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Revelation chapter 12

The war of the Lamb

Today I'm going to tell you the history of the world.

No. Let me try that again, and be a little more modest. Today I want us to see God's view of the history of the church, his people from across the world and across the ages.

As you've just heard, the book of Revelation is full of strange pictures and symbols: a woman wearing the sun for her clothing, a dragon with seven heads, references to 1260 days, and so on. The point of all these pictures is to tell struggling Christians that things are not as they seem. The purpose of the book of Revelation is to give us God's view of reality: God's view of life on earth and life in heaven.

And chapter 12 – the heart of the book and in many ways a summary of its entire message – gives us God's view of the history of the world, or more accurately the history of God's people, the church.

And it is a history of war.

A few weeks ago I pointed us to that verse in chapter 17 and verse 14, which encapsulates the message of Revelation. It goes like this:

They will make war against the Lamb, but the Lamb will overcome them because he is Lord of lords and King of kings – and with him will be his called, chosen and faithful followers.

And that makes a brilliant summary of chapter 12, which itself is a summary of the whole book. The Lamb – that is, the Lord Jesus Christ – and his people are caught up in warfare, but they will overcome. The age of the church, until Jesus returns, is the age of war – but we will most certainly win. That's the message we'll hear this morning.

First we need to clear a bit of ground and have a few introductions. I want us to meet the principal characters in this story, and I want briefly to outline the plot; then we'll dig into the message.

So, first, the characters.

The characters

The principal characters are the woman, the child, the dragon and Michael.

The woman represents the church – by which I mean the whole people of God from Old Testament times to the present day.

Verse 1 refers to the sun, the moon and twelve stars, reminding us of Joseph's dream – he of the technicolour dreamcoat. The sun moon and stars represent Jacob and his wife and his twelve sons, the tribes of Israel, the people of God. And from the people of God the Messiah will be born, the promised child, which is why she is seen as pregnant and about to give birth.

The male child will be born to rule the nations with an iron sceptre. This is clearly the Lord Jesus Christ, as prophesied in Psalm 2.

As for the dragon: John tells us explicitly in verse 9 that he is the ancient serpent, or devil or Satan. So we now know clearly who the serpent in the Garden of Eden really was.

Michael appears earlier in the book of Daniel. He is described as 'the great prince' who is sent to help God's people. He is an angelic being, presumably similar to Gabriel, whose function is to assist the church in times of crisis.

So caught up in this war we have the Lord Jesus Christ, the devil, the church and angelic beings both good and evil.

Now a quick word about the plotline

The plot

You can see in the Bibles that the chapter been helpfully divided into three paragraphs: verses 1 to 6, 7 to 12, and 13 to 17. And they are arranged as a sandwich. The story begins in verses 1 to 6; we then take a break and are given a different view for verses 7 to 12; then the story picks up again from verse 13.

So, first section, we meet the woman and the dragon. She gives birth and he tries to devour the child. But the child is snatched up to safety with God while the woman flees into the desert.

Then, second section, we hear about a war in heaven, with Michael and his angels on one side and the devil and his angels on the other. The devil is defeated and thrown down to earth.

With verse 13 we pick up the story again with the enraged dragon pursuing the woman who has fled into the desert and attempting, unsuccessfully, to destroy her. She is kept safely out of his reach. So now the message.

The message

The message of Revelation chapter 12 is this: The church will always live in a war zone until Jesus returns. However, we will always be kept safe, and we will win, but we will win by losing.

The Christian life is war, but it is a war we will win.

Until Jesus comes again the church will always live in a war zone . . .

Last week, preparing to take a funeral, I met some family members who told me a bit about their early years in wartime Liverpool – a hard place to be. And it struck me that people of my generation and younger can hardly imagine what it must be like to live in time of war; we've had peace for so long. But some of you here know exactly what it's like.

Now the church in Britain and the West finds it hard to imagine the Christian life as war. We've had peace for too long. But most of God's church in most of the world and through most of history knows fully well that being a Christian means being sucked up into a spiritual war. And the Bible teaches us that that, not our experience, is the normal Christian life.

Revelation chapter 12 is the history of the war of the church. Let's see how it pans out.

First, there is war against God's Messiah. So look with me at verse 4:

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.

Here is the devil trying to destroy God's Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ. From the devil's point of view, whatever happens he mustn't let the promised child be born.

And that is one way of looking at Old Testament history.

God promised Eve, in the garden, that there would be warfare between her offspring and the serpent's, and that the serpent would 'bruise his heel'. He wants to destroy her child.

Later we hear of Pharaoh trying to kill all the Israelite baby boys in Egypt.

When we move on and come to the time of David – the ancestor of Jesus, remember – we read of repeated attempts on his life. How narrowly he escapes.

Moving on a few hundred years – an amazing story, this – we meet the wicked Queen Athaliah who goes about slaughtering the entire royal family. Only one baby boy escapes: Joash, who was hidden and protected by his nurse. Humanly speaking, that Queen came within a hair's breadth of ensuring that Jesus wouldn't be born.

Later still the wicked man Haman made a plot to wipe out the entire race of the Jews.

And when we come to the New Testament one of the first characters we meet is King Herod, who wipes out the baby boys of Bethlehem in order to kill the Messiah – or attempt to.

The story of the Old Testament is – from one point of view – the story of the devil's attempt to prevent the Lord Jesus Christ from coming into the world.

The story of the New Testament is the story of the devil's attempt to destroy the Lord's people. Having failed to devour the child, the dragon goes off in furious pursuit of the woman, God's people. That shows us how closely God's people are identified with Christ himself; in a sense, to destroy one is to destroy the other. As Jesus said to Paul when he was killing off Christians, 'Why do you persecute me.'

The chapter ends – verse 17:

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.

Probably what that means is that though the church is kept safe, the devil continues his rampage and still attacks individual Christians, those who believe in Jesus.

So one hugely important lesson for us is that war is normal. Conflict is the stuff of the normal Christian life. Until Jesus returns the church – and individual believers – will always be under attack. So in a sense we are living in a false sense of security. I guess that that's why we don't really pray very much. We don't see that we're at war. I have a strong hunch that if real persecution were to hit our church our numbers would drop on Sundays but the attendance at prayer gatherings would double.

We'll come back to this. First: though it is true that we live in a war zone, it is also true that until Jesus returns the church will be kept safe.

. . . but we will be kept safe . . .

I said that Old Testament history is the history of the devil's attempts to prevent the Messiah from ever being born. At the same time it is the story of God's protection of his people so that, in his own timing, Jesus was born as promised.

So the baby boys in Egypt were preserved by the Israelite midwives and Moses himself was kept safe by Pharaoh's daughter. David was delivered from certain death again and again. The baby prince, Joash, was hidden away by his nurse. Queen Esther saved the Jews from Haman. The baby Jesus was kept safe from Herod by escaping to Egypt. And when the devil finally appeared to have won, in the death of Jesus on the cross, Jesus rose from the dead and ascended into heaven. That's the meaning of verse 5:

She gave birth to a son, a male child, who will rule all the nations with an iron sceptre.
And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne.

God's Messiah was preserved. And God's church, too, will be kept safe. So, verse 6:

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.

And then from verse 14:

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 reach. Then from his mouth the serpent spewed water like a river, to overtake the woman and sweep her away with the torrent. But the earth helped the woman by opening its mouth and swallowing the river that the dragon had spewed out of his mouth.

What's this about? A quick bit of detail:

Fleeing to the desert, being carried on eagle's wings, a threatening river, the earth swallowing enemies . . . these are all echoes of the Exodus, the time when Israel fled from Pharaoh and the might of Egypt and was kept safe for 40 years in the desert.

What about 1260 days, and 'times, time and half a time'?

This is an echo from the book of Daniel. It is a period of time which amounts to three-and-a-half years, the same time-period of the great drought in Elijah's day. At that time God's people were being severely persecuted and killed off by Queen Jezebel, but also protected and preserved by God.

So the message is this: God's people may face severe trials and persecution, but the church will always be kept safe – in the words here: 'out of the serpent's reach.' The picture is like that of a vicious dog on a chain: lethal, but kept within limits. So while it is clear that individual Christians will suffer and even be killed, the church will always be kept safe.

In about 1950 Chairman Mao threw all the western missionaries out of China and set about to destroy the church. The missionaries feared greatly for the converts they left behind. And thousands were indeed killed, as they are still being today. But when China began to open up again in the 1970s it soon became clear that during those years of terrible darkness the Chinese church had multiplied to millions of believers. The dragon rampaged, but the woman was kept out of his reach.

Jesus once said, "I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it." And history is proving him right.

The church is in a time of war, but we will be kept safe.

And we will win.

. . . and we will win . . .

We come now to this crucial paragraph of verses 7 to 12, the filling of the sandwich. Let's pause a moment.

The book of Revelation is telling the story of the church age. If you've been here over the last few weeks you will have followed that in John's vision of God's throne room and the opening of the scroll with its seven seals. That vision, covering chapters 4 to 7, took us from the coming of Jesus into the world to the end and the new creation.

We missed out chapters 8 to 11, but there you have the same period, seen from a different point of view.

Coming now to chapter 12 – and stretching through into 13 and 14 – we have the same thing for a third time: the history of the church until Jesus comes again.

It's like a photographer taking lots of shots of a building from different angles. We see a new perspective each time, but it's the same building.

With these different visions in Revelation, the key thing is that each time, though the angle is different, we're being given heaven's perspective, God's view of reality.

And in chapter 12, this middle section tells us that the reason there is suffering and struggle and persecution and death on earth is that there is war in heaven. The conflict is far deeper than we would realise by simply observing life on earth. Verse 7: there was war in heaven: Michael and his angels on one side; the devil and his angels on the other. Not a different war, but the heavenly aspect of the same war.

Now I want us to understand two enormously important truths from this war.

First: we win. Verse 10:

Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say: "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."

In what sense has the devil been thrown out? In what sense have believers overcome him?

The key is that word 'accuse'. The accuser has been thrown out.

The point is that the devil accuses people before God. Joe Bloggs: he's a sinner, like the rest. You should judge him and send him to hell. And before Jesus came the devil had a point. How could God let the guilty Joe Bloggs into heaven?

But we heard last week that Jesus has come and as the Lamb of God he has shed his blood so that all who trust in him will not face that wrath, judgment and hell. He has born it as their substitute.

So when the devil says to God, "That Philip Venables. I've got a list of his sins here. Six pages. And that's just yesterday's. You haven't read this morning's yet. He should go to hell." And God replies, "But my Son died for him. He has taken all those away. Here's my record: a clean sheet. And it's my record, not yours, that counts."

That's what the Bible means by 'no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus'. That's what Revelation means by 'they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony'. They trust in Jesus. They – as we will later – can sing,

When Satan tempts me to despair,
and tells me of the guilt within,
upward I look and see him there
who made an end to all my sin.
Because the sinless saviour died,
my sinful soul is counted free;
for God, the just, is satisfied
to look on him and pardon me.

So we win – because of the blood of the Lamb.

Second truth: understand where the real battleground is. In the words of Paul, our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against spiritual beings and spiritual forces. There is a lot of exaggerated and sometimes wildly speculative stuff taught about spiritual warfare. But just because we should reject what is not biblical does not mean that we neglect this vital truth: we are in a spiritual battle . . . and we should fight: spiritually, with faith and prayer. That's how we fight; that's how we win.

Last message from Revelation 12:

We win by losing.

. . . but we win by losing.

Verse 12:

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.

They were willing to die rather than deny Jesus. Some did die; some still do die. But these are the overcomers. They win by losing. In Jesus' words, they save their lives by losing them.

That is the normal pattern. That was the experience of Jesus and it was what he promised to those who follow him. Next time you want to claim a promise, what about 'everyone will hate you because of me'?!

Whether any of us will experience real persecution in our lifetime I don't know. But we do face the hostility of our families or the sheer apathy and indifference of our colleagues. How many active Christians suffer illness or depression or loss – and who knows how much of this might come from the

rampaging dragon? How many great Christian leaders have suffered physically or mentally – but have been the winners because they held on to the Lamb who died and the word of their testimony.

Jesus promised no one an easy life. In fact, he promised the opposite. But when we believe in spite of those things, then we are winners, winning by losing.

As some of you know, I have visited Uganda three times now. I have seen the cave in the forest where the great pioneer missionary Alexander McKay used to hide from the forces of the Ugandan king who was out to kill him. I have visited the grave of Bishop James Hannington who gave his life for Uganda before he even arrived at its borders. I have visited the memorial to the martyred page boys of the king's court and seen the life-sized model of those boys being turned into a human torch, while they sang songs of joy for the flames that were taking them to Jesus. I sat and talked with a retired bishop who was present at the last meeting between Archbishop Janani Luwum and Idi Amin, from which Luwum was taken away and murdered. The gospel arrived in that country less than 150 years ago, and yet today 80% of the population call themselves Christian. Surely the great reason for that must be that it is a church founded by martyrs, those who did not love their own lives and did not shrink from death.

The church will always be persecuted and will always be kept safe. And though God's people will suffer and will be killed, they will overcome, by the blood of the Lamb.