

## ***How Did We Get Here?***

### ***Revelation 12***

#### ***Prayer:***

Friends! Let's start with prayer!

#### ***Introduction:***

Today we're talking about the story of Jesus, reframed, looked at in a way that we're not used to looking at; we'll see an enemy, we'll see triumph, we'll see what sort of expectations we should be walking around with as followers of the Lamb. And I think it could be good.

#### ***Locating Ourselves:***

In Chapter 11 we saw the declaration that “the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign forever and ever.” We saw that God is the one who is and was...and has now arrived, no longer coming, but at the end of Chapter 11, here! The Temple of God was opened, we could see the ark that was lost. All the signs Israel expected to see when God was going to finally show up and judge evil line up into place.

And then in Revelation 12 we suddenly shift gears, and enter into something completely different. From a narrative perspective—just as people who “get” stories, understand how they work—we'd expect final judgment to come, right? All the things necessary seem to be in place, now! But instead we enter into this sort of interlude, intermission for a few chapters.

This shouldn't be a surprise, really, because the same thing

happened when the Seal Judgments ended. We expected end of the world...but instead, just saw that set of seven judgments again.

After we move on from this chapter we are going to see some coded and incredibly strong condemnation of Rome, the Emperor, and the worship-demanding Imperial Cult that we've talked so much about.

But this chapter we're looking at: it's crazy intense. And let me just give this away: this vision reframes our basic understanding of what happened when Jesus showed up. It reframes our basic understanding of what happened when Jesus was born.

***Framework:***

Believe it or not, Revelation 12 is pretty straightforward. It's a little sandwich. It's a worship sandwich. It's a worship sandwich with Past bread. If we were to read through, there'd be a scene in the Far Past, a scene of Worship, and a scene in the Recent Past. Far Past, Worship, Recent Past.

***Far Past: 12:1-9***

***Worship: 12:10-12***

***Recent Past: 12:13-17***

This whole chapter is a small history, a story, about how we've arrived at where we are right now--not our right now, of course, but Smyrna's right now, Rome's right now, John's right now. And we can divvy it up, you know: the first 9 verses are about more distant past, and the last four, more recent past. And these stories, which explain our far and

recent history, they surround a scene of worship.

But, look: If today's chapter is about how we in John's churches got here, chapters 13 & 14 are going to tell us about what is really going on around us. And so in some real ways today's message is incomplete without next week's. Today's is kind of a "Part One" to next week's "Part Two."

Anyway, let's walk through this passage, clarifying some things as we do so, and positioning ourselves to figure out what to do with these heavenly signs John has written for us.

### ***Foundations: "Combat Myth"***

But first, let me just mention that in terms of genre, this vision is something that would fall in a category called "combat myth."

We use the word myth to mean "not real," a myth is something that just isn't real. But in theological language, myth refers to stories that guide and define what's most real, explain what's most true about life. I don't know how this got flipped upside down by popular culture, but as a term, "myth" is story story that communicates truth about about our important religious beliefs, whatever they are.

And this "combat myth" is a particular type of myth, a story that gives voice to the struggle between good and evil in the world; and of course as Christians we know that God wins, right? We're not locked in some eternal, good vs. evil battle; evil will lose.

Here's the passage:

***Signs: vv3-6:***

***1 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. 2 She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth.***

***3 Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on its heads. 4 Its tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth. The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that it might devour her child the moment he was born.***

***5 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. 6 The woman fled into the wilderness to a place prepared for her by God, where she might be taken care of for 1,260 days.***

So this is the introduction we have to this combat scene; this grand story that explains to us as John's readers, just how we've got to where we are. And we see these two antagonists, these two characters: one of them a woman, the other a dragon, and each are talked about in just, crazy language, right? And this woman is having labor pains--I mean, she is ready to give birth. And this dragon is waiting

right by her, waiting to eat her newborn.

And the baby is born, a baby described with a royal psalm from the Old Testament, Psalm 2, that was a description of God's Royal Messiah, who would judge evil nations and states and their rulers. And before the dragon can devour the child, it's snatched up to the heavens, and the woman takes flight to a prepared place for that three and a half year period--which we saw last week was a way to describe kind of time, quality of time--a time of suffering.

Our first question should be--even if we think we know the answer to it--who are these characters? Who is this child?

### ***The Child: Jesus?***

And few people have ever said that John is describing anyone other than Jesus when he talks about this child. The verse used to describe the baby, as I just said, is from Psalm 2, a psalm that is quoted all over the New Testament to talk about Jesus. And the emphasis that's made on Jesus as a son is unusual. And we know that Jesus, the Lamb, the Messiah is the one who is at the throne of God, who sits at God's right hand; the idea of being "snatched up" to God's throne echoes the Resurrection. And what we see is God's faithfulness; the dragon doesn't get to chew this baby up, devour him. But if we're talking about the child as Jesus, let's talk about his mother.

### ***The Woman: Mary or Israel?***

And the most natural reading of this woman, the child's mother, this side of Catholicism, would be to see her as Mary, who was Jesus' mother, right? I mean, I know the

basics of birth. Carolyn talked to me about it last night. If this baby is Jesus, then the lady giving birth to him is probably Mary. Easy!

But we need to remember that this was written well before the church developed theology about Mary, attributed power and all the rest to Mary. Since the gospels were written she has been an example of great faith, and should always be, but Mary was not robed in power and authority at the time John's letter was written.

It is far more natural, remembering the original context of this passage, to see this woman as representative of Israel. The twelve stars on her head point us to the twelve tribes that are Israel. The royal messiah can come from only one place: Israel.

And if we know anything by the time we're this far in Revelation, its that there is an enemy. There's the beast from the abyss that we hear mention of in Chapter 9, the one who attacks the church in Chapter 11. There's the persecutor of all the faithful witnesses throughout this book, right?

The Messiah, Jesus, he has an enemy; and we read about this enemy in vv7-9.

### ***The Enemy: vv7-9:***

***7 And there was war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. 8 But he was not strong***

***enough, and they lost their place in heaven. 9 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 enemy of the Messiah, of Israel is named for us: The ancient serpent, the Devil, Satan. We'll talk more about this Dragon next week; but for now what we have to notice is that Satan and those who have sided with him: they lose. Right now in this vision we see them lose temporarily their place of importance in the spiritual realm, "the heavens." They are cast out, expelled; they no longer have any power in the heavenly realm, are no longer part of God's heavenly Temple.

And even when I say this stuff, it barely connects: because what we view of the world is what we can taste and touch and see. We forget that there are spiritual world overlaying ours, which interacts with ours, and that angels & demons—spiritual beings—are real.

We also can't talk about all the ways John is talking greek myths, and old Jewish expectations of the end of time, when God would take out Leviathan, an ancient serpent monster; but there are all sorts of stories that John is, in this small vision, taking from and subverting. He's doing so much at once. He's saying your pagan stories are not the real ones, let me tell you about the real story (cf. Keener, *Revelation*, 316ff.)

We'll skip the middle scene of worship and keep reading:

## ***Helpful Earth: vv13-17***

***13 When the dragon saw that he had been hurled to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child. 14 The woman was given the two wings of a great eagle, so that she might fly to the place prepared for her in the wilderness, where she would be taken care of for a time, times and half a time, out of the serpent's reach. 15 Then from his mouth the serpent spewed water like a river, to overtake the woman and sweep her away with the torrent. 16 But the earth helped the woman by opening its mouth and swallowing the river that the dragon had spewed out of his mouth. 17 Then the dragon was enraged at the woman and went off to make war against the rest of her offspring—those who keep God's commands and hold fast their testimony about Jesus.***

And what we see in this vision, this “sign in heaven” is that this ancient serpent, the devil, the accuser--this being. He's a bully who is no longer allowed on the playground, and so picks on whatever kids are stuck in study hall. The devil is cast out of heaven, can no longer act there: so the devil acts against those who he can reach.

The enemy goes after the woman—Israel—and her offspring, “those who keep God’s commands and hold fast their testimony about Jesus.” Who are not just John’s readers, but us, too, right? I hope.

And there are questions that come up, I'm sure.

***Questions: What's the deal with the wings?***

Like what's the deal with the eagles wings? Three bits of information:

First, remember the Bible often uses Eagle imagery to talk about God's promise to renew the strength of his people. We see it in Exodus, in Deuteronomy. Isaiah 40:31 declares "...but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles."

Second, in the apocalyptic vision of Ezekiel, the prophet has a vision of two giant eagles battling: it's explained to Ezekiel as an allegory of what's happening between Babylon--the first Babylon, the model of an evil empire—and Egypt, which will go on to rescue Israel.

Third, one of the symbols Rome chose for its empire was an eagle.

Three important things. In chapter 13 we'll see John connect the dragon of this vision to the Roman Empire. He'll basically say Rome is the incarnation of the devil, which is pretty intense. In this vision of the woman with eagle wings escaping from the devil, we're supposed to hear echoes of Ezekiel's eagle battle, and we're supposed to see that Rome's eagle loses out to God's. The woman, provided with God's own eagle wings, is way stronger than this dragon.

***Questions: What's the deal with the woman's safety?***

And we might ask, if this woman is Israel, what's the deal

with God preparing a place for her and taking care of her and protecting her--I mean, aren't we all about Jesus, now? And this is something that we don't often talk about, but there was a very strong expectation in early Christianity that Paul definitely gives voice to, in Romans, and John seems to give voice to here, that there will come a time when Jewish people will turn to the Lord, recognize Jesus as Israel's true Messiah and come back to God.

I don't know if we should look forward to some great mass conversion; there are, in fact, many messianic Jews in the world, many ethnically Jewish people who do recognize Jesus as Lord. But this idea is probably a part of whatever it is we're seeing here. We're also seeing some echoes of the common Jewish expectation that before God finally vindicated all his people, there would be a period of trouble: and John is saying that we his readers are in it. (ibid, 319-320).

What we can say for sure is that those who are modeling their lives after this male child who was caught up to heaven, who are keeping God's commands and are holding fast to the testimony about Jesus, witnessing to Jesus: they are under attack. They are under attack by an angry enemy, who has already lost once and will lose again.

### ***Worship: vv10-12***

But just like a delicious twinkie, It's the stuff in the center of this passage that's what's most important, even if it's not what's most interesting.

Listen to it:

**10 Then 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 Messiah.  
 For the accuser of our brothers and sisters,  
 who accuses them before our God day and night,  
 has been hurled down.**

**11 They triumphed over 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.**

**12 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."**

And this worship is triumphal. It's all triumph. The devil has lost in the heaven's. Jesus life, death, and resurrection has ensured it. The accuser, who accused God's people, has lost his voice and been silenced (ibid., 321). And the devil will lose on earth, too, for the same reason. And the devil will lose soon. And the devil is angry about it. But we who are on the side of the lamb must not shrink from death, nor love our lives too much.

***Bridging the Gap:***

And we know that John's readers didn't shrink back. They held to their witness. And their holding to the testimony they had about Jesus no matter that it cost them their lives is what ensured the Gospel would come to us.

Martyrs. John's readers were martyrs--some to death. And while we use the term to mean those who are killed for their faith, it really just means "witness," a witness, a testifier to what Jesus has done. It has been the church's willingness to hold the faith, even if it meant death, that has kept the church alive. And Christians are still killed, Christians are still persecuted and hassled, and, honestly...we're still waiting for this "short time" the devil has been having to hurry up already, and be finished, finally, and for our lives to be redeemed.

But here's the thing. Many of us have lost Revelation 12.

I said early on that this was a combat myth; and didn't mean that it was some untrue story, but that it was a defining story. This is a vision of what's real, a re-framing of what has happened in the history of God's people. This is a story that should have power, and should raise up awe in us, and should cause us to view the world differently for hearing it, and knowing it, and internalizing it. This is a controlling story, in that it defines how we view the world. Do we follow this? It is meant to be a subconscious script for us, a worldview keystone. But many of us have lost it.

### ***Bridging: Inadequate***

We have our personal stories of faith, right? Our testimonies about how we started walking with the Lord, about the role

that the church has played in our lives. For some of us these are very powerful interruptions to how we've lived, for others of us, what's powerful is the way the Church has always been a voice in our lives.

But for too many of us, our “personal testimonies,” they just don't reach out far enough. They aren't powerful, and don't inform our actions. They are very personal:” we may pull them out in our moments of need, we may remember that time God touched us, spoke to us, worked some great need out for us—and we are supposed to do this, we need to do this. They may be filled with experiences we mine for wisdom and courage and to help others.

But for most of the day, and most of the week, and most of the month and most of the year they are on some shelf in our heart, in a box we rarely open. They are not resources in our daily attempts to live, and I think it is simply because we need a story that is bigger than us, that is larger than our daily details—logging on, checking the mail, preparing some food, earning our paychecks, watching TV. We need a story that extends beyond us and into the lives of others. A story that has power to inform our lives especially because it is bigger than our lives.

Do we follow?

### ***Bridging: A Big Story***

John's vision, Revelation 12: it's bigger than you and me. It's larger than Smoky Row, larger than Columbus, larger than Ohio. But man: we're all included in it--you and me and In fact, the whole world is included in it. John gives us tiny

little story, barely any verses at all, that tells us that there was not always evil, but there is now. That there are thinking, living beings outside what we can touch and taste, who affect our daily lives, our getting the mail and earning our paychecks and logging on. There was a war in heaven; and on account of the Lamb, The Messiah, Our Lord and Savior Jesus, God has won, but we are still waiting for the final win, the final goal. And so we are the objects of personal vengeance. And yet we are not unique; we are the Lamb's siblings, we are children of the faithful woman, we are located in a long line of God's People that stretches far behind us. We are protected.

Our controlling story, the thing we reference when we talk about who we are, where we've come from, and where we're going has to be something large and deep and wide. And if Revelation 12 no longer works for us, somehow--we're too dispassionate, or too used to the thing, or whatever--then we have to mine scripture for some similar story, some similar deep narrative that we are characters in, which stretches beyond our daily horizon.

### ***Bridging: Small Horizons***

How did we get here and where are we going? Who are we and why are things the way they are? Isn't every single person you know asking these questions at the end of the day, trying to find answers to these questions? In some ways, in this Pandemic, we're asking them more than we have? And you have them: we have them, true answers, real answers, that we trade away for a picture of the world whose horizons are whatever problem is before us and whatever people we can touch at the moment.

But the fact is, you can't solve problems when your only resources are the problems themselves. We can't speak to the troubles of our own lives or the lives of others without a story that is objectively true and at the same time, larger than we are. We can't solve problems when our only resources are the problems themselves, nor can we speak against the troubles of our own lives or the lives of others without a story that is both true and larger than us.

### ***Conclusion:***

Next week we'll talk about the shape this enemy took in John's day. We'll talk more about what it means to stand against this enemy and maintain our witness. We'll learn more details about the Roman Empire than any of us have ever wanted to know; but it'll be good, because we'll be able to speak with authority about what's going on in the things we're reading.

Until then, I just really need you to consider: Is your life connected to the larger story of what God has been up to in Jesus? Who do you think you are? How would you define yourself? And does your definition make any reference to this story that John presents us with?

Because if it doesn't, it might be inadequate. And I am not condemning any of us, so much as saying that when something is broken, we need the tools and the skills to fix it. And if we are going to help fix this broken world, its broken people, and our own brokenness, we need the tool that is this Revelation 12 vision, and the skill that is our sense of place within it. Revelation 12 is a gift to us. Read it

again and again this week; think about it over and over, and claim your place in it.

Where have you come from? Who are you and where are you going? Why is the world the way it is? Are your answers to these questions large enough? Or are they too small even for you?

## **Extras:**

### ***Questions: What's up with the water thing?***

Moreover, because the devil can no longer accuse God's People in heaven--we'll see this soon--the devil is accusing, slandering, the Lamb's followers on earth.

In the coming chapters we'll see this reference to the mouths of wicked people speaking against Christians, who we're told in Revelation 14:5 "have no lie in their mouths." And we shouldn't by now be surprised that in Ezekiel there's this condemnation God makes of Pharaoh & Egypt, in chapter 32, where God envisions this enemy of His people as a dragon paddling about in streams (cf. v3-16, cf. *ibid.*, 323, for a discussion of all the imagery influencing this passage).