

Study 14: Revelation Chapter 12

Introduction

“...These three – force, false religion, and the lusts of the world – are revealed as Satan’s allies. In opposition to these, the victorious Lamb, the faithful saints who hold the truth even in the face of death, and God’s righteous judgements are set forth as His allies...”

Body of the Study

Introduction

The Woman and the Dragon

The Spiritual War

The Hymn of Victory

The Persecution of the Woman

Homework and preparation for next week:

Re-read chapter 12

Read the notes as a review of the study

Read chapter 13 in preparation for the next study

Satan is still at work in the world, and still wants to bring harm to God’s people. Reflect on the ways that you might have experienced conflict from superhuman powers.

What is the three-point success plan for victory over Satan? (12:11). How do we make practical application of this?

Notes for study 14: Revelation Chapter 12

“...These three – force, false religion, and the lusts of the world – are revealed as Satan’s allies. In opposition to these, the victorious Lamb, the faithful saints who hold the truth even in the face of death, and God’s righteous judgements are set forth as His allies¹...”

Introduction

Chapter 12 begins the third section of the book (the introduction and the letters to the seven churches are the first section; and chapters 4 through 11 take us into God’s Throne Room).

We see here parallelism in the revelation. This is not a continuation of the previous visions, but another look at the previous visions from a different perspective. This time, we see the spiritual battles that are going on behind the scenes.

The Woman and the Dragon

The vision is announced with a *great and wondrous sign*, which indicates that this is a special revelation from God “...A *great and wondrous 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...” (12:1 NIV). Clothed with the sun suggests that she had a radiant and bright appearance – she was an envoy from God. Later in the chapter we see that she represents God’s people through the ages (the Israelites from the Old Testament, and the church from the New Testament). Her clothing and appearance totally represent light – the sun, the moon, and the stars! We could relate this to God’s three dispensations of revelation – the Patriarchal period, the Mosaic period, and the Christian period. There were *twelve* stars on her head (twelve is the number for organised religion) which shows God’s light (revelation) coming through His religion, and His people.

The description surrounding the woman helps us to understand the vision “...*She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth...*” (12:2 NIV). Some have applied the vision to Mary, but the story is much broader than that. God’s people had begun the journey that lead to the Christ – the Messiah – coming from the time of Abraham. It went through the captivity in Egypt, the wanderings in the wilderness, and the establishment of the Law under Moses. Throughout these periods, God’s people had been crying out to Him in pain under suffering. The time had come when Christ was about to be revealed – *she was about to give birth*.

Alternate Views of the Text

Wallace (p.257) notes: “In the first series (of visions), the symbols surrounded the Lamb, the Rider of the white horse – the conquering Christ – with the descriptive emphasis placed on activities of “the beast of the land,” representing the Palestinian persecutors. The second series of symbols surrounds the victory of the church – the conqueror’s Bride – over all the forces of persecution, in a set of symbols which placed the emphasis more fully on the activities of the Roman Emperor, who was represented as *the beast of the sea*, from whom *the beast of the land* derived authority to act. It was, therefore, said that the beast of the land *worshipped*, or “obeyed,” the beast of the sea – meaning that the Palestinian authorities could do nothing without the consent of the Roman Emperor.”

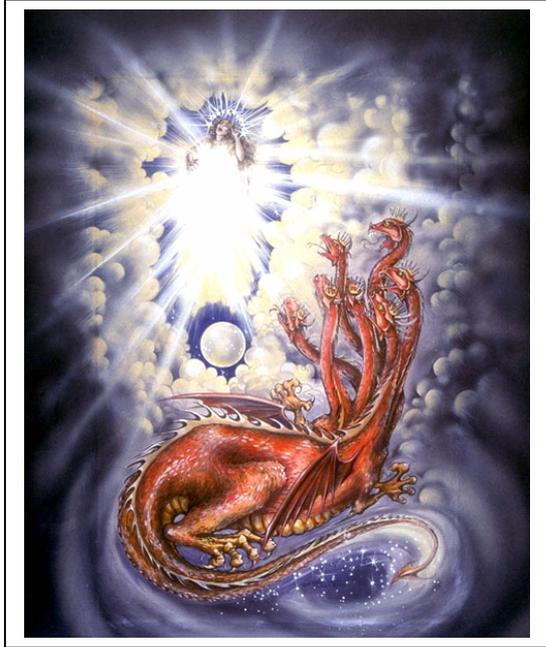
(p.258) “The second series of visions, now ready for consideration, are retrospective – as they reveal the church in conflict with the diabolical powers of Rome, surviving all forces of persecution, and appearing at the close of the vision as the triumphant Bride of Christ, the church, after Babylon the Harlot had fallen in defeat. The victory of the church over these Jewish and Roman persecuting powers was set forth in the imagery of the new Jerusalem in contrast with the apostate Jerusalem.

Alternate Views of the Text

Wallace generally regards the woman as the glory of the church, and the child as (p. 265) “...the martyred saints to which the woman would give birth in the pain of persecution and martyrdom.”

However, the child is described as a *man child* whom Wallace attributes to the church. Scripture describes the church as *the bride of Christ* (feminine).

¹ Hailey, p. 267



Satan is the dragon who is waiting to destroy the Christ when he finally arrives after the prolonged period of promise. By devouring the Christ, Satan thinks that he has won the war with God. However God brings victory over sin and Satan. And that victory was won through the very battle that Satan thought he had won! (The death of Christ)



Satan thinks that he can fight God and win, but he is defeated in the war against God's angels. The war began in Genesis chapter 3, and the victory was won at Calvary. However, Satan does not concede defeat, and continues to fight against God's people.



God's people (the church) are given eagles wings that they might be able to flee from Satan for protection from God, and to be nurtured by Him. Satan still tries to attack God's people, but the christians fight from a position of victory by the blood of the Lamb.

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112

Satan was not prepared to sit idly by and watch these things happen, and so we see the next part of the vision revealed “...Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on his heads...” (12:3 NIV). The dragon is later identified clearly as Satan (12:9).

His description as an "enormous red dragon" symbolically suggests his fierce power and murderous nature. He is further described as having "seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on his heads." Except for the exchange of the crowns from the heads to the horns, the same description is used for the beast from the sea in ch. 13 and the beast of ch. 17. It is a picture of the fullness of evil in all its hideous strength (cf. the monsters in Ps 74:13-14; Isa 27:1, 51:9-10; Da 7:7, 8:10). The diadem crowns on the heads may indicate fullness of royal power (13:1; 19:12). (NIVBC).

Satan's power (although limited) was sufficient to do significant damage to God's people “...His tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth...” (12:4 NIV). The *stars in the sky* is a reference to the descendants of Abraham. Although the damage was significant, it was not complete.

Satan was waiting for the Christ to arrive “...The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that he might devour her child the moment it was born...” (12:4 NIV). Whilst the rest of the world may have had some doubt as to whether Jesus really was the Christ (Jn 10:24), Satan knew who He was. Satan worked through Herod that he might have Him killed soon after His birth (Mt 2:3-18). Harkrider notes²:

The New Testament begins with the account of Satan's effort to devour the man child at his birth. Herod tried to kill Jesus by murdering all the male children two years and under (Matt. 2:16). During his personal ministry several attempts were made by unbelieving Jews to put Christ to death, but none could succeed until he “finished the work” God gave him to accomplish on earth (John 17:4). Finally, at the crucifixion of Jesus, Satan appeared to triumph, but instead, he himself was defeated (Heb. 2:14-15).

Hailey notes³:

Three explanations are offered for the casting down of the stars: (1) The verse emphasizes the power and might of the dragon; in his fury his slashing tail sweeps away a third part of the stars. (2) The scene points to Satan's rebellion against God when he led many angels, who are now cast down and doomed to eternal judgement (11 Peter 2:4; Jude 6). (3) There is a parallel between a vision of Daniel and this one of John: Daniel envisioned the coming of Antiochus Epiphanes who is described as waxing exceeding great, “even to the host of heaven: and some of the host and of the stars it [he] cast down to the ground, and trampled upon them” (Dan. 8:10); “And he shall destroy the mighty ones of the holy people” (v. 24). Parallel to Daniel's vision, John sees the slashing tail of the dragon casting down part of God's host.

All three explanations lead to this conclusion: Certainly the great power of Satan is stressed. His ability to lead angels to their destruction should be a warning of his subtle cunning by which he can cast down God's saints; in Daniel's vision, an implacable enemy of God's people was able to lead some of His mighty ones to turn away from Him. Let God's people beware!

The time came for the birth of the Christ, and He fulfilled the prophecies of old “...She gave birth to a son, a male child, who will rule all the nations with an iron scepter...” (12:5 NIV). The vision quickly passes over the life of Christ, and His death to the period of His resurrection and

² Harkrider, p. 136

³ Hailey, p. 270

ascension “...*And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne...*” (12:5 NIV). This is a view of the time leading up to, and of the life of Christ, rather than the events of Mary at Bethlehem.

“...*The woman fled into the desert to a place prepared for her by God, where she might be taken care of for 1,260 days...*” (12:6 NIV). There are several views about what this passage means. Hailey notes⁴:

Many similar instances out of biblical history might flash before the reader’s mind. Moses fled from Pharaoh into the wilderness, and Israel escaped from a later Pharaoh into the same great wilderness where God nurtured and disciplined His people for future service. Elijah fled from the wrath of Ahab and Jezebel, coming to Sinai where he found protection and received instruction from God. Mary and Joseph eluded the wrath of Herod by fleeing into Egypt where the young child Jesus might be safe. Paul went away into Arabia, apparently to be taught and prepared by the Lord for his future work. The wilderness is the place of withdrawal where God’s people are protected and disciplined. “There they” – the child (v. 5) and God – “nourish her” for twelve hundred sixty days, the same period during which the holy city was to be trodden under foot and the witnesses would testify in sackcloth (11:2,3). As Israel was nurtured in the wilderness with manna from God, so now the new spiritual Israel is nurtured by the true bread which came down from heaven (John 6:50f.).

Alternate Views of the Text

Wallace (p. 269) equates *the flee to the desert* with the Christians fleeing Jerusalem at the time of the siege.

He also takes the 1,260 days as the literal period of the siege of Jerusalem.

The Spiritual War

We are given an insight into the battle going on behind the scenes between God and Satan “...*And there was war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back...*” (12:7 NIV). Michael is elsewhere referred to as the archangel (Jude 9). This is not an “actual war” but rather the spiritual battle going on between God and Satan – Satan uses God’s people as pawns in the game, and we get caught up in the middle. Satan cannot stand up against God “...*But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven...*” (12:8 NIV). Satan was a fallen angel, and therefore a created being who had chosen to rebel against God. Consequently, there was no place for him in heaven and he was cast out. “...*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...*” (12:9 NIV). Hailey notes⁵:

Of the numerous views held concerning the vision of this war in heaven, the three major views are: (1) The vision portrays the primeval war between Satan and God; (2) there was an actual war in which Satan attempted to invade heaven that he might defeat the man child, but Satan was repulsed and cast down to earth; and (3) the vision symbolizes a spiritual warfare which had been going on from the beginning, but reaches its climax in Christ’s victory over Satan. The third position is more defensible by Scripture.

The battle is over, and was won at Calvary. Jesus described this precise victory in John’s gospel “...*Now is the judgement of 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 peoples to Myself...*” (Jn 12:31-32 NKJV); “...*the ruler of this world is coming, and he has nothing in Me...*” (Jn 14:30 NKJV); “...*in regard to judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned...*” (Jn 16:11 NIV).

⁴ Hailey, p. 272

⁵ Hailey, p. 274

The Hymn of Victory

“...Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say...” (12:10 NIV) The hymn is in three parts, and confirms the victory won at Calvary. Like the previous announcements, it clearly comes *from heaven*, which shows that it is a message from God.

“...*Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ. For the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down.*

They overcame 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.

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.”...” (12:10-12 NIV)

This anonymous hymn, which interprets the great battle of the preceding verses, has three stanzas: the first (v. 10) focuses on the victorious inauguration of God's kingdom and Christ's kingly authority; the second (v. 11) calls attention to the earthly victory of the saints as they confirm the victory of Christ by their own identification with Jesus in his witness and death; the third (v. 12) announces the martyrs' victory and the final woe to the earth because of the devil's ejection and impending demise. (NIVBC)

Hailey notes⁶:

Christ's authority is complete and absolute; and the accuser and maligner of the brethren, who constantly accused them day and night, is cast down. Victory for weak and fallen men is now assured through God and Christ. This is the war seen by John in the vision; it is a conflict that had continued from Eden, which was won by the seed of the woman, as Satan's head was bruised beneath His heel.

The heavens rejoice in the victory of Christ over Satan, yet he brings woe to those on earth. However, the time of his trouble making is *but a short time*. Hailey notes further⁷:

The dragon is enraged at his defeat, for he knows that he has “but a short time.” Does this “short time” refer to the period until he shall be cast into the lake of fire, his final end (20:10), or is it until the time when he should be bound and cast into the abyss (20:1-3)? Though contrary to the view of many expositors, the “short time” of Satan seems to be equivalent to the “little time” of the martyrs (6:11). For when Satan would be bound and cast into the abyss, the martyrs would be raised to sit on thrones and reign with Christ a thousand years (20:1-3), at which point Satan's short time would be over and the martyrs' little time ended. Thus the two are parallel.

The Persecution of the Woman

The woman represents God's faithful from all time. Before the cross, it was the faithful in Israel, and after the cross it is the faithful Christians – the church. The passage describes the events after Satan has been overthrown at Calvary, and so the woman is the church. “...*Now when the dragon saw that he had been cast to the earth, he persecuted the woman who gave birth to the male Child...*” (12:13 NKJV). We can see and are given some insight into the persecution of the church, and why it was happening.

Despite the persecution, God still looks out for and nurtures His people. “...*The woman was given the two wings of a great eagle, so that she might fly to the place prepared for her in the desert, where she would be taken care of for a time, times and half a time, out of the serpent's*

⁶ Hailey, p. 276

⁷ Hailey, p. 277

reach... ” (12:14 NIV). The period of “time” (a year), “times” (two years) and “half a time” (six months) is the same 3 ½ years, or 1,260 days that we have seen earlier (12:6), and the same event.

The reference to eagle's wings again introduces imagery from Exodus on the pursuit of Israel by the dragon in the person of Pharaoh: "You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself" (Ex 19:4). As God's people were delivered from the enemy by their journey into the desert, so God's present people will be preserved miraculously from destruction (cf. Dt 32:10-12; Isa 40:31). (NIVBC).

Satan was not giving up the fight “...Then from his mouth the serpent spewed water like a river, to overtake the woman and sweep her away with the torrent...” (12:15 NIV). He was relentlessly pursuing (NIV) and persecuting (NKJV) the Christians, even though the battle was over. The Christians fought (and fight today) from a position of victory. We are not fighting *for* victory and freedom, we fight *from* victory and freedom, because we have been justified (made right) by the blood of the Lamb. Hailey notes⁸:

Now the serpent tried to sweep the woman away by the river that issued out of his mouth: delusions in the form of lies, false impressions of invincible power, false religious teachings, false philosophies, false charges, and malicious reports intended to destroy the church. To these he would add the seductive temptations of lust. Let the saint remember that everything the devil says and does is a lie, for “he standeth not in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar and the father thereof” (John 8:44). But the church has withstood the assault of the serpent because a way has been provided for her deliverance.

The idea of the sandy desert country absorbing the waters of the rivers was common in the regions of Palestine, and would certainly be familiar to John's readers. “...But the earth helped the woman by opening its mouth and swallowing the river that the dragon had spewed out of his mouth...” (12:16 NIV). In the same way, the lies and deceit of Satan were absorbed by the world, who swallowed his bait.

After trying and failing to kill off Christ, Satan turned to the church and failed again. He now turns to individual Christians. “...Then the dragon was enraged at the woman and went off to make war against the rest of her offspring--those who obey God's commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus...” (12:17 NIV). The message of the letter is that we need to remain faithful to Jesus, even in the face of persecution – and we are assured of victory in Christ.

The close identification of the seed of the woman as first of all Jesus and then also those who have become his brothers and sisters through faith agrees with other NT teaching (Mt 25:40; Heb 2:11-12). While Satan cannot prevail against the Christian community itself, he can wage war on certain of its members who are called on to witness to their Lord by obedience even unto death (cf. Mt 16:18; Rev 11:7; 13:7, 15). The church, then, is paradoxically both invulnerable (the woman) and vulnerable (her children; cf. Lk 21:16-18). (NIVBC).

⁸ Hailey, p. 279