

## Series Revelation

### This Message #19 Revelation 12:1-17

Chapter 12 is the beginning of a new section in our study. The first three sections described the outward physical struggles of the Church in the world. The section starting today will emphasize the aspects of spiritual warfare.

Let me give you an overview of this new section: Our study today will help us to understand how the devil opposes the ways of God. Next week, in chapter 13, we will learn about the two special helpers the devil will raise up to carry out his persecution of God's people. In chapter 14, there will be another description of the people who will be spiritually protected by God. The visions in chapters 12 through 14 provide us with many details about the conflict between the people of God and the forces of evil.

The theme of persecution of God's people is a prominent part of this book. In the beginning chapters Jesus alerted His followers to the difficulties they would face, and urged them to be faithful unto death. In chapter 6 John was given a vision of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. In chapter 7 John saw a great multitude of people from every nation, tribe, people group, and language — people who had “come out of great tribulation” and “made their robes white in the blood of the Lamb.” John was to pass on to his readers information concerning the persecution and conflict they would face. The readers were encouraged to be “overcomers.”

By now you recognize that the visions in the book of Revelation are not presented in the chronological order in which they occur. In chapter 11 we read about the sounding of the 7<sup>th</sup> and last Trumpet. We read that “the kingdom of the world had become (*past perfect tense*) the kingdom of the Lord and of His Christ,” that “the Lord God Almighty had taken his great power and begun to reign,” that the time had come “to judge the dead, reward the saints, and destroy those who had destroyed the earth” (*Revelation 11:15-18*). We read that “God's temple in heaven was opened” so that all people could see “the ark of the covenant.” This would give great joy to believers and create terror among non-believers.



If the visions were in sequential order, we would next anticipate descriptions of the glorious appearance of Jesus and the deafening sounds of judgment, but instead the visions seen by John moved off in a new direction. Detailed happenings of the end will not be presented to us again until chapter 15. We were brought to the most climatic moment in human history, and then the vision shifts to something else.

This is the pattern in the book of Revelation. Each section we have studied so far has led us to the climax of the final judgment, but does not describe what happens next. There is one benefit to this approach: each sweep helps us to understand the future of the Church from a different perspective.

I have given this new section the title, “Christ and His Church in Battle with Satan and His Helpers.” We are going to learn about spiritual warfare in this section.

### **Read Revelation 12:1-17**

In this vision John saw two “signs” in heaven. One of them is described as a “great and wondrous sign.” The other is simply “another sign,” apparently one not as remarkable or significant from the perspective of heaven.

A "sign" in Scripture is an object that represents and points to some deeper spiritual truth or meaning. There are several signs mentioned in chapters 12 through 19. [*Revelation 12:1, 3; 13:13-14; 15:1; 16:14; 19:20*]

*[FYI, John described seven “signs” in his Gospel account (cf. 2:11, 23; 3:2; 4:54; 6:2,14,30; 7:31; 9:16; 10:41; 11:47; 12:18,37; 20:30). He identified them as “miraculous signs” by which “Jesus revealed His glory.” The signs in revelation also reveal the glory and power of God.]*

The woman in verse 1 is “clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and a crown of twelve stars on her head.” This is unusual since these are features representing both day and night at the same time. The woman was pregnant and about to give birth. What this woman signifies has puzzled many commentators. It is unlikely that she is the symbol of Mary, the mother of Jesus, because, at the end of the age, this woman in the vision is pursued by the dragon (*Revelation 12:13*) and Mary had died many centuries before.

Commentators are quite certain that the woman is associated with the Jewish people because the sun, moon, and stars are symbolic representations of the Jews in Scripture. For example, in the book of Genesis, Jacob, the grandson of Abraham, is identified with the sun, and Rachel, his wife, is identified with the moon, and the stars to Jacob's 12 sons who eventually became the 12 tribes of Israel (*Genesis 37:9-10*). There are also several references which compare Israel to a woman in travail (*Isaiah 26:17-18; 66:7-9; Jeremiah 4:31; 13:21; Micah 4:10; 5:3*).

Many commentators state that the woman represents all the people of God, comprising the members of the Old Testament covenant-messianic community as well as those who are members of the New Testament Church. In other words, the woman represents the continuous group of people who have believed in and followed God through the centuries. In the context of this passage this is the best explanation.

The second "sign" which appeared was an enormous dragon. This creature is clearly identified in verse 9 as the "ancient serpent called the devil or Satan." The seven heads and ten horns signify the control, influence, and strength of the dragon. Verse four provides a description of his power. He was able to sweep a third of the stars out of the sky and fling them to the earth. The power of the serpent is contrasted with the helplessness of the woman as she cried in pain during the delivery of her child. The intentions of the dragon are very clear. He positioned himself before the woman, preparing to devour and exterminate the child the moment it was born.

Let's put this scene in the perspective of human history. The description of the dragon as "the ancient serpent" is a clue for us. The serpent is linked to the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden in Eden (*Genesis 3:1*). He was the enemy of Eve just like he was the enemy of the woman in Revelation. Because the serpent tempted Eve, a curse was pronounced on him by God: "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."

Since that time at the dawn of human civilization, the devil has sought to prevent that promise from being fulfilled. He attempted to corrupt humanity through murder (*Genesis 4*), cross-breeding (*Genesis 6*), and human self-sufficiency (*Genesis 10*). He sought to prevent the establishment of a special people through whom God would work to accomplish His purposes (*Abraham and the patriarchs, Egyptian slavery*), and to eradicate the Jewish people through internal strife and exile (*time of the Judges, Assyrian and Babylonian captivities, edict of Haaman in book of Esther*).

The “great dragon, that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan,” is the one who has continually tried to “lead the whole world astray,” and thus thwart the purposes of God. The devil has known since the fall of Adam and Eve that there would be a special Someone, who would be born of a woman, who would eventually “crush his head.” And the devil has been clever enough to understand from the Old Testament prophecies that the Messiah would be that special Someone. This is why he positioned himself “in front of the woman so that he might devour her child.”

The third important figure in this chapter is the offspring of the woman. “She gave birth to a son ... who will rule all the nations with an iron scepter.” This child is not designated as a sign. He is a literal figure in the vision. There is no question about His identity. He is Jesus, the Messiah. Verse 5 is a statement about the incarnation.

The “iron scepter” is an allusion to Psalm 2, where it is declared in verses 8 and 9 that the Father will “make the nations the inheritance of His Son, the ends of the earth his possession,” and that He “will rule the nations with an iron scepter and dash them to pieces” in judgment (*Psalm 2:8-9*). We have already studied several passages in this book concerning the worthiness of the Lamb, Jesus, to dispense judgment on evildoers and to rule for eternity.

From the viewpoint of the human race, the new-born child was a helpless, vulnerable person. However, from God’s standpoint, the child was the central person on whom all of God’s purposes depended. Therefore, this child was supernaturally protected by the Father. For example, Joseph and Mary were warned by God to flee to Egypt with the young child because King Herod “gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under” (*Matthew 2:16*).

On several occasions, Jesus supernaturally escaped from threatening and dangerous situations “because His time had not yet come” (*see, for examples, Luke 4:28-30; John 7:30; 8:20*). We seldom think about the dangers associated with Jesus’ incarnation; they were dangers stemming from the ancient conflict between God’s purposes and the devil’s attempts to spoil them.

After His time on earth was completed, Jesus “was snatched up to God and to his throne.” Verse 5 jumps us from the birth of Jesus to His ascension. There is no mention in this vision of the crucifixion and burial and resurrection of Jesus, and in keeping with the context of this particular vision, this is appropriate.

The emphasis in this chapter is on Satan's opposition to the woman and the “offspring of the woman.” The devil has attempted throughout human history to thwart the purposes of God, to make sure that the promise of Genesis 3:15 would not be fulfilled. Satan failed in his efforts in the Old Testament era to prevent the Messiah from appearing. He failed to devour Jesus at His birth, and also failed to destroy Jesus during His life on earth. Satan briefly assumed that he had been successful by having Jesus killed on the cross, but the resurrection became the most surprising and greatest defeat that Satan could possibly experience. Yes, the devil “bruised” the heel of the Messiah on the cross, but Jesus “crushed” Satan’s head by overcoming death and being raised to the Father in heaven.

Now that we know the background for the vision of chapter 12, we can easily understand the rest of the verses. Chapter 12 is descriptive of spiritual warfare. The chapter gives us an overview of the conflict between Satan and God. It is a conflict that involves both heaven and earth, both angels and humans.

The signs of the woman and dragon appeared in heaven, yet the birth and the effort to devour the child was on earth. The “war” involving Michael and the dragon was in heaven, and the result was the casting of the devil to earth. The celebration in verses 10 through 12 occurs in heaven, but the activity of the dragon at the end of the chapter is on earth.

This is the way it is with spiritual activity. Events on earth are often the outcome of events in heaven. For example, the incarnation required a blending of heaven and earth, God's Son becoming human. Another example: Satan has been busy before God being the accuser of God's people (*see Job 1:6-7; 2:1-2; Zechariah 3:1-2; Revelation 12:10*) and he is also the agitator in the lives of humans to get them to sin. This vision in chapter 12 describes activities which occur in both heaven and on earth. The panorama of John's vision is spread between heaven and earth, and deals with events in both places.

Notice in verse 7 that the war in heaven was initiated by Michael and his angels. It seems to me that this battle occurred after the resurrection of Jesus. His resurrection proved that death and the power of evil could be overcome, and with the victory of Jesus, Satan was no longer entitled to be in heaven. The Bible doesn't tell us how it was possible for Satan, with his evil nature, to be in the presence of God in heaven before the resurrection. However, it is clear from this passage that Satan and his angels lost their access to heaven and that his arena of influence became limited to the people on earth.

After he was cast out, there was the sound of a hymn from heaven reflecting on the significance of the dragon's fall: "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." The verb tenses indicate completed action.

The dragon's current activities on earth are introduced with the words: "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." Never before has he been so constrained in his activities with so little time to lash out against God. The war in heaven is concluded; the war on earth is intensified.

Our attention is directed back to the mother figure. She becomes the target of the dragon's fury. The male child is now ruler in heaven, reigning as King of the universe. Heaven is closed to the dragon. Earth-dwellers are already under his evil control — he doesn't need to be concerned about them. The only rebellious action he can take is against the woman and her offspring.

In verse 13 we read that the dragon “pursued the woman.” The word for “pursue” is also the New Testament word for “persecute” (*dioko*). In both verses 6 and 14 we read that the woman is able to escape persecution by fleeing to a special location in a desert where she would be taken care of for three and a half years, or 1260 days. The desert referred to here is not a wasteland but a place of spiritual protection and refuge.

The time of 1260 days corresponds to the same period mentioned in chapter 11. In that passage we learned about the two special witnesses who received special spiritual powers to withstand the onslaughts of evil. These witnesses not only defended themselves, but they testified to the sovereignty and authority of God. Everyone on earth was aware of their activities. The 1260 days refer to the period of intense tribulation which will occur just before the return of Jesus to earth. In the same way that these two witnesses were out of reach of the forces of evil, the woman and her offspring were “out of the serpent’s reach” during the same period of time (*verse 14*).

In the Bible “eagle’s wings” represent swift and powerful protection. The reference to eagle’s wings goes back to the book of Exodus. After God helped the Hebrews escape from Egypt, He said to them, “You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagle’s wings and brought you to myself” (*Exodus 19:4*). In that situation the Hebrews had been pursued by Pharaoh and his army. It is not a coincidence that one of the titles of Pharaoh was “the dragon of Egypt!” You remember that God opened up the Red Sea so that the Hebrews could cross on dry land, but the Egyptians all drowned when they tried to follow.

In verse 15 of our passage, the serpent “spewed water like a river to overtake the woman and sweep her away.” The earth swallowed the water so that the woman could continue to be safe. This situation is similar to the experience of the Hebrew people in Exodus, when God “stretched out his hand and the earth swallowed the Egyptians” (*Exodus 15:12*). The woman in chapter 12 is also delivered miraculously by God’s power.

There is no question that the woman represents Israel, the chosen people of God. Scripture indicates that some of them will be supernaturally preserved through the tribulation time until the appearance of Jesus. The devil has a special hatred for them.



Verse 17 indicates that the dragon will also “make war against the rest of the woman’s offspring, who are identified as “those who obey God’s commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus.” If the woman represents God’s redeemed people collectively, then these offspring are individual believers who are alive during the final desperate days at the end of the age. They represent the Church. Since Pentecost the followers of Jesus have been the special targets of Satanic opposition.

The dominant theme in this chapter has been the decisive overthrow of the devil. He is defeated three times in chapter 12: He is frustrated when God snatches the child from his grasp; he is defeated by Michael and loses his place in heaven; and he is unable to destroy the woman. His rage in verse 17 is based on these defeats.

The followers of Jesus have a battle on their hands. Their faithful obedience to the commandments of God and faithful witness to Jesus is necessary to overcome the devil. The key verse which applies to us is verse 11: “They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony;” and by their readiness for martyrdom, for “they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.” May we have that behavior and attitude.