

“The Dragon at the Stable”

Revelation 12:1-17 ¹

It looked for all the world like a simple, ordinary birth, such as takes place hundreds of thousands of times each day. As tends to be true among the poorest people of the earth, there was no obstetrician and no nurse. There was no pediatrician. There wasn't even a midwife.

In fact, when the labor contractions began and became intense, there was apparently no help at all for the young woman's pain except for the bumbling efforts of her fiancé. The man and woman weren't yet married, and there was considerable talk in town about who the child's father really was.

To make things worse—as if things could *get* worse—this lonely birth wasn't taking place in the couple's hometown, where there might have been help from family and other women. No, this birth was happening in a strange town where they knew no one, and they didn't even have a place to stay. The poor baby—and they *were* poor—was born in a barn, a stable, a cave, with only the animals as witnesses.

Well, there was one other witness. I know you're not going to believe me, but unknown to this weary couple, a large red Dragon was nearby, paying very close attention to what was happening in this stable. Now we're not talking about Elliot, Pete's cute dragon friend, here. We're talking about a truly superhuman creature, sinister and malignant. In fact, this whole scene is much more than just another baby born into poverty in a third-world country. This birth was of cosmic significance.

I really need to back up and tell you more about this situation. We know that this Dragon was at the stable, because the Bible tells us so. But it's a very special kind of telling. You'll recognize that the scripture we read from Revelation 12 gives us the image of the Dragon at the stable. You probably also know that Revelation is a most unusual book.

Revelation is the record of a series of visions that were revealed to John, the apostle with whom Jesus had the closest relationship. The nearest approximation to this vision for most of us would be our nighttime dreams—the difference is that John's vision was inspired by God, whereas ours seldom are . . . though our dreams frequently do have much to teach us.

Our own dreams are not straightforward narratives, but are highly symbolic. Revelation is symbolic, too. In fact, Revelation is a special kind of literature called “apocalyptic,” of which it's the only example in the Bible, apart from the last chapters of the book of Daniel.

Literally, an apocalypse means the uncovering of something that's hidden, or the pulling back of a curtain to show what's behind it. Apocalyptic writing is code language. Most of us know a little bit about codes, and those who work at NSA know quite a lot about them. You might remember that our nation used Navajo Code Talkers in World War II. You might have heard of the “Enigma” code machines the Nazis used—highlighted in the current film, *The Imitation Game*—and whether you know it or not, you probably use encryption codes every day to carry out business on the Internet.

As I'm sure you know, codes are meant to both conceal and to reveal—to conceal their message from outsiders but to reveal their meaning to the initiated. The original readers of Revelation understood its code. We understand some of it; some of it we simply guess at.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship of Columbia, Maryland on December 21, 2014.

Now the best approach to understanding the Bible is usually to take the plainest and most natural meaning of the text unless there's good reason to understand the words as being figurative. In Revelation, though, the reverse is true: we should understand the images to be symbolic unless there's good reason to take them literally.

John's *Revelation* is filled with bizarre images, vivid pictures of death, supernatural creatures, and catastrophic judgment, as well as a future blessed life in a new heaven and a new earth. John's vision is a story of judgment, of reward, and of future restoration.

John's vision was meant primarily to encourage faithfulness among the Christians of his own day, who faced persecution and even death because of their faith in Jesus. Far from encouraging hope in some "raptured rescue" from danger, John's principal message was that while Christians might be tortured and killed—and many of them were—if they remained faithful until death, they would receive God's crown of life in the world to come.

Over the last 1,900 years, interest in Revelation has flourished again and again in times of difficulty, danger, and crisis. In our own time, the onset of nuclear and biological warfare has renewed our interest in Revelation, and the current surges of global terrorism and of Ebola out of control have made Revelation's apocalyptic themes seem far more real than is comfortable.

While all of Revelation is interesting, the twelfth chapter is especially so at this time of year, because Revelation 12 tells the familiar Christmas Story in a different way, placing Jesus' birth in its true cosmic context. Actually, Revelation 12 provides a brief summary of all of sacred history. You may want to get your Bibles out and follow along as we make our way fairly quickly through the chapter

¹ A great 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.

The woman clothed with the sun (which represents God's glory) is a symbol for the true people of God. Before she gives birth to the Messiah, the woman represents that righteous branch of Israel that gave birth to the Messiah, and after the Messiah is born, she represents the Church. Her crown of twelve stars represents both of God's Covenants with the Chosen People: the twelve tribes of Israel in the Old Covenant; the twelve disciples in the New Covenant.

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.

This image of Satan as "a large red dragon" is the origin of many of our ideas about his appearance. The image isn't meant to be taken literally—Satan is not red, and he doesn't look like a dragon—but the image does suggest Satan's ferocious and deadly power (1 Peter 5:8).

As much as we'd like to know more about him, the Bible just doesn't tell us much about Satan's origin. When the Bible's "first curtain" rises, Satan is simply there. Isaiah 14, Ezekiel 28, and Luke 10 may give us some clues, but the truth is that we just don't know.

What we do know is that Satan is absolutely opposed to God, and that he is our own arch-enemy. While Satan is a spirit being of superhuman knowledge and power, Satan is still a finite creature made by God. Satan was not created evil any more than Adam and Eve were created evil, but he apparently rebelled against God in the far distant past, and he led other angels into rebellion as well (2 Peter 2:4; Jude 6).

In ways beyond our understanding, Satan has unique—but temporary—power over our planet (John 12:31, 14:30, 16:11; Ephesians 2:2), and his goal is to frustrate God’s plans for the Creation, most particularly by destroying our own relationship with God by tempting us into sin.

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.

Satan knew that this baby was coming to rule the nations, as had been intended by God even before the moment of Creation, and it had always been Satan’s purpose to destroy Him when He came (Genesis 3:15). Satan tried to use Herod to kill Jesus when He was a toddler (Matthew 2:13-20). Satan tried to distract and destroy Jesus in the wilderness (Matthew 4). Satan tried to drown Jesus on the Sea of Galilee (Matthew 8:23-27). Satan tried to have Jesus thrown over a cliff in Nazareth (Luke 4:29). Satan tried to kill Jesus with Pilate’s scourging (Matthew 27:26).
Satan really wanted Jesus dead . . . he just didn’t want Jesus to die on the Cross.

Verse 5 encompasses Jesus’ entire life on earth. The iron rod refers to Jesus’ universal power and sovereignty. Jesus’ “snatching up” refers primarily to His Resurrection, but also to His Ascension. The 1,260 days, or 3½ years, is half of the perfect number of seven, and represents God’s protection of the Church in the interval between Jesus’ Ascension and His Return.

⁷ Then war broke out 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.

War “in heaven” refers to a conflict that takes place in the realm of the spirit. It’s hard to know just what’s being described, but some think that this refers to Satan’s attempt—having failed in his efforts to prevent the Crucifixion—to prevent Jesus’ Resurrection from the dead.

Apparently, up until Jesus’ Resurrection, Satan had some sort of access to God, and he persistently held up our sin before God, accusingly demanding that divine justice be executed upon us. That divine justice was accomplished at the Cross, when Jesus took upon Himself our Sin (2 Corinthians 5:21), and Jesus’ Resurrection established His absolute authority firmly and forever. Whatever access Satan may have had to God (Job 1-2; Zechariah 3) ended at Jesus’ Resurrection.

And today, on *this* side of Jesus’ Resurrection, the Bible tells us that “Now there is *no* condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus. For the power of the life-giving Spirit has freed you through Christ Jesus from the power of sin that leads to death” (Romans 8:1-2). My friend, when Satan tries to accuse you, just point to the Empty Tomb!

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.”

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 wage war against the rest of her offspring—those who keep God's commands and hold fast their testimony about Jesus.

These final verses of chapter 12 can be summarized with just two points: (1) Satan has been defeated, but he's going to take out as many of us as he can; and (2), God will protect those who are his own.

Making these two points in another way, Paul wrote that “*we are not fighting against people made of flesh and blood, but against the evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against those mighty powers of darkness who rule this world, and against wicked spirits in the heavenly realms*” (Ephesians 6:12, NLT). And Jesus told us that “*Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. **But take heart, because I have overcome the world***” (John 16:33).

So here are the two truths to take away from this message: **#1 - Satan wants you.** Satan knows that his own doom is sealed, but he still wants to prevent as many of us as he can from entering God's New Creation. Satan's battle against all who follow Jesus continues until this very moment, as he works tirelessly to cause you to disbelieve that he even exists so that you will ignore him and his activity in your life. Succeeding in this, Satan can quietly destroy your life and take you to hell with him.

Satan's *spiritual* strategy is very much like his *political* strategy—both involve terrorism. On the political scene, Satan uses human terrorism to create chaos, fear, and wanton destruction. It's the same in the realm of the spirit. Satan knows your every weakness. He knows that of which you are most afraid. He knows what temptations will be most successful in keeping you out of God's Kingdom.

If you've been born again, Satan can't keep you out of God's Kingdom, but he'll use everything in his arsenal to cause you to be disobedient to God's commandments, to involve you in sin, to seal your lips, to compromise your testimony, and to destroy your witness. He'll bring circumstances against you to try to destroy your joy. He'll burden your mind with doubts and troubles to destroy your peace. He'll nurture a bitter and unforgiving spirit in you so that he can use you to destroy the Church.

Advent is a joyful time, and warm thoughts about babies and manglers are pleasant and nostalgic. Satan uses those warm, fuzzy thoughts to camouflage the reality that there really was a Dragon at the stable, and that this Dragon still lives, set loose upon the world “*like a roaring lion, looking for some victim to devour*” (1 Peter 5:8). If Satan can distract you sufficiently with tinsel and toys at Christmas—or at any other time—then he wins.

The second take-away is this: **#2 - Jesus will protect you.** The Good News is that Revelation tells us that the waves of trouble that sweep over us in this life cannot destroy us if we remain loyal to Christ. The great message of Revelation for Christians of every generation is the assurance that not even the worst that the powers of evil can hurl at us can prevent the achievement of God's eternal purpose for Creation in general and for our lives in particular; and you and I are therefore called to be faithful.

Revelation reminds us of God's sovereignty, of Satan's defeat, of Christ's Power, and of the Church's victory when the final curtain comes down. All of Revelation, from its first line to its last,

makes it clear who is the Real Lord of this world. There are many varieties of interpretations of John's Revelation, but all are agreed on John's most important point: ***"Christ Jesus alone is our Hope!"***

Rejoice, my friends! Rejoice! ***Our Lord Christ is King!***