

Sermon – 02/09/2007 pm

The Woman, the Child and the Dragon

Study Text: Revelation 12:1-6

‘What is happening to me? Wherever I turn I find trouble. I feel like I will go under any minute! Why is all this happening to me?’ Have you ever asked such questions? If so you will find help in the Bible. You will find help in Job. You can imagine what this man felt when he got news that all his possessions were stolen or destroyed, and then that his whole family had perished when their house collapsed. ‘Why?’ asked Job. He brought his questions to God. The amazing thing in the book of Job is the ‘behind the scenes’ view the reader is given. We are shown a whole new dimension to his suffering.

The Christians to whom John wrote this book of Revelation were suffering intense persecution. The Jews were accusing them, and the Romans were harassing them. ‘Why?’ they asked. ‘What have we done to deserve this?’ Through these visions from the Lord, John takes them behind the scenes as it were. The battle they are engaged in is not confined to this earth. In fact the real battle is in heaven.

Job’s suffering came because of the accusations of Satan, and because God allowed Job to be tested. God was allowing the churches in Asia to suffer, and he allows the church today to suffer at the hands of Satan, for his own glory. But the good news is that this suffering is limited in extent and in time. Satan is on a leash as it were, and he will be reined in and destroyed in the end.

‘The main point of chapter 12 is the protection of God’s people against Satan because of Christ’s decisive victory through his death and resurrection. The purpose is to encourage the readers to persevere in their witness despite persecution’. Jesus said he came that he might destroy the works of the Devil (I John 3; 8), and the power of the Devil (Hebrews 2; 14).

A Woman

The seventh trumpet sounded and the nations were judged. The wrath of God against the wicked was fully and finally revealed. In chapter 12 we come to another sign appearing in heaven. We come to a major division in this book – some say to the second half of the book of Revelation. But it is not to be viewed chronologically. What we have in chapters 12-14 is a deeper view into the kingdom conflict or cosmic battle going on in the universe. This battle persists even though the enemy of God and of God’s people is already defeated.

This chapter takes us right back to the beginning when *that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world* (12:9) deceived Eve and plunged the whole world into spiritual darkness and death. But even there in Eden the Lord declared to the serpent ‘*I will put enmity between you and the woman, between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise you head, and you shall bruise his heel*’ (Genesis 3:15).

In this vision John saw a woman and her child being confronted by a dragon. The fiery red dragon was on the rampage, especially after he failed to devour the male child. His actions are

consistent with one having a bruised head. In his rage he went after the woman, and then after the rest of her offspring. If you belong to Christ you are among her offspring as we will see.

The woman John saw was magnificent and glorious. She was clothed with the sun and stood on the moon. She was garlanded with twelve stars. This woman was also pregnant and about to give birth. John saw her give birth to a male child which the dragon tried to destroy.

So who is this woman? From this description our first suggestion might be Mary the mother Jesus. The Roman Catholic Church strongly holds to this understanding for it supports their veneration of Mary. It is interesting however, that the woman has other offspring (12:17), a fact that does not support their doctrine of her perpetual virginity. A closer look at this woman will show that the imagery extends well beyond the person of Mary.

The twelve stars point to her being Israel because of the twelve patriarchs or tribes. This is supported by Joseph's offensive dream that the sun and the moon and eleven stars were bowing down to him (Genesis 37:11). The Old Testament prophets often spoke of Israel as a woman – mostly as an unfaithful woman, but sometimes as faithful and bearing children (Jeremiah 4:31, Isaiah 26:17-18).

In his incarnation Jesus was a Jew. He was of the seed of Abraham, and of David (Romans 1:3, 9:5). So not just Mary but all Israel in a sense gave birth to the Messiah – *of whom are the fathers and from whom, according to the flesh, Christ came* (Romans 9:5).

In the New Testament the church is referred to as the bride of Christ (Ephesians 5). The church is founded upon the apostles and prophets. The number twelve refers to the twelve apostles as well as the twelve tribes. So the woman alludes to the continuation of true Israel in the twelve apostles and the church that they represent. Her other offspring bear testimony to Jesus Christ (12:17).

This image of the woman giving birth to a child who will *rule all the nations* will later be contrasted with another woman, the great harlot/prostitute (17:1) who satisfies the desires of the kings of the earth in cohorts with the dragon or Satan.

What happens to this woman and her child? Her child is caught up to God and his throne, while the woman *fled into the wilderness* (12:6). She was chased there by the dragon. But God had prepared this place for her and cared for her. And there she stayed for 1260 days (12:6). This time interval we understand to be that between Christ's first and second coming, or the church age.

What is the wilderness? After delivering his people from oppression in Egypt, God cared for them in the wilderness for 42 months. He protected them and fed them just as he did the woman in this vision, until he brought them into their rest. God will protect his church; he will keep us as his people until he brings us safely into our eternal rest.

A Child

The woman *gave birth to a male child who was to rule the nations with an iron rod/scepter. And the child was caught up to God and his throne* (12:5). This is unmistakably the Christ-child or Messiah. 'The scepter shall not depart from Judah' said Jacob in his blessing (Genesis 49:10). In Psalm 2 the Son of God shall rule the nations with an iron rod. So here again the child is spoken of as a cosmic ruler/shepherd – a ruler who will march forth to take nations promised to him (19:15). The seed of the woman shall bruise the head of the serpent remember!

The child was caught up to God. There is no mention of the life and ministry of Jesus – he was simply born and then snatched up to heaven. Although Jesus as a child was snatched away to Egypt to protect him from Herod's horrific infanticide, the snatching away here refers to his resurrection and ascension.

Jesus' coming into this world and his return to the Father were significant events in themselves. The Son of God came down to a fallen world, to a world under the rule of Satan. He suffered Satanic attacks all his days but remained obedient to God. He came to overthrow Satan (John 12:31, I John 3:8), and by his death and resurrection he did just that. He *destroyed him who has the power of death, that is the devil* (Hebrews 2:14).

In all of this let us remember this deeper dimension to our lives, and remember that our fight is not against flesh and blood but against principalities and powers and the ruler of this present age, namely Satan. We are engaged in a spiritual battle. So we need spiritual weapons – the weapons of human warfare will not suffice. We must pray and take up the word of God. How well are you armed for this battle? Are you still relying on your fists, on guns or bombs to win the battle? If so Satan is laughing his head off, for you are exactly where he wants you.

Dragon

Know your enemy is the first rule of warfare, whether it is Hitler, Osama bin Laden, or Satan himself. Many people are fighting battles without even knowing who their enemy is. They look for someone to blame for their troubles and end up attacking some person, even their spouse and their children. The great troubler of our souls is Satan. He is the one who tempts us, who accuses us, and desires our downfall. The sooner we recognize our enemy the sooner we will get victory and peace in our life.

The fiery red dragon we are told is the Devil or Satan (12:9). Satan means adversary and accuser. The Devil is a deceiver. This is what we see from him right through the Bible, from Eden to Gethsemane and beyond. Why the symbol of the dragon you might ask? Some like to tell us it comes from ancient Near East mythologies, but we find ample reference in the Hebrew literature. The wicked kingdom of Egypt is often portrayed as a dragon or large sea creature (Psalm 74:14, Ezekiel 29:3). Isaiah speaks of the day when the Lord will slay this sea dragon (Isaiah 27:1). So as Egypt was a dragon that persecuted and pursued the people of God until it was destroyed in the sea, Satan will also be cast into the lake of fire.

The seven heads with seven crowns symbolise the supposedly complete rule of Satan. The ten horns represent great power (*cf.* the ten-horned beast of Daniel 7). Satan thinks he has all power and authority, but in truth only has what God allows. Christ is the true ruler, the one with the iron scepter. The dragon is red, stained with the blood of the saints.

In this chapter the dragon, that ancient serpent makes his appearance. He is the same one who deceived Eve, who accused Job and continues to accuse the saints of God. But the child born of a woman and then caught up to God proves to be his nemesis. Jesus came to defeat Satan and destroy his power. Satan was the one behind the attacks upon the churches in Asia. Knowing their true enemy, and knowing that he was already defeated, was a great comfort and strength to these poor persecuted Christians.

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