

# The Great Conflict

## Revelation 12-13

As many of you know, “the war to end all wars” was the name given to the Great War, commonly known as WWI. The phrase was first used by H.G. Wells, an idealist who hoped that the overwhelming and wanton destructiveness of the war would persuade mankind to abandon war as a means of solving political disputes. As you also know, the war to end all wars – wasn’t. It was just the prelude to a much greater, and vastly more destructive war 20 years later.

However, the wars of men are merely a sign that points to the vastly greater cosmic conflict in the heavenly realms. Abraham Kuyper, Dutch theologian and politician, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century once wrote:

“If the curtain were pulled back, and the spiritual world behind it came to view, it would expose to our spiritual vision a struggle so intense, so convulsive...that the fiercest battle ever fought on earth would seem, by comparison, a mere game. Not here, but up there—that is where the real conflict is waged.”

And this is the conflict we see laid out for us in Revelation 12 -14. Here we see the true war to end all wars.

The next three chapters form the theological heart of the book. They answer the question, “Why is the world the way that it is?” More specifically, they answer the question, “Why does the world hate Jesus?” It’s the most amazing thing, isn’t it?

The world goes gaga over the Dali Lama. They have deep respect for Confucius. They idolize music stars and professional athletes. They hang on every word coming from Hollywood actors and actresses – but they continually resist the life-giving word of God. (Look at the magazines on the rack at your local grocery store. People actually buy those things.) The world LOVES the Kardashians, but hates Jesus Christ the Son of God. They use his name as a curse word. They seek to banish his truth from the public sphere. No social group in the world is more despised, more ostracized, persecuted, and hated than those who say they love Jesus.

Why? And, maybe more importantly, how are we, the followers of Christ, supposed to make our way in a world that is increasingly bold in its hatred of Christ and his church? In Revelation 12 we are shown the underlying cause of the world’s hostility, Jesus’s instructions

for how we are to live in this world, and the undisputable certainty of Christ's victory over this world – a victory in which we share as we hold fast to him.

Once again, we have a vivid, dramatic series of visions which paint a graphic picture of the way things are. We are told things here that we would never understand or know in any other way.

Let me begin by painting the big picture; what are we looking at here? What is Revelation 12 and 13 about? It is about the ages-long, cosmic conflict between Christ and the devil. This battle involves every man, woman, and child who has ever lived. It is truly a "world war." But it is a war that originated in the realms of heaven as the Devil sought to rebel against God, his creator. And it's a war that will continue until the Devil is finally cast into the abyss and destroyed forever.

I'm going to follow Sinclair Ferguson's approach to unpacking this text by looking first of all at the big picture, then digging down into some particulars and ending up with the main purpose and point.

Remember, this is not a text given to arouse or satisfy our curiosity. This is a letter from King Jesus to his church, to equip us to stand, endure, and conquer in the midst of the great battle we face.

In chapter 12 we have two visions, each telling the same story – first from the perspective of earth, then from the perspective of heaven.

## **I. The Woman and the Dragon**

### **A. The Woman**

The vision begins with a woman.

*12:1 And a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars.*

Who is this? She represents the people of God of all ages. She is "clothed with the sun" – she is robed in light! Robed with Christ who IS the Sun of righteousness (1:14-16).

The moon is under her feet. She reflects the glory of Christ. Twelve stars are in her crown (12 tribes, 12 apostles), signifying the Old and New Testament church. This woman represents the people of God through all the ages.

This woman is in labor, about to give birth. All through the Old Testament, God promised to bring forth, from his covenant people, a child, a Messiah. A Savior and King. And one glorious evening in Bethlehem that promise came to fulfillment when a child was born to the virgin Mary. This child was the one who is to rule all nations "with a rod of iron" (Psalm 2:8-9). We tend to think of Christmas night according to the words of *Silent Night* – "all is calm, all is bright." But here in Revelation 12 we see that Christmas evening was a night of dramatic spiritual conflict. A great red dragon was there, seeking to kill the child.

## **B. The Dragon**

The vision is graphic and dramatic. Another "great sign," a "great red dragon." This is no fairy tale creature. The dragon is identified for us in verse 9 as the Devil, Satan: "His tail swept down a third of the stars from heaven." In other words, when he rebelled against God and was cast down, he took a third of the angelic beings with him.

The dragon sought to destroy the Christ child. The evidences of his attempts are found throughout the Bible. The Devil continually tried to destroy the people of God, either by outright murder or by seduction and deception. Whether it be Cain murdering Abel or Pharaoh ordering that every newborn Israelite male be thrown into the Nile, the Devil has sought to kill the woman. When Jesus was born, King Herod, in another demonic attempt, ordered all the male children of Bethlehem, aged two years and younger, to be killed. The attempts on Jesus' life during his ministry were all spawned by this great red dragon.

But he failed! He failed to destroy the woman – she is kept safe by God. And he fails to kill the Christ child.

*12:5-6 She gave birth to a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron, but her child was caught up to God and to his throne, and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, in which she is to be nourished for 1,260 days.*

All of Christ's earthly ministry is summarized in verse 5 – he was born, then caught up to God and to his throne. Even though Jesus was put to death, in the great wisdom and power of God his death was not a victory for the Devil – it was the defeat of the Devil! There, Judah's lion crushed the serpent's head.

The story is told again, in verses 7-17, this time from the perspective of heaven.

Here we have the angel Michael, the great warrior of heaven. The battle of verse 7 leads to the Devil's defeat, and he and his fallen angels are cast down to earth. This involves great rejoicing in heaven, and a warning for the earth.

**12:12** *Therefore, rejoice, O heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!*

When the Devil sees that he has failed to kill the Christ; when he realizes that he has lost, and has been cast down, he makes war on the "rest of her offspring" (v. 17), "on those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus."

What's the point? Jesus wants us to understand that we are in the midst of a great cosmic conflict, a battle with the principalities and powers of this present evil age. More specifically, we are the focus of the Devil's wrath. The Devil has turned all his venomous hatred of Christ towards you and me – those who hold to the testimony of Jesus. He is furious because he knows that he has lost and "his time is short." And in this short time, before Christ returns, he is exercising all of his demonic power to wound and destroy the bride of Christ.

This is not hyperbole. This is Jesus telling us the way it is. There should be an appropriate soberness about us. There really is a Devil. He knows who you are – and he has vowed to do everything in his power to destroy you and your children, and all those who belong to Christ.

Jesus wants us to understand that we are involved in a spiritual war with a true enemy. And he proceeds to tell us precisely what we need to know about the powers of darkness.

## II. The Devil

**Deception** – *"the deceiver of the whole world"* (12:9).

He deceived Eve in the Garden of Eden into thinking that God was opposed to her ultimate happiness and joy. He continues to do precisely the same thing today. Every human being is born with a bent, twisted, conviction that the Living God is the enemy of their joy and that life will be found in following our own desires and passions.

We see in verse 15 that the Devil seeks to sweep the church away through a flood of deception.

**12:15** *The serpent poured water like a river out of his mouth after the woman, to sweep her away with a flood.*

**Dennis Johnson:** "In Revelation, what proceeds from the mouth symbolizes words and their power."

The Devil uses words to deceive and destroy – and he is very effective! He does not merely attempt to deceive – he DOES deceive the whole world.

**Accusation:** The Devil is “the accuser of our brothers” (v. 10). We have a vivid example of this in Zechariah 3, where the prophet has a vision in which he sees Joshua, the High Priest, standing before the Lord, and “Satan standing at his right hand to accuse him” (Zech. 3:1). Satan is like the prosecuting attorney, accusing God’s people of wrong.

He’s often right! He takes God’s holy law and can easily show that we have violated it. He wasn’t wrong when he accused Joshua the High Priest of being a filthy sinner. Joshua’s stained garments showed that the Devil was right. He just didn’t tell the whole story. The Lord rebuked him, not because Joshua was without sin, but because Joshua belonged to God; his sin was forgiven, and he was made righteous.

Don’t let the Devil trick you when he accuses your conscience of sin. He may be right – but he’s only telling part of the story. He will NEVER remind you that Jesus Christ died for you and robed you with his own righteousness!

There is good news here we don’t want to miss: the great accuser has been thrown out of heaven! In other words, he is barred from the court of heaven. He is not allowed to bring his accusations to the bar of divine justice. His case against you and me has been thrown out – not because of a legal technicality, but because of the mighty atoning sacrifice of Christ! When Jesus died bearing your sin and rose to give you his righteousness, the Devil lost his ability to accuse us before the Lord. We are pardoned. The Divine Judgment of God has been handed down in your case: “Innocent of all charges! Righteous by the mighty work of Jesus Christ!”

“God made him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21).

*“Well might the great Accuser roar of sins that I have done.  
I know them all and thousands more – Jehovah knoweth none.”*

But though the Devil has no case in the courts of heaven, he is still falsely accusing God’s children of crimes here on earth.

**Matt. 5:11** *Blessed are you when others revile you and say all manner of evil against you falsely on my account.*

The people of the early church were accused of being cannibals because they talked about “eating the body and blood of Christ” in the Lord’s supper. Nero accused Christians of setting fire to Rome and persecuted them mercilessly for it. Totalitarian rulers continue to accuse Christians of being a threat to the state. The progressive left of our day accuses

Christians of being bigots and enemies of human flourishing. All through the ages, the Devil has brought accusations against the church. He is the great accuser.

### III. The Believer

What's the point? Why is Jesus telling us these things?

1. There really is a Devil, and he really does hate you and will do all that he can to destroy you. He is powerful and incredibly effective. He uses his weapons with masterful skill. The church in America is largely unaware of the Devil's schemes. We assume that, since we are not experiencing persecution, we are not under attack. But notice that the Devil's most effective weapon is not persecution but deception. He is the great deceiver of the whole world.

2. The Devil really has been defeated! Christ really does reign over this world! Notice what has come:

**12:10** *And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, "Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God.*

What wonderful words – these are the words that surround us, uphold us, and direct our destiny. These are the realities that “have come” – that are present and functioning and real.

**Salvation** – our lives are not directed or dictated by our sin but by the reality of our salvation in Jesus Christ.

**Power** – the power that guards, guides, and empowers us for gospel mission is the power of Christ Jesus the King.

**The kingdom of God** – we are not citizens of this passing age, but citizens of heaven. We live on this earth, proclaiming that the kingdom of God has come to this earth and calling those who dwell on earth to worship Him. And we do so in the authority of Christ.

**The authority of Christ** – the Devil has no authority. Jesus wants us to know that our great adversary the Devil has been cast down, and the salvation and power and kingdom and authority of Christ has come! The principles and powers that dictate our lives are the principles and powers of the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ, our Savior and King!

Luther: “And though this world, with devils filled, should threaten to undo us. We will not fear, for God has willed his truth to triumph through us” (*A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*).

3. We conquer in Christ

**12:11** *And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death.*

This verse might well be the central verse of the whole book. This is the essence of what Jesus wants us to know. In the midst of this great conflict, the church is triumphant, the saints have conquered the Devil.

Who are “they”? The saints of God. The church of God. You are “they.” You have conquered the Devil. How?

- a) **By the blood of the Lamb** – the objective reality of Christ’s death and resurrection is the objective reality of our victory over the Devil. His blood has rescued us, ransomed us, robed us in righteousness. We are more than conquerors through him who loved us.
  
- b) **By the word of their testimony** – the church conquers by speaking all the truth concerning the Living God and his Christ. This was the testimony of the apostles, the early church, and the faithful church all through the ages. And through this testimony the church conquers the Devil. He cannot stand against the power of gospel truth spoken from the lips of forgiven sinners who love Jesus more than they love their own life. Notice, “for they loved not their lives even unto death.” What did they love? They loved Jesus.

I was going to close this message with a stirring story of a martyr who was willing to die for Christ. There are countless such stories that could be told, and I would recommend them to you. But the point of this text isn’t to direct our attention towards great saints, but to make us great saints. Jesus isn’t trying to get us to marvel at others who were conquered and loved not their lives even unto death. He wants us to be those people, to believe and live and die this way.

So I’ll end with this:

Is the salvation of Christ Jesus and the grace of God that flows through him sufficient for your sins, for your forgiveness, for your victory over death and the Devil? Is the salvation of Jesus sufficient for you? Then believe it.

Is the power of Christ Jesus sufficient for your weakness? Is Jesus able to keep you from all harm? Is the power of Jesus sufficient for your needs, your life, your eternal destiny? Then trust it.

Is the kingdom of our God majestic enough for our devotion and hunger and eager expectation? Is that holy city grand and glorious enough for you to make a pilgrimage? For

you to long for with eager expectation and wait for It with steadfast endurance? Then let's do that.

Is the sovereign, loving authority of King Jesus compelling? Is he trustworthy to do what he has promised? Is he wise in his commands? Is he faithful to his own? Then let's obey him. With gladness. With faith. With joy.

This is how we become great saints – by simply believing in his salvation, trusting in his power, longing for his appearing, and submitting to his loving authority. May God grant it.