

Sam Storms
Bridgeway Church
Revelation #24
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Sermon Summary #24

War in Heaven and on Earth: How the Church Conquers the Devil Revelation 12:1-17

[Having described the seven trumpet judgments, but before explaining the seven bowls, John inserts three parenthetical chapters (Revelation 12-14). The purpose of chapter 12 is to provide us with a deeper perspective on the spiritual conflict between the world and the church. At the heart of its message is that, although Satan is the principal source of the persecution of God's people, he has been decisively defeated by Christ, a victory in which we now share even in the midst of suffering and martyrdom.]

If you ever had any doubts about the reality of spiritual warfare, by which I mean the battle that rages between Satan and the people of God, Revelation 12 should forever put your concerns to rest. The Apostle Paul reminded us in Ephesians 2 that "we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Eph. 6:12). Here in Revelation 12 we find the most graphic portrayal of that battle, albeit in the highly symbolic and graphic imagery that we have come to expect from apocalyptic literature.

As I said just a moment ago, at the heart of Revelation 12 is its message that, although Satan is the principal source of the persecution of God's people, he has been decisively defeated by Christ, a victory in which we now share even in the midst of suffering and martyrdom.

The Woman and the Dragon (vv. 1-6)

Who is this woman described for us in vv. 1-6? Countless interpretations have been suggested. Some believe she is the first woman Eve, whose offspring was to be the serpent's great enemy (Gen. 3:15). Roman Catholic commentators, as expected, have generally argued that the woman symbolizes Mary, the literal birth mother of Jesus. But it's hard to then understand how, according to v. 6, Mary was specifically persecuted after Christ's enthronement, requiring protection for 1,260 days.

Various cults have claimed that the woman is one of their own number. For example, Christian Scientists insist that the woman is Mary Baker Eddy. The child to which she gives birth is her unique doctrinal teachings, and the dragon is the modern mind that disdains and seeks to destroy her influence!

Some have said she symbolizes OT Israel while others argue she stands for the NT Church. I'm convinced that the woman symbolizes what we might call ***the believing messianic community***: both OT Israel and the NT Church. Later in the chapter we read that when the woman is persecuted she flees into the wilderness and has other children who are described as faithful Christians. In other words, ***the woman is both Israel, the community of faith that produced the Messiah, and the Church, the community of faith that subsequently follows and obeys him. John clearly envisioned an organic and spiritual continuity between OT Israel and the Church. They are one body of believers.***

If that interpretation is correct, the 12 stars in her crown would seem to stand both for the 12 tribes of Israel and the reconstitution and continuation of true Israel in the 12 apostles of the Church.

The woman is pregnant and suffering birth pangs. On the one hand, this represents the longing, expectation, and anticipation of the Messiah's birth on the part of those in the OT community of faith (cf. Luke 2:25-38). But it is also a symbolic reference to the persecution of God's people during the period of the OT leading up to Christ's coming. That ***persecution*** is in view is evident from the word translated "in birth pains" (v. 2, *basanizo*). This term is used in the NT of suffering, punishment, trial, and persecution (Matt. 8:6,29; 14:24; Mark 5:7; 6:48; Luke 8:28; 2 Peter 2:8) and in Revelation of torment inflicted by demons (9:5) or by God (11:10; 14:10; 20:10). Nowhere in the Bible is this particular Greek word used to describe merely a woman suffering birth pains.

We then read in v. 3 that John sees yet another “sign” in heaven: a great red dragon with seven heads, seven diadems, and ten horns. In the book of Revelation the “dragon” is typically a symbol for Satan, the one who both represents and energizes all individual and corporate opposition to the kingdom of Christ and persecution of the people of God (see 12:9; 20:2,10).

That there are “7” heads and “10” horns probably should not be pressed (after all, how do you distribute 10 horns onto only 7 heads?), except to indicate and emphasize *the fullness of his oppressive power*. The diadems or crowns probably point to the earthly kings and rulers through whom the devil works.

Contrary to what most of you have probably been led to believe, the “stars of heaven” in Revelation 12:4 which Satan throws to the earth are probably not those in the angelic host who fall with him in some pre-temporal rebellion and subsequently constitute the demonic hosts of which we read in both the OT and NT. There are two reasons for this.

First, the time of this event described in v. 4 is *immediately before the birth of Jesus*, whereas most believe that the angelic rebellion occurred prior to creation. Second, it seems reasonable that the “stars” of v. 4 that are swept down by Satan must be related to the “stars” of v. 1 which are found in the crown of the woman. *Thus the “stars” of v. 4 are not to be identified with the dragon’s “angels” in vv. 7-8. Instead, Revelation 12:4 is probably describing the persecution by Satan of God’s people, perhaps even their martyrdom.*

What is far more important for our purposes is the second half of v. 4 where we read of *Satan’s determination to kill Jesus upon his birth*. Surely this has in view the barbaric and heartless command from King Herod that all the male infants in Bethlehem, two years and younger, be killed (Matt. 2:16-18). I don’t want to minimize the horror of this event, but people have often believed that this was a mass slaughter when in fact the population of Bethlehem in those days would have allowed for at most two dozen young boys who were the victim of Herod’s wrath. It may also be the case that this has in the many times during his earthly ministry that Satan attempted to thwart Jesus’ work (see Luke 4:28-30).

Verse 5 provides us with a synopsis or snapshot of Christ’s entire life. Such abbreviations are not uncommon in the NT (cf. John 3:13; 8:14; 13:3; 16:5,28; Rom. 1:3-4; 1 Tim. 3:16; see also Rev. 1:5,17-18; 2:8). His being “caught up to God and to his throne” in v. 5b is not protection from death but a reference to the resurrection and ascension of Jesus. The reference to Jesus ruling “all the nations with a rod of iron” is an allusion to the prophecy of Psalm 2:7-9 and indicates that whereas this will be consummated at the end of the age (see Rev. 19:15), an inaugurated fulfillment has already begun (see Rev. 2:26-28). Jesus has “*already*” received the authority spoken of in the Psalm and is now ruling the nations from his heavenly throne, but he has “*not yet*” manifested that authority in its fullness.

Whereas the woman in v. 1 was primarily the covenant community of believers prior to the incarnation of Jesus, the woman in v. 6 is the covenant community of believers subsequent to his resurrection. But it is the same, one people of God, the one olive tree. The “flight” of the woman into the “wilderness” is simply a symbolic way to describe God’s supernatural protection of his people, the church, throughout the course of the present age in which we live.

You will recall, I’m sure, from our study of Revelation 11, that the 1,260 days (v. 6b) is a stock or proverbial way of referring to the time of persecution and tyranny. It is equivalent to 3½ years or 42 months or a time, times, and half a time. In every case where this appears it refers to the present church age, from the first coming of Christ extending to the second coming at the end of history. It is during this time that the church is engaged in battle with the Devil and suffers oppression at the hands of his henchmen, the Beast and False Prophet (see Rev. 13).

War in Heaven and Victory on Earth (vv. 7-11)

Revelation 12:7-11 are introduced by John to explain why the Woman (the Church) had to flee into the wilderness (vv. 1-6). The reason why Satan’s fury is now unleashed against the Church of Jesus Christ *on earth* is because he has lost his place and position *in heaven*; his power has been curtailed.

What kind of “*war*” does John have in mind? What kind of “*weapons*” might have been employed, if at all? Was there some sort of contact, appropriate to spiritual beings, that occurred? Could such war have resulted in some form of

injury to the combatants, even death? Or is the use of the terminology of “war” simply a metaphor designed to paint a theological picture? If so, what is that picture?

So, when did (or when will) this expulsion of Satan and his demons from heaven occur? Three answers have figured prominently among evangelicals. (1) According to dispensationalists who read Revelation as applying almost exclusively to the future, it will occur just before or during the so-called seven-year “great tribulation” period. (2) Other say it is timeless. No specific moment in history is in view. It is simply a highly symbolic description of Satan's downfall.

(3) I, on the other hand, believe it is because of the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus in the first century that this defeat of the Devil occurs, indeed, *has already occurred*. Michael and his angels are given the task of expelling Satan consequent to the victory of Jesus *at the time of his first coming* (we see a whisper of this event in the words of Jesus in Luke 10:18). Christians carry on this victory over Satan (v. 11) as they stand on the achievements of the cross and boldly proclaim the authority of Jesus' name.

In other words, this war was provoked by the victory of Jesus Christ over sin and death. Michael and his angels are here portrayed as enforcing the results of Christ's victory on his enemies, namely, Satan and his demons. Michael and his angels win because Christ won.

Satan's accusations no longer have any legal or moral force following his defeat at the cross. This, I believe, is the meaning of his being “thrown down” and there no longer being “any place for them in heaven.” In other words, this is not a description of a literal or spatial or geographical change in the devil's dwelling place. Rather we should understand that this is John's way of describing the glorious fact that Satan's power was broken through Christ's atoning sacrifice on the cross and his bodily resurrection. The result is that Satan can no longer successfully bring accusations against God's people. Prior to the cross the accusations and slander of Satan had legal force, for the sin of those against whom he spoke had not been fully expiated. But now, subsequent to the cross, “there is no condemnation for those that are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1). Whatever ongoing work of accusation Satan may attempt is countered by the intercessory ministry of Jesus (Rom. 8:33-34; Heb. 7:25; 1 John 2:1-2).

The word “*devil*” in v. 9 is used 35x and literally means “slanderer” or “accuser” (*diabolos*). See 1 Sam. 29:4; 1 Kings 11:14. In Luke 4:2,13; Rev. 12:9,12 *it is the devil's aim to defame. He is a constant source of false and malicious reports* (1) to God, about you (Rev. 12:10; but cf. 1 John 2:2; Rom. 8:33-39); (2) to you, about God (Gen. 3; Matt. 4); and (3) to you, about yourself (Eph. 6:16; he seeks to undermine and subvert your knowledge of who you are in Christ). The title “*Satan*” in v. 9 is used 52x in the Bible and literally means “the adversary,” the one who opposes (see Zech. 3:1-2; cf. Numbers 22:22,32; 1 Sam. 29:4; 2 Sam. 19:22; 1 Kings 5:4; 11:14,23,25. In Ps. 109:6 it has the sense of “accuser” or “prosecuting attorney”).

According to v. 10, the fact that Satan has been defeated, that the atoning death and resurrection of Jesus have stripped him of his legal right to accuse the brethren is evidence that the “kingdom” of God and the “authority” of Christ have been inaugurated. Thus v. 10 does not merely anticipate the final and consummate coming of God's kingdom but celebrates the presence of the kingdom in the here and now.

The point of v. 11 is to reassure the people of God, then and now, that suffering and even martyrdom at the hands of the devil is *not defeat for them, but for him!* It is an ironic victory, but a victory nonetheless.

What does it mean to “conquer” the Devil?

It does not mean we destroy him (not until Rev. 20). In fact, note well that the victory of these believers only serves to intensify the wrath of Satan directed against the earth (v. 12)! It does not mean we put a permanent end to his attack of us (cf. Jesus after temptation). It does not mean Satan can't kill you (through persecution; cf. Rev. 2:10; 6:9-11). Here is what it *does* mean.

You overcome the Devil when you stand firmly in your faith in Christ and thereby find the strength to say No to sin. How is this done? Paul refers to the “the shield of faith” in Ephesians 6:16 that protects us against “the flaming darts of the evil one.” What are these “missiles/darts/arrows” that Satan launches against us?

We would have to include here the sudden and unexpected eruption in our minds of vile images and thoughts that shock and surprise us (such that are obviously and undeniably contrary to our most basic desires). Paul may also have in view words and pictures that disgust you and violate your God-given sense of propriety/morality. These often leap into your mind without warning or provocation. This may include blasphemous thoughts about Jesus; revolting images of sexual perversity; suicidal urges; compulsive thoughts of doing horribly violent things to family/friends; unaccountable impulses to rebel against God, against one's family, against one's church; subtle insinuations against God's character/goodness; and false feelings of guilt.

Frequently, people report these things to occur while reading the Bible (not newspapers or magazines), while praying and while praising God. ***This aggravates feelings of personal guilt and worthlessness***, insofar as such occasions are regarded as spiritual ("What kind of person am I that I would have such thoughts/fantasies at precisely the time I should be loving and worshipping God?").

So how does faith function as a shield of protection against these "flaming darts" of Satan? Several things should be noted. First, putting our faith in the superior pleasures of God extinguishes the flaming darts of Satan. For example, we read in Hebrews 11:24-26 that it was Moses' faith in the glory of the coming Christ and the rewards of obedience that enabled him to say No to the powerful temptation presented by the wealth and treasures of Egypt.

Second, there is faith in the steadfast promises of God. When Satan whispers, "God may have cared about you once before, long ago, but his interest in who you are is gone," you lift up the shield of faith and say, "That is impossible. God is immutable. He cannot change. His concern for me is eternal. What he has promised to me he will fulfill."

Third, when Satan whispers, "God doesn't love you anymore; not after you've failed him so many times," you lift up the shield of faith and say, "That is impossible. God's love for me can't cease to exist, for he demonstrated it when he gave his Son to suffer in my place." Thus, the shield of faith functions whenever we say to the enemy, "I'm going to believe God when he tells me that there is great gain in godliness and therefore I will not fall prey to your seductive temptations."

The shield of faith functions each time we hold up the truth of the Scriptures under the onslaught of Satan's lies. Satan knows he can gain a major strategic advantage over us if he can sow the seeds of doubt in our minds concerning our relationship with God. In every instance of serious and sustained demonic attack that I have encountered, the individual was plagued with doubt concerning his/her salvation. Thus when Paul tells us in Ephesians 6:17 to put on the "helmet of salvation" he is instructing us to live in the knowledge and assurance of the truth expressed in Romans 8:1,31-38 and Hebrews 13:5-6.

There is nothing Satan can do to alter or undermine the fact that we are saved. Not "angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:38-39). But, what he ***can*** do is ***erode our assurance and confidence*** that we are saved. Our salvation, our standing with God, does not fluctuate or diminish with our success or failure in spiritual battles. But Satan is determined to convince us that it does.

By what means did they (we) overcome him?

John answers this question by mentioning three things in particular. **First**, they conquered Satan "by the blood of the Lamb" (v. 11a). How is this done? It is done when we stand on the truth of Romans 8:1, that there is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus. It is done when we proclaim the truth of Colossians 2:13-15 and Christ's triumph over Satan and his forces by means of his cross. It is done when we declare and trust in the truth that the cross/resurrection of Jesus has secured for us the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. Thus, the phrase "the blood of the Lamb" is simply a way of referring to Jesus in his capacity as Lord and Savior, the one who triumphed over sin and death.

Simply put, Satan's only hope for victory in your life is the presence of unforgiven sin. But Christ's blood cleanses us from the condemning power of our guilt, guilt incurred by our sin (1 John 1:7) and thus forever removes any and all grounds on which Satan might have a legal basis for launching his attack.

Second, they conquered Satan "by the word of their testimony." This starts with the confident proclamation of our identity in Christ. One of Satan's primary weapons is the *lie*. He is committed to deceiving you into believing you ***are***

not what, in fact, *you are*, and that you *cannot do* what, in fact, *you can*. Satan will try to persuade you that you are: a failure, a fool, of no use to God or other Christians, worthless, an embarrassment to Christ, that you are wasting your time to confess your sins (God won't listen), that you are inferior to other believers, destined always to fall short of their successes, that you are a hopeless victim of your past and helpless to change your future, that you are a pathetic excuse for a Christian, that you are owned by Satan, that you are now what you will always be (there's no hope for improvement), that you are stupid and beyond the reach of prayer, etc.

You must respond to such deceitful, destructive slander by remembering and standing firmly on the truth of 2 Cor. 5:17; Eph. 2:1-7; 5:8; 1 John 3:1-3; etc.

The “word” of our “testimony” is also expressed when we engage in heartfelt, passionate *worship* of the Son of God. The power to repel the enemy, the authority to overcome, is *not* to be found in the physical elements of music per se. I.e., *volume, melody, rhythm* have no inherent spiritual power. Power to repel and overcome the enemy resides in the *truth* of what is sung or played and the *heart* of the singer/player.

The devil pays no attention to decibels or sweat or physical gestures. But he is compelled to submit to the proclamation of truth and the presence of the Spirit and the authenticity and intensity of heart devotion to Jesus. Intimacy in worship (God's love and ours) together with our adoration, declaration of God's power, grace, kindness, justice, etc., as well as the affirmation of our commitment to Christ, do more to repel the enemy than anything. That is warfare worship. Nothing will do more to drive away demons than the intensity of intimacy with Jesus!

The “word” of our “testimony” is also expressed in *prayer*. This involves praying for ourselves and others to be given insight and understanding into who we are in Christ and what is ours through faith (Eph. 1:15ff.). There are also prayers of resistance and rebuke of the enemy. E.g.,

“Satan, I rebuke you in the authority of Jesus Christ. I declare your works in my life destroyed. Jesus triumphed over you in the wilderness, on the cross, and in the grave. His resurrection has sealed your fate. I triumph over you now in the strength of his name. I resist and rebuke your efforts to oppress, afflict, or deceive me. I remove from you the right to rob me of the joy and fruit of my salvation. Through the power of the blood of Calvary, I command all powers of darkness assigned to me, sent to me, or surrounding me now, to leave. Go where Jesus Christ orders you to go, never to return” (Tom White, 116).

Third, and finally, they conquer Satan by not loving their lives “even unto death.” What is being described in this little phrase is a value judgment, a prioritizing that affected every aspect of their lives. *They loved Jesus more than their earthly welfare, more than earthly pleasures, more than earthly convenience, more than peace, prosperity, comfort, etc.*

Here he means the willingness to give up good things for the sake of better things; the willingness to sacrifice all in life, even life itself, because life isn't the most valuable thing to us; they would rather die than yield one inch of their hearts to the world or Satan; no earthly pleasure was worth denying Jesus. No promise of peace or power was deemed of greater value than the value of remaining steadfast. We read in Hebrews 10:34 – “For you . . . accepted joyfully the seizure of your property, knowing that you have for yourselves a better possession and an abiding one.” They had refused to let anything in life get a grip on their hearts in such a way that it might diminish their devotion to Jesus. “Jesus is more valuable to us than anything life can offer. Jesus is greater treasure than life itself. We will gladly die before we renounce him!”

Don't you see that Satan has absolutely no chance of winning when he confronts a heart like that! Simple, unqualified, unconditional, devotion to Jesus! That is why *even in their death they overcame him* (Rev. 2:10).

Satan only wins when we love our lives more than we love God. When we allow our hearts to be captured by earthly comfort and find that we would do anything and everything to procure more, preserve what we have, promote it, make it comfortable, insulate it, etc. Too many of us love our lives illegitimately; there is a good and legal love of life (I'm not talking about that; celebrate life, enjoy it, etc.). This is an over-protective concern for personal comfort and convenience and peace and prosperity and the resultant energy and life-style designed to perpetuate it. *Satan wins whenever we treasure anything more than Jesus.*

So, how does this perspective on life overcome the enemy? When you prioritize your life so that nothing means more to you than Jesus, you deprive Satan of any legal right to your heart or mind; you undermine and short circuit his power to influence your soul. How? If this (Rev. 12:11) is your life, what can he possibly latch hold of? What is there in your life to which he can affix himself? To what can he appeal in your soul that would give him a power base from which to operate?

The Church, the Dragon, and Divine Protection (vv. 12-17)

Verses 12-13 pick up where v. 6 left off. Failing to destroy the “child” (Jesus), Satan turns his wrath and destructive attention to the “woman”, i.e., the people of God, the Church.

Verse 14 is a vivid and obviously figurative portrayal of how God has taken steps to protect his people and preserve them against Satan’s attacks during this present church age. As you know, Hal Lindsey and other dispensationalists believe this refers to something that has yet to occur. It will take place, so Lindsey says, during the time of the so-called Great Tribulation. He writes: “Some kind of massive airlift will rapidly transport these fleeing Jews across the rugged terrain to their place of protection. Since the eagle is the national symbol of the United States, it’s possible that the airlift will be made available by aircraft from the U.S. Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean” (179). Says Craig Keener, “fortunately for both Lindsey and other Americans, Ben Franklin failed in his attempt to make the national bird a turkey” (329)!

The devil’s persecution of the church is described in the vivid imagery of water pouring forth from the serpent’s mouth in an effort to drown the woman. The imagery of an overflowing flood or torrential waves of water is used throughout the OT in two primary ways: (1) it points to the persecution of God’s people by his enemies (see 2 Sam. 22:5; Pss. 18:4,16; 46:3; 66:12; 69:1-2,14-15; 124:4-5; 144:7-8,11; Isa. 43:2); and (2) it is also used to portray the judgment that God brings against those who resist him (see Isa. 8:7-8; 17:12-13; Jer. 46:8; 47:2; 51:55; Hos. 5:10).

It may be that since the waters pour forth from the serpent’s “mouth” the idea is particularly of Satan’s attempt to destroy the church through deception and false teaching/doctrine (see Rev. 2:14-16,20-22; 3:15-17; Rom. 16:17-20; 1 Tim. 4:1; 5:15; 2 Tim. 2:23-26. Recall the numerous times in church history (past and present) where the rise of heresy threatened the purity (and even existence) of the church: Gnosticism and Marcionism in the 2nd-3rd centuries, anti-Trinitarian Monarchianism in the 3rd century, Arianism in the 4th century, Pelagianism in the 5th century, the various false teachings in Roman Catholicism throughout the middle ages, Socinianism in the 16th and 17th centuries, Deism in the 17th and 18th centuries, the emergence of Darwinian evolution and religious liberalism in the 19th and 20th centuries.

And do you remember how God’s defeat of Pharaoh’s armies at the Red Sea is portrayed? We read in Exodus 15:12, “You stretched out your right hand; [and] the earth swallowed them.” Later in the wilderness “the earth opened its mouth and swallowed” the families of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram because of their resistance to Moses’ leadership (Num. 16:12-14; Deut. 11:5-6; Ps. 106:17).

The devil’s fury and wrath is now directed at the “rest of her offspring.” That’s you and me! Satan hates you. He hates everything about the church, the people of God. He hates those “who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus” (v. 17).

Conclusion

The Church, the people of God, have been engaged in a war with Satan for more than 2,000 years. It is a staggering testimony to the wickedness of our Enemy that “he knows that his time is short” (12:12b) yet continues to assault, accuse, and do everything in his power to undermine our faith in Jesus. But we have been guaranteed victory, not because of our righteousness or spirituality, but because of the victory secured for us by Jesus, whose blood cleanses from all sin. Praise be to God!