

## **The Woman and the Dragon**

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Revelation 12:1-17

Today, we continue our walk through the “art gallery” of Revelation. Chapter 12 begins the second half of the book, which is, basically, a repeat of the messages from the first half of the book, only using different images. Like paintings, the various images often have multiple meanings. Most of these images are symbolic of realities that we experience here on earth, but they also give us a glimpse of realities that happen in heaven. We learn something of the spiritual realities happening behind the scenes in our world, and we receive a bit of insight into why people suffer.

We start with great portents of a woman, and of a red dragon appearing in heaven. Portents are images, or signs that are connected with power and with wonder. John, the writer of Revelation, often borrowed images from the surrounding nations and used them to describe his vision from God. Egypt, Babylon, Persia, and Greece all had their own stories of a beast trying to kill a special child at birth. For example, in Greek mythology, when Leto is about to give birth to Apollo, (son of Zeus), she is pursued by a red serpent. From his place on the island of Patmos, John would have been able to see the island of Delos, the place where Leto would have given birth to Apollo – according to the story. So, John had likely thought about this when he tried to describe the reality of Christ’s birth.

Followers of Jesus may recognize that today’s story of the woman, child, and dragon here has parallels with the birth of Jesus Christ. Satan is the dragon who waits for the woman to give birth to Jesus. Satan wants to devour the child, but God protects Jesus. Here, Satan is also known as the Devil, the ancient serpent, or the deceiver. Already in Genesis 3:15 with the story of Adam and Eve, God says there will be enmity between the serpent and the woman, after Satan takes the form of a serpent and deceives Adam and Eve.

In the story of Jesus’ birth, the evil king Herod is like the dragon. He is worried that Jesus will be someone who challenges his throne, and so, in an effort to have Jesus killed, he orders all the baby boys of the land to be killed. But, God warns Mary and Joseph in a dream, and they are able to escape with Jesus to Egypt until it is safe to return to Israel.

At first I thought that the woman in today’s chapter represents Jesus’ mother, Mary, but as I studied the background and explanations of this text I realised that in this story, the woman likely has a wider meaning. She is given superpowers. She is given eagle wings to fly and escape the dragon. She is described as being clothed with the sun, which could mean being clothed with glory and majesty. The moon under her feet could be an image of her power over earthly rulers. At that time, coins would have shown emperor Augustus and his wife as a sun and moon. So, with the moon under the woman’s feet, it could have meant that she has power over even the most powerful earthly rulers. Her crown of 12 stars likely represents both the 12 tribes of Israel as well as the 12 Apostles of Jesus. For these reasons, the woman in this story most likely represents the community of Israel and faithful Christians, out of which Christ was born.

This makes a lot of sense. In Hebrew Scriptures, God’s people were sometimes described as a beautiful woman in covenant with God. When they fell into idolatry, God’s people were at times described as a faithless prostitute. In our story, the woman representing God’s people is protected in the wilderness just as God protected the Israelites in the wilderness after freeing them from slavery in Egypt. The 1,260 days or three and a half years is a number repeated in other parts of Revelation. Sometimes, it is stated as 42 months. Later, in our chapter it is described as “a time, and times, and half a time...”, still meaning three and a half years. A key point is that the persecution and need for protection will be limited. It won’t last a long, long time. And, God does not let Satan harm Christ or the community during the hardships.

In our story, Satan takes the form of a red dragon, the colour of blood. Horns were symbols of power, and having 10 horns meant the dragon had great power. The seven crowns would normally be an image of royalty, but here they more likely represent the deception of the dragon, who pretends to be

king, even though Jesus Christ is the true king. The dragon may have seven crowns as he poses as king, but Christ has many more. Later, Revelation 19:12 describes an image of Christ “with many crowns.” The dragon sweeps down 1/3 of the stars from heaven. This is an image of the fall of Satan and his angels. It seems like Satan has such awesome power, but the 1/3 is not necessarily literal. The point is that Satan’s power and influence is limited. It’s very different from Christ’s supreme power.

In our story, the woman gives birth to a son “who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron.” This sounds like Jesus will be a leader who is strong by using violence, but actually the word for rule here also means “shepherd.” Jesus shepherds his followers. It’s a caring image such as we find in Psalm 23, “The Lord is my Shepherd, and there is nothing I lack...” Leading with a “rod of iron” carries with it the meaning that his authority is absolute and universal. There’s nothing flimsy about it at all. And, how does Christ conquer evil? We just need to look at his sacrifice on the cross. “Suffering love” is where we find strength and power. The violence of this world may look powerful, but that is nothing compared to the power of God’s love.

God protects the faithful people. The message in today’s passage is that faithful followers of God, even though persecuted and killed will still be protected. Life is relatively short, compared with eternity in heaven. The book of Revelation often alternates between describing God’s protection and periods of suffering. It also alternates between heaven and earth. In today’s passage war breaking out in heaven symbolizes conflict on earth. Michael leads some of the angels in the battle against Satan, the dragon. The name Michael means “one like God” so he was likely one of the leading angels who represented God. The battle seems short, and Satan and his angel followers are banished from heaven, thrown down to the earth where they continue to wreak havoc. The victory over evil in heaven parallels Christ’s victory over evil on earth. Here on earth, even though Satan is still desperately trying to regain control, Satan has already lost. In verse 12 there is much rejoicing in heaven, but also a warning that the devil has come to earth with great wrath, “because he knows that his time is short.” I’ve heard Christ’s triumph over Satan is like cutting the head off a chicken. Although the chicken will die soon, actually the body may still jump around for a while! Satan is indeed much more dangerous than a chicken, but even with all the evil we see in the world today, we will see it differently if we realise that Jesus Christ already has the final victory. Suffering and death may continue, but they are not the end. We see this fact in the resurrection of Jesus.

Satan was known as the “accuser who accuses people before God, day and night.” Satan is the one who keeps telling us we’re not good enough to be a part of heaven, or that we have to work harder to be good enough. But, because Jesus died on the cross for our sins, we are now forgiven. Our salvation no longer depends on how good we are. It only depends on God’s goodness and grace. Jesus makes us pure. Our sin, is that we keep listening to Satan’s voice, thinking that we need to work harder so that God will accept us. No matter what we do, we are still sinners. It’s only through Christ that we are accepted into God’s Kingdom. We are accepted as forgiven sinners. Evil has lost the battle. In 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 15:57 the Apostle Paul says, “But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

The message of today’s chapter is that Satan is already defeated. So, followers of Jesus, be faithful to the end! Faithful people may suffer because they follow Christ who also suffered. But, in their suffering they receive strength, knowing that they have the final victory through Christ. Notice that in the words of praise and rejoicing of the faithful it says nothing of their victory coming through violent force. Nothing is said about the believers fighting the evil. The faithful end up conquering evil through two things – the blood of the Lamb, and through the word of testimony of the believers. Jesus, the Lamb of God, won the victory by being faithful even to death on a cross. The followers of Jesus give testimony through their love and obedience to God. We grow in following Christ by learning to let go of our self-centred ways. At the extreme, we may even be called to literally die for our faith. In verse 11, we read that the faithful “did not cling to life even in the face of death.” Starting in Galatians

chapter 2, verse 19, the Apostle Paul says, "...I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." It is my prayer that we can all grow in our faith in this way. Let's pray.

Lord God, the images of the book of Revelation are often hard to understand, but thank-you for the messages we can receive from our study of this amazing book. Today we read of a red dragon, and a pregnant woman. It's easy to wonder what it's all about. As we learn about what the images would have meant to the people at the time when Revelation was written, we see how John was describing how you won the victory over evil, limited the power of Satan, and how you continue to protect the faithful, even in suffering. Thank-you that no matter how terrible things in this world may look, you have already won the victory and now limit the power of evil. Grant us the courage to let go of self-centredness, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave his life for us. In Christ's name we pray, Amen.