

The Dragon and the Child

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The glitter, tinsel, and Christmas lights are out! Our trees have pretty ornaments. Christmas bells are ringing and parties are being planned. The Christmas season is in 5th gear and we're all working overtime to make sure there's plenty of Christmas joy and spirit for everyone. But all the color, the glitter, the lights... all the songs, the eggnog, and the presents can't conceal this fact: there is something wrong with the world. There's evil; there's brokenness. There's a darkness that touches every aspect of life that our Christmas celebrations can't erase. Christmas itself is infected. Kids will wake up on Christmas morning in poverty, with a mom or a dad consumed by alcoholism. Meth is going to destroy somebody's Christmas. Somebody is going to find out they have cancer this Christmas season; a baby will be stillborn. Infertility is going to break a woman's heart. Christians are dying in North Korea; protesters are fighting for freedom in Hong Kong; and America is rotting from the inside out by our own immorality, selfishness, and corruption. The festivities of Christmas only mask or hide the fact that there's a lot that's wrong in our world.

What is that? What is wrong with our world? Why is there so much evil, so much darkness around us? Isn't that why Jesus came: to make this world a better place? How come it doesn't seem like it is? Why are the fingerprints of evil on everything around us?

For the next two Sundays, we're going to be examining that from the scriptures; an unlikely Christmas passage - Revelation 12. This chapter in Revelation helps us understand why there is so much darkness still in this world. But it also shows how in the coming of Jesus and Jesus' work, those evil works are being destroyed. So, this is my attempt to get real this Christmas; let's turn in our Bibles to Rev. 12.

Now, before we read, let me explain to you what I think is happening in Revelation. Because Revelation is such a mysterious book with its vivid imagery, there are lots of opinions on how to read this book. I'm of the persuasion that, by and large, the author of Revelation is giving us differing pictures, differing viewpoints of the battle between good and evil, between God and the powers of darkness, so that (so, there's a purpose to the variety of pictures) believers in Jesus keep looking up to him and keep the faith. There are so many temptations in our world due to the evil around us. Riches are a temptation. Suffering is a temptation. Sensuality, comfort, and the pressure from the mob (the world) all tempt our faith. And the author of Revelation is trying to help us, saying, "Hold on. Keep the faith. This is what is happening and this is what will happen. But don't fall away. Jesus has got you; he's worth it!"

Revelation 12 provides us with one of these viewpoints, one of these angles, these perspectives of this battle. And the perspective from Revelation 12 is a picture of the battle from a cosmic perspective. It's an allegorical picture of the battle from a dimension we don't see with

these eyes; instead, we can only see the battle of good and evil with the eyes of faith. So, with that in mind, let's read this entire chapter (READ).

This chapter highlights two main characters to this drama; a child and a dragon. Today's focus is on the dragon. Who is this dragon? What is he up to? What is he doing? Next week, we're going to look at the child and how this child wins the victory and how we can participate in that victory ourselves.

The story starts by talking about a woman. This woman is an allegorical picture of the people of God throughout the ages. The woman is first depicted as the family of Jacob, renamed Israel. Then we see the woman transformed as the mother of the divine child. At the end of Rev. 12 the woman is the mother of everyone who holds to the testimony of Jesus. So, this woman is depicted over the course of thousands of years. And this woman has a stalker, a villain throughout the ages. And that's the dragon. The dragon is powerful and influential; that's what his horns and heads represent in vs. 3. He has angels that make war on the hosts of heaven and the sons and daughters of men.

So, who is this dragon? We get a lot of information about that from vs. 9 so let's look at that (READ). The first thing that jumps out to me is that we learn that this dragon has a name. His name is Satan, the devil himself. Do you see that there in vs. 9? The Bible makes clear that God has a nemesis, he has an adversary. And this enemy has been at work from the beginning of time to this very moment. That's why he's called "that ancient serpent." He's the Evil One throughout the ages. He was creating trouble for Adam, for Abraham, and Jacob. He was working through Pharaoh in Egypt and the Philistines during the times of David. Satan was scheming against kings of Judah. He was infiltrating the religious establishment in Israel where the very prophets of God were murdered. And he's alive and at work today as I will point out in a moment. But that's who this dragon is; God's adversary throughout the ages.

Look how Satan does his primary work. He deceives. That's who he is: he's the deceiver of the whole world. Jesus calls Satan the Father of lies in John 8:44. You know, when we think through and imagine the work of the Evil One in the world, evil at work in our own hearts, we often times romanticize or glamorize this work as some exotic, mythical force with ghosts, spirits, and demons. But the scriptures emphasize the work of Satan as lies and deceit. We'd do ourselves a lot of spiritual good if we paid more attention to the lies and deception around us rather than the more dramatic depictions popularized in books and movies. When you're tempted to believe that the most important thing for you to focus on to live the good life is yourself, the first person to love is yourself, you're being lied to by the Father of Lies, the Devil. When your accumulation of possessions, when your riches tempt you to forget God, deceiving you to think you don't need the Lord, you're being lied to. When your suffering, your hardships are screaming at you, "See, God doesn't care! God isn't good!" that's demonic - Satan is telling you lies in his effort to destroy the work of God in your life. We are in a battle of truth, FBC. Truth is of God; deceit of is the Devil. That should tell you just how important the Word of God is

and how careful we all need to be to build into our lives truth-seeking mechanisms, habits, and communities so we are guarded from the work of Satan.

Now, let me tell you what the main point of this chapter is and then I will show you that from the text itself (because that's where the power is): this chapter is really a warning. It's a warning to you and to me, followers of Jesus left on this earth who now wait for Jesus to come again, that the Evil One is lurking and threatening your faith. Let me show you that.

The dragon is defeated; praise God! We're going to look at that in depth next week and how we can join the child in the triumph over Satan. But just because Satan has been defeated doesn't mean we're not in danger. Look at vs. 12; it says, "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!" Jesus has won the battle! Satan has been defeated in the heavens! That's something to celebrate. But there's still a time that Satan can do damage through lies and deceit on earth. And look what the writer is saying. "Watch out, those of you who are still on earth. Be careful!" Why? Because the dragon has come down in great wrath. Yes, he's been defeated; he knows it. And he only has a little time left. And with that time he's going to make a mess of things. He's going to oppose the work of God anywhere and everywhere he can.

Then, listen to what we're told at the end of chapter 12 in vs. 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 commands of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus." I would say that the war the dragon is making is certainly included in the great wrath that he's bringing in vs. 12. And who is the dragon making war against? Well, it says on the rest of the offspring of the woman. But who is that? We don't have to guess; we're told explicitly. The rest of the woman's offspring are those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus. I don't think those are two different groups of people; that's just one group described in two different ways. People who hold to Jesus' testimony are those who keep his commandments and vice versa. And to be redundant on purpose to drive home this critically important point: how do you think the Devil is going to wage war against the people of God? Through lies! He's the Deceiver of the whole world.

I don't know if I have a definitive answer to the age-old philosophical and theological questions of "what is good?" and "what is evil?" But what I do know is that the scriptures describes evil as embodied an Evil One; the Devil and Satan. Vs. 4 also shows us what drives and motivates this Evil One; it says, "And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she bore her child he might devour it." When I read this verse, I see a dragon with fangs sharp and long, with scorching fire coming out of his mouth with a taste for blood. Just waiting, salivating, to devour the child. At the heart of this evil is the desire to destroy everything that is precious to God. Satan wants to destroy justice, righteousness, and peace. He wants to bring death, destruction, and fear. He's in the business of manipulating and abusing.

One last thing about this evil, this Evil One, and its impact on all of us. We might be tempted to hear these things and come to the conclusion that everything that's wrong in the world and even in us is completely the fault of someone else - the Devil. The famous Black actor and comedian Flip Wilson coined the phrase "The devil made me do it" as part of his legendary acts. But rather than seeing that as merely a comedic phrase, we evangelicals have entrenched it in our theology where we truly think that the sin that we commit and that dwells inside of us really isn't our fault because the devil made me do it. But that's not completely what the scriptures teach. Yes, there is a Devil and yes he is the adversary in the world today. And he certainly can impact us very powerfully for the worse. But the scriptures teach is that we are his ally without the saving grace of God at work in our lives. Before our New Birth, the scriptures teach that we ourselves are enemies of God; we are ourselves are children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. We're not helpless victims to the Devil; we are his foot soldiers gladly carrying out his orders. So, the remedy needed isn't merely the Devil destroyed outside of us, but also for Christ to defeat the darkness inside of us, too, that is our own to own.

Now, what should our response be to this news? I have two thoughts. The first response is to be on guard. As I shared before, Revelation is a call to the elect to keep the faith and to resist the schemes of the Evil One while we are still on this earth. Revelation is a rallying cry for all of us to say to one another, "Let's keep holding onto Jesus! He's worth it." Later in Revelation the author throws these little statements of encouragement that say, "Here is a call for the endurance of the saints." Do see that? Endure, FBC! Keep the faith! The first thing we are to do is endure; to hear this information, this truth, to believe it, and then to hold on.

The second thing we're to do is lament. Lamenting is a combination of a prayer and complaint. Now, you might hear the complaining part and think that's unbecoming for a follower of Jesus. But the scriptures show there is a long tradition of God's people expressing displeasure at the pain, injustice, and sorrow of the world. Our laments to God are not meant to be a whiney *if this is the way things are, I'm taking my ball and going home* response. A true lament is a faithful and hopeful belief that God can and will do better. There's this gap between the way things are and the way things will be one day. Our laments to God fill that gap between the Present Age and the Age to Come when everything will be made right. Laments are expressions of faith in God, but at the same time they are honest critiques and disappointments about the struggles today.

We're going to end the service with some laments. One's a Christmas song, one's not. But while we sing them I want to invite you to do two things. First, personalize the lament; put your fingerprint on it. What are you frustrated by? Express that to God. Is it the violence in our world? The Greed? Maybe the sickness - your sickness. Maybe it's broken families or poverty. Don't be self-righteous about this. Don't curse those people whoever they are. But be honest in your lament. But secondly, be hopeful. Don't complain like our God isn't able, willing, and good. He is all those things. Humble yourself to his wisdom, his way, and his time. But have hope that God will defeat the dragon and make things right.