

## #18 THE WOMAN AND THE DRAGON (REV 12)

**Setting up the vision.** God gave man and woman dominion over the beasts and the earth, but the craftiest of all beasts deceived Eve and gain the upper hand over mankind. God cursed the snake, declaring that he and the woman and their offspring would be enemies. The snake would attack her offspring's heel, but the woman's offspring would crush the snake's head (Gen. 3:14-15). However, it would be in much pain that Eve would bear children. In contrast to Adam and Eve, Abraham obeyed God's voice, so God promised that it would be through *Abraham and Sarah's offspring* that all nations would receive this blessing and more (Gen. 22:17-18).

Scripture depicts much of this battle between the offspring of the woman and the snake. The nations with their rulers plot and scheme — with Satanic spirits at work in them — how to overthrow God's people and rule. But God further specified his promise: within the lineage of Abraham, God would establish a king from David's offspring — both David's and God's Son — who would rule the nations with a rod of iron and dash the rebels into pieces (Ps. 2).

However, both Abraham and David's offspring stopped listening to God's voice. They all became like snakes and spiders themselves (Isa. 59:5). The hope that they would bear offspring to overcome the forces of evil seemed dead. But the prophets described the daughter of Zion as a woman in labor — writhing and groaning until deliverance was birthed in the form of a king. They would suffer, but this ruler's birth would signal hope (Mic. 4-5). God's faithful remnant needed to hold on through the bruising of the snake — these pains of childbirth would bring forth conquering offspring. This and more stands behind the vision of Revelation 12.

As Revelation 12 opens, two signs appear in heaven. **First**, a pregnant woman clothed with the sun, feet resting on the moon, and crowned with twelve stars — she is crying out in birth pains. Looking at the chapter as a whole, she appears to be a unified portrait of God's suffering-yet-faithful remnant anticipating offspring who will conquer the snake (or, dragon).<sup>118</sup> **Second**, a great red dragon waits to devour the woman's offspring. Later in the chapter, this is identified as Satan — the ancient snake from the garden. The woman bears the child — Jesus, the one who is to rule the nations — but he is snatched from the dragon up to God's throne. The rest of the chapter depicts the defeat and casting of Satan and his angels from heaven, the woman escaping the dragon to be nourished in the wilderness, and the dragon determining to wage war on the rest of the offspring of the woman. Looking at vision as a whole, a number of significant themes arise.

**Nourished and vulnerable.** This vision offers yet another view into how the people of God are both protected and vulnerable. After the woman's child is caught up to God's throne, the dragon and his angels are cast to the earth. The dragon pursues the woman (*generally*: the people of God). Despite the dragon's pursuits, she escapes to the wilderness to be nourished for 1,260 days or, later described as for a time, times, and half a time. The language here bears many similarities to when God rescued Israel from Egypt into the wilderness. Pharaoh is depicted in Satanic terms as a great sea dragon that God slew at the Exodus (or, Leviathan; Ps. 74:12-14; Isa. 51:9). God bore Israel "on eagle's wings" out of the grasp of Pharaoh into the wilderness (Exod. 19:4). While the wilderness was a difficult time of testing, it was also the place where God cared for Israel (Ex. 16:32; Deut. 2:7; 8:4).<sup>119</sup> Later, the prophets talked about God's coming salvation in terms of a new

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<sup>118</sup> Nailing down an ultra specific referent for this woman is likely not helpful. She is like the woman of Genesis 3 who would birth the offspring to crush the snake; she is like the daughter of Zion hoping her offspring would rule the nations; she is like Mary who really did birth this child; she is all the people of God — raising up offspring to battle the dragon. She can also be seen as all true Israel — see Gen. 37:9-10.

<sup>119</sup> See Beale, 248-249 for a fuller look at the Exodus theme here.

exodus (Jer. 16:14-15, etc.). God would again slay Pharaoh and the great sea dragon (Isa. 27:1; Ezek. 29:3-5; 32:2-6). The prophets repeatedly foresaw how God would pour out water and nourish his people in the wilderness (Isa. 41:17-20; 51:3; Jer. 31:2; Ezek. 34:25-31, etc.). The dragon is unquestionably fierce, but the woman is well protected by God in the wilderness.

But the people of God are also exposed. Frustrated at his inability to harm the woman, the dragon leaves to make war on *the rest of her offspring*. While Jesus is a unique offspring of the woman who overcomes Satan, he is simply the first in a whole family of offspring who battle the dragon's forces. Chapter 13 will explore the theme of how Satan makes war on the woman's offspring by means of two beasts who have authority for the similar forty-two month period.

This time period (1,260 days, forty-two months, etc.) seems to generally span from Jesus' resurrection until Jesus' second coming. During this time God's people have been imaged as simultaneously protected and vulnerable. We have seen this paradox before. God's people exercise royal power (kingdom) in tribulation (1:9). God's people are both a sealed army and a crowd of martyrs (ch. 7), a measured temple and a trampled city, a woman nourished in the desert and her offspring on whom Satan makes war. God's people are not protected from persecution but through it. But how can the people of God patiently endure Satan's attacks?

**Conquer.** War breaks out in heaven with Michael and his angels fighting the dragon and his angels. The dragon had cast a third of the stars to earth (12:4, potentially harming God's people - Dan. 12:3), but here the dragon is defeated and thrown down with his angels to the earth. While it initially appears that Michael and his angels alone accomplish this conquering, verse 11 shows the people of God participate significantly. This aligns with Romans 16:20, "*The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.*" This conquering is not as final as Romans 16:20 or even Revelation 20, but the dragon's power over God's people is nullified through Jesus (Heb. 2:14-16). Given the other pictures of Satan's fall elsewhere (Luke 10:18; 11:14-22; John 12:31; etc.), it is likely best not see this as a single event, but rather as an ongoing frustration of Satan's powers enabled by Jesus.

But how do God's people conquer the dragon? This vision speaks both to the ways the devil ("slanderer," "accuser") and Satan ("adversary") does battle and to how his powers are frustrated.

- Satan is described as "*the deceiver of the whole world,*" but the brothers and sisters conquer him by the word of their testimony. Their testimony is elsewhere described as "*the testimony of Jesus*" and as "*the spirit of prophecy.*" While the testimony of Jesus is truth, it is not truth in general (math, history, psychology, etc.) that allows them to overcome Satan's deceptions; rather, as we will later see, it is the prophetic message of Revelation that God alone should be worshipped (see 19:10 and later discussion).<sup>120</sup>
- Satan is described as the "*accuser of our brothers [and sisters]... who accuses them day and night before our God.*" This picture of Satan as an accuser is seen in both Job 1-2 and Zechariah 3. But the brothers and sisters conquer him "*by the blood of the Lamb.*" God had appeared to be unjust because he did not dole out the due punishment for sin, thus Satan accused God's people (and God). But Jesus has freed us from our sins and allowed us to wash our robes white in his blood (1:5; 7:14), so the accusations of Satan are rendered powerless (*cf.* Zech. 3; Rom. 3:21-26).
- Satan has the power of death and enslaves people by means of their fear of death (Heb. 2:14-15). However, the brothers and sisters are said to overcome Satan's forces, "*for they loved not their lives even unto death.*" The earth-beast will cause those who do not worship the sea-beast to be slain and to be unable to buy or sell. They do not allow the fear of death or of their inability to have the life others have to enslave them into worship of the beast. They are

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<sup>120</sup> See Bauckham, 118-121 for a fuller explanation of the testimony of Jesus as the spirit of prophecy.

willing to die for their testimony, but, even more, they *do not love their lives*. Killed or not, they are living sacrifices (cf. Luke 9:23-25; Rom. 12:1).

Jesus and the Spirit urged each of the seven churches to conquer, and now we see the object of their conquering — at least in part. The dragon has an arsenal of schemes — both to overtly wage war and to quietly shush them to sleep (3:1-3). Every generation of Christians must take hold of the kingdom, power, and salvation of the Lord to render him and his forces powerless.<sup>121</sup>

**He knows his time is short.** When Satan and his angels are cast from heaven, woes are pronounced upon the earth and sea because he has come down in great wrath. Later, unable to reach the woman, the dragon is “*furious with the woman*” as he turns to “*make war on the rest of her offspring*.” Seeing this vision is immensely helpful. From an earthly perspective, when Satan’s power is most obvious and vicious, it may seem like the saints are losing. However, in Revelation, Satan’s overt attacks are a sign he is losing. Satan does not win by slaying saints, for they are protected. He only wins when he causes the churches to cave in fear of the beast or to compromise with the prostitute. However, the contrasting experiences of the churches show us how Satan has little need for the earth-beast (see ch. 13) in cities where the wealth, power, and sexual immorality of the prostitute has lulled the churches to sleep.

**Ordered disorder.** Revelation imparts a transcendent perspective that orders our disorganized perception of reality. Consider how the vision of the pregnant woman in labor gives us a clear picture of what was happening on earth before Jesus’ birth. For centuries, it appeared as though Israel was suffering a chaotic mess that was going nowhere (exile, Antiochus Epiphanes, etc.) — especially as many Jews defected into Hellenization while many of the faithful were killed. But, we see here that their tribulations were birth pains to bring about the one who would rescue them.

When Jesus was born, Herod killed a whole region of baby boys in an attempt to kill Jesus. Later, Jesus was resisted, betrayed, arrested, falsely accused, and crucified. This opposition may appear random on earth, but they were the organized forces of Satan.

Our secular culture denies supernatural reality. Good, bad, catastrophic — these things are all random to the secular eye. But the vision of chapter 12 (and other visions) gives order and meaning to our chaotic experience. God, his people, his angels, a dragon, and his angels are all in a cosmic battle spanning all time. Christians must neither be blind to God’s activity nor ignorant of the dragon’s schemes. As a couple of writers have put it, John’s Revelation may appear to manufacture a crisis — especially for Christians in Laodicea or Sardis. But “complacency... *was the crisis*.”<sup>122</sup> There is a terrible danger for the churches to be blind and asleep, unaware of Satan’s and God’s activity. Revelation’s visions offer the opportunity to wake up and purchase some eye salve.

***What strikes you as significant or eye-opening from this vision of the woman and the dragon?***

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<sup>121</sup> Writing near Mother’s Day, I am reminded of the vital role mothers play in this salvation. Because of Jesus, mothers — in great pain — have the opportunity to bring snake-crushers into the world (1 Tim. 3:13-15).

<sup>122</sup> Howard-Brook and Gwyther, *Unveiling Empire*, 116. Quoted in Gorman, 33.