

## **An Apocalyptic Christmas Story**

### **Revelation 12:1-17**

**Introduction:** 1) Concerning our text Eugene Peterson says, “This is not the nativity story we grew up with, but is it the nativity story all the same” (Mounce, f.n.15, 234). Peterson is right. There is no baby in a manger, shepherds rejoicing or wise men bringing gifts and worshipping. There are angels, but they are not singing. Rather, they are engaged in a heavenly war of eschatological proportions. No, in this Christmas story there is a beautifully clothed woman, a male child (“Son”) and a great fiery red dragon who stands ready to devour, to eat, the Son “who is going to shepherd all nations” (v. 5). This is an apocalyptic Christmas Story.

2) Revelation 12:1-17 tells us, in part and in summary fashion, the Grand Redemptive Story of the Bible. It is something of a panorama of salvation history. It tells us in fantastic imagery and vision the true story of the whole world. It looks to the past, addresses the present, and points to the future. It naturally divides into 3 sections: 1) 1-6 is the story of the woman, the male child and the dragon; 2) 7-12 is a war in heaven and song of redemption; 3) 13-17 is the satanic attempt to destroy the people of God and its failed project. This is a Christmas story unlike any you have probably ever heard!

## **I. God sent a Savior just as He promised 12:1-6**

The story of Christmas does not begin in a city called Bethlehem. It begins in a garden called Eden. There, immediately following the Fall when Adam and Eve yield to the temptation of “the ancient serpent” (v.9), God made a promise to send a Savior. There in Genesis 3:15 he said to Satan and Eve, “I will put hostility between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed. He will strike [crush] your head, and you will strike [bruise] his heel.” This promise, made to Adam and Eve, often called the “proto evangelium” or first gospel, would be further developed in God’s promise to Abraham (The Abrahamic Covenant, Gen. 12) and God’s promise to David (The Davidic Covenant, 2 Sam. 7). The fulfillment of those promises is now explained in our text.

### 1) Trust God to keep His Word 12:1-2

- John says “a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of stars on her head.”

This is the 1<sup>st</sup> of 7 signs that appear in the remainder of the Revelation (cf. 12:3; 13:13, 14: 15:1; 16:14; 19:20). This is also the 2<sup>nd</sup> of 4 symbolic women in Revelation. There is the Jezebel in 2:20, the prostitute of chapter 17, and the bride of the Lamb in Chapter 19 (MacArthur, Vol.2, 3-4).

- The identity of this woman has been variously understood. The Catholic Church has identified her as Mary. Others have said it is Israel, the Church, or the “the messianic community, the ideal Israel” (Mounce, 231). Her marvelous description draws directly from the patriarch Joseph’s dream in Genesis 37: 9-11. There the sun represents Jacob, the moon Rachel, and the stars the tribes of Israel. Perhaps it is best to see her representing the righteous remnant of Israel, the people of God. I believe Romans 11 would lend support to this understanding.
- Verse 2 informs us she is pregnant, in labor and agony, about to give birth. Crying out in labor and in pain to give birth is reflective of Old Testament imagery that is often applied to the nation of Israel as a mother giving birth (Isaiah 26:17-18; 54:1; 66:7-12; Hosea 13:13; Micah 4:10; 5:2-3; Matthew 24:8). Indeed the nation agonized and suffered throughout the centuries as she longed for her Messiah to come. “It is out of faithful Israel that Messiah will come” (Mounce, 232). God promised us He would send a rescuer, a deliverer, a Savior. We can trust Him to keep His word.

## 2) Trust God to honor His Son 12:3-5

- John now sees another, a 2<sup>nd</sup> sign, in heaven. It is “a great fiery red dragon.” In verse 9 he is identified as “the ancient serpent...the Devil

and Satan.” 13 times in Revelation Satan is described as a dragon. As a dragon he strikes fear in our hearts. As fiery red his murderous character is revealed. Seven heads, 10 horns and 7 diadems recalls the 4<sup>th</sup> beast of Daniel 7 and speaks of his great power and authority. We will see this again in chapters 13 & 17.

- Verse 4 informs us that the tail of the dragon “swept away a third of the stars in heaven and hurled them to the earth.” I believe this refers to the primordial war in heaven when Satan rebelled against God and 1/3 of the angelic host chose to follow him in his rebellion (Osborne, 461).  
Isaiah 14:12-15 may typify this tragic event where Isaiah says, “Shining morning star, how you have fallen from the heavens! You destroyer of nations, you have been cut down to the ground. You said to yourself: “I will ascend to the heavens; I will set up my throne above the stars of God. I will sit on the mount of the gods’ assembly, in the remotest parts of the North. I will ascend above the highest clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.” But you will be brought down to Sheol into the deepest regions of the Pit.”
- The dragon takes his stand (“stood” is perfect tense) in front of the woman to devour, consume, eat up her child. This action, on the part of the dragon, is not new. Since the declaration of God in Genesis 3:15,

Satan has sought to prevent this male child from coming. He moved Cain to kill Abel (1 John 3:12). He moved Pharaoh to kill Hebrew baby boys (Exodus 1-2). He moved Saul to kill David (1 Samuel 18:10-11). He moved wicked Athaliah to destroy all the royal heirs of the house of Judah (2 Chronicles 22:10). He moved Haman to plot genocide against the Jews (Esther). He moved Herod to kill Jesus (Matthew 2). But he failed! Verse 5 tells us, “But she gave birth to a Son – a male who is going to shepherd all nations with an iron scepter.” David Platt says, “the birth of Christ on that day in Bethlehem inaugurated the death of this ancient serpent, just as it had been promised back in Genesis 3. The birth of Christ declared the death of the ancient serpent; the death of Christ defanged the adversary” (Sermon, 9-23-12). Shepherding the nations reflects the messianic Psalm 2. “In Psalm 2 the messianic Son is to receive the nations as an inheritance and “rule [shepherd”]; cf. comm. On 7:17] with an iron scepter” (v. 9). As a shepherd defends his flock against wild beasts of prey, so Christ will strike the nations that oppress and persecute his church...” (Mounce, 234).

- Suddenly, and unexpectedly, John writes “and her child was caught up to God and to his throne.” What are we to make of this? Verse 5 summarizes the “first coming career” of the Lord Jesus Christ. It

includes his birth, his destiny to rule all the nations (cf. Psalm 2:9), and his ascension. The reason the ascension is highlighted rather than the crucifixion and resurrection is two-fold: 1) the crucifixion and resurrection were beautifully expounded in chapter 5, and 2) the ascension is the unquestionable proof that Satan was defeated in that he could not prevent Christ from rising from the dead and ascending back to His Father where He now is seated at the right hand of the throne of God, perhaps the very place that Satan coveted when he fell. Satan disgraced and dishonored himself with his idolatrous ambition. God exalted and honored His Son in His incarnation and humiliation. The way “up” really is found in a willingness to go “down.”

3) Trust God to care for His people      12:6

Verse six anticipates the dragon’s rage in verses 13-17. Here the wilderness symbolizes a place and promise of protection and provision, just as God cared for Israel following the Exodus. God has specifically prepared a place for her, a place where He will feed (*ESV*, “nourish”) her for 1260 days or 3½ years. The place will be one of spiritual refuge. She may be persecuted and suffer, but she will also be provided for and sustained. Everything the righteous remnant needs to honor her God and experience the victory provided by the male child, the babe of Bethlehem, she will

have. God has preserved and taken care of his people in the past. He continues to meet our needs in the present. He will not fail us in the future. We have His word. You can trust Him.

## **II. God has accomplished a salvation that is certain 12:7-12**

The incarnation of the Son (v.5) was nothing less than a declaration of war upon Satan and his demonic forces. It was God keeping his promise to “ransom captive Israel” with the coming of Immanuel. It was indeed His promise kept to “fill the whole world with heaven’s peace.” However, heaven was anything but peaceful when the Son was born, lived, died, raised, and caught up to heaven in ascension and exaltation. Heaven’s “Battle of the Bulge” ensued but an empty cross and an empty tomb sealed the devil’s fate!

### 1) Remember our enemy is a defeated foe 12:7-9

- “War broke out in heaven.” The time is not specified. Some believe it looks back to the time of Satan’s original, primordial fall. Others believe it looks to the time of the crucifixion and his climatic defeat. Still others believe it looks to the future and possibly the midpoint of the tribulation. Dogmatism is unwarranted. What is certain are the results of the cosmic conflict.

- Michael is named in Scripture as the archangel (Daniel 10:13, 21; 12:1; Jude 9). Interestingly, the name Michael means “who is like God?” and stands in stark contrast to Lucifer’s egocentric attack on the Lord where he said in Isaiah 14:14, “I will be like the most high.” Michael is the guardian and protector of God’s people. He has a particular role with respect to Israel as Daniel 12:1 makes clear.
- Satan and his angels (demons) fight and are defeated. They are cast out of heaven and, as verse 13 notes, they are “thrown to the earth.” Satan and his demons were cast out of heaven as their home at the time of their original rebellion. However, the Bible seems to indicate that they still had some degree of access to heaven (see Job 1:6; 2:1). However, beat down in this great battle, they are cast out permanently and denied any access to heaven at all. In other words, they are banished and barred from the presence of God and heaven forever.
- Revelation 12:9 contains a mini seminar in Satanology by means of 4 instructive titles of our archenemy: 1) “the great dragon” emphasizes his ferocity and terror, 2) that “ancient serpent” identifies him with the beguiling snake of Genesis 3 who seduced Adam and Eve into committing sin, 3) “the devil”, literally *diabolos*, means “the accuser or slanderer,” and 4) “Satan” is a proper name which means “the adversary”



or “the enemy.” He is the “one who deceives the whole world,” the one Jesus says is “a murderer from the beginning and has not stood in the truth, because there is no truth in him...he is a liar and the father of lies” (John 8:44). He is defeated, humiliated in this war, along with his angels. The critical and crucial battle is done. The end of the war is soon to follow. Remember: our enemy is a defeated foe.

2) Remember our salvation is a settled reality 12:10

- Verses 10-12 constitute another beautiful hymn in the apocalypse. John hears a loud and unspecified voice in heaven declaring the victory of the saints by virtue of the redemptive work of the Lamb. Verse 10 addresses 4 wonderful realities that have come and now are ours because “the accuser of our brothers has been thrown out; the one who accuses them before our God day and night.” The perpetual spiritual tattle-tale has been kicked out of the heavenly house. In his place comes 1) salvation, 2) power, 3) the Kingdom of God and 4) the authority of Messiah Jesus.
- Brothers and sister, when Satan accuses you of being a grievous sinner you look him in the eye and say, “You are right I am. But I have a greater Savior than my sin and He has given me salvation, power, a kingdom and the authority of my Messiah. I have been delivered and I

am safe from your accusations now and forever.” Yes, our salvation is a signed, sealed and settled reality! Praise His Name!

3) Remember our victory is through the blood of Christ and the gospel

12:11-12

- 12:11 provides the basis or ground of our salvation through a beautiful and magnificent declaration. Those who follow the Lamb, the Christ of God, have conquered, become victorious, over the dragon. And how did they overcome? Two grounds for our victory are noted: 1) the blood of the Lamb and 2) the word of their testimony (witness), their faithfulness to the gospel of King Jesus. The power of the blood is indeed sufficient for our sin. It is also sufficient for a martyrs’ death. Indeed the loyalty of the child of God to the Lamb who shed His blood is witnessed by their faithfulness even unto death. This verse beautifully states that their love for the Lamb was greater than their love for their own life.

Amazingly, the blood of the martyrs shows not the triumph of Satan, but rather the triumph of the saints as their acceptance of Jesus and His work on the cross provides victory over sin as well as Satan. Because our sins have been washed in the blood of the Lamb of God, no accusation by the devil can stand against us. We have not been forgiven because of who we are, we have been forgiven because of who He is and what He has

done for us. He washed our sins away in His precious blood. For such a great salvation, they gladly and willingly put their lives on the line. He is worth it.

- In verse 12 those in heaven and those on the earth who know the Lamb are called to rejoice. In contrast, there is a woe pronounced on the inhabitants of the earth, unbelieving humanity that stands in opposition to God. What is the basis for the woe? Answer: the fact that the devil has come down and he has great wrath. Why? Because he knows he has a short time. Indeed, he has no more than 3½ years before he will find his new home for 1000 years in the abyss (Rev.20:1-6). Satan has raged against humanity ever since we were placed in the Garden of Eden. He is not letting up one wit in our day. As his time draws to a close, his wrath will increase to proportions beyond our wildest imagination. Truly, hell will come to earth during these horrible final days of the tribulation. Sinners can only expect destruction, disaster and death at the hands of the great fiery red dragon. But, it does not have to be that way. God has accomplished a certain salvation that is available and offered to all.

### **III. God will provide for His servants in His war against Satan 12:13-17**

- Christmas was indeed a declaration of war that was promised in Genesis 3:15.

Calvary was the decisive battle where the final outcome of this war was settled and made clear. There is no question as to how it is going to end.

However, our enemy, the dragon, Satan, fights on. And, “because he knows he has a short time” (he does know his Bible), his hostility and rage is only going to intensify as the end draws near. His rage against the people of God will be a special focus of his attention. But, as he failed to destroy the male child, he will fail in destroying His children too!

#### 1) Satan seeks the destruction of God’s people 12:13

In verse 6 the woman, the righteous remnant, fled into the wilderness to be cared for by God. Verses 13-17 further develop that verse and reveal the wrath of the dragon who has “been thrown to the earth.” Indeed he “persecutes the woman who gave birth to the male child.” Clearly the woman was righteous Israel in verse 1-2. Here, she is not only that remnant, but the eschatological remnant, the church, the true vine of Jew and Gentile as Paul makes clear in Romans 11. Mounce is quite helpful when he writes, “it is out of faithful Israel that the Messiah will come [ultimately embodied in a particular woman named Mary]. It should cause no trouble that within the same chapter the woman comes to signify the church (v.17). The people

of God are one throughout redemptive history. The early church did not view itself as discontinuous with faithful Israel” (232). This woman the devil rages against. He always has and he always will. The rage will only grow more intense as the end approaches.

2) God is a rescuer of those who are His 12:14-17

- Exodus imagery and typology dominate these final verses of chapter 12. The dragon seeks the destruction of the Son’s children but God comes to the rescue. “The woman was given two wings of a great eagle, so that she could fly from the serpent’s presence to her place in the wilderness, where she is fed [nourished] for a time, times, and half a time” (or 3½ years).
- The phrase “two wings of a great eagle” should not be taken literally. Neither should this be viewed as some type of 747! It is simply a picture of God’s providential protection of His people. Wings often appear in the Bible as a sign of God’s protection (see Exodus 19:4; Deuteronomy 32: 9-12; Psalm 17:8; 18:10; 36:7; 57:1; 61:4; 63:7; 91:4; Isaiah 40:31). Indeed Exodus 19:4 says, “You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to Myself.” The length of her time in the wilderness is again specified as 3½ years (time and times and half a time). Furthermore, she is said to be in a place that

is separated from the presence of the serpent. Some have identified this wilderness place as Petra. Others believe that it simply indicates a scattering of the people of God throughout the nations for protection. One cannot specify with any certainty exactly where this place will be. What we do know is that God will make a way for His people during this great wave of persecution. That anti-Semitism may be a component of this persecution should not be ruled out. I believe it is certain.

- In verse 16 the serpent spews water out of his mouth like a flood. It is an indication of his desire to destroy the woman. Some believe this refers to an army, because often an army is pictured as a great flood of water (see Jeremiah 46:8; 47:2). Others believe the flood from his mouth refers to his arrogant and blasphemous words (see the activity of the beast in Revelation 13:5). However Satan comes at the woman, his efforts will utterly fail.
- Verse 16 also indicates that the earth will help the woman, opening its mouth and swallowing up the flood which comes from the dragon. If this is reference to a literal physical miracle, we can think back to when the Lord had the earth open up to swallow Korah (Numbers 16:31-32). It is possible that even one of the great earthquakes that visits the earth during the great tribulation will be the avenue whereby God will provide a

- physical miracle to spare His people. Interestingly, the dragon-inspired Egyptians of old were swallowed up by the earth. Exodus 15:12 reminds us, “You stretched out your hand and the earth swallowed them.”
- Having failed to destroy the woman, the wrath of the dragon is enraged to even greater heights. Not being able to defeat her, he chooses now to go off to make war with the “rest of her offspring.” This is probably simply a reference to all the other followers of the Lamb that he can find throughout the earth, Jew and Gentile alike. The rest of her offspring are clearly believers, for they are referred to as those who keep the commandments of God and have (continually) the testimony or witness of Jesus. The phrase “to make war” is the same expression used of the beast’s attack on the two witnesses in 11:7 and also his attack against the saints in 13:7.
  - It is interesting to note that although the devil will be unable to totally exterminate Israel, Zechariah 13:8 sorrowfully informs us that 2/3 of the Jewish population will be killed during the tribulation. Satan will not utterly succeed in wiping God’s people from the face of the earth, but he will succeed in plunging many to their death. Satan indeed hates the righteous remnant of God.

## **Conclusion**

It was penned by the wonderful Methodist Hymn writer Charles Wesley. It is only 2 simple verses. However, they powerfully capture the drama that has unfolded in our “Apocalyptic Christmas Story.”

**Come, Thou long expected Jesus**

Come, Thou long expected Jesus,  
Born to set Thy people free;  
From our fears and sins release us;  
Let us find our rest in Thee.  
Israel’s strength and consolation,  
Hope of all the earth Thou art;  
Dear desire of ev’ry nation,  
Joy of ev’ry longing heart.

Born Thy people to deliver,  
Born a child, and yet a King,  
Born to reign in us forever,  
Now Thy gracious kingdom bring.  
By Thine own eternal Spirit  
Rule in all our hearts alone;  
By Thine all sufficient merit,  
Raise us to Thy glorious throne.