

Sermon 40: Revelation 12:1-6: Battle of the ages

OUTLINE

Outline of the enemies

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INTRODUCTION

Chapters 12-20 of Revelation are not necessary to the basic storyline of Revelation. Chapter 11 ended with the judgement according to works, the destroying of all the destroyers, and we could have logically gone straight to Revelation 21 with the creation of the New heavens and earth. The purpose of chapters 12-20 is not to add new information but to provide deeper insight into points already made. It has been suggested that a basic way to understand the book of Revelation is to divide it into 2 parts, chapters 1-11 describes the physical and historical happenings, but 12-20 are the behind-the-scenes spiritual perspective. This division is correct. These chapters have been written to show the persecuted and struggling believers the real powers behind their struggle. These things have been revealed to encourage them to resist sin and compromise because in doing so they are resisting the devil and his minions.

Outline of the enemies

As we have entered a new section of the book we need to get a lay of the land before we proceed, so let me set before you some of the broad brush strokes which should create a skeleton upon which we can hang the meat as we go along.

Vern Poythress in his excellent commentary on this book outlines some important themes for this section. Firstly, there is the whole notion of counterfeiting. The devil is unoriginal in what he creates and he seeks to mimic in order to mock the Lord. Just as the Father has the Son, and God has made man to bear His image the devil has done something similar. Where the Father has the Son to express His nature and ways, the devil has the first beast. Notice the similar descriptions. Both have 7 heads, both have 10 horns and both wear crowns. The beast is deliberately mocking Christ as an antichrist. Both bear their names on them, 13:1, 19:12; both have power 13:2, 12:5, 10; both are resurrected 13:3, 12; both receive worship 13:4; and both seal their people 13:16, 14:1.

But that is not all just as there is a Trinity of Father-Son-Spirit, so there is the antitrinity of dragon-beast 1-beast 2.

The Spirit has an antispirit in the person of the second beast. But where the Spirit teaches and gives truth the beast deceives 16:13; where the Spirit does authenticating miracles testifying to the truth of the gospel, the beast has false miracles 13:13; where the Spirit acts on behalf of Christ, the second beast acts on behalf of the first beast 13:12.

So as the Father originates the plan, the Son executes it and the Spirit witnesses to it and authenticates it; the dragon hatches the plan, the first beast is his instrument and the second beast plays the supporting role.

But just as the Son has a bride in the church, the beast has a bride in Babylon. This anti-bride is a prostitute not a bride, immoral not pure, persecutes is not a martyr and is characterised by false worship not the true.

The rest of 12-20 is going to introduce the enemies and then show their downfall and judgement. Last week we spoke of a chiasmic pattern. We are introduced to the dragon, the beasts and then Babylon, we then see in reverse order the judgement of Babylon, the beasts and finally the dragon. 11:18 spoke about destroying the destroyers, here is the blood and guts version in graphic detail about how that happens. God lingers over each one and details the downfall of each one though they will all finally fall together. The repetitive nature of the rest of the book is deliberate to impress upon suffering and tempted Christians the certainty of the end and the need to endure.

Outline of the battle

Chapter 12 comes at the beginning of the next cycle which ends, and overlaps with the beginning of the next cycle at 15:4. We have spoken about how each of these perspectives covers the church age and ends with a judgement scene depicting for us different camera angles on the same events, the judgement is most explicit in this section in the harvesting of the earth in 14:14-20, followed by the song of victory by the saints, 15:1-4.

This section has been divided into 7 histories of the dragon, the woman, the 2 beasts, the 144 000, the angelic announcers and the Son of Man. We begin today looking at chapter 12. Chapter 12 falls into 2 repeating parts. We have the same scene with differing details, v1-6 and v7-17. You will notice that both parts focus on the war between the dragon and the woman, both end with woman ending up protected in the wilderness. Parallel indications of time are used in v6 and v14. The focus of both parts of this chapter is to draw our attention to the war that exists between the devil and the bride, to help the hearers of this letter realise what they are a part of and why life hurts so much as a Christian.

Our vision opens with a picture of the church, in particular the OT people of God, v1, '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.' The indication of this being a sign reminds us that this is a representation of something. The fact that the church is pictured as a woman, should not surprise us as in the OT God often spoke of Israel as His wife. The sun, moon and stars remind us of Joseph's dream of the sun, moon and stars, representing the 12 tribes of Israel bowing down to him. The crown indicates her royal priesthood and the honour placed on her by God. This is not Mary, nor Eve, but the collective people of the OT. V2, 'She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pains and the agony of giving birth.' Here we see the OT coming to fulfilment in the birth of the Messiah. The pains and agony

of birth have been thought to indicate the many hardships and trials Israel faced leading up to Christ's birth.

V3, 'And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads seven diadems.' We are next introduced to the dragon. This word dragon was often used to speak of the sea serpent that represented Israel's enemies, it was often used to represent Egypt who is one of the Arch enemies of God's people. V9 reminds us that this dragon is merely a very large serpent, the serpent from Eden who God cursed and promised a deliverer who would crush his head. Red is thought to represent war and blood, the 7 heads have been thought to be the collective heads of Daniel's visions, 4+3. The 10 horns could represent great power, and diadems we have seen are mocking crowns as he usurps God's authority and worship.

V4a, 'His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and cast them to the earth.' There are differences of opinion here, some think this is a historical reference to the devil who also influenced a third of the angels to originally rebel with him, stars are often used to indicate angels. Others think that this demonstration of power indicates the political turmoil he leaves in his wake.

V4b, 'And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she bore her child he might devour it.' God prophesied enmity between the woman and the serpent, and here we have it characterised for us. Cain vs Abel, Isaac vs Ishmael, Jacob vs Esau, Moses vs Pharaoh, Saul vs David, Herod vs Jesus, throughout history the war between the dragon and the seed of the woman has been waged. Every attack by any foreign power against Israel would have been satanically motivated as another advance in this ongoing war. With the births of Moses and Christ we see a literal attempt to murder the children when they are born.

V5, '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.' That no doubt is one of the shortest telling's of the gospel, and it focuses us directly upon the resurrection and victory of Christ to take up His seat on the Davidic throne in fulfilment of the promises.

V6, '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.' The story really rushes to this last point, that the woman which represents the church has a place prepared by God where she is nourished for 1260 days. There are various things we need to bring out here.

Firstly, the wilderness. When we think of the wilderness the text is taking us back to the Exodus. We are a people set free from Pharaoh and captivity. But we are a people who are not yet home. We are a people who need to be sustained and look to God for all that we need. The wilderness also reminds us of Elijah, and especially the fact that he was nourished by ravens after he fled Jezebel. These ideas of wilderness, preparation and nourishment all speak of God seeing to our needs and protecting us. We see that the woman necessarily fled because the devil was raging, but God protects. Secondly, the time of 1260 days is a familiar time that we have already seen. We have said that this symbolises the time of the church age when we are under attack by satan. This was originally used by Daniel 7:25. This is the time that the antichrist would rise up against God's people. When Antiochus Epiphanes attacked Israel in the OT, he waged war on the saints for 3 ½ years. It is thought that this reference is now symbolic of such action, it

indicates intense but limited persecution against God's people. We saw it was used of the time the witnesses prophecy, now we see it is how long the woman in the wilderness is provided for, and it will be repeated in 12:14.

These ideas are the ones that have direct bearing upon us. We are wandering in a wilderness, but God's presence is with us, we are on our way home, this is not it. God provides all that we need and teaches us to look to Him through our difficulties. The pains and things we suffer are under His control, they are prepared by Him. And we are nourished as Elijah was by the ravens. And all of this is temporary as we wait for the 1260 days to be over. To expect perfection now, heaven now, all the blessings of home now is to forget these truths.

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