

Defeating the Dragon

Revelation 12

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Do you remember as a child hearing your parents or other family members talk about life before you were born? It begins to dawn on you that the world didn't start with you. Your life is part of something bigger.

Each of our lives is a story. We each have a story to tell. Our stories intersect with other people's stories. But we also discover that we come into the middle of another story that's already going on. Our stories are part of a bigger one.

It's the story of God and God's people. In grace, God creates a world, a universe. Into this creation God places beings that he's made. Some of God's creatures—angels, spiritual beings—used the freedom God gave them to rebel against God. Human beings used the freedom we were given to rebel against God. Now God's on a mission to rescue and redeem and restore humans to right relationship with himself and to be the people he made us to be. The people of Israel are a big part of that work of God. Their story is the story of what God has done.

This story reaches its high point, its fulfillment, in Jesus the Messiah. His incarnation, birth, life, ministry, teaching, death, resurrection, and ascension express God's love and purpose. Jesus opens the way for everyone to find their place in God's story, to make his story ours. The final chapter has yet to be told. That'll come with the return of Jesus, when he appears in glory as King and Lord and floods all of creation with the glory and love of God.

In the meantime, until that final day, Jesus already rules. God's kingdom is advancing. But the world is still broken. We live in a time when the old ways of sin and death are still clinging, still active, but the new way of grace and salvation and life is available. The goal is for our story to become more fully aligned with God's story, to allow his to shape us and form us—and for us to be less influenced by the old story of rebellion, alienation, and death.

This is the story that John retells in Revelation 12. It looks like the book of Revelation could have concluded at the end of chapter 11. But the second half of the book tells what is happening and what will happen in a slightly different way. Chapters 12-15 show us a war that rages from Christ's incarnation (12:5) to his second coming (14:14-20). We, along with John's readers, live in between those two events. People who look back to Jesus' first coming and await his second coming find ourselves called to endure as we face competing claims for our loyalty (13:10; 14:12). The struggle can be intense, but in the end John brings us back to the heavenly throne room, where God's people who have overcome the beast sing praise to God and to the Lamb the way they have at the end of other cycles in Revelation (15:1-4; see Craig Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things* 117).

In Revelation 12, John borrows from the Old Testament and from popular storytelling of his time to retell the story of God, God's people, and Jesus.

There were ancient and popular myths from Babylon, Egypt, and Greece that were circulating in the late first century, when John received this revelation and wrote to the churches. One myth told about a dragon and another Beast that threatened the reigning gods. In some tellings, the supreme god was defeated or killed and the dragon ruled in chaos for a while. Finally the dragon was defeated by the god who had ruled before or by one of his allies.

In one Greek form of the story, Apollo was born from the goddess Leto. The great dragon Python pursued Leto because he learned that she would bear a child who would kill him. Leto was carried off to Poseidon, the god of the sea, who placed her on a remote island and then sank the island for good measure! Python failed to find her and went back to his mountain. Leto's island was brought up from the sea. Her infant was born and immediately gained full strength. Within four days Apollo went and killed Python. In a Babylonian version there was a seven-headed sea monster who fought the gods. (On these myths and John's use of them, see Ben Witherington, *Revelation. The New Cambridge Bible Commentary* 164-65.)

Isn't it interesting that God would inspire John to use popular mythology to tell God's own story? God's able to make use of just about

anything to communicate with us. God starts with what we can understand to lead us into more truth. So this story in Revelation of the woman giving birth to a ruler who's threatened by a dragon would have echoed stories that a lot of John's readers would have already known.

Another thought is that myths and stories that are told in various cultures have hints of truth in them. They point to a bigger story, a true fulfillment of what they're hinting at. J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis claimed that in Jesus the old myths come true. That was one of the points Tolkien made that helped Lewis come back to Christian faith after being an atheist for several years. For example, there are myths of dying and rising gods in various cultures. But with Jesus, the myth became real; it actually happened. That's a little different from what's happening with John's use of mythology in Revelation 12, but it's still interesting.

Let's look more closely at the story John tells here. And let's see how the enemy is defeated.

John sees a great sign in heaven. It's almost like a constellation coming to life. The woman in the vision represents the people of God. In the first place, she represents Israel, the covenant people that the Messiah came from. She's pregnant and cries out in pain as she's about to give birth. Then another sign appears: a fearsome monster, a giant red dragon. It's waiting to devour the woman's child when he's born.

We're seeing behind the scenes of the Christmas story. After Jesus was born, some astrologers from Persia came to find him. When they inquired at the palace of Herod, who called himself the king of the Jews, they were told the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem. Herod was threatened by the idea of new king, a true king of the Jews. So he began the attack on Jesus, sending soldiers to kill young boys in Bethlehem, hoping to get rid of this rival. That was the dragon trying to devour the child. But God warned Joseph and he got Jesus and Mary out of Bethlehem in time.

The opposition to Jesus continued all through his public ministry and it finally brought him to die on a cross. And yet, he's the one who was born to reign, who "will rule all the nations with an iron scepter." That's from

Psalm 2, a royal psalm that celebrated the king of Israel and is fulfilled in King Jesus.

The whole life of Jesus is condensed into a verse here. He was born to rule and he was snatched up to God and to his throne. Jesus was born, he lived, he taught, he healed, he died, he was raised from the dead. Then he was exalted, brought to the throne of God, like the Son of Man that Daniel saw in a vision. That's how he became the Lamb that was slain who stands at the center of God's throne.

One result of Jesus coming into the world and doing what he did is that war breaks out in heaven. The archangel Michael and his angels fight against the dragon and his angels. Michael and his angels win. The dragon and his angels lose their place in heaven. Now we finally learn who the dragon is. He's the ancient serpent, called the devil, or Satan. He's the adversary of God's people. He's hurled out of heaven to the earth. Later, he'll be hurled from the earth into the Abyss and then into the lake of fire.

We don't know much about the devil's origin. There's not much about him in the OT. The Hebrew phrase "the satan" means "the adversary." He seems to have been some sort of angel who acted as a prosecutor, accusing God's people. Some have taken a couple of passages in the prophets about the downfall of pagan kings to have a bigger meaning and to point to the rebellion by Satan and other angels against God. In the Gospels, Jesus dealt with the devil and various unclean spirits that are usually taken to be these fallen angels. Since Jesus' death and resurrection, Satan's influence is limited. He's not part of the heavenly court. He's kind of corralled on earth. He's already defeated, but he still keeps lashing out.

There's another worship song here that announces his defeat and celebrates what God has done in Jesus to defeat this enemy.

God's salvation, power, and kingdom, and the Messiah's authority have come. They are present and available.

The accuser has been hurled down. We might think of the apostle Paul's words here:

Therefore, there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.... If God is for us, who can be against us? ...Who will bring any

charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. ...[nothing in heaven or earth] will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:1, 33-34, 39)

The dragon is defeated by the blood of the Lamb and the word of the martyrs' testimony.

We want God to rule. We're happy for him to defeat evil. But we may not be thrilled with how God does it. He rules from a cross. He defeats evil through self-giving love. He makes himself vulnerable and lets evil do its worst to him. He takes it in and transforms it. Then he rises from the dead in victory over it.

We share God's rule, we defeat the enemy by following Jesus and identifying with him in the way of the cross. Whether we literally give up our lives for our testimony, we still bear witness to Jesus who died and rose again. That means ultimate victory, but it also means conflict on the way to victory.

Knowing that his area of operation is limited and that his time is short, the dragon, the devil, lashes out again. He goes after the woman who gave birth to the Messiah. But she was given eagles' wings so she could fly to a place of protection and provision. The 1,260 days or time, times, and half a time represent the time we're living in between Jesus' first and second comings. It's an indefinite but limited time. Here the woman represents all the people of God, of old and new covenants. The dragon tries to drown her, but the earth itself helps her. Creation is on the side of God's people.

So the dragon chases the rest of the woman's offspring, the believers who keep God's commands and hold fast their testimony about Jesus. Eugene Peterson says that by the end of the chapter, the dragon appears a bit bedraggled. It seems John is having a little fun at the devil's expense (*Reversed Thunder* 122).

I mentioned that John's vision employs popular mythology, but it also draws on the long story of God's people. This lets the story apply to people in many times and places—it applies to us. Let's highlight some moments from the story of God's people that appear here.

Think of *Eve*, the mother of all the living. She was warned that she would have pain in childbearing. The woman in John's vision cries out in the pain of childbirth. Eve was tricked by "that ancient serpent" who deceived her. But God promised that her offspring would bruise the serpent's head (Genesis 3:15). That happened through the victory of Jesus the Lamb of God and the people of God over Satan the serpent.

Parts of the woman's story recall *Israel's exodus and wilderness journey*. The people of Israel fled through the sea to escape destruction by Pharaoh who pursued them. And God, who is able to "divide the sea" and to "break the heads of the dragons" (Psalm 74:12-15), carried the people of Israel on "eagle's wings" to a place of refuge in the wilderness (Exodus 19:4). God nourished them with manna in the wilderness (Deuteronomy 8:3). The woman in Revelation is delivered from the dragon, who spews a flood of water against her. She's given eagle's wings to carry her into the wilderness where she's nourished.

Through a good bit of Israel's history, they're threatened by the *king of Egypt*. Ezekiel calls him a dragon (29:3; 32:2). Later, the armies of *Babylon* threaten and capture Jerusalem. Jeremiah compares the king of Babylon to a dragon that filled its belly on the people of God (51:34). *Daniel* spoke about a fearsome monster that had ten horns like the dragon (7:7). Isaiah speaks of *Zion, the city of God*, being in labor and giving birth to a son, which is a sign of deliverance (66:7-9).

After all that, John ties his vision to the experience of Christians, who are threatened because they "hold their testimony about Jesus." In the story of the woman, John's readers can see their story, and we can see our story within the story of God's people. We participate, we don't just watch the action from a distance. The dragon's coming after us—sometimes openly, violently, but sometimes subtly and sneakily. We overcome by the blood of the Lamb, by staying close to the cross and Jesus who died for us. And we

overcome by the word of witness as we tell who Jesus is and what he's done for us. (For this summary, see Koester 124-25.)

The gospel and people who believe the gospel and follow Jesus have powerful and fierce enemies. But those enemies have been defeated. The decisive battle has been won. There's an illustration of this in the history of World War II. In June 1944, the Allies landed at Normandy on D-Day and established a foothold in France, which was occupied by the Germans. The end of the war was in sight from then on. But it wasn't until May 1945 that Germany was fully defeated and surrendered on VE-Day. Between D-Day and VE-Day there was still a lot to do, lots of battles, but the final outcome wasn't in doubt.

Jesus came and invaded this world. He established a foothold for the kingdom of God. Through all that he did, especially in his death and resurrection, he won the battle. Someday he'll appear again in glory to finish the war. In this time between, the kingdom of God keeps advancing. And we have a part in that advance. God wants to work in us and through us to defeat evil, to give a preview of life as he means it to be, to give glimpses now of what his kingdom will be when it's fully realized. God does that as we live lives of love and faithfulness, as we walk with the one who rules and defeats enemies by loving and giving his life on a cross.

Who will we line up with? Who will we give our allegiance to? A defeated enemy who's struggling even though his doom is sure? Or, Jesus the victorious one who rules in love?