

*All Things New: The Woman Clothed With The Sun and The Dragon*

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*Isaiah 14:3-15; Matthew 2:13-21; Revelation 12*

Our final Scripture reading today is Revelation 12. May God speak to us through His perfect, holy, infallible Word. “A great and wondrous sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth. Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on his heads. His tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth. The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that he might devour her child the moment it was born. 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. The woman fled into the desert to a place prepared for her by God, where she might be taken care of for 1,260 days. And there was war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven. The great dragon was hurled down – that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him. Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say: “Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ. For the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down. They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death. Therefore rejoice, you heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to the earth and the sea, because the devil has gone down to you! He is filled with fury, because he knows that his time is short.” When the dragon saw that he had been hurled to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child. The woman was given the two wings of a great eagle, so that she might fly to the place prepared for her in the desert, where she would be taken care of for a time, times and half a time, out of the serpent's reach. Then from his mouth the serpent spewed water like a river, to overtake the woman and sweep her away with the torrent. But the earth helped the woman by opening its mouth and swallowing the river that the dragon had spewed out of his mouth. Then the dragon was enraged at the woman and went off to make war against the rest of her offspring – those who obey God's commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus.”

Stories that last over time have layers. When we look at the authors of the past whose books are still meaningful to us today, we see that they wrote works that had something to say beyond merely telling a story that was one event after another. People are still remaking *Little Women* and *A Christmas Carol* because their themes are timeless.

But sometimes, a story has so much going on that we miss things. Many people who've read *1984* know it as a story about a dystopian society where everyone is watched and the government edits everything to conform to their way of thinking. But no one remembers the lead character – his name is Winston Smith, by the way. On the other side, *The Great Gatsby* is a critique of the so-called American dream...but it's also a personal story about a man who can't have the woman he wants despite all he has. You can get so wrapped up in Gatsby and his love interest Daisy and his friend Nick Carraway that you miss the underlying ideas.

Revelation 12 is a passage with so much going on, with so many layers, that we might miss some of it. It is a complete change from what we've read about so far in the book – it reverses gears. It is, in essence, a restart; from here, we're going to see everything we've experienced so far from another angle. It is a chapter full of symbolism. But as we take it apart piece by piece, we'll see what God is showing us in part of John's vision, and we might learn about our own relationship with God in the meantime.

In chapter 11, we actually came to the time of Christ's reign, of His victory over the enemy and the defeat of all evil. But in chapter 12, we have a complete and somewhat jarring change. We've shifted into a symbolic journey through what we've just seen, explained in much greater detail. And this journey will take us through most of the rest of the book. Some of the symbols take on real forms and shapes we can understand, but others, we have to interpret.

The story in chapter 12 begins with a pregnant woman on the verge of childbirth. A great dragon with immense power plans to devour the child, who we're told is to rule the nations. Yet the dragon, who is thrown out of the heavens along with his compatriots, is foiled in his plan, and the mother flees into the wilderness for three and a half years. The dragon has multiple plans to take out the mother, the child, and her offspring, but none of them ultimately succeed. That's the story in a nutshell.

Parts of this story have a very literal counterpart in the Christmas story, which I'm pretty sure you might have already guessed! In a literal sense, the pregnant woman is Mary, about to give birth to Jesus. After He is born, she, Joseph, and the baby flee to Egypt for a few years to escape the wrath of King Herod, who is more than willing to murder innocent children to try and destroy any possibility of a child outside of his family taking over his throne.

The wings of the great eagle that get them to safety could be the gifts that the Magi brought the family – gifts worth a great deal of money that would sustain them when they had to leave suddenly. (Remember that pretty much all they owned would have been back in Nazareth!) Those gifts made it possible for them to flee to Egypt with just the clothes on their backs. And while others would try to stop Jesus' ministry and stop Jesus' followers, the gospel spread like wildfire.

But the events of Mary's life are only a part of the sign John sees. She fulfills parts of it, and there are obvious parallels. But there is more meaning to the passage than just that. We have to start at the beginning to see why this isn't just about Mary. The woman in the passage is clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. What is this about?

For this one, we have to go all the way back to Genesis. You might remember the story of *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, right? What got Joseph in trouble, what got him sold into slavery in Egypt, were his dreams. He dreamed that his mother and father and brothers would all bow before him. And in fact, that was what happened; after years in slavery and then in prison, Joseph becomes the second in command of all of Egypt when he can interpret Pharaoh's dreams. What does he see in his dream bowing down to him? The sun – his father; the moon – his mother; eleven stars – his other brothers.

While this vision has a certain limited fulfillment in Mary, it's much bigger than that. The sun is Jacob; the moon is Rachel; the stars are the heads of the twelve tribes that come from them. The woman draped with the sun, moon, and stars in this vision is faithful Israel. This is the remnant that truly believes in God and His promises, who await God's messiah, who trust in God and not themselves for salvation. These are the saints of the Old Testament. In the time when Jesus was born, these were the folks like Mary and Joseph, like Zechariah and Elizabeth who had John the Baptist, like Simeon who followed the Spirit's leading to come to the temple and was given the knowledge by the Spirit that the infant Jesus was the Messiah, like Anna the prophetess who never left the temple but welcomed Jesus at His circumcision.

Faithful Israel is responsible for two births: the first is Jesus, who is Jewish through and through, who is the Jewish messiah, who is the promised one God's chosen people knew about. But faithful Israel also is responsible, in part, for birthing the church. The church that Jesus assembles reaches all the nations and eventually becomes far, far more Gentile than Jewish. Yet the initial church, the church that is birthed by Jesus, is all from the Hebrew nation. Out of Israel both comes the Messiah and the ones who will do the Messiah's work throughout the world.

Short thought for us today in this: *as a Christian, you not only have a future, you have a history and a people you belong to.* There has been a movement in recent years – one that has a long history, but it comes and goes – to get Christians to ditch the Old Testament as antiquated or out-of-date. Jesus Christ came and saved us and that's what we need to know. Get rid of all those old laws and concepts and stories that are supposedly embarrassing to modern sensibilities.

Phooey. I need the Old Testament, and so do you. I need to know *God's* people, *my* people. I need to know Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, Moses and Joshua; I need to know David and Hezekiah and Josiah, Isaiah and Jeremiah, Elijah and Elisha. These are our spiritual parents. They lead us and point us to our true Father and His true Son Jesus. While we are not obligated to the Law of ancient Israel, we agree with Psalm 19:17 – “The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul. The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple.”

We are a people now, the Christian church, because God chose a race of people through whom He would make His name known, and out of them He birthed His Son Jesus as the God-man who would set us right, and out of them both He birthed the church. You might say, “Oh, I'm Irish,” or “I'm Polish,” or “I'm Ukrainian,” or “I'm Nigerian.” But our identity is not wrapped up in what lands our earthly ancestors came from. Our identities are wrapped up in our God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – and our forefathers in the faith.

Understanding this also helps us to dive into our Bibles more. Because if it's just stories of some people some where some time ago, OK, fine, but it doesn't have a lot of bearing on me. But if the Bible is the story of *my* people that tells me who *I* am in Christ Jesus and who *we* are as a family adopted and beloved by God, it takes on a lot more meaning. Nobody has patience with a slideshow of pictures of people they don't know. But bring out the video of your own family's photos, and the stories go on and on for ours. When we understand that the Bible is the *story* of our people, and that the church is the *gathering* of our people, we know we have both a past and a future. Every day of Bible reading is digging up my spiritual genealogy; every Sunday service is a family reunion.

Next thing I want to talk about briefly is this dragon. The dragon is important because it's the second sign, and it's the embodiment of Satan, the accuser. I think he's red because it's the color of blood – as an accuser, he demands the penalty for our misdeeds. He has seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on his heads. The seven heads and seven crowns are a sign of perfection gone wrong – seven usually means wholeness, but here, the sevens show us that the dragon is the embodiment of pure, unrivaled evil. And the ten horns represent the power of the nations. Daniel, who had visions of the coming of the Lord, tells us that the horns represent kings and rulers. Again, not surprising, because the devil has always wanted authority and power, and so he manipulates the powers of the world.

“His tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth.” It's hard to know exactly what this means. Some have interpreted it as part of the war in heaven. Satan is cast out of heaven with his angels – we would think of them as demons – and some have conjectured that it was 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of the created order in heaven. But in other places, the descendants of Abraham are compared to the stars; the twelve tribes are symbolically stars. It could also be a symbolic discussion of how Satan has continually attacked the people of God throughout history.

What we do know is that Satan and his minions no longer have a place in God's Kingdom in any way, shape, or form. They have been cast out of heaven and all that awaits them is being cast permanently into hell at the final judgment. Satan is going to try to do whatever he can to stop the spread of the gospel – the dragon is described as spewing water like a river to overtake the woman, which is the spewing of false doctrines and deceptions to keep people from faith. He makes war against the offspring of the woman – believers like us. But Satan's rage is really at his powerlessness. No matter how many schemes he tries, no matter how many deceptions, no matter how many Christians he may persecute and bring to earthly death, he is utterly and completely ineffective in truly harming any of God's chosen people.

What does this mean for us? Second point of the day: *our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms (Ephesians 6:12)*. We must know our real enemy so we can stand firm against every attack.

We must realize that our enemy is not an earthly foe. Jesus was surprisingly quiet when it came to Rome. He didn't bad-mouth Roman soldiers who were a constant presence. In fact, He told His followers, “if a soldier demands you carry his gear a mile, carry it two.” When it came to taxes, He said, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's.” Speaking to a Samaritan woman with a history of sexual promiscuity, he didn't condemn her but told her the day was coming when Jews and Samaritans and Gentiles would worship together not on some mountain but in spirit and truth. The only people Jesus called out were the Pharisees for their hypocrisy, for supposedly representing God while leading the people far from Him.

Our political situation is a wreck where both sides demonize the other. If we aren't on the same team, we're evil, bigots, whatever name you want to call. This pleases the dragon and his forces. Because it's precisely the opposite of what Jesus modeled. It diminishes and reduces people made in the image of God. Just because other people do it doesn't mean we do it. Our struggle is not against human enemies, even though they do evil. It is against the dragon.

When we see folks who advocate for sin, our first thought should not be to shut them up or to criticize them but to pray. When someone advocates for abortion on demand without restrictions, when they want to force artists to create works celebrating evil, when they demand all sorts of things that are displeasing to God, we should be on our knees advocating for them before the throne of God because they have been deceived. They have bought into a lie.

Some people are genuinely on the wrong side; Jesus says we will have enemies. But our war is not with them. Our war is with the great deceiver, who lies to us and then accuses us of sin once we've fallen into his trap. It is on the spiritual forces of darkness that have already been defeated and want to take humanity down with them. Pray that God would change the hearts and minds of those who oppose Him. You never know when someone will become the next Paul, one minute attempting to destroy Christianity and the next becoming its greatest advocate.

Last thing I want to talk about today is the victory we have. Satan is already defeated. As the loud voice in heaven says, the saints have overcome the accuser by the blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony. The accuser still fights, he makes war against us, but he is done. Nothing he can do can harm the saints one iota in a way that really matters. Because there is life after death, because the saints receive their rewards in eternity, death has no sting.

So our last thought for the day: *You need not fear, for Christ is near.* All the devil can do is attempt to put fear in us – fear of failure, fear of punishment or condemnation when we fail, fear of sickness and trouble and death, fear of loss. There's a popular song on Christian radio called "Fear Is A Liar." And that's absolutely right. It's really the main way our enemy makes war against those of us who obey God's commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus.

Do you know what the devil is? The devil is a terrorist. He has no chance of winning the war, no hope of any positive outcome, so all he can do is snipe at us through our fears and through manipulating the fears of others. Right now, our world is gripped with fear surrounding the Coronavirus. We're not shaking hands; we're using hand sanitizer. People are preparing for quarantines; the stock market is tanking, particularly travel stocks. And that's not to say we shouldn't be cautious. It's a real thing, a serious thing. But my goodness! It makes no sense to be praising Jesus one minute and then panicking over a virus.

Romans 14:8 – Paul says, "If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord." That's our comfort and our hope. If we remember this, we're in the clear. You know why? Because a terrorist's methods are useless against someone who cannot be made to fear. A terrorist can kill someone like that, but he can't hurt someone like that. Someone who knows that their eternal future is secure and is confident in that truth doesn't need to fear anything.

Friends, we need not fear. If you belong to Jesus, we have a real enemy, and he is enraged, but he cannot do anything to us. What this passage teaches us is that the church, true and faithful Israel, they withstand the onslaught. God chose His people, and He has brought us safely through the storms. Because of God, we are a people with a history and a purpose. Our enemy has lost the war. We have nothing to fear. All we need do now is persevere – ride out the storms – and we will see the glory of the Lord at the end of our days.