulsion from heaven means he is no longer in a position to denounce the saints before God. In Hebrew, the word *Satan* means adversary. The Old Testament pictured Satan as a member of God's heavenly court who accused people of sin. For example, God considered Job to be righteous, but Satan insisted Job was not truly good (Job 1:6-12). Similarly, Zechariah saw a vision in which a high priest appeared in filthy clothing, and Satan stood by to denounce him, but God refused to heed Satan and took away the priest's guilt, clothing him with clean garments (Zechariah 3:1-5).

By the time we get to Revelation, things have changed. Revelation says all Christians are now a kingdom of priests whose garments were made white by the blood of the lamb (Revelation 1:5-6; 5:9-10; 7:9-14). Christ's death was the sacrifice that purifies us from our sin. Satan's expulsion from heaven means he no longer has any business accusing us before the Father in heaven. Jesus has cleansed us from all our sin

Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Romans 8:33–34 (ESV)

Second, a peek behind the heavenly curtain shows us things are not always what they appear on earth. Earlier in Revelation we read of forces that

were threatening the church, imprisoning believers and killing the faithful. It is easy to conclude that Satan is winning and Christ's death and resurrection didn't make much of a difference. But let's think about this. Satan was decisively defeated at the cross because Jesus paid for our sin. So Satan's **power** over us through sin and death was defeated at the cross. The **place** Satan wanted, is now occupied by Jesus. The worship Satan and the place Satan wanted to occupy is now held by Jesus. He lost his **presence** in heaven. Michael and his armies have now decisively defeated Satan and his demons so he is bound from heaven to earth. While it looks like Satan is winning, nothing could be further from the truth. He lost his **power** of us through Christ's death and resurrection. He lost the **place** of worship to Christ who was super-exalted to the throne by the father. He lost his **presence** in heaven when he was defeated by Michael and the angelic armies of heaven. The only thing left for him to lose is the **planet**, called earth. Satan is in "check" in the cosmic chess game. He lost three of the four things he wanted.

So we have seen Satan's defeat on earth in the first six verses, then we saw Satan's defeat behind the scenes in heaven. Now we see the portion of the war between the dragon and the lamb that is still waging today.

The dragon pursues the woman and her children - 12:13-17

And when the dragon saw that he had been thrown down to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child. But the woman 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 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. Revelation 12:13–17 (ESV)

The imagery here pulls from many Old Testament stories. For example, the woman escapes into the wilderness where she is nourished by God. Does that remind you of anything from the Old Testament? How about the Exodus and Israel's wilderness wanderings where they were in the wilderness and nourished by God with manna? Deuteronomy 8:3 says Israel was nourished in the wilderness by God with manna. Exodus 19:4 says Israel was born on Eagle's wings out of Egypt, just as the people of God here are born on eagles wings. Psalm 74:12-15 says Israel was delivered from the dragon of Egypt. Anybody seeing Old Testament background?

Similarly the woman in Revelation is delivered from the dragon, who unleashes a flood of water against her from his mouth. So what we have now is that the church is supernaturally protected and nourished by God at the time when the dragon is trying to drown her. By the way, as we will see in a moment, this is not a guarantee of physical protection. Many Christians will be persecuted and some will even die for their faith. That is something we should expect. This is not a promise of physical safety or security or comfort. This is a promise that no matter what you face, no matter what may happen to your physical body, if you know Christ, you are safe in the council and throne of God.

If we look more at the imagery from the Old Testament, there is helpful hints of what is going on. The dragon tries to overtake the woman and her children that are being protected and provided for by God through a flood of

water that comes out of his mouth. What is that all about? Does the dragon have bad breath? In Revelation, what proceeds from the mouth symbolizes words and their power. For example, in Revelation we see a sharp sword proceeding from the mouth of God which represents the power of his words to execute judgment. In Revelation 11:5, the two prophetic witnesses have fire that comes out of their mouths if anyone wants to harm them. Their words are powerful. In Revelation 16:12-14, from the mouth of the dragon, beast and the false prophet come deceiving demonic spirits that look like frogs. Here the floodwaters from the dragons mouth appear to represent false teachings that would, if believed, drown the church's faith and destroy the worship of Christ, the redeemer. If you study theology, you know the religious landscape is littered with deceptive teachings and false religions. Many mainline denominations are getting caught in the flood water from Satan's mouth because they no longer believe Christ is the center of creation and our salvation through him is the exclusive way to God. But the good news is God will supernaturally preserve a remnant and sustain his church.

What about the earth opening up and swallowing the flood waters? Think Old Testament imagery. Anybody remember the last time the earth opened up and swallowed false teachers who were trying to draw people away? Think Numbers 16:31-33 and Korah's rebellion when Korah and his followers challenged Moses' authority to lead the people because they were singing Frank Sinatra's favorite song, *I want to do things my way*. God supernaturally protected his church by the earth swallowing the false teachers.

So lets sum up and then show you more ways this connects with our life. First, Satan, who claims all wisdom, power and strength on earth had his authority challenged by the birth of a male child from the people of God, Jesus Christ. Rather than gobbling the child up and destroying him, Jesus was actually exalted to the throne of God and given the power Satan wanted in the first place. Satan lost his **power** over us through Christ's defeat of sin. Satan lost the **place** he wanted in heaven because it was given to Christ, so Christ is worshipped as God, the very thing Satan wanted.

Behind the scenes in heaven, Christ's enthronement resulted in a massive angelic war that ended with a decisive defeat for Satan. He lost access to heaven. He has no **presence** there. Satan is now confined to this earth and having lost three of the four things he wanted, Satan is really irritated. Picture him as a caged animal who is furious to be confined. Satan is taking his anger out on Christians. That is why even though Christ reigns, as Christians, life can be real hard and for Christians, many times gets harder rather than easier. Satan is losing so he is taking his anger out on us.

How does this apply to me?

1. **Flee from the dragon and worship the lamb.** Some of you this morning have not bowed your knee to Christ. You are on the dragon's team. This chapter is warning you to change sides quickly. Satan's defeat is unfolding and when you die or Christ returns, whichever comes first, there are no second chances.

2. Adjust my expectations for life. Ladies and gentlemen, most of us grew up hearing that once we get out of high school, we go to college, get married, get a great paying job and have 2.3 kids. That is pounded into our head by society. Expect the good life. We need to adjust our expectations. Expect affliction, be surprised by prosperity. Adjust your expectation. When someone is saved they are summoned to the battlefield. If you know Christ, Satan has taken out a contract on your life. He plans to destroy you at all costs. For Christians, life does not get easier. Temptations do not go away, they get worse. There are setbacks and times of suffering in the Christian life. We are in a war, not a walk in the park. Expect shots to be fired at you.

3. Have courage to stay in the battle. The next installment of the Narnia movie series came out called, *Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. If you have seen the Narnia movies, you know Edmond, Lucy and the forces of Narnia must gather their courage to fight in an epic battle against overwhelming odds in hopes that at the right time, when it looks like all hope is gone, Aslan the lion, will show up and save the day. Friends, that is a picture of our Christian lives. Take courage, stay in the battle, no matter how overwhelming the odds. Stay loyal to the Lamb of God, no matter what the challenges, no matter what the odds. Trust him to show up to save the day. He will, even if it means trusting him to snatch you from the gates of Hades and bring you home to heaven as you die. Friend, take courage, stay in the battle to the end.

Prayer

Jesus, thank you for defeating Satan decisively. Forgive us for not feeling defeated in life as we see how much power and control Satan has in this world.

Thank you for Revelation 12 which gives us a glimpse behind the scenes to see how much Satan has lost. Help us to take courage and faithfully trust and live for you Jesus, no matter what we face. Amen.



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