

The Woman, the Dragon, and the Male Child

Revelation 12

Revelation chapter 12 is the hinge upon which the whole book turns. Up until chapter 12, history is being revealed. Chapters 1-11 cover three sequences of sevens—the seven churches, the seven seals, and the seven trumpets—outlining events from the beginning of Christianity to the end of time from different perspectives. The second half of the book focuses on the end time.

Chapter 12 deals with three characters—a woman, a dragon, and a male Child. These three are the main players in the great controversy—that centuries-long battle between good and evil that began in heaven and became transferred to earth. This chapter also takes up four episodes in the great controversy:

- Episode #1: Satan attempts to kill Jesus. That doesn't work. God wins; Satan loses.
- Episode #2: Satan attempts to take over God's throne in heaven. That doesn't work. God wins; Satan loses.
- Episode #3: Satan attempts to destroy God's followers in every age. That doesn't work. God wins; Satan loses.
- Episode #4: Satan attempts to destroy Jesus' end-time church. That doesn't work. God wins; Satan loses.

This list of episodes above is numbered in the order in which they are presented here in chapter 12. But you will note that they are somewhat out of order chronologically. Chronologically, Episode #2 took place before Episode #1. Satan tried to take over God's throne in heaven before he tried to kill Jesus when He came to earth. However, we will take up these episodes in the order in which they appear in chapter 12. The important message is that God's always going to win and Satan is always going to lose.

Episode #1—Satan Attempts to Kill Jesus

Now a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a garland of twelve stars. Then being with child, she cried out in labor and in pain to give birth. And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great, fiery red dragon having seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems on his heads. His tail drew a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was ready to give birth, to devour her Child as soon as it was born. She bore a male Child who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron. And her Child was caught up to God and His throne (Revelation 12:1-5).

Let's look at the symbols being used here. What does the woman represent? In Scripture, a pure woman represents God's church, His faithful people. Paul wrote to the Christians at Corinth, "For I am jealous for you with godly jealousy. For I have betrothed you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ" (2 Corinthians 11:2; see also Ephesians 5:25). In contrast, as we will see later in Revelation 17, an impure woman, a harlot, represents apostate Christianity. However, here in chapter 12 there is a dual application of this symbol of a pure woman. This woman represents God's true church, but she also clearly symbolizes Mary, the mother of Jesus.

Who does the dragon represent? We don't have to guess. Verse 9 tells us plainly that the dragon is "that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan."

Who does the male Child represent? Clearly, this is a reference to Jesus, who left heaven and came to earth to be the child of Mary.

These three—the woman, the dragon, and the Child—are the main characters in this chapter. But we have seen this same trio before in Scripture. They are first introduced in the Garden of Eden at the beginning of the world. There in Eden, we have the woman, Eve. We have the dragon, the serpent who deceived her into sin. And we have the woman's "Seed," her Child, the promised Messiah. Do you recall what happened in Eden after Adam and Eve disobeyed God? The Bible records that God said to the serpent, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel" (Genesis 3:15).

God tells Satan that the Child, the promised Messiah, the Seed of Eve, will “bruise your head.” Bitter conflict would take place between the serpent and the woman, between his followers and her seed. The “Seed” of the woman, the Messiah would gain victory by crushing the head of the serpent, while suffering a wound to His heel. Satan heard God’s words and took them seriously. He knew Jesus would someday come to earth to inflict on him a mortal blow. Is it any wonder that he tried to kill Jesus as soon as He was born?

The woman John saw stands on the moon, clothed with the sun and with a garland of twelve stars encircling her head. As a symbol of God’s true church, she is clothed with the glory of God. Some have suggested that the twelve stars adorning her head represent the twelve apostles of the early church. But as we noted earlier, there is a dual aspect to this symbol. The woman is pregnant. In fact, she is in labor and on the verge of giving birth (verse 2). In this context, the woman symbolizes Mary, the mother of Jesus.

Standing before the woman is a great, fiery red dragon. He is waiting, prepared to “devour her Child as soon as it was born” (verse 4).

This is clearly a picture of what happened at the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. Using King Herod as his agent, Satan tried to kill the baby Jesus as soon as He was born. Satan remembered God’s words in Eden. He knew Jesus had come to gain the victory and destroy his power. “Then Herod, sent forth and put to death all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all its districts, from two years old and under, according to the time he had determined from the wise men” (Matthew 2:16).

Satan tried to kill Jesus, but the “Child was caught up to God and His throne” (Revelation 12:5). Of course, Satan did manage to kill Jesus on the cross. But although it might have seemed like a victory for the dragon, Jesus’ death on the cross dealt a mortal wound to his head. Satan was defeated. Jesus was resurrected and returned to heaven. His death was a temporary blow to His heel. God won, and Satan lost this episode in the great controversy.

Episode #2—Satan Attempts to Take Over God’s Throne in Heaven

War broke out in heaven: Michael and his angels fought with the dragon; and the dragon and his angels fought, but they did not prevail, nor was a

place found for them in heaven any longer. So the great dragon was cast out, that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; he was cast to the earth, and his angels were cast out with him. Then I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, “Now salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of His Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren, who accused them before our God day and night, has been cast down” (Revelation 12:7-10).

Episode #2 brings us back to the very beginning of the great controversy in heaven. Sin originated with Satan in heaven itself. There was no reason for that to happen. There is no logical explanation for why Lucifer, this perfect angel, should have allowed pride and jealousy to take root in his heart and grow into rebellion against his Creator. But it happened. Isaiah tells us:

How you are fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning!
How you are cut down to the ground, you who weakened the nations! For you have said in your heart: “I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God; I will also sit on the mount of the congregation on the farthest sides of the north; I will ascend above the heights of the clouds, I will be like the Most High” (Isaiah 14:12-14).

Satan’s pride ripened into open revolt. He accused God of being unjust and unfair. He infected the angels with his doubts and accusations. Revelation 12:4 says, “His tail drew a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth.” A third of heaven’s angels sided with Satan and joined him in rebellion.

The rebellion came to the point of open warfare. When God could no longer allow Satan to continue his rebellion war broke out in heaven: Michael and his angels fought with the dragon and his angels, but they did not prevail, nor was a place found for them in heaven any longer. So the great dragon was cast out, that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world, he was cast to the earth, and his angels were cast out with him (verses 7-9).

We learned in Daniel 10 that Michael is one of the names in the Bible for Jesus Christ. When war broke out in heaven, the angels had to make a decision—would they follow Lucifer or Michael? Satan or Jesus? It's interesting that Michael is the leader of the loyal forces arrayed against Lucifer. We might have expected God the Father to have been the One taking command of the forces resisting Satan in heaven. It suggests that Jesus may have been a major focus of Satan's jealousy and dissatisfaction with his role in heaven.

What was the nature of this war that broke out in heaven? Was it a physical war like those on earth that use weapons to kill the enemy? Or was it a war of ideas like those on earth against poverty or drugs? Or did it include elements of both kinds of war? We don't know. But at any rate, the conflict was physical enough that Satan and his angels were "cast out" "nor was a place was found for them in heaven any longer (verses 8, 9).

The dragon lost this opening episode in the great controversy. God wins; Satan loses. "The accuser of our brethren, who accused them before our God day and night, has been cast down" (verse 10).

Episode #3— Satan Attempts to Destroy God's Followers in Every Age

Woe to the inhabitants of the earth and the sea! For the devil has come down to you, having great wrath, because he knows that he has a short time. Now when the dragon saw that he had been cast to the earth, he persecuted the woman who gave birth to the male Child. But the woman was given two wings of a great eagle, that she might fly into the wilderness to her place, where she is nourished for a time and times and half a time, from the presence of the serpent. So the serpent spewed water out of his mouth like a flood after the woman, that he might cause her to be carried away by the flood. But the earth helped the woman, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed up the flood which the dragon had spewed out of his mouth (verses 12-16).

Where did Satan and his angel followers go when they were cast out of heaven? They were cast down to this earth. Verse 12 says, “Woe to the inhabitants of the earth and the sea! For the devil has come down to you, having great wrath, because he knows that he has a short time.” The apostle Peter puts it like this: “Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour” (1 Peter 5:8).

When the dragon lost the battle in heaven, he transferred his rebellion to earth. He successfully deceived Eve, who tempted Adam to join her in disobeying God and surrendering their allegiance to Satan. As a result, Satan claims this world as his own. Ever since Eden he has tried to continue the great controversy and destroy God’s followers in every age. We have seen in both Daniel and Revelation how his attacks against God and against God’s faithful people intensified during the time of great spiritual darkness and apostasy that took place during the Dark Ages. Satan’s attempts to destroy the followers of God during this time is described in these verses as spewing out a flood of water in order to carry away the woman, God’s church.(verse 15).

Whenever God’s people remain faithful to Him, Satan becomes enraged and he brings persecution upon them. Verse 14 says that the woman was forced to fly into the wilderness “where she is nourished for a time and times and half a time.” We have seen this time period before. In chapter 11 we learned that the 1,260 days, the forty-two months, and the time, times, and half time are all referring to the same period—A.D. 538 to 1798 when spiritual darkness covered the earth and God’s people had to “fly into the wilderness” in order to worship God. Millions of Christians were martyred during this time because they obeyed God and His Word instead of the traditions and rituals of men.

At times the flood that Satan sent to destroy them seemed about to overwhelm them. But God protected His people. “The earth opened its mouth and swallowed up the flood which the dragon had spewed out of his mouth” (verse 16). Toward the end of the 1,260 years in the wilderness, a new world was discovered. America became a place where those who were persecuted for their faith could find relief. There the devil’s flood was swallowed up. God won, and Satan lost. But he was still intent on continuing the great controversy.

Episode #4—Satan Attempts to Destroy Jesus' End-Time Church

As we look at the history of Satan's attacks down through the centuries since Eden, it often seems that he was successful in drawing men and women away from God. In every age only a small number remained faithful to the God of heaven, compared to the great majority who followed the dragon. But although it may seem that Satan was winning the great controversy, there were always those who "overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony" (verse 11). They "washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" (Revelation 7:24). You see, it's not a matter of numbers. Truth is not determined by a majority vote.

Satan continues to lose, and God continues to win in the great controversy. But this only makes the devil more determined to never stop attacking God's people.

The dragon was enraged with the woman, and he went to make war with the rest of her offspring, who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ (verse 17).

The dragon made war against God in heaven. He made war with Jesus on earth and tried to destroy him. He has made war with God's followers down through the ages. And now enraged and desperate, he goes "to make war with the rest of her offspring (verse 17). Who is that?

God's church has a remnant. God's faithful people living in the last days are the offspring, the remnant, of all those generations who have gone before—the apostles, the martyrs, the Reformers, the faithful men and women who stood for truth during all those long, dark centuries.

Can we identify this remnant? Verse 17 gives two identifying characteristics of this last-day group with whom the dragon is enraged and with whom he makes war. First, they keep the commandments of God. In the last days before Jesus returns God is going to have a people who keep His commandment—not because they believe that obeying the commandments will save them. Not because they are trying to earn salvation. They are keeping God's commandments, because they love Him. Because they want to please Him and show their loyalty to Him. Jesus said, "If you love Me, keep My commandments"

(John 14:15). You see, love is the only motive that counts. We obey God, because we love Him. As Jesus also said through the psalmist, “I delight to do Your will, O My God, and Your law is within My heart” (Psalm 40:8). Love is the motive, but obedience is important. You can’t really love and be disobedient. So that is the first identifying characteristic of God’s remnant people; they keep His commandments. All of His commandments.

Secondly, God’s last-day remnant will “have the testimony of Jesus Christ” (Revelation 12:17). What does this mean?

Revelation 19:10 says, “The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.” Just as God guided Israel with the gift of prophecy in the days of Moses; just as He guided Israel throughout the Old Testament with the gift of prophecy; just as God brought the gifts of prophecy to the New Testament church, likewise in the last days of earth’s history God will have a remnant church that will be guided by the gift of prophecy. His remnant will take seriously the testimony of Jesus through His prophetic voice.

Just before He returned to heaven, Jesus gave His disciples, and us, the great commission. “

Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age (Matthew 28:19, 20).

Down at the end of time God’s remnant will be carrying the gospel message of salvation to the ends of the earth, teaching people to observe all those things that Jesus has commanded. He will be with His people to the very end. The dragon may be enraged against them. The devil may go to make war against them with every hellish power at his command. But Jesus says, “Lo, I am with you always, even to the end” (Matthew 28:20).

God wins; Satan loses!