

# THE WOMAN AND THE DRAGON

## A sermon based on Revelation 12

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Haven't you found that there are times in Christian life and ministry when things happen that you really can't understand?

- A ministry colleague falls into serious moral failure and you just shake your head, thinking, "Surely not him. How could that be?"
- A church after a long period of stability and growth enters into a phase where it seems the wheels are starting to fall off. Divisions, tensions, distractions, frustrations for no apparent reason. You're left wondering why on earth it is happening.
- A family is bombarded by crisis after crisis. They lose a child. He loses his job. There's ill-health. There are financial problems. You wonder what it will be next.
- A new convert who looked so promising and in whom you invested so much is slipping away and you can't fathom it.
- The message you prepared with such a sense of anointing is one of the biggest flops of your ministry. Everything conspired against you. Every baby in the church cried, the sound system failed, one man had an enormous coughing fit just as you reached the pinnacle of your message! You went home utterly deflated.

This messiness of life and ministry doesn't sit well with the contemporary church's obsession with statistics, strategy, methodology and marketing. Church experts tell us that so long as we plan well, resource our people adequately and provide motivational leadership, all will go well and our church will soar. But it never quite seems to be so easy. Why not?

I think a significant part of the reason is unfolded in Revelation 12. This chapter is a turning point in the book of Revelation. It's the point at which we are most clearly taken behind the scenes. Perhaps you've watched shows on television that give behind-the-scenes footage of the making of a movie. We see how the staging and special effects were done, we learn

about the computer graphics and the costume design. We see all the things we don't usually even think about when we're watching a movie. This chapter takes us behind the scenes of the church's warfare. It shows us what is behind the church's struggles and persecutions. It shows what lay behind the difficulties spoken of in the letters to the seven churches (chaps 2-3).

The behind-the-scenes footage unfolds in three scenes.

The first is **a scene of hatred**. We are introduced in this scene to three main characters. First, John saw a woman - a magnificent woman. She's grand, majestic, clothed with the sun, her feet resting on the moon. She's huge - a cosmic figure. She's royal - on her head she wears a crown. And she's pregnant. In fact not just pregnant, but actually in labour, crying out in pain as she is about to give birth.

What does this picture mean? Well, we understand more as we see who it is to whom she gives birth. She gives birth to a male child, the second of the characters in the scene. The male child is described in verse 5 as one who "will rule all the nations with an iron sceptre". That's a clear allusion to Psalm 2 and leaves us without any difficulty knowing that this child represents our Lord Jesus Christ. We're told that he is born and then snatched up to heaven. We are given just a glimpse of him entering the world and then departing from it in his ascension.

So back to the woman. Who is she? The symbolism is too grand for her to only be Mary, the mother of Jesus. She represents the entire Church, the people of God, the community from which the Messiah came. She represents God's people of both the Old and New Testaments. The twelve stars on her crown are no doubt representative of the twelve tribes of Israel and perhaps the twelve apostles of the church. She's a grand cosmic figure who represents the entire community of God's people from which the Messiah came.

It's significant that the Church is depicted here in such a splendid way. In the sight of God that's what the Church is: glorious, splendid, magnificent, cosmic, clothed with the sun, feet resting on the moon, crowned! What a message that must have been to the struggling, nervous, threatened believers huddling in houses and withstanding the pressure and the temptations of an evil empire! They belonged to something that in God's

sight was ancient, enduring and of massive significance, and from which the Messiah of the world had come.

Those are two of our three characters. But there's a third character: an enormous red dragon. You need to think of a monstrous dinosaur. It's red, indicative of its love of war and bloodshed. It's huge and ugly, with seven heads and ten horns - signs of great power and authority. With one swish of its tail a third of the stars are swiped from the sky. Apart from anything else that imagery might mean, it is at least saying this is one mighty dragon.

This is again a cosmic figure and there is no difficulty identifying who it represents. In verse 9 we are told that this great dragon is the ancient serpent, the devil, Satan.

Now when we put these three characters together in the picture that John sees it is a hideous scene. The glorious woman is about to give birth and the dragon is sitting there in front of her, waiting to grab her child and eat it. How foul is that?

It's a disgusting picture and yet it's exactly the picture needed to convey the hatred of Satan toward Christ. No sooner than Jesus was born, Herod mounted his hellish campaign to kill the baby boys in Bethlehem in order to wipe out the new born King. And the dragon went on to hurl his venom at Christ throughout his earthly life. He led him into the wilderness to be tempted. He stirred people to place many an attempt on his life. No doubt he rejoiced when, by the hands of wicked men, Jesus hung dead on a Roman cross.

Satan's hatred predated Christ's coming as well. Repeatedly the line of promise was under threat. The ancient serpent was there in the Garden of Eden. The hatred of the dragon was there when Cain killed Abel. His hand was there when there were attempts to wipe out the people of Israel. His hand was there in the many attacks on the life of King David. You can look at any stage in the history of God's people and see that the Messianic line has constantly been the focus of Satan's desire to kill and destroy.

Friends, it is essential for us to be reminded that this is the real behind-the-scenes footage. The real battle in this world is not between good and evil, as two impersonal forces. Nor is the real battle between Islam and a Christianised West, or between the devil and you or me. Nor is the real

battle even between the Church and the world. The real battle is between Satan and Christ.

The world is the stage where that battle is played out. Our battle is not against flesh and blood. It is a battle in the heavenly realms. Satan utterly detests the honour and glory, the majesty and holiness of Jesus. He is mad at his dominion. He's enraged at his power and sovereignty. He hates the work of salvation. He hates the community from which Christ came, and the community that Christ is redeeming, and the community that gathers and declares that Jesus is Lord. He hates the community that Christ will return to glorify. That's what's really going on.

But we're told that, by God's grace, the church is protected. In verse 6 the woman flees to the desert to a place prepared for her by God where she might take refuge. There she is cared for, for 1260 days.

Why the desert? And why 1260 days?

First, the desert here is seen as a place of refuge, not a place of suffering. The symbolism is rooted in the Exodus where God brought his people out from Egypt. In the Old Testament Egypt itself is sometimes represented as a dragon or monster, and God brought his people out of slavery and bondage into the wilderness where he provided for them. There he fed them and gave them water from the rock. He protected them and ensured their sandals didn't wear out. The desert was a place of tender care and fellowship with God. That's the imagery here. Amidst this attack and in the face of the monster, God tenderly cares for His church.

But what about the 1260 days? 1260 days is 42 months, which is three and a half years, which is a time (that's one year), times (that's two more of them) and half a time. These are really four ways of saying the same thing. And three and a half years is half of seven years – half of a perfect and complete time. So it's symbolic of a short, set time. A time cut short.

But it's also symbolic of a time of intense persecution. You see there's an Old Testament background to this period of time as well. Daniel had prophesied of exactly this time frame. His prophecy was fulfilled in the inter-testamental period between 168 and 165 BC during the Maccabean revolt. For three and a half years there was an intense conflict, with great persecution and suffering and loss of life. Judas Maccabeus and his men

counteracted the aggression of Antiochus Epiphanes. God gave them victory. But it was 1260 days of intense persecution and trial.

Daniel's prophecy was not exhausted at that time, however. There was to be another short, intense period of persecution in which God would protect his people. That time was when John lived. And it is the time in which we live. These last days are viewed in Revelation as a period of short, intense opposition from the evil one, in which God protects his church despite fierce attack.

So John's readers were reminded by this first scene of what they were up against. But they would also have been encouraged by the knowledge that the days of struggle were numbered. God was protecting his church. Christ had been snatched up to heaven. There he reigns.

So we move to scene two, which begins at verse 7. If scene one is a scene of hatred, scene two is **a scene of war**. It's war in heaven. We now see that what is happening on earth is but a reflection of what is happening in the heavenly realm.

What is striking about the war in heaven is that it is between Michael and Satan. Michael is the one Daniel speaks of as the chief of the angels, the prince among the angels, the archangel. But is it not of huge significance and great encouragement that this war is not between God and Satan, or Christ and Satan? I take that to mean that God's undersecretary can handle this one! Satan is not pitted against the Almighty, but against another created being. And he loses!

We need to banish from our minds the idea that in this world the battle is between two equal and opposite forces. It's not. The battle is between two opposite forces, but two very unequal forces.

Many of the battles in Revelation are actually a bit of a fizzer. This is no exception. We're not told much detail except that he lost. And he's hurled down. He's tossed out of heaven.

What does this picture mean? When did this happen? I don't believe this is referring to Satan's original fall from glory. It's referring to what happened when God's kingdom came in power through the ministry, the death, the resurrection and the ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ.

When Christ came into this world he came as King. When he healed the sick and raised the dead, when he purchased salvation for men on the cross, when he rose victorious over sin and death, and when he was snatched up to heaven, Satan's dominion was slashed. Satan's reign was dealt a decisive blow and Michael's victory in heaven was but a reflection of that decisive, once and for all victory of Christ.

Listen to these New Testament verses:

- The seventy-two returned with joy and said, "Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name." He replied, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you. (Luke 10:17-19)
- Jesus said, "This voice was for your benefit, not mine. Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself." (John 12:30-32)
- "But if I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you." (Matthew 12:28)
- Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." (Matthew 28:18)

We ought never to underrate the massive change that took place spiritually when Christ's kingdom came in power. Then, Satan was hurled down. Then, Satan lost his place as the accuser of the brethren.

The name Satan means accuser. And Devil means slanderer. We're given in Scripture the picture that that is what the evil one loves to do. He loves to accuse, he loves to slander. Think back to the well known picture of that in the Old Testament in the book of Job. There too we are given behind-the-scenes footage, and the evil one speaks to the Lord and says, "Well of course he loves you! Look what you've given him. He's got a good deal from you. He just loves you for the goodies. It's cupboard love."

Maybe we know the devil's accusations much closer to home, in our own conscience. "You call yourself a pastor and a preacher? You call people to holiness and prayer? What about your own prayer life? What about your

own purity of mind? How can you be so two-faced in ministry? You dare to lead other people. What about those private sins? What if they knew them?”

Friends, it seems that there was a sense in which Satan could once lay such accusations against God’s people in the court of heaven. But when Jesus died, he died to pay for our sin in totality. He blotted it out completely. All our sin is wiped from before the face of God. We are pardoned and there is no longer any basis for accusation before God. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Who can bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? Satan, the accuser, has been cast down. He can never mess up your place in heaven. No one can snatch us from God’s hands.

And so we hear the choirs of heaven in the loud voice of verse 10: “Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of God and the authority of his Christ.” There’s joy in heaven over the finished, secure and final work of Christ on behalf of His people.

But.... there is a third scene. If there’s joy in heaven, there is now a new threat on earth. The third scene is **a scene of fury**.

The devil is cast down. He can no longer attack Christ who was snatched up to heaven. He can no longer accuse God’s people before the throne of God. But does he just roll over and die? Do we now see this great dragon with his feet in the air, defeated and dejected? Far from it! The picture we have is that he is as mad as a dog. He is wild. He is furious. And his fury is now turned against the Church on earth with fresh vigour.

In verse 13 we’re told that the dragon now pursued the woman who’d given birth to the male child. When the woman is protected by God, we are told in verse 17 that “the dragon was enraged at the woman and went off to make war against the rest of her offspring.”

The rest of her offspring. Who’s that? Well it’s you, and me, and our Churches, and every gospel ministry that we’re engaged in. If he can’t accuse us in the courts of heaven he will accuse us in our own consciences. And he’ll endeavour to have us accused in the courts of men, as John’s readers were.

In his fury he'll do whatever he can in our lives to undermine the work of the gospel. He'll do that in all sorts of ways.

You may find situations like the ones I described at the beginning. We look at pastoral and family and Church crises and wonder what on earth is going on. Here, surely is a key part of the answer. There is an adversary! There is one who hates the work of the gospel. There is one who is furious at all that honours and exalts Christ.

You may find too, as I have, that it is the very thing that I'm speaking out against that I struggle with the most. I preach about family life, and I go and mess up at home. I preach about holiness, and I find that I struggle more with impurity than ever before. I preach about prayer and I feel spiritually dry.

You may also find that this world is a larger temptation to you than it should ever really be. Though you know eternal treasure, you're prepared to trade it for fleeting excitement.

Satan is busy. The next chapters of Revelation go on to show us the agents that he uses: the beasts and the great prostitute. These are what he uses to attack, to undermine, to demoralize, to distract, to lead us away from faithfulness to Christ.

So we might well ask, "Can we survive? Will we make it?" John's readers may well have asked that in the face of increasing persecution. Would they survive the godless Roman empire?

There's a wonderful answer to that concern in this passage, and I want to go there as I close. In the middle of this chapter there's a song, and in the middle of the song there's verse 11. It seems to me that this verse unfolds three wonderful ways in which God's people overcome the fury of the evil one.

First, you will overcome only by the blood of the Lamb. That is to say, you overcome only through utter dependence on and allegiance to the finished work of Jesus. You have no other hope.

When you hear accusing voices in your own conscience, how do you answer them? By justifying yourself? By mounting some kind of self-

defence? Or by claiming the cleansing that comes only from the blood of Christ.

Our only defence against the accusations of the evil one is that Christ died for us. He paid for our sin. He has set us free from condemnation. We do not claim our sufficiency, but his.

Then next it says they overcame by the word of their testimony. That is true for us as well, I think. Testimony here is not our personal testimony about when we were saved. It is, rather, our testimony to the gospel. It is the testimony we give as to who Christ is, just as the apostles did before us. They overcame by the word of their testimony – that is, by their faithfulness in preaching and proclaiming Christ.

It is in the work of the gospel that Satan is driven back. It's often said that the best form of defence is attack. I think that is true in the spiritual realm as well. The best form of defence against Satan's approaches is to be active and vigorous in the work of God. Get on with God's work. Get on with mission and evangelism and preaching and Bible teaching and discipling others. That's the work to which we are called. Satan's great business is to distract us from that - be it with the colour of the church carpet, or the layout of the bulletin, or some other little argument over nothing. Anything to distract us from the work of the gospel.

But for the last 2000 years, despite his fury, the saints have overcome. The church of the Lord Jesus Christ is growing. Think of the church in China, where there might be 100 million worshipping Christ. Think of the church in South Korea and South America. The gospel has gone to the ends of earth. Despite Satan's fury, despite many martyrs, despite terrible opposition, the gospel advances. That's how it will be until Christ comes again.

Friends, we don't win by hunkering down and holding tight. We win by going about the work of the gospel boldly and courageously.

That leads us then to the third and final way in which believers overcome. You'll overcome by never shrinking back. "They did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death." That's a pretty challenging verse.

We've learnt from fanatical Muslims that it really ups the ante when someone is prepared to die for their cause. What do you do then? You can't

threaten them. They would count it an honour to die. That was exactly the attitude of the apostles. It was an honour to be persecuted, an honour to suffer.

The one we follow is the one who gave his life for us. He did not shrink back from death. We are called to serve the Lord with the same commitment and courage. We know that our souls are eternally saved, do we not? We know that heaven is our true home and that it's going to be better than this earth, do we not? And we know that Christ has already had the victory, do we not? So don't hold back!

We need to renew our commitment to work for Christ no matter what it costs us. Don't look for a comfortable ministry, a successful ministry, one that will give you acclaim. Don't look for ease and pleasure and an income as good as anyone else's. Realize that you've been enlisted in a cause far greater than the things that this world can offer.

Shrink back from nothing. Lay down your life in service of Christ. Paul says, "Give yourself fully to the work of the Lord."

As you do these things - as you stand by the blood of the Lamb alone, and as you give yourself to the testimony of the gospel, and as you shrink back from nothing - you will join with those who have overcome and you will find that the devil is already a defeated foe. In these ways you will increasingly enjoy the reign of him who rules the nations with an iron sceptre, and you'll join with the loud voice in heaven: "Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ." Amen.