



Part 26 – A Woman, A Child, and A Dragon

Revelation 12:1-6

“The main point of chapter 12 is the protection of God’s people against Satan because of Christ’s decisive victory over Satan through His death and resurrection. The purpose is to encourage the readers to persevere in their witness despite persecution.”¹

Revelation 12 forms a theological break in the action between the seven trumpets and the seven bowls. It stands in the very center of the book and helps to explain further the source of all the church’s trouble in this world. The messages to the specific churches in Asia minor describe the sorts of pressures put upon the church from hostile forces outside and sinful compromises within. The seals reveal the calamities unleashed upon the world, all of which fall under the sovereign decree of the resurrected Christ. The trumpets depict God’s judgment upon an unrepentant world. But throughout these harrowing depictions of persecution and judgment, John’s vision is interspersed at various points with symbolic descriptions of how God seals and keeps his church through all of her woes.²

Beginning in chapter 12, “we encounter the battle between the false trinity (Satan, the beast, and the earth beast) and the Triune God and his followers.”³ In the first section of chapter 12 the vision gains greater specificity as three characters in the cosmic war are identified: a woman, a child, and a dragon.

The Dragon

From Genesis 3 onward, the Bible tells the story of the dragon’s attempt to devour the child, first by cutting off the righteous line, and then finally by destroying him at the cross.

Vs. 3 – “And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads seven diadems.” – The dragon is easily identified as Satan, the ancient serpent from the garden (confirmed in verse 9). John’s vision paints a frightening image. As we will see in the vision of the woman, the description of the dragon is highly symbolic. The dragon’s seven heads and ten horns depict the completeness of his reach to affect wickedness and persecution around the world. The seven “diadems” (crowns) are symbolic of Satan’s false claims to be the sovereign authority on the earth.⁴

Vs. 4 – “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.” – The sweeping of stars out of heaven is an image intended to convey the great power of the dragon. Much of the imagery of this chapter comes from Daniel. The dragon sweeping the stars out of heaven is taken from Daniel 8:10, the fourth beast of Daniel’s vision. There too the account was of the oppression of the people of God by spiritual powers. The dragon waits in eager longing to devour the child the moment he is born. Recall the efforts made to kill Jesus in his infancy.

The Child

Vs. 5 – “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...” – In verses 2 and 4, the child is mentioned indirectly. Here John’s vision identifies the child more directly and leaves no doubt that he is Jesus the Messiah. The vision connects this child to the prophecy of Psalm 2 which tells of the Messiah who will “rule all the nations with a rod of iron.” The reference to the “child” being “caught up to God and to his throne” points to the ascension and glorification of the resurrected Christ. “Passing over Jesus’ earthly life, [the vision] arrives immediately at the ascension and enthronement of the Messiah...The Messiah himself is beyond the reach of satanic attack. So, subsequent to the ascension, Satan turns his attention to the woman, the followers of the Messiah.”⁵

¹ G.K. Beale, *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015) p. 242

² Beale, p. 241

³ J. Scott Duvall, *A Theology of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2015) p. 212

⁴ Beale, p. 246

⁵ Vern Poythress, *The Returning King* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2000) p. 136

The Woman

Vs. 1 – “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.” – The term translated “sign” (*seimeion*) refers to a symbol which carries a deeper meaning than the surface description. It is a reminder that John is writing in word pictures. The woman is “clothed” in the regalia of God’s good creation (in contrast to the great harlot who is adorned in the world’s riches). Roman Catholics view the woman as Mary because her offspring in verse five is clearly Jesus. But Protestant interpreters view the woman as a symbolic representation of the church from her infancy (Israel) through her fulfillment as the new covenant body of Christ. Indeed, in the rest of the chapter she seems to occupy *that* role. For example, we read how this woman is persecuted and flees into the wilderness following the ascension of Jesus and later in verse 17 her offspring are said to be the saints. It seems clear that the woman is symbolic of the church. The twelve stars on her head represent the twelve tribes of Israel. In chapter 7, the church is depicted as 12,000 men from the 12 tribes of Israel. The woman appears in heaven, not on earth or Bethlehem or Nazareth. This is the church or, as Paul puts it in Galatians 4, “the free woman,” the new covenant community allegorically depicted by Sarah.

Vs. 2 – “She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pains and the agony of giving birth.” – Although Mary may be “secondarily in mind, the primary focus is not on an individual but on the community of faith, within which the messianic line ultimately yielded a kingly offspring...The woman’s birth-pangs refer to the persecution of the covenant community and the messianic line during Old Testament times and especially the intertestamental period leading up to Christ’s birth.”⁶ Poythress writes:

“The light-bearing character of the woman foreshadows the glory of the new Jerusalem (21:11, 22-27). She has her citizenship in heaven and receives the splendor and importance of heaven. In her privileges, the church already partakes of the blessings that are to come. But she is still buffeted by Satan.”⁷

Vs. 6 – “...and the woman fled into the wilderness...” – The woman is now depicted as being no longer in heaven but on earth. These sorts of shifts in vantage point are common in Revelation. Once again the church is troubled by tribulation for 3 ½ years, a period first found in the prophecies of Daniel 7, 9, and 12. As we’ve already seen the 3 ½ year period of time is symbolic of the time in which evil will be permitted to exercise great influence. In its use here, as in chapter 11 and in 13:5, the period of 3 ½ years, 1,260 days, or forty-two months – all three forms of the description are found in Revelation – depicts the church’s life between the two advents of Christ (“the church age”). The 42 months may derive from the 42 stages of Israel’s progress through the wilderness (as listed in Numbers 33:5-49). In Scripture, the desert wilderness was often a place not only of various dangers but also of spiritual refuge for the people of God.

“The story being told is really the story of the gospel. The dragon pursues the woman because he wants to destroy her unborn child who is the rightful heir to the kingdom of the world. The child is Jesus, the Messiah. The mother, we learn, is not his literal mother Mary but the community of God’s people to whom the Messiah is given.”⁸

Satan, the dragon, has been defeated. But even though the wound he has received is fatal, he fights on. This fatal wound has been dealt to him by the One who came into the world through the holy seed of his redeemed (Genesis 3:15). It is through his beloved people, the holy line of the redeemed, that God brought the Messiah into the world, the One who came to crush the dragon once and for all.

1. The tireless wickedness of Satan**2. The unbreakable faithfulness of God****3. The wonder of the incarnation**

⁶ Beale, p. 244

⁷ Poythress, p. 134

⁸ Paul Spilsbury, *The Throne, the Lamb and the Dragon* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2002) p. 91