

REV 12:1-17—THE GREAT COSMIC DRAMA

INTRO: We live in one of the most rationalistic times and places probably in the history of the world. By “rationalistic” I mean essentially naturalistic, secular, reason-oriented, and denying the supernatural. We evaluate everything in rationalistic ways. We look at geopolitical events in terms of economic and sociological forces. Our science and technology are based on that which can be observed and counted.

Of course, there is very much good in all of this. Eliminating various pre-rationalistic superstitions has been an important factor in bringing about the highest standard of living in human history. But what we can see, touch, and measure is not all there is. As Hamlet said, “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”

Even in the church, although we believe in God, Christ’s ascension, the HS and his indwelling presence, we cannot see or feel or hear these things. So in practical terms we tend to think and live our lives like everyone else. We miss the incredibly significant cosmic drama of which we are all playing an integral part. We go to church on Sundays but miss the deeper role that the church has in God’s plan for the world. Our vision is narrowed so that we miss the real significance of what is happening in the world.

Revelation 12 gives us the grand sweep of church history. But it does more than that. It draws back the curtain so that we see what is going on behind the scenes. It tells us not only what is happening to God’s people, but why.

[READ REV 12]

PROP: This chapter is telling us that we are central players in a vast cosmic drama. This drama includes both supernatural and human beings, heaven and earth.

O/S: In this chapter: (1) vv. 1-4 introduce the main characters of this drama; (2) vv. 5-6 give us the plot; (3) vv. 7-9 take us behind the scenes to heaven with the casting down of Satan; and (4) vv. 10-17 take us back to earth and give us the significance of the casting down of Satan for us.

I. The two main characters: a woman and a dragon.

Both the woman and the dragon are introduced as “a sign”—IOW they signify something.

A. The woman: Because v.2 tells us that this woman was with child, and v.5 makes clear that the child is Christ, some people think that the woman is Mary. Some Roman Catholic churches pick up on the imagery of v.1 and have paintings or statues of Mary with a crown on her head and call her the Queen of the Universe. But that cannot be true because after the ascension of Christ referred to in v.5, both vv. 6 and 14 tell us that the woman flees into the wilderness where she is persecuted, and that never happened to Mary.

1. Others look at vv. 1-2 and conclude that the woman is the nation of Israel. The basis for this is that the Messiah (Christ) came from Israel and the imagery of v.1 is reminiscent of Joseph’s dream in **Gen 37:9** in which the sun, the moon, and the stars (which refer to Jacob, his wives, and sons) were bowing down to Joseph. But again, I don’t believe that Israel is the exactly correct identification of the woman, because v.17 tells us that the dragon made war against “**the rest of her children who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus.**” That obviously refers to Christians who come from both Jewish and Gentile backgrounds.

2. Therefore, I think the best view is that the woman represents the true Israel—the Messianic Community of both the OT and the NT. Remember, in **Rom 9:6** Paul said “**not all Israel is from Israel.**” IOW, the true, spiritual Israel are all those who are of faith. In fact, in **Gal 4** Paul contrasts *physical* Israel, the present city of Jerusalem, with the Jerusalem above. He says that the Jerusalem above, *not* OT physical Israel, “**is our mother.**” In the OT, the vast majority of Israelites were not saved. However, within Israel there was what the Bible calls the “faithful remnant.” With the coming of Christ, all those who have faith in Christ, whether from Jewish or Gentile backgrounds, are grafted into that faithful remnant and become the new, true, spiritual Israel—that is the woman.

B. So who or what is the dragon? v.9 specifically defines the dragon for us when it says that the great dragon is “**the serpent of old who is called the devil and Satan.**” Note two things about him:

1. First, v.3 says that he has “seven heads and ten horns.” That same language is picked up in **Rev 13:1** and **17:3** when talking about “**the beast from the sea.**” The beast is a symbol for anti-Christian governments and leaders. What the “**seven heads and ten horns**” language here is telling us is that Satan is the “power behind the throne”—IOW, the power behind all anti-Christian powers, rulers, and governments.

2. Second, **v.4** says that **“the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she gave birth he might devour her child.”** The picture here is of a woman in the process of giving birth with the devil standing between her legs, wanting to eat the child as soon as it is born. It is a grotesque image. Yet, the symbolism here was, in fact, played out in history when Herod ordered all the male children in Bethlehem two years old and younger to be slaughtered.

3. And there’s a very interesting verbal connection between Herod and Satan that indicates Satan was indeed the power behind Herod’s throne: In **Matt 2:16** it says that **“when Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi, he became very enraged.”** Similarly, in **Rev 12:12** it says that Satan persecuted the woman because he has **“great wrath.”** Satan’s “wrath” is the same Greek root word used of Herod’s “rage.”

II. vv. 5-6 give us the plot of the drama.

v.5 obviously is Christ. Note that **v.5** passes directly from Christ’s birth to his ascension without explicitly talking about his life, death, and resurrection. The reason is that, for the events that occur on earth that are described in this chapter, the focus is on the woman. The significance of Christ’s crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension is seen beginning in **v.7**, which we will talk about in a few minutes.

v.6 says **“Then the woman fled into the wilderness where she had a place prepared by God, so that she would be nourished for 1260 days.”** There are two things we need to understand here: the significance of the wilderness and the 1260 days.

A. The wilderness, of course, would have caused any 1st century reader steeped in the OT to think of Israel’s wandering in the wilderness for 40 years after the exodus from Egypt. The wilderness was where the OT Messianic Community had to pass through on the way to the promised land. It was a time of testing. But it was also a time when God was present with them in a special way: leading them; protecting them; and preparing them for the promised land. God worked mightily on their behalf: providing water from the rock and the manna to eat.

1. It’s the same for us today. In a sense, we are in the wilderness: although Christ’s kingdom has been inaugurated, it has not yet been consummated. We face challenges, temptations, dangers, toils, and snares. And yet, Christ is with us, just as he was with the Israelites when they were in the wilderness. For example, **1 Cor 10:4** says that the rock from which the Israelites got water was Christ. Now, in **John 7:37** Jesus says **“If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink.”** And in **John 6** the Jews said to Jesus, **“Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness.”** Jesus replied, **“It is not Moses who has given you the bread out of heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread out of heaven.”** He then specified, **“I am the bread of life; he who comes to me will not hunger, and he who believes in me will never thirst.”**

2. Jesus was drawing a connection between the OT Messianic Community and the NT Messianic Community. All of which means that God is using all the hardships we face to test and prepare *us* for the true, final, promised land—the consummation; the new heavens and new earth—when Christ comes again. But until then, we are in the wilderness.

B. So what about the 1260 days? This language has the same meaning as the **“time, times, and half a time”** in **v.14**. These time periods are figurative, not literal. This language comes from the book of Daniel. In Daniel, this language refers to the great time of testing of the Jews by Antiochus Epiphanes, the pagan ruler over Israel from 175-164 BC. Antiochus had defiled the temple by sacrificing a pig on the altar. He sought to kill all the priests and make the practice of Judaism a capital crime. As a result of all that, there rose up Judas Maccabeus who led what is known as the Maccabean revolt which lasted from 167-164 BC, a period of 3½ years. The revolt ultimately was successful and God’s people were saved.

That time period became etched in Jewish memory and came to symbolize a period of severe testing before God gives his people rest. In Revelation 12, John is using those references to 1260 days and time, times, and half a time and is applying them to us, the church. He is saying that since Christ’s ascension we too are in the wilderness; we are undergoing testing. In various times and places that testing can be very severe, such as in Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia, North Korea, and other places today where the church is severely oppressed. But God is with his people and will ultimately give us rest.

That is the plot of God’s great cosmic drama. Now let’s go behind the scenes and see what’s happening in heaven.

III. vv. 7-9 talk about a war in heaven and the casting down of Satan to the earth.

What is happening in heaven is tied to what is occurring on earth in vv. 5-6. Specifically, the casting down of Satan is not something that occurred before Adam and Eve in the garden and is not something that will occur in the future just before Christ comes again. Rather, what we see in these verses is the heavenly and symbolic counterpart to Christ's sacrifice on the cross and the victory over Satan it entailed which was demonstrated by Christ's resurrection from the dead and His ascension to heaven.

We see this connection between Christ's victory on the cross and the defeat of Satan throughout the Scriptures. For example, in **Gen 3:15**, when God cursed the serpent immediately after the fall of Adam and Eve, He said, **"I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your seed and her seed; He shall bruise you on the head and you shall bruise Him on the heel."** In veiled form, this is the first announcement of the coming of Christ and His death on the cross: Satan would indeed bruise Christ on the heel—IOW, Christ would die on the cross—but in doing so He would bruise Satan on the head—IOW, defeat and doom him.

Similarly, in John 12:31-32 Jesus says, "Now judgment is upon this world; now the ruler of this world will be cast out. And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself." The next verse tells us that Jesus was specifying the kind of death He was to die. Note the parallel between **John 12:31** ("now the ruler of this world will be cast out") and **Rev 12:10** ("now ... the accuser of our brethren has been thrown down"). So it was Christ's victory on the cross that caused Satan to be thrown from heaven.

IV. This leads us to vv. 10-17 which explains the significance of Satan's being thrown out of heaven.

There are three aspects of these verses that are very important for us as Christians to understand:

A. The first is the significance for the believer of Satan's being cast down. v. 10 indicates that the "casting down" of Satan appears to relate to his ability to accuse believers. Satan has only one fatal accusation he can make against people: unforgiven sin. At the cross, **Col 2:14-15** tells us that Jesus took that ability of Satan **"out of the way, having nailed it to the cross"** and thereby **"disarmed the rulers and authorities"** (which refers to Satan and his demonic host).

The accusations of Satan referred to in Rev 12:10 appear to be directed against the believers' salvation. But v.11 says **"they overcame him because of the blood of the Lamb."** IOW, the death and resurrection of Christ have banished the devil from the privilege of having access to heaven and of accusing people. The devil no longer has any *basis* to accuse believers, since the penalty that they deserved has been paid by Christ.

The result for believers is an important change in status and security, even though it may not appear so to the naked eye. Part of the reason why John wrote the book of Revelation is to make clear to believers that "things are not what they seem." Because of what Christ has done for us on the cross, external hardships are no indication of God's disfavor or of spiritual insecurity.

B. The second thing we need to understand about Satan's being thrown down to the earth is Satan's response to this. As a result of what Christ has done, just as the believers' status and security has been changed, so has Satan's. English theologian George Beasley-Murray clearly grasps this. He says, **"Satan's defeat in heaven signifies that his power has been broken in the affairs of man in history, so that even if he does intensify his efforts to control the nations and destroy the work of God, the extent of his influence is limited (he has for example no power over the Church), and his days are numbered."**

1. v.12 tells us that Satan knows he only has a "short time." That "short time" is reflected elsewhere in the NT which says that, as a result of Christ's crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension, we are now in the "last days." In fact, **1 John 2:18** twice says that this is the "last hour." We don't know how long this will last, but Jesus has changed the times. We are now in the last act of the drama.

2. And precisely because his sphere of influence has been limited and he knows his time is short, Satan is violently angry. And he takes his anger out on the church because he cannot take it out on Christ Himself as he tried to do through Herod and through the cross. So vv. 13-17, in symbolic form, talk about Satan's persecution of the church.

3. Satan's response to his being thrown down should not surprise us. It is similar to the Nazis in WWII. After their massive defeats in Russia in 1943 and D-Day in June 1944, their days were numbered. But they didn't give up. Instead, they began launching what they called their vengeance weapons—V1 and V2 rockets—against London and Rotterdam. Those weapons had little military significance but were an expression of Hitler's rage. And the Nazis also sped up their program to exterminate the Jews by increasing the deportations and the gassings in the death camps. Satan is just like that.

4. But through it all, vv. 14 and 16, in symbolic language, tell us that God is protecting His people. In fact, the language in v.14 about giving the wings of the great eagle to the woman so that she could fly into the

wilderness is a paraphrase of **Exod 19:4** which talks about God's protecting ancient Israel in the wilderness after the exodus from Egypt. **Exod 19:4** says, **"You yourselves have seen what I have done to the Egyptians, and how I bore you up on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself."** And even though we are in the wilderness and face tests and trials, **vv. 6 and 14** say that God "nourishes" those who are His.

C. The third thing we need to understand about Satan's being thrown out of heaven is our role in this cosmic drama. **v.11** reveals this. It says [**READ v.11**]. The *only* basis for our salvation and our ability to overcome Satan lies not in us but in **"the blood of the Lamb."** Yet we are playing out this drama in our lives. So the end of **v.11** adds two statements that are applicational for us:

1. "They overcame him by the word of their testimony." Lots of Christians, especially here in the US and the West in general, think that we can be a witness to unbelievers simply by living good and decent lives. That, however, is *not true*. Most people, whether Christian, Jewish, New Age, unsure, agnostic, or atheist, lead good and decent lives. Without actually opening our mouths and telling people about Jesus and the difference He makes, our good and decent lives make us no better and no different from good pagans. And we don't overcome the devil by being good pagans. We overcome him by the word of our testimony.

So when is the last time we actually told somebody about Jesus? 6 months ago? A year? Two years? Five years? Who has God put in your life? Think about how you can testify about the person and work of Jesus, and do so.

2. v.11 also says "they overcame him because they did not love their life even when faced with death." Because of the time and place in which we live, most of us will never have to face death because we choose Jesus over Muhammad, Buddha, Krishna, the State, or anybody else. But millions of believers today do face death because Jesus is their Lord. They take seriously **Phil 1:21** which says, **"To live is Christ, and to die is gain."** Did you know that there have been more martyrs for Christ in the last 150 years than in all the rest of history since the time of Jesus?

If we are not called to go to a place where our own life may be on the line, what are we doing to help those Christians whose lives constantly are on the line? Voice of the Martyrs is an excellent organization that helps Christians who live in Muslim and Communist lands. It assists the families of martyrs. International Justice Mission provides legal assistance for people whose rights have been taken away. It has helped entire villages to be set free from slavery. And there are other good missions to help those in dangerous lands.

Here in the US we have been massively blessed with peace, freedom, money, and material goods. It's not just for ourselves and our earthly families that we have been given these things. Let us use what God has given us to help our brothers and sisters in Christ **"who do not love their life even when faced with death."**

Additionally, we may have not been called to die for Christ, but Jesus calls us to take up our cross every day and die to ourselves. At minimum, that means that we should not be living just like the good pagans. Since our Lord is different from theirs, then our values and priorities, including what we do with our time and money, should be different too.

CONCL: We are the central players in a vast cosmic drama. The entire church is engaged in a spiritual war that is being played out physically on the earth in our lives. We may not see it or sense it, but it is true. What Christ has done is to change the times and seasons. He has cast Satan out of heaven and guaranteed our ultimate triumph. *When* the final curtain will come down, we don't know.

Until it does, we are called to proclaim the gospel to those who are perishing without Christ. We are called to use the resources God has given us to help our brothers and sisters who endure persecution yet remain faithful even to death. We are also called to die to our own selfish ways and live *as Christians* in a non-Christian world.

If we do these things, God has promised to nourish and sustain us even as He prepares for us the great, everlasting consummation of the new heaven and new earth when all the evil of this present world will be no more.