



## Be Not Afraid When the Devil Rages

### Advent Series #4

Revelation 12

Patrick Havens

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Please turn to the last book of the Bible, Revelation, chapter 12. If I were to tell you that we're going to talk about the Christmas story today, you might think of the events and characters surrounding Jesus' nativity—no room in the inn, being laid in a manger, His parents, the events involving Herod, the magi and their gifts. Well, that's the Jesus story on earth that we read about in the Gospels.

But what we're going to read in Revelation 12 is the epic Christmas story. It's what happened in heaven at Christ's birth and the battle that ensued. Here we're given insight into what was going on "behind the scenes" in what we normally think of as the Christmas story.

*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. <sup>2</sup> She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pains and the agony of giving birth. <sup>3</sup> And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads seven diadems. <sup>4</sup> His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and cast them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she bore her child he might devour it. <sup>5</sup> 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, <sup>6</sup> 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.*

*<sup>7</sup> Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon. And the dragon and his angels fought back, <sup>8</sup> but he was defeated and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. <sup>9</sup> And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him. <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> 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!”*

*<sup>13</sup> And when the dragon saw that he had been thrown down to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child. <sup>14</sup> But the woman was given the two wings of the great eagle so that she might fly from the serpent into the wilderness, to the place where she is to be nourished for a time, and times, and half a time. <sup>15</sup> The serpent poured water like a river out of his mouth after the woman, to sweep her away with a flood. <sup>16</sup> But the earth came to the help of the woman, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed the river that the dragon had poured from his mouth. <sup>17</sup> Then the dragon became furious with the woman and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus. And he stood on the sand of the sea.*

Let's pray.

Lord, may we meditate properly on this passage. We ask You to give us insight into the great work You have planned in this world. Build our confidence, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Sometimes before I preach, our youngest daughter will say, “Dad, preach something I can draw.” Well, how about drawing this passage? Can you imagine getting this on a Christmas card? A pregnant woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and 12 stars on her head, about to give birth. She's travailing in labor. And right there with her is this enormous red dragon, literally between her legs. She's in the hospital room, but he's right there, pushing the doctors and the father aside. He wants to devour this Child. “Give it to me—I'm going to eat it!”

That's the image we're given. It's meant to be shocking and gross. It would make you afraid to open the Christmas card. But you do, because you're curious to know what happens next. As you look inside, you learn, ah, she gave birth to a male Child—and He's safe. And she's safe too. This is the Child Who's going to rule the nations. He was ushered up to the throne room of God. The woman was sent out to the wilderness where she'll be nourished for 1,260 days.

But that doesn't stop the dragon. He goes into battle with Michael and his angels. They defeat him and he's kicked out of heaven. Yet he continues to pursue the woman, but she's carried off on the wings of an eagle. Then out of his mouth comes a river, a flood to wipe her out—but the earth swallows the water. And you're left thinking, "What a Christmas story!" Right? This is an epic battle. This is the scene behind the scenes we read about in Matthew, Mark and Luke. This is what was happening in heaven.

The book of Revelation is laden with symbolism, and every symbol has a referent to which it points. The woman, the dragon, the child, earth, heaven—what's going on? First I'll define some of the symbols.

Who is the woman? Is it Mary? Well, no, the first verse tells us this is a sign pointing to a greater reality. Is it Eve maybe? We read in Genesis 3:15 that a Child would be born, her offspring, Who would crush the head of the serpent. This Child is the dragon slayer. We do have the right Child. But it's not so much Eve in the story. As a matter of fact, it's not Eve or Mary, but a collective people. The woman represents the people of God—Israel. Several indicators point to this. Her clothing—being wrapped in the sun, the moon under her feet and these 12 stars. In Revelation, numbers have meaning. So chapter 12 is often referring to the Old Testament tribes of Israel. But later in Revelation it talks about the 12 apostles.

Maybe you remember that Joseph dreamed, in Genesis 37, that the sun and moon and 11 stars would bow to him. Of course, he was the 12th star. So again, this woman is referring to the people of God, and Israel in particular. The woman flees to the wilderness, an allusion to the people of Israel fleeing Pharaoh by going into the wilderness.

And the 1,260 days mentioned here? Every first-century Jew would have known what that was. Just as in America, when we hear "Four score and seven years," we know immediately that it's a reference to the Gettysburg Address. When the first-century Jew heard 1,260 days—or later it's called "time, times and half a time," or earlier, it's called 42 months, or we might say three and a half years—they immediately thought of Antiochus IV when he invaded Jerusalem. His defeat in a battle was recorded in Daniel 11, and after that he raged against Jerusalem from 167-164 B.C. That's when he put the god Zeus in the temple and was forcing the people to sacrifice pigs. That season lasted three and a half years, until the Maccabean Revolt pushed them out. So when they see that number, that's what they associate it with: an intense time of tribulation, but still only a season. It didn't last forever.

Again, these allusions to the Old Testament give us a point of reference when we try to understand this woman. And we also see the heart of the Father for this woman, again carrying

her on eagles' wings. Or when the flood comes from the mouth of the dragon, the earth is there to swallow the waters. God is keeping His people, ensuring their survival.

Now, what is it with this dragon? We're given his name in verse nine. It's not Lord Voldemort or anyone like that who might come to mind. He's the ancient serpent. He's Satan. He's the devil. We know exactly who he is. If you're not familiar with fantasy literature it can be hard to imagine a dragon with seven heads. And if your parents told you there was no such thing as a monster—they're wrong. There are monsters. This is a huge one right here, like Leviathan, the ancient serpent. This is a red, seven-headed dragon—referring to what? Why red? Maybe a reference to blood? Jesus said the devil was a murderer from the beginning. It's not a stretch to believe that Satan has been behind every murder since Cain and Abel.

So the good news here becomes this Child, this Champion Who has been born during a time of war. He is birthed in the middle of a battle and in enemy territory. It's like a five-star general parachuting right into the middle of a battle. Everyone on the enemy side thinks, "Let's get Him as soon as He lands. We'll win the war." But up—whoof—He's gone. In these great themes here of the woman and the dragon and this Child, there is victory.

Revelation 12 is communicating an important message: the primary problem of every generation of the church is the rage of Satan. You're probably here today thinking, "I wasn't afraid of Satan, but now I am," yet we're supposed to be telling you not to be afraid of Satan. If our point is to be not afraid when Satan rages, how do we do that? Let's look at three themes in this storyline: Christ's victory, Satan's defeat and God's protection of the church.

## **Christ's Victory**

How did a Child conquer this enormous red dragon? That's a very counterintuitive idea. But of course, He's not a typical child. Two aspects of this Child come together powerfully. First, in verse five, we're told when He's born that He will one day rule the nations with a rod of iron. It's exactly what we're told in Psalm 2. A Messianic King will be born Who will rule all the nations. In fact, there's a warning in Psalm 2 that if you don't kiss the Son, this Messianic King, the Father's wrath will come upon you. You see, your worst enemy is actually not Satan. It's God. The Messiah has come to rescue us, but if you're here without having been reconciled to Jesus Christ, your greatest enemy is not Satan—it's God and His judgment on you. So this Child will come to rule.

Then in Revelation 12:11, we are told how the Child will rule. How will He conquer and be triumphant? It will be done by the blood of the Lamb. We can understand, in verses seven and eight, how Michael and his angels defeat the dragon and his angels. That kind of warfare is

normal. But to think of a Child Who becomes a sacrificial Lamb? How is Christ's death going to defeat His enemy?

It all happens really quickly. The demons are there ready to eat the Child, and then the next thing you know He's in the throne room of God. There isn't any span of time given in this text for the incarnation or the cross or the resurrection. Some believe it's because that has already been discussed earlier in Revelation. Chapter 12 is talking about the enemy's rage against the church. What is important is that we understand the victory that Christ won.

The images of Ruler and Sacrifice come together earlier in Revelation. In chapter four we see the Lord seated on a throne. Then in chapter five, John—who is receiving this vision—begins to weep because no one was worthy to open the seven seals of the scroll. He didn't know who would be able to rescue God's people. But he is told, "The Lion of the tribe of Judah is able." Then when John looks, what he sees is "*a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain*" (Revelation 5:6).

Once again, the lamb image is an allusion to the Old Testament Paschal Lamb, the sacrifice that provided the blood for the doorposts for the Israelites in Egypt, so the death angel would pass over their house. If you were to type "lamb" into Bible search software, you would be amazed at how often the word appears in Scripture. It's found in Revelation nearly 30 times, but in some of the Old Testament books like Leviticus and Numbers it's everywhere. You can easily see the connection between this image in Revelation and the sacrificial system, which tells us that this is how God is rescuing us.

No wonder Revelation is peppered with songs of praise and worship. Sometime go through the book and see all the little break-out worship songs that are sung by the angels or the elders or whomever. They're singing "To Him Who is on the throne, and to the Lamb." These are the merged images: He Who is on the throne, and He Who is the Lamb.

*"Worthy are you...for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation"* (Revelation 5:9). *"Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!"* (Revelation 7:10). This is Christ's victory. This becomes our hope, and this is what alleviates our fear.

## **Satan's Defeat**

Our second them, Satan's defeat, is tied into Christ's victory. But while Satan is defeated, the word "war" is used a lot, along with "wrath" and "pursuing." So here's a defeated enemy who's very active in hunting you down. He's angry and obsessed, and here are his schemes. We need to be aware of them.

Let's say your child is moving to the city to take their first job, and you're telling them what the city is like: "There are con artists, and this is what they'll do. There are scams that you need to be aware of." In a way, being aware of the devil's schemes helps us navigate this world. Three of his schemes are mentioned right here in the text. Verse nine: he's a deceiver. Verse ten: he's an accuser. And then verse 17: he is engaged in spiritual warfare and persecution.

Let's say earlier in the week I had asked you, "What's wrong with the world?" Some of you might have made an observation based on history, psychology, sociology, anthropology, and there probably would have been a lot of truth in what you said. Others of you might have said, "Oh, it's the sinfulness of man." Or someone might have suggested worldliness. But think about it. Would any of you have been quick to say, "The devil"? I think we who are Christians understand things like sin and worldliness, but I'm not sure we spend enough time thinking about the devil.

When we lived overseas in Morocco, I was almost shocked at how little I thought about the devil compared to the locals. African Christians talk about him all the time. It reminded me that there is more to our troubles than just sin. There is also satanic work. And Satan is a deceiver.

Right now, if you were a Christian in Aleppo, you would understand warfare. You would know about demonic activity. You would be so aware of the suffering and persecution. You've read about how ISIS comes through, and if you're a Christian who won't pay tribute or convert to Islam, they would write an Arabic letter above your door, "*nuun*." It stands for *Nasara*, which means a follower of a Nazarene, and it marks you out for persecution. That's diabolical.

In the American church, no one is marking our doors. While the church in Aleppo is a persecuted church, we're a tempted church. We encounter temptations that we don't realize are demonic—but they are. We're not aware of the demonic temptations in our lives. We think comfort is fine. Security is a good thing. We are fine with all the cautions in our lives. But notice that verse nine says that Satan is a deceiver of the whole world. He has led the whole world astray.

How is Satan actively deceiving us here in the American church? This is a great question to ponder. What does this deception mean to us? Remember, we're dealing with a guy who has seven heads. That's not a normal dragon. The number seven represents completion, and horns often symbolize kingdoms. Plus he has crowns. This is a creature who is amazingly powerful and skilled in deception—the master craftsman of deception. His ability to deceive is complete.

We aren't able to see through this level of deception. He's fooling us. That's how Genesis 3 started. The serpent who entered the Garden was craftier than any other beast. He's the

ancient serpent. He's been at this a long time. We might ask how we're being deceived—how his lies are working in our lives. One lie is the idea that if we can only get a certain thing, it will satisfy us. Another is that because of our hard work we deserve something. Do you think those are neutral ideas? No way. There's a whole demonic world behind them. Our care for ourselves is not always "neutral."

Now, we know Satan is defeated. Verses 9- 13 tell us this over and over again. He has no place in heaven, but is thrown out. He's cast down to earth. This is where he is now. So when we read in Job that Satan is accusing him before God, that's not going to happen anymore. He's now down on earth—at least that seems to be what's indicated here—after Christ's victory over him. Yet while he's kicked out of heaven and defeated, guess what? His time is short. Verse 12 says he's come down in wrath because his time is short, and he knows it.

On June 6, 1944, the most important fight of World War II took place when the Allied forces attacked Normandy. In one week they had secured the beach, and by August they had liberated northern France. It was a beautiful storyline. They were on the verge of the end of the war. But Hitler staged a surprise attack on December 16, 1944. In his fury, he had his troops come through a wooded area in an attack that reporters called "The Battle of the Bulge." More Americans died in that skirmish than any previous battle. This was an instance where one who was defeated came in rage and inflicted more casualties than ever.

Think about it. How soon is Christ returning? As we near the end, Satan is going to go ballistic until Christ comes back. He's not going to lie down before then. And this is what the church needs to be thinking about. Along with worldliness and sinfulness, we need to be aware of what the devil is doing.

Besides deception, another of Satan's tactics is accusation. He's called "the accuser of the brethren" (Revelation 12:10). This isn't just once in a while. Verse ten says he accuses us "day and night." Jerry Bridges explains it is like two courts. One is in heaven, where God is, and then there's a court in our soul—our conscience. When we trusted in Christ for salvation, God's court made a decision on our behalf. The verdict was declared: not guilty. In His court, we sinners are justified in Christ. Never again will a charge be brought against us. Everything was paid in full. That's the universal supreme court in heaven.

But then Satan also speaks accusingly to our conscience through our minds. So we must bring in the verdict that was declared in the heavenly court and apply it to the daily court in our mind. That verdict is what rules us, not anything Satan might say. That's what we mean by the phrase, "the centrality of the gospel." We have to constantly go to the ground of what Christ has

done. It's our only foundation and hope! And we must make it central in our lives by constantly remembering it.

### **God's Protection of the Church**

Then Satan's third tactic is persecution, which brings us to our last question: how does God protect His church in the face of Satan's rage? Verse 11 tells us spiritual warfare is won by meditating on the gospel. Put your armor on every morning with that gospel. Believe it or not, when you consciously think, "My righteousness is established by the blood of Christ," that is the way to fight against Satan.

Second, Satan is conquered by the word of their testimony. This is not referring to the testimonies we give. Those are good and we want to give them regularly. But this testimony specifically says we must not love our lives so much that we would be unwilling to die. That's the testimony verse 11 is talking about.

What does that look like? Well, that looks like Christ, doesn't it? You see, as a follower of Jesus, His life has become our pattern. He has modeled the Christian life. When we imitate Him, that's doing warfare. Repentance, generosity, love, giving our time, dying to ourselves—that's heavy duty spiritual warfare. That's the word of our testimony. That's what draws people to Christ. They can tell we're living for another God.

Imagine someone whose god is this world—maybe with an idol like money. When he gets to know you and realizes you're not living for money, he thinks, "What is wrong with you?" It throws him off that you live for a greater Lord and King. The word of your testimony is that you did not love your life even to the point of death. What are they going to do with a person like that? How do they persecute that guy, because death is gain?

That's what Paul said and it's a profound reality that should be gripping us. For us, maybe that kind of "dying" is deciding to get to know a family who is really annoying us. But we determine to die to ourselves and get to know them. If that's death to you, then die. Die all day. Die in the morning and then die again that night. Go do that, because that's what you're called to do. And may God help us all die in the face of things we're afraid of or don't want to do.

Notice the end of verse 17 says they kept the commandments of God. We are to be gripped by those, holding fast to the testimony of Jesus. That's our call. Satan has zeroed in right now on a community of people who are committed to God's commandments and the testimony of Jesus. That is the focus of his wrath. So all of us have that letter "*nuun*," *Nasara*, on us and Satan has targeted us. You've already been marked out. He knows you and he can incite warfare against you.

But God's not going to let you fail. The great part of the story, where the eagles and the earth come to help the woman—does it not remind us of Narnia or Lord of the Rings, the march of the ents that came and took over, or the surprise of the trees that came to conquer? Even the created order is going to foil Satan's plan.

It's like a mother eagle in the Middle East who kicks her little baby bird out of the nest. "Go. Fly!" Well, that bird doesn't know how to fly. The mother sees it, swoops down, grabs the baby and carries it to safety. This is the theme we see here in verse 14: "*But the woman was given the two wings of the great eagle.*" This is exactly what God did for His people as they left Israel. Think about what happened in the wilderness. The people were nourished there. God provided for them. In a difficult, difficult place, He provided water and manna and even fresh quail. He cared. But it was also a time of testing. Right now, this is like a second Exodus theme for the church if we are compared to the woman in the wilderness. And it's a reminder that we're being tested right now. Even in our time of affluence, we are not yet home.

Notice the picture of Satan's rage as a river of water pours out of his mouth. He wants to sweep the people away. Have you ever felt flooded by accusations or deceptions or temptations or self-pity until you're overwhelmed beyond measure? But God raised up the earth to swallow that water. Remember the parallel Old Testament image when Pharaoh's army was going to attack the Israelites? They were defenseless. They didn't leave with swords. But the water swallowed up their enemies.

That's what God is going to do. This is the hope you can have. God is going to foil Satan's plans. Meditate on that for a minute. How is God going to use the created order to foil Satan's plans? Have you ever had a moment when you're so angry at something, but you go outside and it's a beautiful day, then immediately God starts melting your heart, leading you back to Himself. Satan didn't plan for that. He didn't know that was going to happen. He's not omniscient. But God is protecting us. He's leading us through this world in which we live. And this is a beautiful picture of what God will do for us.

Martin Luther was meditating, I believe, on Revelation 12 when he wrote "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," which includes this verse:

And though this world, with devils filled,  
Should threaten to undo us,  
We will not fear, for God hath willed  
His truth to triumph through us:  
The Prince of Darkness grim,  
We tremble not for him;  
His rage we can endure,

For lo! his doom is sure,  
One little word shall fell him.

Let's pray.

Father in heaven, we thank You that You are the Lord on Your throne, and Jesus, that You're the Lamb Who has rescued us. You've ransomed us. You've covered the penalty of our sin. You've reconciled us to God. You've defeated all our enemies. And even now, God, You protect us. You carry us with wings and You even use this created order to protect us. You love us.

Christ, You said You're going to build Your church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. Thank You that while we've all been marked to be hunted down and Satan is angry and enraged, You are on Your throne. You are God. There is no other. Help us, Lord, with any temptation or deception or accusation. May we give those to You.

We pray for our brothers and sisters who are right now experiencing physical harm in Syria. We pray that You would be gracious to the church there. We're one with them. We're all in this together. We pray that You would help them through this time of suffering and trials. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

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## New Covenant Bible Church

4N780 Randall Road, St. Charles, IL 60175

(630) 584-2611 ♦ [www.newcbc.org](http://www.newcbc.org)

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