

# The Great Red Dragon of Christmas

Revelation 12:1-17

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on December 23, 2018

## Introduction

- ❖ This is a cherished time of year for my family. We love the Advent season and preparing for Christmas. Carols are in the air. Lights and decorations have gone up in our house and wherever you go throughout the city. We've walked around our neighborhood and a few others and appreciate everyone's effort to get into the holiday spirit. And it's encouraging to still see families putting out nativity scenes and keeping a focus on the birth of Christ.
  - **Now think about a typical nativity scene.** It's going to feature Mary and Joseph and baby Jesus. There's probably a donkey in there because Mary is traditionally depicted as arriving in Bethlehem on a donkey. There's sheep because we include the shepherds and the angels who made the first birth announcement. And typically you'll see three wise men bearing gifts for the newborn king.
    - But that's where there is obviously artistic license being applied. Because there's no way those wise men were there to see the newborn king. They were most likely from Babylon, and it would've taken months to get to Bethlehem after seeing the Christ Star in the sky. So Jesus was probably a year old by the time they arrived, and I doubt the family was still living in a cattle shed.
  
- ❖ **But what troubles me more is not what these nativity scenes add in – but what they leave out.** They're missing an animal. They got the donkey, the sheep, some camels, and maybe even a barn cat or mice. But they always forget the great red dragon. **When was the last time you saw a great red dragon included in a nativity scene?**
  - That's the image we find in this morning's passage. In case you weren't aware, Revelation 12 is a Christmas text. It touches on events that started that very first Christmas Eve. If you've never heard about this – if you never knew a great red dragon was part of the Christmas story – I'm not surprised. I agree with Eugene Peterson's assessment in his book on Revelation. **He grieves the fact that the nativity story we've grown up with has been “sentimentalized into coziness and domesticated into worldliness.”**<sup>1</sup>
    - We fill the scene with cute little cherub angels and fluffy sheep. We ooh and ahh at a well-lit, decorated nativity scene, but never do we shudder and tremble at the sight. But as Peterson rightly reminds us, “Jesus' birth excites more than wonder; it excites evil.”
  
- ❖ **On that first Christmas, evil forces in the cosmic realm were stirred up and agitated.** A great battle commenced that day and lasted for a good thirty-three years. Until a final victory was won, on a hillside, during the Passover, a day before the Sabbath.
  - Church, if we allow the nativity to be “sentimentalized into coziness and domesticated into worldliness”, we lose sight of the true meaning and power of the Christmas story. Until the image of a great red dragon – and I would add a woman clothed with the sun – until these images become part of the backdrop in our Christmas celebrations, we're missing something.

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene Peterson, *Reversed Thunder: The Revelation of John & the Praying Imagination*, pg. 121.

- ❖ **This morning I hope chapter 12 will fill in some of those details that'll give us a greater appreciation for Christmas and the Christ child.** Now preaching from Revelation is no easy task. There's so much imagery in this book, and there are so many interpretations. So there will likely be questions still remaining and interpretive knots that we won't untangle. But I will do my best to help you see the big picture that chapter 12 is painting for us.
  - And I do mean that. I think the best way to study Revelation is to treat it like a great work of art. **The imagery in this chapter is not merely to be interpreted – it's to be appreciated for itself.** The imagery makes its own statement. If you go to the art gallery to see masterpieces, having a docent there to comment on a painting might help you "get it". But those explanations can never replace the message being communicated in and through the painting itself.
  
- ❖ In the same way, I'll try to explain some of the imagery in this text, and I hope it helps you understand better. **But you still need to appreciate the evocative imagery for itself because it's meant to stir something in you.** Too often we treat the book of Revelation like a mysterious code that needs to be unraveled. When it's more like a painting – that still needs explanation – but really needs to be appreciated for itself.
  - To help you do that, I've divided this message into three parts. If the main idea is that a cosmic war is being waged by a great red dragon – in reality but in an unseen realm – then let's unveil these events for all to see. We'll start by considering 1) the war's long history, 2) the war's climactic battle, and 3) the war's enduring epilogue.

### **The War's Long History**

- ❖ Now if we're going to examine the long history of this war, then we do need to first identify the combatants. Which war are we talking about? It's a cosmic war involving a woman, a dragon, and a male child. Let me help you identify each of these key characters. Let's start with the woman. Look at v1 again, "*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.*"
  - Now this vision begins with a great sign in heaven. **Signs in Revelation or in John's Gospel are always pointing beyond themselves to a greater reality.** That means we shouldn't try to identify her with a biblical character like Mary or Eve. John wasn't seeing a real-life woman just as he didn't see a real-life dragon in v3. He saw a sign, a symbol, a picture of a greater reality.
  
- ❖ **And because of the way this woman is depicted as being clothed with the sun, moon, and twelve stars, it suggests that we're talking about Israel, about the collective people of God.** In Genesis 37:9, in Joseph's dream, he recalls seeing the sun and moon and eleven stars, which represented his father Jacob, his mother, and his eleven brothers. So this great sign of a woman, similarly depicted, reminds us of Israel.
  - But she's not just ethnic Israel – **this woman is the spiritual Israel; the faithful community of the saints in the Old and New Testaments.** She represents Israel and the Church all at the same time. It's common in the Bible for the people of God to be portrayed as a woman (Isa. 1:8; Jer. 4:31; Gal. 4:26-27; 2 Jn. 1; 3 Jn. 9; Rev. 22:17).

- ❖ Now in v2 we're told the woman is pregnant with child and she's in labor. The baby is coming, and she's agonizing in pain. Now this imagery of a pregnant woman suffering birth pangs is used throughout Scripture to represent the suffering of God's people (Isa. 26:17; Jn. 16:21). And that fits the context of rest of Revelation where the Church is under extreme opposition. **So these birth pangs represent the persecution of God's people over the many centuries – particularly when it comes to the line of the promised Messiah.**
  
- ❖ Now this persecution finds its source in the next sign that John sees in v3. *“And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads seven diadems.”*
  - Here John is pulling from a rich source of OT imagery. **The word for dragon is used in the Greek translation of the OT when referring to the great sea monster known as Leviathan.** In ancient near east literature, the sea was often used to symbolize the unfathomable depths of chaos and disorder, so Leviathan – this terrifying dragon rising from the sea – was understood to be the embodiment of evil.
  
- ❖ Now what you also see happening in the OT is the prophets depicting certain nations and rulers in opposition to Israel as sea monsters, as Leviathan. **Psalm 74:13-14**, in describing the Exodus from Egypt, it says, *“<sup>13</sup>You divided the sea by your might; you broke the heads of the sea monsters on the waters. <sup>14</sup>You crushed the heads of Leviathan.”* In **Ezekiel 29:3**, Pharaoh is directly called *“a great dragon”*, and in **Jeremiah 51:34**, Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon is also represented as a sea monster.
  - **So this great red dragon oppressing the woman represents all the evil kingdoms and rulers of the earth that have persecuted God's people over the centuries.** Their dominion is represented in the seven heads, ten horns, and seven diadems. Heads, horns, and crowns represent power and authority and the numbers 7 and 10 symbolize completeness – here it refers to completely *evil* power and authority. Now in John's particular context, the dragon could be a veiled reference to Rome.
  
- ❖ **But v9 goes on to identify this great red dragon with an actual person – with the devil himself.** *“And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan.”* That mention of the “ancient serpent” harkens back to Genesis 3, where another woman was attacked by a dragon (or serpent). Sadly, she and her husband fell for his lies and cursed the ground and the generations to follow.
  - **But in Genesis 3:15, that ancient serpent is told by God that from now on there will be enmity (war) between you and the woman – between your offspring and her offspring.** But just as you think this is leading up to an epic battle between two armies of descendants, we keep reading v15 and find a twist, *“he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.”* **The twist is the sudden shift to singular pronouns.** *“He shall bruise your head.”* God is prophesying (promising) that a champion will one day rise from the offspring of the woman to defeat the great dragon once and for all.

- ❖ Which relates to our text and the third key character, a male child born of the woman. He's mentioned in v5, and notice how this time John doesn't call him a "*sign*". The woman is a sign. The great red dragon is a sign. Those images point to realities beyond themselves. **But this male child doesn't point to another reality. He is the reality.** You don't expect to find a literal woman clothed with the sun or a literal great red dragon. But you can expect to find a literal male child born in the midst of a great war.
  - Now what child is this? It's the Messiah, the long-awaited, promised king of Israel. We know this because of how he's described in v5 as, "*one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron.*" That's a clear reference to Psalm 2, which is known as a messianic psalm that predicts the coming and victory of a future king. One who is described as the LORD's own Son (Ps. 2:7). And the psalm speaks of how his reign will encompass the nations and stretch to the ends of the earth.
  
- ❖ **Now the great red dragon is well aware that these prophecies of a coming Messiah do not bode well for him.** The words have been ringing in his ears ever since Genesis 3. "*He shall bruise your head.*" The devil was haunted by those five words for centuries.
  - I love how **Martin Luther** put it, "*God never told the devil who 'He' would be. The devil lived in dread of every woman's son who was a believer .... because he never knew who 'He' might be.*"
  
- ❖ **That's why, throughout Scripture, the sons of Israel are constantly being targeted by the devil.** If you look at v4, it paints a frightening image of the great red dragon crouched below the woman, waiting for her child to be born, with hungry jaws wide open, ready to devour. And so we read in Exodus 1, the devil inciting **Pharaoh** to kill the baby boys of Israel. Even after they were settled in the Promised Land, he tempted Israel to adopt the idolatries of their neighbors, including sacrificing their sons to **Molech** and other false gods.
  - Later when it was looking like David was that promised child, **Saul** (who was filled with an evil spirit) tried a number of times to kill him. Then there was a wicked queen mother named **Athaliah** in 2 Kings 11 who – after her son the king died – tried to kill the royal family. But the king's son was rescued and hidden away. And then there's the **book of Esther**, and how she foiled a wicked plot designed to kill all the Jews in the vast empire of Persia. If it had worked, it would've snuffed out the offspring of the woman and the promise of a Messiah. That was the devil's plan.
    - Then we get to the NT and the great red dragon incites King Herod to issue the murder of every male child in Bethlehem two years or under (Mt. 2:16). He keeps going after the boys. **He's trying to kill the 'He' before he could grow up and crush his head.** The devil knew his time was short.

### **The War's Climactic Battle**

- ❖ Now this war's long history leads up to a climactic battle. This is the second part of this message. Our text alludes to a climactic finale that took place in space and time, but, like the rest of the chapter, it's depicted through layers of imagery.

- ❖ **In v4, it describes the dragon using his tail to sweep down a third of the stars of heaven and cast them to the earth.** Whatever this is referring to, it gets picked up again in v7 where John sees another vision. This one is of the angel Michael leading an army against the dragon and his angels. They end up defeated and thrown down.
  - Now some would say these verses are referring to the original war in heaven where Satan and his followers rebelled against God and were soundly defeated and cast down from heaven. **But others would argue that it's referring to a heavenly battle whose victory was won by an earthly event recorded in the Gospels.** That's because vv10-11 seem to suggest that this throwing down of the dragon took place as a result of Christ and his shed blood on the cross.
  
- ❖ This is the climactic battle in this centuries-long war. V9 mentions two ways in which the great red dragon has been attacking the woman, the people of God. **The first strategy is to use deception.** V9 says he is "*called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world.*" The dragon is a perpetual liar. Only falsehoods and half-truths are found on his lips.
  - Like with Adam and Eve, he attacks with pernicious lies getting people to question the goodness of God's Word and the reality of his love for them. **He approaches with a friendly face, telling you that you're not that bad and God's not that mad.** "So don't feel bad about indulging in that sin. It's only natural." But the instant he gets you to sin, he rips off his friendly mask to reveal a terrifying accuser.
  
- ❖ **That's the second strategy in the devil's attack is the use of accusations.** The name Satan itself means Accuser. And in v10, he's called that, "*for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God.*" Let's not take the devil too lightly. He's often depicted in modern times as a little guy in red tights with a pitchfork, sitting on your shoulder whispering naughty thoughts in your ear. That's how he wants you to see him, so you won't really fear him or take him seriously.
  - **But he really is more like that great red dragon, who can't wait to devour you if he can just get God to declare you guilty and condemn you to an eternal hell.** And like any good lawyer, he's built a strong case against us. He knows our sins and he knows God's law, and he's right when he accuses us of falling short.
  
- ❖ **But the good news found in this text, in vv7-11, is the repeated refrain of how this dragon has been defeated.** He's been thrown down. That's repeated five times. And in v11 there that's definitive statement of being conquered by the blood of the Lamb.
  - Now granted this climactic battle is not recalled in any detail here in chapter 12, but it's alluded to in v5. "*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.*"
  
- ❖ **Just picture that great red dragon crouched and waiting for the Messiah's birth.** He kept guessing wrong and failing to snuff out the messianic line in centuries past, but now he has a good feeling about this baby boy being born in Bethlehem. So he launches his first attack through King Herod's wicked edict – but misses again.

- ❖ Then he waits, years later, to tempt Jesus in the wilderness at the beginning of his ministry, but unlike Adam, Jesus doesn't take the bait and remains true to his Father's will (Lk. 4:1-13). So the devil incites the townsfolk of Nazareth to try to throw Jesus off a cliff but Jesus walks away unscathed (Lk. 4:29). Later, when Jesus and his disciples enter the region of the Gerasenes, Satan hopes his evil spirits, known as Legion, will attack and tear them apart, but instead Legion is cast out by a simple word from the lips of Christ (Lk. 8:26-33).
  - As Jesus goes on from town to town in the province of Galilee, all of the dragon's wicked angels go shrieking and fleeing from his presence. So the devil turns then to the religious leaders of the day, the governing authorities, and a close companion – and he twists their hearts to resist, oppose, and betray the Son of God.
  
- ❖ He finally has Jesus where he wants him. In his grips. Under Pilate's jurisdiction. In the crosshairs of the Sadducees. With the crowds stirred up chanting, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" (Lk. 23:21) And on the hill of Calvary, unbeknownst to those present, the great red dragon climbed to the peak, crept behind a man hanging from a cross, raised his mighty chest, bared his fearsome teeth, and opened wide his terrible jaws to devour that man whole.
  - **The sky darkened. The ground quaked. The demons cheered. The dragon thought he had won.** But shortly after, as he went on his merry way, the dragon's belly began to rumble. Something was stirring inside. And on the third day, just before dawn, the Son of God burst forth, from the belly of death, alive and well, and was caught up to God and to his throne above.
    - That word "*caught up*" can be translated "*snatched up*" and conveys the sense of taking something (or someone) suddenly and vehemently. **What a fitting way to describe the Resurrection and the Ascension of Christ!** That's how God thwarted the dragon's so-called "defeat" of the Messiah.
  
- ❖ To the devil's dismay, Jesus's death was not his own. He was dying a death in the place of others. Dying for their sins. Making atonement by his blood. **And by that sacrifice, he defanged the dragon. He disarmed the devil.** He took away his one weapon, the only thing that can truly hurt us. Jesus took away our sins.
  - So we read in **Colossians 2:13-15**, "*God made us alive together with [Christ], having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, triumphing over them in him.*"
  
- ❖ Friends, as I've been retelling this ancient story, I hope you see that you're a part of it. You're a character in this story. You're either still in the dragon's grasp – or you've been freed by the Christ child. **The devil either still has a compelling case against you and he's accusing you day and night before God – or his case has been dismissed for lack of evidence since all your trespasses have been forgiven.** Because your record of debt has been cancelled, having been nailed to the cross of your Savior. So what's your place in this story?

- ❖ **Friend, if you want your sins forgiven, if you want to be saved, the beauty of the Christian faith is that God doesn't ask you to earn it.** He doesn't expect you to prove yourself worthy. You don't have to bear a heavy burden, or climb a mountain, or slay a dragon to win the prize. Don't you see? **Christ has already done those very things for us.** You are asked to believe. Turn from your sin and trust in Christ's death and resurrection – and you will be saved. That's the promise of the Gospel.

### **The War's Enduring Epilogue**

- ❖ So we've considered the war's long history. We've studied its climactic battle. Now let's conclude by looking at the war's enduring epilogue. The climax of the story was the Death and Resurrection of the Messiah. That was when the dragon received his fatal wound. The decisive battle was won. Ultimate victory is assured. But the story's not over. There's an enduring epilogue that's ongoing. In fact, we're still living in it.
  - It's important to remember that John was writing this book to churches that were living in a time of great persecution. **His point in this chapter is that the ongoing suffering of God's people is *not* a sign of Satan's victory.** It's a sign that the dragon realizes he's been defeated by the Christ child, and now he's lashing out in anger. Since he can't get at the child (who's already reached his throne according to v5), the dragon turns his attention to the woman, to the Church.
    - Look at v6, *“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.”* The same idea is repeated in vv13-14, *“<sup>13</sup>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. <sup>14</sup>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.”*
- ❖ Let's consider those numbers. 1,260 days equals 42 months (counting 30 days to a month). And that equates to 3.5 years, which is represented by that phrase *“a time, and times, and half a time”*. So we're talking about the same length of time, but I would advise against taking these numbers literally.
  - **42 months or 1,260 days is mentioned earlier in Revelation 11:2-3 as a reference to the time of the Gentiles/nations.** It's a period of time in which the nations (the unbelieving world) will seem to be dominating the world, but the Church will be protected and empowered to witness for Christ even in the face of opposition. These 1,260 days symbolize the length of church history from the first to the second Advent.
    - But regardless of how you interpret these numbers, the emphasis is not on the length of time but on the protection and nourishment that the Church will receive from God himself.
- ❖ But again I must warn you *not* to take the devil lightly. **Yes, he's been mortally wounded, but he hasn't given up the fight.** His days are numbered so he has nothing to lose. His bite is still deadly, and his tail can still do damage. Christian, you have to keep up your guard.

- He's still going to wield his power of accusation, even against God's people. Now on this side of the Resurrection, he knows that God's verdict in heaven has been delivered. **He knows there's no opportunity to accuse us in the courtroom of heaven, so he's going to focus on the courtroom of the human conscience.**
  
- ❖ He knows he can't change the fact that God is now for us and that his love will never leave us. But the devil will try his best to deceive us. **Christian, recognize that the devil will attack the courtroom of your conscience and try to make you feel like there's no way God could be for you.** There's no way God could ever use you in his plans. You've sinned yourself out of his love or at least out of any chance to be of good use in his kingdom.
  - These are all lies. You need to see them for what they are. It's the devil's schemes. But like it says in v11, this dragon is conquered by the blood of the Lamb and *by the word of our testimony*. By testifying to the truth of the gospel!
  
- ❖ **The only way to counter the devil's deceit is to speak and walk in the truth of the gospel.** This is why every Lord's Day we gather to sing the gospel to each other; to confess our sins together in light of the gospel; to pray the gospel into our hearts; and to sit under Christ-centered, gospel preaching. It's because we're so prone to forget and quick to believe the lies.
  - That's why we need a constant reminder that the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser has been thrown down. **The great red dragon has been defeated. The Christ child has won.** The woman clothed with the sun will soon stand before her Bridegroom. And the Church at war shall soon be the Church at rest.