

## **“The Dragon” (Revelation 12)**

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**Brian Watson**

What do all great stories have? Think of all the fairy tales you heard growing up, all the books you’ve read, and all the movies that you’ve seen. I don’t mean the trivial stories and comedies, but the epic dramas. All great dramas have evil that must be defeated. This evil is often personified in the form of a villain, a particularly evil individual who must be conquered in order for the day to be saved.

Another common feature of great stories is that there is someone who needs to be saved. The one who needs saving is weak and vulnerable and can’t save himself or herself. That someone could be a damsel in distress, or it could be a child.

Do you want to know what the plot of the greatest story ever told is? The Bible could be summed up in six words: kill the dragon, get the girl. Of course, there’s much more to the story.

Today, as we continue our study of the book of Revelation, we will meet the personification of evil, an ancient, mysterious dragon who rages against God and his people. We will also meet a woman who needs saving who, perhaps unexpectedly, gives birth to a child who does the saving. In chapter 12 of Revelation, we see a large portion of the biblical story told from a particular perspective, one that highlights this woman, the dragon, and the child. This chapter teaches us about evil about how that evil can be conquered. It shows us that there is a spiritual war that is being waged, one that we can’t always see, but one that we are always involved in, one way or the other.

We’ll begin this morning by reading Revelation 12:1–6:

<sup>1</sup> 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. <sup>2</sup> She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pains and the agony of giving birth. <sup>3</sup> And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads seven diadems. <sup>4</sup> His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and cast them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she bore her child he might devour it. <sup>5</sup> 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, <sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>1</sup>

We should remember that the book of Revelation is quite different from every other book of the Bible. The messages of Revelation are relayed to John, the author of the book, in a series of images. These images should be read more like poems, symbolic impressions of profound realities. So, one thing we need to know is that the book is full of symbols that we must interpret. Another thing we need to know is that the key to interpreting these symbols is often the Old Testament; Revelation makes countless allusions to the Hebrew Bible. The third thing we need to keep in mind is that Revelation often depicts the same reality, or the same time frame, in different ways. The same time frame or reality is shown through different images, with each image giving us a different perspective, or different details.

In this chapter, we see that there is more to reality than meets the eye. The veil that obscures heavenly or spiritual realities is removed, and we see a fierce enemy.

But before we get to the enemy, let's talk about the woman. She is called a sign, which might indicate that this isn't a literal woman. She is clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and she is wearing a crown of twelve stars. Those who know the Bible well might remember the story of Joseph and his coat of many colors. Joseph was one of the twelve sons of Jacob, the grandson of Abraham. Jacob is also known as Israel, and his sons would go on to populate the twelve tribes of the nation of Israel. Joseph had a dream that the sun, the moon, and eleven stars bowed down to him. His father understood this as referring to himself, Jacob, Rachel, Joseph's mother, and Joseph's eleven brothers (Gen. 37:9–10). So, the basic image here is that the woman represents Israel. But we shouldn't think of her as being the nation of Israel of the Old Testament. The word "Israel" can also mean God's people, and sometimes it is used in the New Testament to refer to those who believe in Jesus, the Son of God. Based on what we see in this chapter, I think the woman represents the people of God, generally speaking.

We're told that she is pregnant and is about to give birth. She is in labor, crying out. The idea of a woman being crowned with beauty who is about to give birth ties together a number of passages in the Old Testament book of Isaiah (Isa. 54:1; 61:10–11; 62:3–5; 66:7–14). That book also tells of a special child who will be born, a child that will be called "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (Isa. 9:6). He will reign forever and bring

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

about justice and righteousness (Isa. 9:7). He will be anointed with the Holy Spirit, and he will vindicate his people and judge the wicked (Isa. 11:1–5). He will gather true Israel together (Isa. 11:10–16).

The child that is to be born is Jesus, who, according to his human lineage, is a descendant of Abraham and Jacob, of David, and eventually of Mary, his mother. But he is also the Son of God, conceived not through the usual means, but through a miraculous act of God. He is the fulfillment of all the promises of the Old Testament, the promises that Abraham would have offspring that would bless the world, that a descendant of Jacob would reign, that a son of David would reign forever, that a child, who is also God, will bring about ultimate, lasting peace.

It's not stated here, but the reason why the Son of God needed to become a man was because of our great problem: we have sinned against God. From the beginning, human beings have rebelled against God. God made us to love him, worship him, and serve him. But we don't do that. We fail to acknowledge God. We act as if we are the center of the universe. We don't live life on God's terms. We need someone who can live perfectly, fulfilling God's plans for humanity. But we also need someone to take away our guilt, to take the penalty of our sins. God can't just overlook evil. Evil must be punished. It must be conquered. And Jesus came to do away with sin.

Jesus also came to destroy the works of the devil (1 John 3:8). And that brings us to this dragon. We're told there is another sign in heaven, "a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads seven diadems." We're going to be told exactly who this dragon is, but let's first note the details here. He's red, a color associated with blood. He has seven heads, which is strange. But in Canaanite mythology, there was a seven-headed serpent named Lotan, and it seems he finds his way into the Bible. In the Old Testament, he is called Leviathan, who is also called a dragon (Isa. 27:1). This creature may also be called Rahab (Isa. 51:9; Job 26:12–13), who is also called a serpent. At one point in the Old Testament, Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, is also called a dragon (Ezek. 29:3; 32:2). That means that evil powers on earth are ultimately influenced by this evil being.

The fact that he has seven heads and ten horns is strange. We have already talked about the seven heads identifying him as this ancient serpent. The seven heads may also come from the four beasts of Daniel 7, since one of the beasts has four heads, so that there are seven heads between them. The ten horns also come from Daniel 7 (Dan. 7:7, 24). Horns represent strength.

Crowns or diadems represent royalty. The numbers seven and ten can both represent fullness. The idea is that this fierce, bloody dragon is supposed to have great power, holding sway over all the evil authorities on earth. This might also be an evil imitation of Jesus, who is represented as a lamb with seven horns in Revelation 5:6, and who later is said to wear many diadems (Rev. 19:12). As I've said before, we see that this evil being has a way of imitating God or godly things. This imitation isn't perfect; it's a cheap knockoff. But it can fool people.

We're also told that this dragon sweeps down a third of the stars of heaven with his tail, casting them down to earth.<sup>2</sup> The stars most likely are angels (Rev. 1:20). The dragon casts them down so that he might devour the child when he is born. Now, to explain this, I have to reveal who the dragon is. We're going to be told in verse 9 that this dragon is "that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan." Some people think that Satan took a third of the angels and caused them to rebel against God sometime prior to the creation of the world, or at least the creation of human beings. But since this event seems to be about the birth of Jesus, it seems that what is happening is that Satan is sweeping down those evil angels when Jesus is born, or while he is on the earth, so that they can attack him. And that's what we find in the Gospels. We don't read too much about demons in the Old Testament, but when we read the four Gospels, the biographies of Jesus that we have in the New Testament, we often read of demons and unclean spirits. When Jesus was on earth, there was a spiritual war. Satan and his minions tried their best to attack the Son of God, as if they could thwart God's plans.

We should also note that in the Bible, there are at least two occasions when evil people want to destroy children. One is when Pharaoh attempted to kill all the male Israelite babies. This was when Israel was enslaved in Egypt, and Pharaoh was threatened by the number of Israelites. To reduce this threat, he ordered people to drown the newborn male Israelites in the Nile River. The other occasion was when Jesus was born, and Herod, also an evil and jealous ruler, had the male infants of Bethlehem killed. Revelation says that behind such actions is demonic power. There is another dimension to reality, one that we can't see. Satan and his demons want to stop God's plans, as if they could. Satan is mysterious. The Bible doesn't say all that much about him and his origins. But we know he is powerful, that he is evil, that he is a liar and a murderer (John 8:44), and that he would like nothing more than to destroy God's work.

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<sup>2</sup> Another Old Testament allusion, this time to Dan. 8:10.

But Satan can't do that. In verse 5, we're told that the boy was born, the one who will rule the nations, which is a reference to Psalm 2:7–9. And before Satan could destroy this boy, he is caught up to God. This is a reference to Jesus' ascension. What this passage skips over is Jesus' life. He was not only born, but he grew up to be a man. He is the only man to live a sinless life. Yet he died on the cross, bearing the shame and pain of that death, so that he could pay for the sins of everyone who ever trusts in him. He then rose from the grave in triumph on the third day, in a body that can never be destroyed. And then he ascended into heaven.

One of the reasons that Jesus died was because Satan schemed to have him killed (John 13:2, 27). Satan didn't know, however, that it was God's plan for Jesus to die. It was the Son of God's plan to lay down his life for his people. And Satan didn't know that Jesus would be resurrected. Satan, though he is powerful, does not have the power of God. He is not omniscient, knowing all things. Satan seems to win some battles, but he cannot and will not win the war against God.

After the boy is caught up to heaven, the woman escapes to the wilderness, to a place prepared for her by God. She is fed by him there for 1,260 days, or three and a half years. The wilderness can be associated with trials and temptations, but also with God's provision for his people. After God rescued Israel, freeing them from slavery in Egypt, they wandered through the wilderness for forty years. In one of his sermons on Revelation, Jim Hamilton says, "Just as Israel went into the wilderness after the exodus from Egypt, so the people of God go into this symbolic wilderness after the new and greater exodus is accomplished by Christ on the cross. Just as Israel was provided for by God throughout their time in the wilderness, with manna from Heaven and water from the rock, so the church will be nourished for 1,260 days."<sup>3</sup> If the woman represents the people of God, that seems right. Jesus brings about a true and greater exodus, a freedom from slavery not to Pharaoh, but to sin and Satan. Last week I explained that the three and a half years symbolically represents a time of trouble and trial. It represents this whole age between Jesus' first and second comings.

The spiritual battle involving Satan and Jesus—and Jesus' followers—is depicted in verses 7–12:

<sup>7</sup> Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon. And the dragon and his angels fought back, <sup>8</sup> but he was defeated, and there was

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<sup>3</sup> James M. Hamilton Jr., *Revelation: The Spirit Speaks to the Churches* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 249–50.

no longer any place for them in heaven. <sup>9</sup> And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him. <sup>10</sup> And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, “Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. <sup>11</sup> And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death. <sup>12</sup> Therefore, rejoice, O heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!”

In this image, we’re told that the dragon fought against Michael and his angels. Michael is an archangel, mentioned in Daniel 12:1. In Daniel 12, he seems to fight for Israel. He’s doing the same thing here. This war that we’re told about was probably being waged at the same time that Jesus lived, died, and rose from the grave. What happens on earth has counterparts in heaven. When Jesus triumphed from the grave, the dragon was defeated and cast out of heaven (cf. John 12:31). We’re told quite clearly that this dragon is Satan, the serpent of Genesis 3, the one who tempted Eve to eat the fruit that God had forbidden her to eat. How did Satan tempt Eve? He got her to doubt God’s goodness, slandering God and accusing him of withholding something good from the first humans. He also lied, deceiving Eve into thinking there would be no bad consequences to her actions. So, he is a slanderer and a deceiver, and this is captured in his titles: “devil” literally means “slanderer,” and “Satan” means “adversary.”

Not only does Satan lie and oppose God, but then once people have sinned, he accuses them. Satan accused Job of obeying God only because he had received good things from God (Job 1:6–11; 2:1–6), and then Job’s friends did the work of Satan by accusing Job of sinning. In a powerful image from Zechariah 3, Satan accuses the high priest, Joshua, of sinning, point out his uncleanness (Zech. 3:1–5). Satan wants to cut people off from God, and he does this by leading them to sin, and then having them believe that there is no way they can be reconciled to God.

But God is merciful and gracious. God had a plan to rescue sinners, to forgive them of sin, make them clean in his sight, and bring them into his family. Even in that image in the book of Zechariah, we see God doing that. He removed Joshua’s filthy clothes and replaced them with clean garments. That’s a picture of what Jesus does for us. He took our filthy clothing—our sin—and he wore that sin on the cross, where God crushed our sin. (When I say “our” I am referring to Christians, those who put their trust in Christ.) Jesus also gives us his perfect, clean

clothing—his righteous life. Jesus takes our impurity and makes us pure. And that is how Satan is defeated.

That is why we're told, in verse 10, "Now the salvation and the power of our God and the authority of his Christ have come." When Jesus triumphed, Satan was cast down. When salvation had come, Satan was knocked down, made low. Though he accuses, he cannot condemn. We're also told that Christians overcome Satan "by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony." Jesus' sacrifice on our behalf wins the battle against Satan. And if we trust in Jesus and hold fast to the gospel—that's what "testimony" means here—then Satan can never destroy us. But note what the end of verse 11 says: "for they loved not their lives unto death." Those who truly trust Jesus are willing to die for their faith. Jesus once told his followers that they had to deny themselves and take up their cross if they were going to follow him and be part of his people (Matt. 16:24–26). Taking up the cross is a reference to being crucified. We must crucify our old ways of living. We must put to death our sin, our running from God, our making other things more important to us than God, which is idolatry. We must also be willing to suffer whatever persecution may come our way. Anything short of this is not true faith. Believing in Jesus doesn't mean merely liking him or believing that some statements about him are true. Believing in Jesus means giving up your life for him, because he first gave up his life for you.

In verse 12, we see that though Satan is cast down, he hasn't given up. He is angry because he knows he has lost. He knows that his time is short. But he still wages war against God's people. We read about that in verses 13–17:

<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. <sup>15</sup> The serpent poured water like a river out of his mouth after the woman, to sweep her away with a flood. <sup>16</sup> But the earth came to the help of the woman, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed the river that the dragon had poured from his mouth. <sup>17</sup> Then the dragon became furious with the woman and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus. And he stood on the sand of the sea.

The dragon pursues the woman after she gave birth to this special child. But God gives her an eagle's wings, so that she could be nourished for three and half years—this is another perspective on what we've already been told in verse 6. The reference to an eagle's wings reminds us of

what God said to Israel at Mount Sinai: “You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself” (Exod. 19:4). God also promises that those who wait on him will have their strength renewed and will be carried along on eagles’ wings (Isa. 40:31). Though Satan pursues God’s people, he protects them.

But Satan doesn’t quit just yet. He pours water like a river out of his mouth, trying to sweep her away. Perhaps the water represents Satan’s lies. He is, after all, called “the deceiver of the whole world.” He wants to tear God’s people away from God by getting them to believe lies—lies about God and lies about their own sin, that it is unforgivable. But God rescues his people. In this image, he causes the ground to open up and swallow that river. After Israel passed through the parted waters of the Red Sea, God caused those waters to drown the chasing Egyptian army. In Exodus 15, we’re told that “the earth swallowed them” (Exod. 15:12). In Numbers 16, the ground swallowed up wicked Israelites who rebelled against the leadership of Moses. God will destroy all lies and those who come to believe those lies.

But still, Satan doesn’t give up. Perhaps the woman in this paragraph represents the early church. We’re told that the furious dragon then tries to attack this woman’s offspring, “those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus.” I take it that these are other Christians, those who are “birthed” by the church. Satan is still trying to attack us. First Peter 5:8 says, “Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.” Satan cannot destroy true Christians, but he would like to harm us. He would like us to believe his lies. He would like us to think we can’t be forgiven for our sins, to stand accused without hope of redemption. But if we are in Christ, if we truly trust, love, and follow him, nothing can tear us away from him. We are forgiven, we are part of God’s family, and even Satan can’t change that.

I want us now to think about a few things that we see in this passage.

One is that evil is real. Evil is a powerful force. And evil can ultimately be traced back to a person, that ancient serpent, the devil, Satan. This passage shows that seemingly mundane and ordinary events on earth can be connected to a greater, epic story that is unfolding in heaven. The book of Revelation shows us that there is more to reality than what we can see. There are truths that lie behind the veil. God gives us a glimpse of these realities to wake us up to the truth. We are all part of a cosmic war, battle of good and evil.



The second thing we should think about is the image of a pregnant woman. It's hard to think of someone more vulnerable than a woman far along in a pregnancy, at the point of labor. Such a woman couldn't fight off a dragon. The fact is that is who we are. We cannot defeat the dragon. At our best, we can mitigate evil, reduce the worst of it, put an end to a Hitler and a Holocaust. But evil is something we cannot remove from the world, and we cannot save ourselves from the evil that lurks within us.

The third thing we should think about is the child. Perhaps the only person more vulnerable than a pregnant woman is a baby. And yet this baby is the one who rescues the woman and fends off the dragon. One day he will crush Satan and defeat him forever (Rom. 16:20; Rev. 20:10). This is just what God promised in the third chapter of the Bible, when he told the serpent that he would be at war with the woman and her offspring. Though Satan would bruise Jesus' heel, Jesus will crush Satan's head (Gen. 3:15). But Jesus' victory comes about through an unlikely way. We would expect the hero of the story to come like a knight upon a horse, wearing armor and wielding a sword to slay the dragon. Jesus will do that in the end, but he didn't do that when he first came to earth. Instead, he came as a vulnerable baby. He grew up to be a man who didn't conquer evil through worldly strength. Jesus wore no armor. He allowed himself to be slain, so that sin could be destroyed. And then Jesus rose from the grave. That is the way God works. He uses the weak and the lowly of the world, he works in surprising ways, and he triumphs just when all seems to be lost.

Christians, we will not win this world through political power or military might. We won't fix this world through money or medicine. Only Jesus can fix the world. Our role in this war is to be faithful and to cling to Jesus.

The fourth thing we should see is that this war is ultimately one between truth and lies. Much of Revelation depicts battles that seem over the top and far removed from our daily experience. But these images depict real battles that occur on earth and look very ordinary. Every time a lie is told, Satan is at work. The most important truths, and the most devastating lies, are about God—who he is, what he created us to be, what he expects of us, what he says about us, and how he has provided a solution for our problem of sin. Christians, we need to know the truth. Truths about God are known from the Bible. Yet there are many people who claim to speak the truth, who even quote the Bible, and who twist the truth so that it becomes a lie. Usually, this happens when people quote only part of the Bible and leave out important parts. Or, they

challenge what the Bible clearly states, providing new and implausible interpretations. These teachers can look very impressive. They can appear to be very sincere. But elsewhere in Scripture we're told that "Satan disguises himself as an angel of light" (2 Cor. 11:14). To counter Satan's schemes, we must know the truth.

Christians, we must also speak the truth about things not mentioned in the Bible. We can't go around repeating untrue things we have heard from so-and-so, whether that's someone on television, or a friend, or something we read online, as if these things are gospel truths. If we're not sure about what is true, then we should say, "I don't know." Christians today are getting caught up in conspiracy theories that aren't backed by evidence. When we do that, we lose credibility in the world's eyes. Why should they listen to us when we speak about Jesus when we share false reports about politics or medicine?

I'll end with a word to anyone who may not have yet denied himself or herself, taken up the cross, and followed Jesus. This passage may seem strange, just like the rest of this book. But the imagery captures something true: There is more to reality than we can see, and part of that reality is the force of evil. We cannot defeat that evil. We even have evil within ourselves, and we can't root all of it out through will power. The world is broken in a way that only God can fix. God's solution is Jesus. He came a first time to bear the sins of his people and receive punishment for them. He will come again in glory to crush evil forever. Right now, you have the opportunity to trust in Jesus and have your sin forgiven. If you turn to Jesus now, your sin has already been punished, and you have nothing to fear. But if you reject Jesus, you will stand before him when he comes again, and he will judge you and find you guilty. You don't want that.

Here's another thing to think about: What do you do with your guilt? If you are being honest, you must acknowledge that there are times when you have done wrong. And you are probably aware that there are things you can't fix, deeds that cannot be undone, words that cannot be retracted. If you reflect on these things, what do you do? I can assure you that you are guilty of sin, just as I am. And I can testify that you cannot remove the stain of sin. You cannot undo the guilt. But Jesus can. Turn to him.

You may think that turning to Jesus will mean that you lose freedom. In his *Paradise Lost*, John Milton has Satan say of hell, "Here at least we shall be free. . . . Here we may reign

secure. . . . Better to reign in hell, than serve in heaven.”<sup>4</sup> That is a lie. Running from God doesn’t bring you freedom, and hell is not a place you ever want to be. Being in hell means being separated from God and every scrap of goodness, and it means being stuck with yourself, with no escape, and no hope for a better future. But turning to Jesus means an exodus from sin and condemnation, and a bright future. God can deliver you on the wings of an eagle and put you on safe ground. Turn to him today.

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<sup>4</sup> John Milton, *Paradise Lost* I.258, 259, 261, 263, Oxford World’s Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 11.