

"THE GREAT WAR"

I. Introduction

- A. Revelation 12 begins a new visionary cycle in John's Apocalypse.
- B. This cycle of visions continues to end of chapter 14, which concludes with another depiction of the final judgment.
- C. Chapters 12 through 14 contain a series of symbolic histories.
- D. As with chapters 1 through 11, these visions focus on the period in between Christ's first and second comings.
- E. The main difference is that while the first half of the book gave a heavenly perspective on the suffering and persecution that characterizes this period, the second half offers a heavenly perspective on the key players in the great drama that is being played out across history.
- F. In Revelation 12, we are introduced to three of these characters: the woman, her male child, and the dragon.

II. A Summary of Biblical History (1-6)

- A. The first six verses of the chapter set forth a symbolic summary of biblical history.
 - 1. The woman is clearly not a literal woman, since John describes her as "a great sign."
 - 2. While Jesus' mother Mary belongs to the group that is being symbolized by this woman, she is not to be identified with her.
 - 3. This is a picture of the church, with an emphasis on the church under the Old Testament administration of the covenant of grace.

4. The description of the woman in verse 1 alludes to Genesis 37:9, where Joseph tells his brothers of the dream that he had where the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to him.
 5. That was a depiction of God's people, with the sun and moon being Joseph's father and mother and the eleven stars his brothers.
 6. Here in Revelation 12, the twelve stars signify the twelve tribes of Israel, which correspond to the twelve apostles under the New Testament administration of the covenant of grace.
 7. This is the church from a heavenly perspective, the church arrayed in glory.
 8. The fact that the woman is wearing a crown points to the church's participation in Christ's rule of his kingdom, something that has been described by the imagery of crowns in the earlier chapters of Revelation.
- B. The reason why the woman is pregnant is because she is a symbolic depiction of what is described in Genesis 3:15, where God says that the offspring of the woman will crush the serpent's head.
1. That was the first proclamation of the gospel, sometimes referred to as the protoevangelion.
 2. It was the first promise of Christ.
 3. The idea being conveyed by the image of the woman here in Revelation 12 is that all throughout the Old Testament, the line of promise, which from the time of Abraham onward was Israel, was pregnant with the Messiah.
 4. That the child is the Messiah is made even more clear in verse 5, where it says that he "is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron."
 5. That is a quotation from Psalm 2, which is a messianic psalm.

- C. The third main character in this vision is introduced in verse 3: the great red dragon, who is also referred to as the serpent, the devil, and Satan later in the chapter.
1. The dragon's seven heads and diadems depict his status as the ruler of this world, and his ten horns symbolize his great power.
 2. The dragon's ten horns point back to the fourth beast in Daniel 7, which also had ten horns.
 3. That beast represented Rome, along with its spiritual successors in various regimes that oppress Christ's church.
 4. In John's vision, the dragon sweeps a third of the stars from heaven and casts them to the earth.
 5. This is another detail that is taken from the prophecy of Daniel.
 6. It recalls Daniel 8:10, where a little horn took some of the stars and threw them to the ground and trampled them.
 7. The initial fulfillment of that prophecy came about in the second century B.C., when the Syrian ruler Antiochus Epiphanes sorely oppressed God's people.
 8. The same thing is being depicted in our text when the dragon's tail sweeps a third of the stars out of heaven and casts them on the earth.
 9. This is telling us that the same demonic power that influenced Antiochus is behind the persecutions that the church faces from the various kingdoms of the world.
- D. This vision is summing up the whole Old Testament as the story of the conflict between the seed of the woman and the dragon.
1. Ever since the fall, Satan has been trying to prevent the coming of the Messiah.

2. We can think of many different ways in which Satan's efforts found expression throughout biblical history.
 3. We see it in Cain's murder of Abel.
 4. We see it in the rivalry between Ishmael and Isaac, and then between Esau and Jacob.
 5. We see it in Pharaoh's command for the midwives to kill all the male babies born to Hebrew women.
 6. We see it in Saul's attempts on David's life.
 7. We see it in Haman's plot to wipe out the Jews.
 8. And at the beginning of the New Testament, we see it in Herod's attempt to kill the infant Messiah by ordering the slaughter of the infants.
 9. In John's vision, the dragon's attempt to devour the child as soon as he was born is foiled, as the child is caught up to God.
 10. This is clearly referring to Jesus' resurrection and ascension.
 11. Though Satan was the influence behind Judas' betrayal of Christ and the subsequent crucifixion of Christ, those efforts proved futile when Jesus rose from the grave in victory and ascended to the right hand of God in triumph.
- E. The first part of the vision concludes by telling us that the woman fled into the wilderness, where she was provided for and nourished by God for 1,260 days.
1. This is a picture of the church's experience in the period in between Christ's ascension and his return on the last day.
 2. Like Israel after the exodus, we are a sojourning people, waiting to enter into our inheritance in the heavenly promised land.

3. We have seen the figure of 1,260 days before in Revelation.
4. It was used in chapter 11 to describe the period when the church would bear testimony to Christ.
5. Recall that the same time period was calculated in that chapter as 42 months of persecution and as 3 ½ days of laying dead in the streets Babylon.
6. As we noted in our study on Revelation 11, the figure of 3 ½ is significant because it is half of seven.
7. It conveys that the period in which the church will serve as a suffering witness for Christ in a world that hates her will be less than a full measure of suffering.
8. The same idea is being depicted by the woman's 1,260 days in the wilderness in this chapter.
9. And take special note of the fact that God has not abandoned his church during this wilderness period.
10. He has prepared a place for us.
11. He will see to it that we are nourished, just as he fed Israel with the manna and Elijah by the ravens.

III. Victory in Heaven (7-12)

- A. The second part of the vision begins in verse 7.
 1. Here we are given another picture of the events that were described in the previous verses, except that the focus here is not on the experience of God's people on earth but upon what has transpired in heaven as a result of Christ's victory.
 2. While Jesus was carrying out his ministry on earth, a war was taking place in the heavenly realm.

3. We can see the evidence of that war when we read the Gospels.
 4. This is why there was so much overt demonic activity during the period of Jesus' public ministry.
 5. We do not see anywhere near the same level of overt demonic activity anywhere else in Scripture.
 6. Because Satan understood that Jesus was the promised child, he pulled out all the stops.
- B. There is great irony in the thing that brought the great heavenly conflict to an end.
1. It was Jesus' death that brought about Satan's downfall.
 2. Jesus speaks of this in John 12, where he knows that the cross is looming ahead of him and says, "Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." (Jn. 12:31–32)
 3. What is meant by Satan being cast out or thrown down?
 4. Verse 10 of our text tells us what it means.
 5. It means that Christ's accomplishment of redemption for his people has resulted in Satan losing his ability to accuse the brethren before God's throne in heaven.
 6. Prior to Jesus' death, Satan had the opportunity to accuse the saints at the bar of divine justice.
 7. We see him doing this very thing in the opening chapter of the book of Job.
 8. We see him doing it in the vision that the prophet Zechariah has in Zechariah 3.

9. Before redemption was accomplished by Christ within history, Satan had grounds for bringing accusations against the saints before God.
- C. This is one significant difference between saints who lived under the old covenant and saints who live under the new covenant.
1. Both participate in the same redemption.
 2. But old covenant saints participated in a redemption that was promised but yet to be secured, while new covenant saints participate in a redemption that has been accomplished within history.
 3. As Paul explains in Colossians 2, the record of our debt has been canceled, being nailed to the cross.
 4. In Christ, God has disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame.
 5. While Satan can still accuse the consciences of believers, he has lost his ability to accuse us before God.
 6. We have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb to which we testify.
 7. And notice what else is said about the saints here.
 8. It says that the evidence or grounds of their faith is that they loved not their lives even unto death.
 9. True believers understand nothing in all the world that can supersede Christ in importance.
 10. Even if it comes to the point of choosing between remaining faithful to Christ and being put to death for their testimony, they refuse to renounce Christ.

- D. This part of the vision concludes in verse 12 with a summons for those whose citizenship is in heaven to rejoice and give thanks.
1. Even though we still live on earth, our dwelling place is in heaven, where Christ already is as our advocate.
 2. No matter what happens to us in this life, nothing can threaten the security that we have in heaven.
 3. On the other hand, woe is pronounced upon those who dwell upon the earth, those whose true home is in this world over which Satan is still ruler.
 4. Though Satan has lost his ability to accuse the brethren before God, this has only enraged him all the more.
 5. Before Christ returns, he is seeking to do as much damage as he can.

IV. Conflict on the Earth (13-17)

- A. The picture of victory in heaven in verses 7 through 12 is followed by a picture of conflict on earth in verses 13 through 17.
1. Here we see that though Satan has lost his ability to harass God's people in the heavenly sphere, he redoubles his efforts to do so in the earthly sphere.
 2. This is what it means when it says that the dragon pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child.
 3. To be a part of the church is to be the target of Satan's assaults.
 4. While this is not a pleasant thought, it is better than the alternative.
 5. If the devil is not at war with a person, then he is at peace with that person, which means he already has the person in his clutches.

- B. While Satan is a fierce enemy and is not to be trifled with, the saints remain secure under the protection of God.
1. This is the meaning of the woman being given eagle's wings so that she can fly from the serpent into the wilderness.
 2. Remember, this is not describing something literal but something figurative.
 3. And the key to interpreting Revelation's symbols is to look to their Old Testament background.
 4. This reference to eagle's wings points back to Exodus 19:4, where the Lord says to his people, "You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself." (Ex 19:4 ESV)
 5. Just as God delivered his people from the clutches of Pharaoh and provided for them in the wilderness, he also delivers his church from the assaults of the devil and takes care of us as we make our way through the wilderness of this world.
- C. The reference in verse 14 to a duration of "a time, times, and half a time" is another instance of a 3 ½ year period.
1. We mentioned in a previous sermon that the book of Daniel is a key background for that phrase.
 2. Another is found in the experience of the prophet Elijah in 1 Kings, where he was sustained by God in the wilderness during a 3 ½ year period of famine.
 3. John is being told in this vision that the Lord will do the same thing for his church in this present age.
- D. The image of the serpent pouring forth a river out of his mouth in an effort to engulf the woman is another detail that is clearly symbolic.

1. It seems likely that a comparison is being drawn here with the two witnesses in chapter 11.
 2. Recall that when those two witnesses prophesied, fire came out of their mouths to consume anyone who would harm them.
 3. The point being made there was that the proclamation of the gospel brings judgment upon those who persist in opposing it.
 4. In chapter 12, the river that comes from the serpent's mouth is an image for the deception that he uses in his assaults on God's people.
 5. After all, deception is the principle thing that issues from Satan's mouth.
 6. The opening up of the earth to swallow the river alludes to how God caused the earth to open up and swallow Korah and his followers when their false claims put all Israel in danger of God's judgment in Numbers 16.
 7. In the same way, God ensures that Satan's efforts to deceive God's people fails.
 8. Though those who are only outwardly a part of the body do fall prey to the devil's snares, true believers are kept safe.
- E. Finally, we should note how true believers are described in the final verse of this chapter.
1. The dragon's fury with the woman causes him to commit himself to an endless war with her children.
 2. The woman's children represent the church.
 3. And the church is further described here as "those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus."

4. These are the defining marks of genuine Christians.
5. They are committed to following God's commandments, and they hold firm to the gospel.
6. May God grant that these would always be the marks that define us.