

## “Dethroning the Dragon”

Introduction: Boys and girls, if you wanted to draw a Christmas card to send to your friends and relatives, how about one that has a picture of an enormous, red, seven-headed dragon with ten horns and seven crowns, licking his chops as he awaits to feast upon a child who is about to be born to a screaming woman in labor who is dressed with the sun, and has the moon under her feet and twelve stars on her head? Pastor Tim, have you lost your mind, you might be asking! Well, I don't think so because what I've just described to you is the Christmas card we find in Revelation 12. Now, why do I say it's a Christmas card, and what is it doing in the overall vision that makes up this sometimes strange and bizarre book?

Well, as the overall vision that Jesus gave to John to give to the church continues to cycle back in ever deepening and intensifying ways, this next section of the vision reveals the cosmic nature of the conflict that began to occur at Christmas, with the birth of Jesus, as the kingdom of God began to break, and continues to break, into the kingdom of this world. Revelation 12 reveals in symbolic form what Paul, for instance, taught the church propositionally:

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his might power. Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the power of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. [Eph. 6:10-12]

Revelation 12 gives us a picture of those heavenly realms and how what is going on there relates to what is taking place in our dimension of earth. Above all, what the vision reveals is that behind much of the suffering in this world are the spiritual forces of evil. But not only that. Lest we be tempted to give up or compromise our faith in the face of such suffering, this vision also reveals that the demise of these forces has been set in motion by what Jesus did on the cross, through which the dragon has been dethroned. So let's consider this cosmic conflict that began at Christmas, and then at how we're encouraged to stand fast in the midst of it.

### I. The Cosmic Conflict

A. The setting of this picture runs from the birth of Jesus to his ascension at the Father's right hand, as the entire life of Jesus is summed up by v. 5: “She gave birth to a son, a male child, who ‘will rule all the nations with an iron scepter.’ And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne.” Like a good preacher, John describes this scene by drawing on stories from a variety of pagan myths, stories that would have rung bells in the minds of his formerly pagan readers. And so many ancient mythologies contain a story of an evil monster that is doomed to be destroyed by a yet unborn prince. The monster tries to escape his destiny by killing the prince when he is born but the prince is whisked away to safety until he is old enough to chase the monster down, kill him, and assume his rightful place on the throne.

B. John takes this myth and infuses it with Godly truth and Christian content. He tells us that both the woman and the dragon are signs, which means that they point beyond themselves to something else. The woman certainly points to Mary, but, with her twelve stars and the mention of her offspring, she most likely also represents the community of God's people, first in Israel, and then the church. The great dragon, with all of his heads and horns and crowns, represents the personal power behind evil. This ancient foe is identified in the vision as the ancient serpent, called the devil, or Satan (v.9). But, and here's where we know we're no longer dealing with

pagan mythology, the child is not identified as a sign; he is the real deal, the real thing, the Christ child, the Messiah. This is declared through a Messianic reference in v. 5, taken from Psalm 2, which anticipates his coming rule over the nations.

C. The story of Jesus is collapsed into one verse because the point is that what happens with his birth is that it's not Christmas carols that ring out but a great war that erupts in the dimension of heaven. It's a battle that's described as a conflict between Captain Michael and his angels, and the great dragon and his horde of rebellious angels. What is described beginning in v. 7 is the heavenly counterpart of what was taking place on earth through the ministry of Jesus. Michael, who we first meet in Daniel (chs. 10 and 12), is reflecting Jesus' earthly actions in heaven as he fights the dragon and his hordes. And what we see is that the dragon and his hordes were no match for Michael and his troop. The dragon was thrown out of heaven, literally "bounced" from the throne room because of the birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension of this Child.

D. As C.S. Lewis has put it, the birth of Jesus is a "great invasion," the invasion of God into the territory of earth, a territory that has been held hostage by the evil one. It's really a wake up call in which we are called to recognize that Christmas excites more than wonder; it excites evil. Now the evil one is a believer of sorts, that is, he knows full well what's about to happen and he wants to prevent it. However, he fails; the child is snatched "up to God and to his throne." In this verse, we can read everything from the parents of Jesus fleeing into the wilderness to escape the murderous intentions of King Herod, to the failed temptation of Jesus in the desert, to the resurrection and ascension of Jesus

## II. Holding Fast in the Midst

A. But this may raise the question, if this is all true, if the devil has been bounced, then why are things so bad? Here we push up again against the age old question, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" and its follow-up, "What are good people to do when bad things happen?" The vision helps us to think about this as it reveals the fury of the dragon. Simply put, his fury is because the dragon is ticked. Grounded, "he is filled with fury because he knows his time is short" (v. 12). That is, he knows that he's not the greater power, he knows that he's not going to return to heaven, and so he's determined to wreak as much havoc on earth as he can before he's done for good. It's like a football or hockey team that knows the game is over, even though there's still time on the clock, and so they scramble madly around trying desperately to make something happen, even taking nasty shots at their opponents. So we see that the dragon goes after the offspring of the mother, the church – those "who obey God's commandments and hold to the testimony about Jesus." It's a reminder that the evil one doesn't really care about those who don't follow Jesus; he cares about and seeks to derail those who do. Things are so bad, not because the dragon is so strong but because he is so weak. He's been bounced and he's furious,

B. What, then, is his primary tactic? This is an important question because if we can recognize his approach, and if we know how to hold fast in the face of it, then the fury of the dragon will only, in the long run, be folly. Above all, the vision reveals that the dragon is an "accuser," that is, he seeks to fill God's people with guilt, to show us where we're always falling short, to make us believe we're no good, not worthy of God's love, and that God doesn't really want anything more to do with us. There is probably nothing more harmful to our mental and emotional health than believing that God no longer loves us. Do you recognize that tactic? If you do, you also need to recognize that he is, as Jesus calls him, the "Father of lies" (John 8:44) who wishes to lead the whole world astray (v. 9)

C. So how do we hold fast and overcome? What is the armor we are to put on? Learning from those who have gone before us, v. 10 says, “They triumphed over him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony.” That is, the only counter to deceit is to know the truth, the truth of God’s word, in particular, its testimony about Jesus. And the wonderful testimony about Jesus is that on the cross he has paid the penalty for our sin, and that his blood, the blood of the Lamb, has cleansed us from that sin. Therefore, the dragon’s accusations fall short. Certainly one part of his accusation is true: we are not worthy. But what the dragon cannot stand is that God loves us anyway, to the extent that he has given up his life for us. Only God can condemn us, and since Christ died for us, rose for us, reigns in power for us, and even prays for us, we can say with authority and confidence, “dragon, get lost!” The devil no longer has any basis for his accusations against us since the penalty that we deserved, and that the devil would have come against us, was paid by Jesus. So Paul can write with confidence to the church: “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ” because no one can bring a charge against us (Ro. 8).

In the Christmas card that is Revelation 12, we see in deeper dimension of the conflict between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world played out through the birth of Jesus. Through the crucifixion and subsequent resurrection and ascension of Jesus, the dragon has been dethroned. Though he still thrashes about, his doom is sure and will be cemented when Jesus returns. As we await this coming of God’s kingdom in its fullness, God offers us, not always physical protection but always spiritual protection, symbolized here by the wilderness, which is both a place of rescue and a place of testing. If we hold fast to the truth about who Jesus is and what he has done and what he will do, not giving in to fear or compromise, we will enjoy all that God has for us, both now and in the new creation to come. So let us go to the cross, which is the ground of both our hope and our security.