



Revelation - Chapter Twelve

Summary of Chapter Twelve

This chapter begins with John seeing a great sign in heaven. He saw a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of stars. She was pregnant and gave birth to a male child, who is to rule all the nations. This child was caught up to God and the woman fled to a place prepared by God where she will be taken care of for three and a half years. The male child is Christ and the woman is thought to be the nation Israel.

There was a war in heaven between Michael and his angels, and the dragon, or Satan, and his angels. Satan and his angels were defeated, then thrown down to earth and those in heaven rejoiced. When Satan saw that he had been thrown down to earth he went after the woman who gave birth to the male child, but could not capture her so he became furious and went away to make war with the rest of her offspring, i.e. the church.

V. Revelation 12:1-14:20 - The cosmic conflict between Christ and Satan

At the centre point of the book, John records the vision that reveals the deepest dimension of the conflict in which the church is engaged: through his sacrificial blood Christ, the seed of the woman, has defeated Satan, the accuser of his people. In light of the Cross, believers' sufferings, although intensely painful and inflicted by powerful opponents, are merely symptoms of the dragon's desperation, since 'he knows that his time is short'.

V.a Revelation 12:1-17 - Two signs in heaven

The two signs are a woman who gives birth, and a dragon intent on destroying her offspring, which dominate the two visions in this chapter. Twice John sees the dragon decisively defeated, and both descriptions of the battle's aftermath describe the woman's protection in the wilderness.

The first vision (vv.1-6) portrays a decisive battle at the turning point of history when Christ's incarnation, obedience, sacrifice, and exaltation forever disqualified Satan as the accuser of believers (v.10).

Some interpreters think the second vision (vv.7-17) also represents the same series of events, while others think it portrays events at the beginning of the great tribulation.

V.a.i Revelation 12:1-6 - The Woman and the Dragon

Christ, the promised son of Israel and of Eve, although apparently a defenceless newborn before the mighty dragon, has been caught up to reign with God. As the trumpet series ended, John was looking into the very temple of God in heaven (11:19). Now his vision continues with a panorama of events starting in heaven but running their full course on earth.

He describes two great signs in heaven: first, the pregnant woman (vv.1-2) and second, an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns (vv.3-4). The two meet in a brief confrontation (vv.4-6), but its outcome is inconclusive and its meaning unclear until an interpretation is given (vv.7-18).

¹ A great portent appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. ² She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pangs, in the agony of giving birth.

Revelation 12:1-2

The woman's description as a great portent in heaven and her clothing with the sun, moon, and twelve stars show that she symbolises Israel, i.e. Joseph's dream: <<*He had another dream, and told it to his brothers, saying, 'Look, I have had another dream: the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me'*>> (Genesis 37:9).

That she had the moon under her feet provides an insight into the authority that God has given to her over part of his created order. This is supported by the fact that she wore on her head a crown of twelve stars.

She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pangs, in the agony of giving birth. Using the imagery of a natural birth, there is symbolism showing how God had created his church through the agony of giving his only Son in reconciliation with his creation: <<*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life*>> (John 3:16), and: <<*I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church*>> (Colossians 1:24). The bible often reflects the pain of childbirth with a life of serving God: <<*Like a woman with child, who writhes and cries out in her pangs when she is near her time, so were we because of you, O Lord*>> (Isaiah 26:17), and: <<*My little children, for whom I am again in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed in you, I wish I were present with you now and could change my tone, for I am perplexed about you*>> (Galatians 4:19-20).

³ Then another portent appeared in heaven: a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems on his heads.

Revelation 12:3

Then another portent appeared in heaven. Unlike the first, which promised great blessing upon all of human kind, this time it is a bad omen, at least for a time.

The great red dragon is <<*that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan*>> (v.9), who had facilitated the fall of humankind as recorded in Genesis 3:1-15. The prophet had seen his downfall as part of Israel's redemption: <<*On that day the Lord with his cruel and great and strong sword will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan the twisting serpent, and he will kill the dragon that is in the sea*>> (Isaiah 27:1).

Its seven heads with seven diadems and ten horns symbolise great power: <<*After this, as I watched, another appeared, like a leopard. The beast had four wings of a bird on its back and four heads; and dominion was given to it. After this I saw in the visions by night a fourth beast, terrifying and dreadful and exceedingly strong. It had great iron teeth and was devouring, breaking in pieces, and stamping what was left with its feet. It was different from all the beasts that preceded it, and it had ten horns*>> (Daniel 7:6-7). This is the description of the beast: <<*And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, having ten horns and seven heads; and on its horns were ten diadems, and on its heads were blasphemous names*>> (Revelation 13:1).

⁴ His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth. Then the dragon stood before the woman who was about to bear a child, so that he might devour her child as soon as it was born.

Revelation 12:4

His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven. Evil spirits or demons, in league with Satan, share his defeat and downfall before the forces of God (vv.7-9). Some interpreters think this refers to the original fall of Satan, taking a third of the angels with him: <<*For if God did not spare the angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to chains of deepest darkness to be kept until the judgement*>> (2 Peter 2:4), <<*And the angels who did not keep their own position, but left their proper dwelling, he has kept in eternal chains in deepest darkness for the judgement of the great day*>> (Jude 6); and probably referred to by the prophet: <<*How you are fallen from heaven, O Day Star, son of Dawn! How you are cut down to the ground, you who laid the nations low! You said in your heart, 'I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit on the mount of assembly on the heights of Zaphon; I will ascend to the tops of the clouds, I will make myself like the Most High.' But you are brought down to Sheol, to the depths of the Pit*>> (Isaiah 14:12-15).

The dragon stood before the woman who was about to bear a child. Satan was opposed to God's sovereign plan for redemption and remains opposed to his church. He will not relinquish this opposition until he is finally destroyed by Christ.

The dragon's intent to devour the woman's child at birth recalls Genesis 3:15, which predicts that the woman's offspring will strike the serpent's head as the serpent strikes his heel.

⁵ And she gave birth to a son, a male child, who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron. But her child was snatched away and taken to God and to his throne; ⁶ and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, so that there she can be nourished for one thousand two hundred and sixty days.

Revelation 12:5-6

And she gave birth to a son. It was from the people of Israel that the Messiah was to come and to them that he was promised: <<*For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace*>> (Isaiah 9:6).

This male child is the promised Messiah who is born to rule all the nations with a rod of iron. He is not destroyed by the dragon but is exalted to God's throne: <<*Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you both see and hear. For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says, "The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.'" Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified*>> (Acts 2:33-36), and: <<*To the one who conquers I will give a place with me on my throne, just as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne*>> (Revelation 3:21). Yet the second vision (vv.7-17) will reveal that the Messiah's suffering was integral to his victory (v.11 and 5:9-10).

Her child was snatched away is language used when God translates people from one physical location to another: <<*When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing*>> (Acts 8:39).

The rod of iron, also referred to in 2:27 and 19:15, is not a royal sceptre as in some translations, but the shepherd's club, here used to shatter the nations like pottery: <<*You shall break them with a rod of iron, and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel*>> (Psalm 2:9).

The child's mother fled into the wilderness, a setting in which God's people are utterly dependent on him but are protected from the dragon's rage (vv.13-14). There, she was nourished by God's provision, as were Israel (Exodus 16:13-18), and Elijah (1 Kings 17:6 and 19:5-8). This provides encouragement for believers in life that God will take care of his own: where she has a place prepared by God, in the same way as he will in the life yet to come: <<*In my Father's house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?*>> (John 14:2).

Some scholars think the time period symbolised as one thousand two hundred and sixty days, or a time, and times, and half a time (v.14), began with Christ's ascension and will end when God withdraws his restraint on the dragon's power to deceive the nations and gather them against the church (20:7-10). Others understand the one thousand two hundred and sixty days, or three and a half years, to represent the second half of the great tribulation, and to be the same period as the second half of Daniel's seventieth week (Daniel 9:27). On this view,

the woman's fleeing into the wilderness indicates that, during the great tribulation, Jewish believers will be persecuted by the Antichrist and will flee into the wilderness; refer to the comments made on Revelation 11:1-2.

V.a.ii Revelation 12:7-12 - Michael Defeats the Dragon

The second of the two visions of vv.1-17 reveals more detail about Christ's victory and the dragon's ongoing attempt to destroy the people of God. The vision is in two parts with the first showing how the archangel Michael led his angels in victory over Satan and his angels, casting them out of heaven to earth, leading to a great victory proclamation in heaven.

⁷ And war broke out in heaven; Michael and his angels fought against the dragon. The dragon and his angels fought back, ⁸ but they were defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. ⁹ The great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world – he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.

Revelation 12:7-9

And war broke out in heaven. Such language raises the question of whether or not John has in mind a specific event of the recent past, perhaps the same event to which Jesus referred when he told his disciples: <<*I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning*>> (Luke 10:18b). It is possible, but not likely, for Jesus also stated: <<*Now is the judgement of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out*>> (John 12:31). Rather, the account of war in heaven rests on a conclusion drawn from John's own experience and from the vision just recorded. From experience John knew that Satan was very much in evidence on earth, and he attributes this to his recent expulsion from heaven.

In Daniel, Michael is the spiritual prince and guardian of God's people, refer to Daniel 10:13, 10:21, and 12:1. The text: <<*But when the archangel Michael contended with the devil and disputed about the body of Moses, he did not dare to bring a condemnation of slander against him, but said, 'The Lord rebuke you!'*>> (Jude 9), identifies Michael as the archangel who contended with Satan over the body of Moses, attributing to him words that echo the angel of the Lord's answer to Satan the accuser: <<*And the Lord said to Satan, 'The Lord rebuke you, O Satan! The Lord who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! Is not this man a brand plucked from the fire?'*>> (Zechariah 3:2). Many futurists think Michael's battle with the dragon marks the beginning of the 'time of anguish' (Daniel 12:1), which is also the great tribulation.

The victory of Michael and the holy angels over the dragon and its co-conspirators, who are fallen angels, may symbolise the triumphant power of Jesus' Cross: <<*He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it*>> (Colossians 2:15), or a subsequent defeat of demonic forces flowing from Christ's victory at the Cross, or the original casting of Satan and his demons out of heaven.

There was no longer any place for them in heaven. This could be seen as an historic event or an intriguing insight into the possibility that God has tolerated the

presence of his opponents in heaven, as he once had: <<*One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them*>> (Job 1:6). Another possibility is that John saw the battle take place in the spiritual realm and being cast solely into the physical realm of earth.

The deceiver of the whole world. Satan is once again identified in his true role, as Jesus had stated quite clearly to a group in Jerusalem: <<*You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies*>> (John 8:44).

The Devil, from the Greek *Diabolos*, and Satan in Hebrew, describe a legal opponent, an accuser at law. Many futurists think he was thrown down to the earth in order to intensify demonic activity on earth during the great tribulation.

¹⁰ Then I heard a loud voice in heaven, proclaiming,
 'Now have come the salvation and the power
 and the kingdom of our God
 and the authority of his Messiah,
 for the accuser of our comrades has been thrown down,
 who accuses them day and night before our God.
¹¹ But they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb
 and by the word of their testimony,
 for they did not cling to life even in the face of death.
¹² Rejoice then, you heavens
 and those who dwell in them!
 But woe to the earth and the sea,
 for the devil has come down to you
 with great wrath,
 because he knows that his time is short!'

Revelation 12:10-12

Before resuming the story of the dragon and the woman (v.13), John heard a loud voice in heaven reflecting on the significance of the dragon's fall. The event invites comparison with stars that fell to earth in two earlier scenes: the star called Wormwood in connection with the third trumpet (8:10-11), and the star with the key to the Abyss in connection with the fifth (9:1). The first star poisoned rivers and springs of water, and the second brought severe injury and pain on the earth's inhabitants. Similarly, the dragon's expulsion from heaven means woe to the earth and the sea, for the devil has come down to you! He is filled with great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!

Yet the differences outweigh the similarities. The announcement by the heavenly voice has the form of a song or hymn, and it is a hymn of joy more than of woe. The dragon's fall means that: now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Messiah. The echo of the seventh trumpet assures the reader that the outcome of the conflict on earth is not in doubt, even before it begins. This conflict will end as the war in heaven ended – with the defeat of the dragon and his cohorts. More specifically, Satan's fall from heaven means that his traditional role as the accuser of the people of God is at an end, for he has no more access to God in heaven. The perspective is much the same as Paul's: <<*Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us*>> (Romans 8:33-34).

The dragon's expulsion from heaven shows that Satan can no longer press charges as the accuser of our comrades or brothers because the Lamb shed his blood for them: <<*I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!*>> (John 16:33), and they maintain their testimony of trust even unto death.

Although 'conquered' by the beast physically in death (11:7 and 13:7), in fact the martyrs have conquered both the beast (15:2) and the dragon that empowers it. That they have conquered him is set in ironic and beautiful contrast to: <<*Also, it was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them. It was given authority over every tribe and people and language and nation*>> (Revelation 13:7), confirming that the overcomers of Chapters 2-3 are now identified as Christian martyrs.

His time is short! Jesus' death and exaltation inaugurated the kingdom of our God, and guaranteed the certain and approaching demise of Satan's tyranny. All the demonic activity here and in the Gospels is connected to Satan's frustrated anger and his impotence before God and the power of the Cross.

Rejoice then, you heavens and those who dwell in them! But woe to the earth and the sea, for the devil has come down to you. Now that Satan has been cast out, those who dwell in heaven can rejoice. Is their joy at the expense of those on earth? Yes and no. Although Satan is now able to focus his deceitful lies on the occupants of planet earth: <<*Discipline yourselves; keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour*>> (1 Peter 5:8). However, it will only be for a season, for his defeat is certain.

V.a.iii Revelation 12:13-17 - The Dragon Fights Again on Earth

Frustrated in his attempt to devour the woman's child (v.5), the dragon pursues the woman herself. This explains her flight to the desert described in v.6. Like Israel in ancient times: <<*You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself*>> (Exodus 19:4), the woman is carried by the two wings of a great eagle to her place of protection for a defined period of time. Hers is the promise of Isaiah: <<*but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint*>> (Isaiah 40:31).

¹³ So when the dragon saw that he had been thrown down to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child. ¹⁴ But the woman was given the two wings of the great eagle, so that she could fly from the serpent into the wilderness, to her place where she is nourished for a time, and times, and half a time.

Revelation 12:13-14

The dragon now becomes the serpent as he pursued the woman, representing God's chosen people. The enmity of Genesis 3:15 breaks out into open conflict.

The two wings of the great eagle. A metaphor of the exodus becomes an image of God's care for his church, exposed in the wilderness yet guarded and nourished in its pilgrimage.

That the woman will be nourished in the wilderness is reminiscent of the way God had cared for his people Israel as they travelled to the Promised Land from Egyptian slavery: <<*Yet he commanded the skies above, and opened the doors of heaven; he rained down on them manna to eat, and gave them the grain of heaven. Mortals ate of the bread of angels; he sent them food in abundance*>> (Psalm 78:23-25), and: <<*Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, "He gave them bread from heaven to eat"*>> (John 6:31).

A time, and times, and half a time. This half-sabbatical period, derived from Daniel 7:25, signifies the brevity of the saints' suffering and of their persecutors' power; refer to the comments on v.6.

¹⁵ Then from his mouth the serpent poured water like a river after the woman, to sweep her away with the flood. ¹⁶ But the earth came to the help of the woman; it opened its mouth and swallowed the river that the dragon had poured from his mouth.

Revelation 12:15-16

Water like a river. The serpent tries to destroy the people of God with lies and false teaching from its mouth, just as it had deceived Eve: <<*Then the Lord God said to the woman, 'What is this that you have done?' The woman said, 'The serpent tricked me, and I ate'*>> (Genesis 3:13).

But the earth came to the help of the woman; it opened its mouth and swallowed the river that the dragon had poured from his mouth. The earth is personified over against the dragon or serpent. The dragon, who had tried to devour the woman's child, Greek *katēsthio* (v.4), meets his equal here in a creature of God swallowing or 'drinking up', Greek *katapino*, his deadly stream of water. Yet the woman's real protector is God, who had prepared the desert as her place of refuge on earth. The earth is simply the instrument by which God keeps the woman safe.

¹⁷ Then the dragon was angry with the woman, and went off to make war on the rest of her children, those who keep the commandments of God and hold the testimony of Jesus.

Revelation 12:17

Having failed to destroy the Messiah (vv.4-5) and his mother, i.e. Israel, the frustrated dragon went off to make war on the rest of her children, that is, war on either the church on earth down through the ages, including the last three and a half year period in focus here, or, as some hold, war on believing Israel, or the remnant described in Chapter 7. These include all who keep the commandments of God and hold the testimony of Jesus, that is, all who persevere in faithfulness and obedience to the Gospel while under the persistent attack of Satan. The dragon's weapon is the beast that emerges from the sea to wage war on the saints.