

Revelation 12:1-18

Fighting God

Is change possible? That's one of the "big picture" issues of this magnificent chapter of the Bible. Is change possible in my life and yours? Is change possible in the lives of those around us? Is change possible in our nation and our world? Is change possible in our church? Sod's law says that whenever you want something to go your way, it'll go the other way. If I wanted to demonstrate sod's law I would toss a coin wanting it to be heads, and it would be tails - except in a true demonstration the coin would have to land heads up because this would confound my ability to demonstrate sod's law. A sod's law mindset believes that if something can go wrong, it probably will go wrong: keep your expectations low and you'll never be disappointed. But if we let such a defeatist mindset control us we'll never progress, we'll never grow, we'll never triumph, we may not even survive.

During this series on Revelation I've often said that apocalyptic writings aren't necessarily about the End Times, but rather, they seek to show what lies behind our current world. We can see this very clearly in this week's chapter: On the earth we have a vulnerable woman, fearful and fleeing from a vicious and hungry dragon - probably tempted towards a sod's law mindset. Obviously this in itself is symbolic picture language, but at least it's on the earth. By contrast, in heaven, we have the same dragon being defeated comprehensively, shamed and thrown out. The message is that your faith in Christ is well placed, your hope will be rewarded, and that the love of God is triumphant.

Introducing the Characters and Scene

Before we go any further, let me talk briefly about six characters or factors in this very dream-like chapter of the apocalypse.

The Woman

First of all, the woman. Is she Mary? Almost certainly not. Although the child is certainly Jesus, the woman is much more than Mary, for she represents the people of God from among whom the Messiah will come. At Christmas we read from Micah the prophet, "**You Bethlehem, in the land of Judah... Out of you will come a ruler.**" (Micah 5:2) - it's just one of many prophecies looking forward to the emergence of the Messiah from among God's people. Throughout the prophets, indeed throughout the Bible, and not least in Revelation, the people of God are described as a woman - the wife of God, the bride of Christ, and so on. Again and again, the same sources see God's salvation coming with "**birth pangs**" with Israel as the mother whose delivery mirrors deliverance from foreign oppression. This, and other imagery would have provided the mental background which the Spirit stimulated in John to produce the new work of Revelation 12.

The Dragon

Secondly, the dragon. Like the woman, the dragon is drawn from a mosaic of Old Testament imagery, symbolising oppressive forces and kingdoms. Its description with “**seven heads and ten horns**” connects it with the fourth and worst beast of Daniel 7 which attempts the annihilation of Israel. Yet the dragon in Revelation is more than a figure of oppressive rulers. It goes *behind* these rulers to reveal the ultimate power as “**that ancient serpent called the devil or Satan.**” (12:9) Revelation doesn’t speculate on the origin of Satan, it simply reveals his real existence.

Michael

Third, in v.7 we come across “**Michael and his angels.**” Many Jewish writings of the time speak of Michael as Israel’s guardian angel, as indeed does the letter of Jude, but the main biblical source is in the book of Daniel, where Michael fights in the heavenly realms alongside the Son of Man. I don’t think we’re intended to make precise correlations, as if Daniel’s words referred to just one point in time, and John’s to another or the same point. It’s more the case that both seers are peering into the heavenly realm and seeing this embodiment of God’s power coming to our aid.

Places

Fourth, I want to move on from the characters to the places. They’re visionary places rather than literal. The woman is seen first of all clothed with the sun, and in heaven. The word can mean either the place where God dwells, or quite simply the skies. Later on in v.7 John says “**there was war in heaven**” if that means the place where God is sovereign it’s a very disturbing image. It’s much more likely that when John talks about “**heaven**” he simply means, “in the spiritual realm” - “not on earth”. He’s talking about that arena which lies behind the earthly reality, and which can only be seen by the gift of the Holy Spirit.

So what about the desert, the river and the sea? Again, these aren’t specific earthly localations. When the woman flees “**into the desert**” (v.6) it’s the equivalent of running to the hills, hiding in the bush, or taking refuge in the ghetto. If you know the environment, you know how to survive and it becomes a friend. If you don’t know the environment you’ll die. For the woman this desert’s a place of refuge because God has given her a place in it. For the dragon it becomes a place he tries unsuccessfully to assert his power over. By contrast, the river and the sea are his home as these are ancient biblical images of disturbance and chaos.

1260 Days

The fifth background factor I want to explain is the 1260 days when the woman's in the desert.. Again, it sounds very specific, and again, it's symbolic. He used it before in Chapter 11, also there referring to it as 42 months. Later on in v.14 of chapter 12 John refers to it as "**a time, times, and half a time**" which means one year, plus two years, plus half a year. Convert this 3½ years into months and you get 42. Convert it into days, at 30 days a month, and you get 1260. These symbolic numbers, again, first appeared in the book of Daniel - chapters 7 and 12. There it marks a time of extreme oppression. So through the Spirit John's reminded that the true enemy of God is far greater than time or place, but appears in differing guises throughout history - and we'll see this more clearly when we come to look at the nature of the Beast in Chapter 13.

Space-Time

So finally, before we look at the message of this chapter, I want to consider the space-time structure of the passage. That sounds like the realms of Einstein or Douglas Adams - and perhaps it is. In Revelation, points in time jump backwards and forwards as we slide in and out of eternity. Events often aren't meant to be read sequentially, but rather they act to illustrate the characteristics of someone, just as you might select a number of random incidents to do a pen portrait of someone. John therefore sees the dragon sweeping down "**a third of the stars out of the sky and dragging them down to earth.**" Is this referring to a moment in primeval history when angels became demons and began to torment human life? Not specifically. Rather, it's an illustration of the vicious intent of this dragon: to destroy good things God has made, be they angels, stars, or humans.

Yet time does exist and events happen in it. The 1260 days may be symbolic but it does tell us that as God's people on earth, we do undergo lengthy periods of hardship, during which we need to cling to the protection of the Lord. In v.7 John sees war in heaven and the dragon or devil being hurled down. Then in the hymn of vv.10 to 12 this triumph is said to have been brought about by "**the blood of the Lamb**" - in other words' Jesus' death on the cross. And so we have this interplay between the mythic - which is truth outside place and time - and the historical, which is truth inside space and time. And that's a dream or a vision, or an apocalyptic text like Revelation can speak across many places and points in our lives.

The Message of Revelation 12

So what's the message of this chapter? I've given you a lot of background information but how does this chapter speak to us? I began this sermon by talking about the sod's law mindset. But we don't need to be defeatist. The dragon may be fearsome, but we have a powerful God

who fights for us. He has fought for us, he fights for us now, and he will continue to fight for us - for us, with us, alongside us, beneath us, behind us, in front of us, and all around us. I said at the start of this sermon that it's about faith, hope, and love, and now I want to consider the message under those three headings.

The Reward of Faith

First, the reward of faith. John sees: **“a great and wondrous sign 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.”** (12:1-2)

I've already said that the woman stands for God's people, but there are more layers of allusion to uncover. Jewish writings of the time refer to Abraham as being like the sun, Isaac like the moon, and Jacob with his twelve sons as like the stars. Here in Revelation, the woman is clothed with the sun just as Sarai was covered by Abram, the moon, like Isaac her son, is at her feet, and her descendants - for she became the mother of a nation, are her crowning glory - twelve stars for twelve tribes. Indeed, God's promise to Abram was that he would make his **“descendants as numerous as stars in the sky.”** (Gen. 22:17) But Abram and Sarai had to be people of faith.

How is your faith? God has given us so many promises, but sometimes we find them so hard to hold on to. St Paul wrote, **“God, who has called you, is faithful.”** (1 Cor. 1:9; 1 Thess 5:24) Elsewhere he says that even when we are faithless, God's still faithful, (2 Tim.2:13). God's committed to us not because of what *we're* like, but because of his own character. We may find ourselves attacked by the dragon, feeling pursued, weak and vulnerable, but these are times to stand firmly on God's faithfulness. He kept his promise to Abraham - and we ourselves are the proof of that: Abraham's offspring through Christ. And so this same God will keep his promise to us: **“I will never leave you nor forsake you.”** (Hebrews 13:5)

So the first heading under the message of this vision is the reward of faith. Our trust is not misplaced, but it has been, is being, and will be rewarded. The second heading is the power of hope.

The Power of Hope

A thread of fear runs through this chapter. The dragon licks its lips in front of the woman, waiting to devour her child. Later she flees urgently into the desert. Later still she's about to be engulfed by the river. Time and again she's under attack and needs rescuing. But God's protection is always there and so hope is always alive.

Does this mean nothing bad ever happens to us? Not at all. Revelation 11, of which this chapter is a kind of re-run, describes two faithful witnesses who are attacked and killed after prophesying for three and a half years. Their bodies lie in the streets for three and a half days before being resurrected by God. A consistent message of Revelation is that God may not protect the body, but he will always protect the soul of one whose heart is given to him.

But the power of hope in chapter 12 is greater than simply being about protection. The true power of hope lies in the birth of the child: **“a son... Who will rule over all the nations with an iron sceptre.”** (v.6) The picture may not seem attractive, but it's simply picking up on the Messianic hope expressed in Psalm, which the early Christians came to see as pointing to Jesus. The ultimate hope, therefore, doesn't derive from belief in God's protection, but rather from the birth of his Son, our Messiah. Sometimes hope grows weak, however, and that's why John has an urgent message for us. He sees not only the hope inherent in a pregnant woman, but also the fact that her son *has* been born, and *is* safe from the evil one. Therefore change *is* possible. Therefore a new world *can* come. Therefore we will *not* always be defeated - either by the devil or simply by sod's law.

So we've seen the drama of this chapter pointing to the reward of faith and the power of hope. The final aspect of its message is the triumph of love.

The Triumph of Love

The triumph of God's love in this drama begins with his apparent joy in the woman. She appears resplendent and God loves her. He saves her child from the dragon's mouth, and he takes care of her in the desert, (v.6) But the greatest message of this love comes in the contrast between the salvation of God and the fury of the dragon who is cast down by it. This salvation, which we read about in v.10 doesn't come by force. It's not by coercion that the great accuser is thrown down and denied his voice in the heavenly realm. In v.11 we read that **“they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony.”**

The way of Christ, the way of the one who rules with an iron sceptre, is the way of the Lamb, the way of love, the way of one who **“gives his life as a ransom for many”** (Mark 10:45). The dragon is one who accuses, a prosecutor before the judge - one whose aim is to prove us guilty. But the Messiah saves us by covering our guilt, paying the price for it with his own blood, his own life. And so there is no longer a case to answer. The ransom's been paid. The charges must be dropped. The accuser no longer has a voice. He's thrown out of court. He was defeated by love. And this way of Christ must continue to be *our* way. **“They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony.”** If we struggle on with the adversarial weapons of the devil's fury then we simply become like the dragon. But salvation calls us to speak instead of sacrificial love.

So how do you deal with conflict? Do you simply run and become fearful? Do you absorb it and become bitter? Do you lash out and answer fury with fury? Or do you try to handle the conflict in the confidence of Christ, and point to the grace of God which covers all of us?

Conclusion

So just to draw things together. The chapter of Revelation is quite a scary one. The dragon that still wages war on the offspring of the woman - in other words, us and all of God's people today - can be vicious and destructive. It seeks to damage us in a whole host of ways, but ultimately by trying to undermine our trust of Jesus. The Spirit has therefore revealed to John, and by extension to us, that God is entirely faithful in every way, that we can stand again and proclaim a certain hope rather than a hopeful bet, because that hope is rooted firmly in the undying love of God, and the finished work of Christ on the cross. So, as Paul wrote, **“these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.”** (1 Cor. 13).