

UNDERSTANDING THAT WEIRD BOOK OF REVELATION - Part thirteen

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SATAN - HIS END-TIME UPRISING AGAINST CHRIST'S CHURCH

Revelation 12:1-17 - "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. [2] She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pains and the agony of giving birth. [3] And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads seven diadems. [4] 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. [5] 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, [6] 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.[7] Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon. And the dragon and his angels fought back, [8] but he was defeated and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. [9] 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. [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. [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. [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!"[13] 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. [14] 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. [15] The serpent poured water like a river out of his mouth after the woman, to sweep her away with a flood. [16] 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. [17] 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."

In many ways the next three chapters form the *theological centerpiece* of the book of Revelation. In just the same way that they appear roughly in the middle of the book, they *explain* the reason for the visions that have come before and will come after.

Chapters 12 through 14 introduce us to the great *antagonists* of the church. These chapters are so important because they give us the *reason* for all the persecution and trial the church is going to experience in the last days. *Why* is all of this happening? *Who* is behind the devastating events coming upon the earth? *What* is the *nature* of the battle we find ourselves in?

Those are important questions. As most of us read Revelation we are most interested in the "*when*" questions. We love to piece together the sequence and the timing of all the things revealed in John's visions. But I would submit to you that this is not John's primary interest at all - *especially in these central chapters*. These chapters contain visions that take us in both directions time-wise. They stretch back to the creation of the world. They take us back to the birth of Christ. And they take us into the future events coming upon this earth - *sometimes all in one vision, with little or no explanation*.

In other words, these central visions deal more with the *meaning* of events around us than the *timing* of these events. The great antagonists are introduced in these next three chapters:

The first and most dominant antagonist of the church is introduced in chapter twelve as the "*great red dragon*" (12:3). This dragon is later positively identified as "*that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan....*" (12:9). The second antagonist is simply introduced as "*....a beast rising out of the sea....*" (13:1). The third antagonist is introduced as "*....the beast rising out of the earth....*" (13:11). And finally, we are introduced to another end-time power, just briefly, in Revelation 14:8 - "*Another angel, a second, followed, saying, "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great, she who made all nations drink the wine of the passion of her sexual immorality."* This is just an introduction to Babylon. She is described in more detail in chapters 17-18.

In many ways, these visions form the *heart* of John's revelation. We're going to study each one in turn:

1) THE FIRST CHARACTER WE'RE INTRODUCED TO IS A PREGNANT WOMAN

Revelation 12:1-2 - "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. [2] She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pains and the agony of giving birth."

Now, this child, when born, will change everything else about world history. There are going to be some wonderful pronouncements made as to the meaning of the birth of this child. But the child doesn't just come out of nowhere. The child has a mother. John sees a woman "*...clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars*" (12:1).

But, while this "*male child*" (5) is certainly the dominant theme of this vision, we're told quite clearly that this is not the *only* child this woman has: **Revelation 12:16-17** - "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. [17] 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."

All of these details help establish the identity of this woman. The most common interpretation tells us this woman is Israel. After all, it is from Israel - from the line of David and the tribe of Judah - that the Messiah will come. So far, so good.

But I think that, while certainly Israel is *included* in the definition of the woman, it's a mistake to say this woman is *only* the nation Israel. John sees that she is also the mother of many other children who "*...who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus.*" (12:17).

I think the woman is representative of *all the people of God*. This picture is consistent with the people of God marked as the **144,000** as the seventh seal is opened and the *two witnesses* described at the sounding of the seventh trumpet. This woman in chapter twelve is *Old Testament Israel* and she is the *New Testament Church*. She represents the unfolding *root* of the Messiah and the Church of Jesus Christ. And John sees that, right away, this woman and her child are going to have trouble:

2) THE DRAGON SETS ALL OF HIS ATTENTION AND ENERGY ON THE DESTRUCTION OF THE MALE CHILD OF THE WOMAN

Revelation 12:3-4 - "And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads seven diadems. [4] 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."

Don't get too hung up on the meaning of every little detail here. The heads and horns and diadems are merely a descriptive picture of the greatness and power of this dragon. This is an entire dark power structure. This is no small enemy. There is great power and authority pictured here. Also, notice the dragon poised to devour this child. Here we see the source of the very specific antagonism to Jesus Christ as Lord in this word. The dragon isn't against religion in *general*. It's this one baby he's out to destroy.

Many people see a picture of Satan's fall from heaven with a third of the angels in verse 4. I think that a very likely possibility, though I don't think this is the *same* fall from heaven described in verses seven through nine. You'll see what I mean in a minute.

3) THE BIRTH OF CHRIST AND THE PROTECTION OF THE WOMAN ARE DESCRIBED

Revelation 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, [6] 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."

That verse 5 pictures the birth of Jesus Christ, the Messiah, is made clear in two different ways:

- a) **First, John goes directly to Psalm 2 to describe the rule of the Davidic King who will rule and shepherd His people with a rod of iron - Psalm 2:8-9** - "Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. [9] You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel."

- b) **Second, John identifies the means by which the battle in the heavenlies is to be fought and won - Revelation 12:5b - “....but her child was caught up to God and to His throne.”**

Here John sees the epicenter of the holy war between the dragon and the Messiah. But it's not where you might expect it to be. Even while the battle still rages on earth (this is a very important point) - even while the conflict, in the eyes of the church **seems** to be raging and undecided - it's actually only the **aftermath** of the battle that we're seeing on earth.

The child (the Christ), through the cross, resurrection and ascension, is caught **even now** up to heaven and - please don't miss this - “**....to His throne” (5b)! That is, through the cross, resurrection and ascension, Christ reigns **now**.**

Colossians 2:13-15 - “And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, [14] by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. [15] He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.”

Later on in this chapter John will see that Christ's **already accomplished victory** is actually the whole **reason** for the remaining conflict on earth - Revelation 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!**”

To miss the brief message of that little phrase about Christ on the throne of God at the end of verse 5 is to miss John's whole point in these next few chapters. Remember, the conflict on earth is just the frantic **aftermath** of the victory already won through the Cross. But the battle on earth **does** still rage. John takes us right back into it in Revelation 12:6 - “**....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.**”

Here we have the same thought already portrayed in the divine protection over the ministry of the two witnesses (whom I identified as the church) in Revelation chapter 11. This number is used repeatedly throughout the book of Revelation to represent the wrapping up of time and the nearness of the end. John will pick up in this picture of the people of God protected in the “**wilderness**” again at the end of chapter 12.

4) **THE RESULT OF THE TRIUMPH OF THE WORK OF CHRIST ON THE CROSS**

Revelation 12:7-9 - “Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon. And the dragon and his angels fought back, [8] but he was defeated and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. [9] 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.”

Remember, a little while ago I said that if you want to interpret Revelation 12:4 (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.) as portraying Satan's original fall from heaven, verses 7 through nine probably don't describe the same event. So if Satan is already cast out from heaven with his fallen angels, **what do these words in verses 7 to 9 portray?** Let me give you my thoughts on these challenging, yet also very **powerful** verses:

I think these verses speak of a different battle in the heavenly realm than the casting out of Satan and his angels in verse 4. I think these verses describe a real battle and a real victory, but one that's accomplished **after** and **through** the death, resurrection and ascension of the Christ described in **verse 5b**. I think verses 7 through 9 describe a **salvation victory**.

I think these verses describe a casting down of Satan that occurred, **not** when he was cast out of heaven with his angels before creation, but a casting down of Satan as the **accuser of the brethren** through the victory of Christ on the cross.

In fact, I think John **tells** us this is the victory he is describing in the words immediately following in **verse 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.*"

There is a victory that comes through Christ *right now* - "Now," John says, "*salvation has come....because the accuser of our brethren has been cast down....*"

It is a simple Scriptural fact, difficult to explain, of course, that long after his fall from heaven Satan still accused saints before the throne of God. It's described in **Job 1:11**, **Job 2:5**, and **Zechariah 3:1**. In fact, probably more than we would ever have imagined, John says Satan was so busy with this accusing work, he "***accuses them day and night before our God***"(10b).

Here's John's wonderful point in these strange verses: ***That work of accusing the brethren before God ended with the victory of Christ on the Cross!*** This is a great truth. It puts new and deeper meaning into Paul's words in **Romans 8:33-34** - "Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. [34] Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us."

Please understand church, these words aren't simply Paul's way of encouraging a better self-image or personal esteem. He's describing a change in our standing through Christ. He's talking about a particular manifestation of the victory we have through Christ Jesus, *right now*, while we live through the trials on earth. ***There has come a tremendous change through Christ. When you come to Father God through Jesus Christ there are no unfriendly voices around God's throne. There is no one NOT on your side when you come to God through Christ!***

Satan certainly does work *here* - on earth. He certainly tries to twist and influence your mind with lies and deceptions. But he can't condemn you *before God* anymore. He's been kicked out of the throne room!

That this is very important is made clear by the fact that, in John's vision, this news comes very dramatically - in the form of a megaphoned announcement - **Revelation 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." We're clearly being signaled never to forget this present victory through Christ.

5) **THE ALREADY ACCOMPLISHED VICTORY OF CHRIST IS THE REASON FOR THE INTENSITY OF THE PRESENT BATTLE ON EARTH**

Revelation 12:11-12 - "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. [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!"

I see two huge theological truths in these verses:

a) ***Christians demonstrate the victory of Christ in their sufferings in a way they never could in their removal.***

To grasp this we need to remember the **reason** for Satan's banishment from heaven in the first place. The Bible says he was filled up with pride. He wanted the glory and worship that was due to God alone.

Satan has never lost that love to be worshiped. This is why he sets churches quarreling over secondary things to distract them from a pure devoted worship of God through Christ. He has never lost the desire to be seen as the most desirable being in the universe. Do you remember how he tried to desperately so have Jesus bow down and worship him in the wilderness temptations? This is what he is still after in all his temptations and enticements to sin. He still craves the worship of everyone on earth.

Suppose for a minute that God simply came to earth right now and destroyed the Devil and all his angels. Certainly God could do that. And He could do it instantly. We could avoid all the trials and troubles of life. We would never again be tempted to sin. We certainly could avoid all the agonies of the last days (I've had scores of people ask me, "***Why would God put us through all of that!***).

But if God simply wiped out all of the Devil's work right now, that would only prove He is more **powerful** than Satan. And that's not what God is out to prove right now. What He's out to demonstrate, through the lives and choices and priorities of Christians all over the world, is not only that He is more **powerful** than Satan, but infinitely more **desirable** than Satan.

And He's going to demonstrate that fact through the testimony of an end-time church that loves Christ more than they love their own lives. God can prove He's more **powerful** than Satan all by Himself. But He can only prove He's more **desirable** than Satan through you.

I said there were **two** truths in these verses. Here's the second:

- b) ***The reason Christians are going to be persecuted is they are the earthly representatives of Satan's defeat through the death of Christ on the Cross.***

In other words, faithful Christians, who love Jesus more than all the deceptions, distractions and toys of Satan, in effect, ***rub Satan's nose in their deeper love for Jesus than anything else.*** Faithful Christians reflect the more desirable glory of God to the whole world. And Satan hates that.

This is manifested most strikingly in the way we persevere through persecution. Remember the account of Job. Satan couldn't stand the fact that Job would love God, not for the blessings God gave, but for the glory of God Himself. Satan can't stand the fact that anyone would love God for His sheer wonderfulness. His pride won't allow that kind of devotion.

6) **THE PROTECTION OF THE CHURCH FROM SATAN'S CORRUPTING INFLUENCE**

Revelation 12:13-17 - "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. [14] 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. [15] The serpent poured water like a river out of his mouth after the woman, to sweep her away with a flood. [16] 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. [17] 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."

The church certainly won't escape **persecution**. But that's not what these verses describe. They describe God's plan to distance the church from the **system** and **deception** and **seduction** of the Devil. The wilderness represents that space **removed** from the influence of Satan. The wilderness represents the opposite of the corrupting influence of this world, spoken of as a great **city - Babylon**.

The church will come under the protecting aid of the Spirit of God **to the exact degree she maintains her separation from the world**. That's why, you will note, that the stream of water that issues from the dragon's mouth isn't to **drown** the people of God, but to **sweep them away from the safety of the wilderness**.

John would understand this vision well. This is the same aged, beloved apostle who also wrote these words: **1 John 2:15-17** - "Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. [16] For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions—is not from the Father but is from the world. [17] And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever."