

“By the Blood of the Lamb”

Sermons on the Book of Revelation # 18

Texts: Revelation 12:1-17; Isaiah 54:1-8

John has witnessed the Lamb open the scroll and its seven seals. He has witnessed seven angels sound seven trumpets, announcing God’s judgment against the city of man which persecutes the church of Jesus Christ. Now, John sees a war in heaven in which Satan is cast down to the earth where he wages war upon the saints who are protected by God and who overcome the Devil and those allied with him through the blood of the Lamb.

We now enter a new section of John’s apocalyptic vision in Revelation chapter 12. As with all things in the Book of Revelation, a word of explanation is in order before we go any further. Beginning with this chapter we find a whole new perspective on the course of redemptive history, markedly different from that of the seal and trumpet judgments which we have already covered. Revelation chapter twelve marks the literary center of this book and is an important turning point in the apocalyptic drama.¹ While in certain sense Revelation 12 contains a change in subject from what we have just covered in Revelation 8-11, in some ways it really doesn’t. Let me explain.

Recall the analogy we have been using—that of different camera angles focusing on the same series of events. Take, for example, the seal judgments of Revelation 6-8:1. The focus is upon the Lamb who was worthy to open the scroll and its seven seals. When the Lamb open the seven seals, God’s judgment comes against one fourth of the earth. When the seven seals—seven being the symbolic number for perfection—have run their course, we read of the second coming of Jesus Christ, to judge the world, raise the dead and make all things new. Although the seal judgments intensify before the end of the age—remember the birth pain analogy—these judgments cover the period of time between the first and second coming of Christ from the perspective (or the camera angle) of the worthiness of the Lamb.

Then in Revelation 8-11, we read of a new series of judgments upon the earth, this time more intense than the seals, effecting one-third of the earth and its inhabitants. The series of trumpet judgments run simultaneously with the seal judgments, and as we have seen, there are many parallels between these two cycles of judgment. The trumpet judgments are the result of the prayers of the suffering saints, which ascend before the throne of God, who hears the cries of his people suffering upon the earth, who then acts to vindicate them. And yet despite God’s judgment upon the earth, the earth’s inhabitants are unwilling to repent. They prefer to worship the beast and his image, to worship demons and to reply upon the works of their hands. Therefore, the trumpet judgments run their course with the second coming of Jesus Christ. The trumpets cover the same period of time as the seals, but from a different “camera angle” with a completely different perspective. When the seventh seal was opened there was silence in heaven. But when the seventh trumpet sounds, heaven is opened and the ark of the covenant is seen, the symbolic sign that the wicked city of man—like Jericho—has fallen, totally destroyed by the judgment of God.

In both cycles of judgment there is an interlude between the sixth and seventh judgment. In Revelation 7, during the interlude in the seal judgments, John sees the church upon the earth (the 144,000) sealed with

¹ See Beale, Revelation, 621.

the name of Christ and thereby protected from his wrath. He also sees the church in heaven (the great multitude no one can count). During the interlude between the sixth and seventh trumpet judgments, likewise, John sees the church on earth and in heaven. John sees the heavenly temple—the mystical body of Jesus Christ—as well as the church on the earth, the outer court of the temple, trampled down by the Gentiles for 42 months (three and a half-years), which is the last half of the seventieth week of Daniel’s prophecy of the seventy weeks as recorded in Daniel chapter 9:24-27. Both interludes describe the church militant on the earth struggling against the beast and those allied with him, and the church triumphant in heaven, which has conquered her enemies and is now safe awaiting the day of resurrection.

The purpose of these two interludes is not only to give the persecuted church of John’s day hope in the face of persecution from the pagan Roman empire, but to explain to us the nature of the spiritual warfare we face two-thousand years later. In Revelation 10, we read of a mighty angel who gave a little scroll to John and commanded him to eat it. The scroll contained the bittersweet word of the law and the gospel, as well as the declaration of the final word of woe which is coming upon the earth when the seventh trumpet sounds and when Jesus Christ returns to earth to judge the world. This message was given to John and who now, through this vision, passes it on to the church. This means that it is our mission to preach the law and the gospel, and to warn the world of the final judgment yet to come.

In Revelation 11, John describes two mysterious witnesses, who like Zerubabel, build the temple of God, who like Joshua, serve as priests, who like Elijah, can shut up the heavens and call down fire upon the earth, and who like Moses, can bring plagues upon those who oppose the kingdom of God. These images, as we have seen, virtually mirror the first four seal and trumpet judgments. But when empowered by Satan and allowed to do so by God, the beast turns upon the two witnesses and kills them, leaving their bodies in the street of the boastful and arrogant city of man, the symbolic sign of the world’s disdain for their message. The two witnesses are symbolic of the church of Jesus Christ, preaching to the world the bittersweet words given by the angel to John, and in turn, by John to the church.

But just when it appears that the beast silences the preaching of the gospel, God intervenes and vindicates his witnesses by raising them from the dead and taking them to heaven. He also raises up more witnesses to preach the gospel after them. The point is that Satan cannot win. He cannot triumph. The beast will kill the witnesses of Jesus Christ only to find God raise up new ones to take their places. But this struggle will come to an end, John says, when the seventh trumpet sounds on the great day of judgment, when, at long last, the kingdoms of this world become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ. When the seventh and final trumpet sounds, the city of man is destroyed and the New Jerusalem will come down from heaven to take its place. When the seventh trumpet sounds, the elders around the throne worship God because all that was hidden is finally revealed. God’s will is now done on earth, just as it has been in heaven. Babylon the Great is no more! The New Jerusalem will take its place.

Therefore, the seal and trumpet judgments each view the same period of time, and some of the same events, though they do so from different perspectives, or from different “camera angles.” So when Revelation 12 opens with a new vision, we should *not* see what is written here as descriptive of that which comes after the seal and trumpet judgments simply because Revelation 12 comes after Revelation 8-11. Instead, we should view this section as the beginning of a whole new vision, a vision which once again takes us from the first coming of Christ to his second advent, which is depicted in Revelation 14:14-20. Once again, we will discuss the period of time between the first advent and second coming of Christ, from yet another camera angle or theological vantage point.

Although there is no explicit numbering mentioned here, beginning in Revelation 12 John discusses seven main characters—in symbolic form, of course—who are the primary combatants in the cosmic war between Christ and Satan during this present age,² which is that same period of time between the two comings of Christ and variously spoken of by John as the “last days,” “the great tribulation,” “the thousand years,” “the forty-two months,” and the “1260 days.” The seven histories of the seven symbolic characters include the account of the dragon, the woman, the beast, the false prophet, the angelic announcers, the 144,000 and the Son of Man.

The antagonists in the story are the dragon (who is Satan), and his primary henchmen, the beast and the false prophet. Together, these three enemies of God form a counterfeit “trinity” of sorts, and attempt to lead the world away from Jesus Christ.³ We will face these same antagonists in our own lives as Christians and as a church. As Paul reminds us in Ephesians 6:12, “*or our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.*” The two main protagonists are the woman (Israel) and the 144,000 (the redeemed people of God). These characters are the primary figures in the spiritual conflict we watch play out in redemptive history as a whole, as well as in this present evil age in which we live.⁴

Turning to our text in Revelation 12:1-6, we find two of the central characters in the great drama of redemption, the woman (Israel) and the dragon (Satan).

The vision opens with a dramatic scene. “*A great and wondrous sign appeared 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.*” Who is this woman? Some, most notably Roman Catholic interpreters, have argued that this is the virgin—to whom they refer as the queen of heaven—in part, based upon this vision.⁵

But once again, the key to proper interpretation is the Old Testament. For one thing, this vision immediately recalls to mind Genesis 37:9-10 and the account of Joseph’s dream. “*Then he had another dream, and he told it to his brothers. ‘Listen,’ he said, ‘I had another dream, and this time the sun and moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me.’ When he told his father as well as his brothers, his father rebuked him and said, ‘What is this dream you had? Will your mother and I and your brothers actually come and bow down to the ground before you?’*” The stars, you may recall, represent Jacob, his wife and the heads of the tribes of Israel. This foreshadows the coming messiah.

Then, there are a number of Old Testament texts, including our Old Testament lesson Isaiah 54:1-8, which speak of the nation of Israel, using the metaphor of a mother whose house is filled with the children of the husband-redeemer. Isaiah puts it this way: “*Sing, O barren woman, you who never bore a child; burst into song, shout for joy, you who were never in labor; because more are the children of the*

² Poythress, *The Returning King*, 133.

³ Poythress, *The Returning King*, 16 ff.

⁴ Poythress, *The Returning King*, 133.

⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1138.

desolate woman than of her who has a husband,' says the LORD. 'Enlarge the place of your tent, stretch your tent curtains wide, do not hold back; lengthen your cords, strengthen your stakes. For you will spread out to the right and to the left; your descendants will dispossess nations and settle in their desolate cities. . . . For your Maker is your husband—the LORD Almighty is his name—the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer; he is called the God of all the earth. The LORD will call you back as if you were a wife deserted and distressed in spirit—a wife who married young, only to be rejected,' says your God.” From passages such as this one—and there are many more⁶—it is clear that the woman in John’s vision is symbolic of the nation of Israel, which includes the virgin, who has given birth to the Messiah as well as the chosen remnant who will become his people.

If the identity of the woman requires discernment, the identity of the dragon is quite explicit. As we read in verse 3, “*Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on his heads.*” The dragon is identified as Satan in verse 9. The fact that he is depicted as a dragon symbolizes his ferocity, while the hideous imagery of seven crowned heads and ten horns reminds us that there are many different manifestations of Satan’s power in history, seen in the kingdoms of this world which arise and persecute the church. Seven, being the number of fullness or perfection, indicates that Satan’s kingdom is spread throughout the whole world and that his kingdom imitates the kingdom of God—the very height of blasphemy and idolatry.⁷

In a demonstration of the Devil’s power, we read that “*his tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth,*” perhaps a reference to those angelic beings who followed Satan in his revolt against God, but more likely, an echo from Daniel 8 in which a great kingdom grows so powerful it displaces part of the heavens. In any case, the primary image given us here is one of blasphemous arrogance, first seen in Antiochus Epiphanes, who attacked the Jews two centuries before the coming of Christ and who desecrated the Jerusalem temple after it had been rebuilt. Antiochus becomes a type of all god-hating, self-deifying emperors who oppose the kingdom of God, including Caesar Nero.⁸

The struggle between these two characters—the woman and the dragon—is as old as redemptive history itself. In Genesis 3:15, The Lord God says to Adam immediately after the fall, “*And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.*” Here in Revelation 12:4, we see another stage in this conflict when the dragon attempts to kill the promised seed (Jesus Christ), *before* he can bring redemption to God’s people and usher in the messianic kingdom.

According to John, “*The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that he might devour her child the moment it was born. She gave birth to a son, a male child, who will rule all the nations with an iron scepter. And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne.*” Here, we have in apocalyptic form, the account of the birth, the life, the death, the burial, the resurrection, and the ascension of Jesus Christ, as well as God’s protection of Jesus and Mary from the efforts of Herod when he ordered the death of all young Hebrew males in Bethlehem (Matthew 2:1-11).

⁶ See the discussion in Johnson, Triumph of the Lamb, 179-180.

⁷ Poythress, The Returning King, 135.

⁸ Johnson, Triumph of the Lamb, 181.

Having given birth to the Savior, the dragon turns upon the woman—who is now protected by God from the wrath of Satan. *“The woman fled into the desert to a place prepared for her by God, where she might be taken care of for 1,260 days.”* This too, recalls to mind a number of Old Testament events. God kept Israel safe during their 400 years of Egyptian captivity as the people of Israel dwelt safely in Goshen while God’s judgment fell upon Egypt. During the Exodus, God protected Israel in the wilderness while providing them with manna. Just as God provided for Elijah, when he was feed by ravens while hiding in the wilderness (1 Kings 17:2-6), so now God provides for the woman, throughout the entire period of time between Christ’s first and second coming (the 1,260 days).

This, of course, means that the church is the new Israel, protected from Satan’s attacks and given everything she needs during her exile in the wilderness until at last she enters the promised land. Therefore, the church, like Israel, is in the midst of a great exodus from the city of man (John has already called it “Egypt”), wandering in the wilderness, protected by God who feeds us with bread from heaven and who gives us living water, until one day, he will bring us to the promised land, the heavenly city, the New Jerusalem.

But in verse 7, John describes the same period of time, yet from a different perspective—not that of the struggle on earth between the woman and the dragon which we see throughout the great drama of redemptive history—but this time a “behind the scenes glimpse” of the cosmic and heavenly struggle, which culminates in the banishment of Satan from the presence of God. Once the woman has given birth and the Messiah has come, Satan suffers a great defeat. Again, John describes this in apocalyptic terms, as a war between angelic beings. Says John, *“And there was war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. But he [the Dragon] was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven.”*

As a result of this defeat, says John, *“the great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him.”* This is what Jesus is speaking of in Luke 10:18, when he says, *“I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven.”* This is the same event described by John in Revelation 20, when the thousand years (the millennial age) begin. *“And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. He threw him into the Abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations anymore until the thousand years were ended. After that, he must be set free for a short time.”* Therefore, having been defeated by Jesus Christ, Satan is cast down to the earth, banished to abyss, bound by the preaching of the gospel, and now enraged because his days are numbered. But like a mortally wounded animal, Satan is more dangerous now than ever.

As a result of Satan’s defeat, heaven resounds with the sounds of victory. *“Then [John says] I heard a loud voice in heaven say: ‘Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ. For the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down. They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death. Therefore rejoice, you heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to the earth and the sea, because the devil has gone down to you! He is filled with fury, because he knows that his time is short.’”* No longer can Satan enter heaven and make accusations against the saints! For they overcome the Devil by the blood of the Lamb, since their sins have been paid in full, and since Christ’s blood washes them, removing every hint and trace of sin. How can Satan accuse us of anything, since God himself has cleansed us from our sins? The saints don’t fear death, nor do they fear Satan, who can kill the body but cannot touch the soul. But, as John warns

his reader, woe to the earth, for Devil has been cast down, and he is furious because his time is short.

In verse 13, John returns to describing the battle which rages on the earth between Satan and the woman, this time as the battle takes shape after Satan is cast down from heaven. According to John, “*when the dragon saw that he had been hurled to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child. The woman was given the two wings of a great eagle, so that she might fly to the place prepared for her in the desert, where she would be taken care of for a time, times and half a time, out of the serpent’s reach.*” Again, the apocalyptic symbols John uses draw upon Old Testament images of the Exodus. In Exodus 19:4, the Lord says to Israel, “*You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself.*” As YHWH had done for Israel, so now he does for the woman, preserving her in the wilderness for the now familiar period of three and a half years, this time spoken of as “a time, a times and half a time.”

Enraged by his defeat and his impending doom, and frustrated by his inability to overcome the woman or her offspring, John describes Satan opening his mouth and “*spew[ing] water like a river, to overtake the woman and sweep her away with the torrent.*” The image is not literal, but symbolic. Recall that in Revelation 1:16, John had described a sharp sword coming from the mouth of the Son of Man. This, of course, was not a literal sword, but was symbolic of the power of God’s word, able to divide bone from marrow. Unable to conquer the church directly, Satan will attempt to deceive. Therefore, the serpent (dragon) opens his mouth and imitating the powers of the Son of Man, spews forth his own deceptive word to deceive the people of God, symbolized by a great flood. This is the spirit of antichrist which has already gone forth into the world to deceive the people of God through false teaching and which was already plaguing the churches described in the seven letters of Revelation 1-3 (1 John 2:18 ff).⁹

Because the woman sought refuge in the safe place prepared for her by God, God will protect her. Thus we read in verse 16, that “*the earth helped the woman by opening its mouth and swallowing the river that the dragon had spewed out of his mouth.*” Here again, John’s somewhat mysterious language makes perfect sense in light of several Old Testament texts. In Numbers 16 we read that the ground opened and swallowed the false priests of Israel, God’s judgment on those who sought to deceive his people. As soon as Moses finished speaking in verses 31-33, we read, “*the ground under [the priests] split apart and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them, with their households and all Korah’s men and all their possessions. They went down alive into the grave, with everything they owned; the earth closed over them, and they perished and were gone from the community.*” As the ground swallowed Korah’s men alive, so too, God will ensure that the flood of Satanic lies will not overwhelm the church.

Not only do we have the image of God’s judgment coming upon false teachers—symbolically depicted by the earth swallowing the river of Satanic lies—there are covenant promises to be considered here as well. Through the prophet Isaiah, God promises his people, “*When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze*” (43:2). Therefore, when we take refuge in Christ and in his covenant promises, Satan’s lies are of no avail. Satan is defeated by the truth. And, so says John, after being frustrated two times, “*The dragon was enraged at the woman and went off to make war against the rest of her offspring—those who obey God’s commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus.*” The dragon will now wage his battles through the agency of the beast—those anti-Christian governments who persecute the church—and who, at times, is allowed by God to wage war upon

⁹ Johnson, Triumph of the Lamb, 186.

the saints. The story of the god-hating and blasphemous beast is our subject next time, when, Lord willing, we turn to Revelation 13.

Therefore, as we conclude our time, let us be mindful of what John says to Christ's church which must face the rage of Satan after he is cast down to earth. Despite the Devil's rage, he cannot defeat us! Rather, John says, [we] *overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of [our] testimony; [we] did not love [our] lives so much as to shrink from death.* Here again we are reminded of the weapons God has given to us which equip us for this great struggle. God has given us the gospel—the power of God unto salvation—which announces to us that Christ has died for our sins and that he has been raised for our justification.

Since the guilt of our sins has been removed—Christ paying our debt in full—Satan's accusations have no merit.

No longer can he accuse us before God.

Sin no longer has any hold upon us. Its power over us is broken. The penalty has paid in full.

The truth of the gospel has set us free.

And since Jesus Christ has conquered death and the grave in his resurrection, we need not fear death. For even if the beast is permitted to take our lives, we come to life and reign with Christ. And then we take our places before the throne, and join that multitude so vast they cannot be counted as we await the resurrection at the end of the age.

Beloved, John's point is simply this. We overcome the Devil and all his works by the blood of the Lamb. Therefore, we need not fear the sword of the beast, nor lies of the Devil. In fact, we need not fear even death itself. Through the shed blood and triumphant resurrection of Jesus Christ, we have overcome all our enemies. Amen!