

The Victory Of The Church Over The Devil

[A Bible study on Revelation, chapter twelve; presented to the Pastoral Conference of the Northern Illinois District; April 16, 1958; River Forest, Illinois]

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Introduction.

The book of Revelation was written to bring consolation and hope to the Church in the face of great trials and persecutions. In our day, when the holy city is trodden under the feet of the Gentiles, when heathen have risen to positions of prominence in the church, when those who hold faithfully to the truths of Holy Scripture are read out of the church as men lacking the spirit of Christ, when unbelief reigns supreme under the guise of faith, when denial of the truth puts on a pretense of concern for and loyalty to the truth, when pious parades have become the substitute for Christian worship and moralistic platitudes the substitute for Christian doctrine, when the Christian desire for unity has become the search for ambiguous phraseology, when ecumenicity of organization seeks to replace the catholicity of the church, when theological gobbledegook has become, at its very best, the bushel under which men hide the true light of the Word lest they be made to bear the cross after the Lord Christ, when the church is more prosperous and more poverty-stricken than at most times in the history of the world, in such a time as this we need the comfort and the hope and the assurance that we can find in this book. We make a great mistake when we ignore the book of Revelation. It is also a part of God's inspired Word and as such it was written for our learning, that also from its pages the children of God may gather hope. In our Bible study this morning we will turn our attention to the twelfth chapter of this neglected book and consider TIE VICTORY OF THE CHURCH OVER SATAN as it is there portrayed.

Dramatis Personae (12:1-6)

In the first verse of the chapter we meet the first character in the drama which unfolds in this chapter. John says, "And a great sign appeared in the sky, a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars." This woman is not identified for us by name, but there can be no doubt as to the interpretation of this part of the vision. This woman is the church.

The first clue to her identity is the statement that she wears a crown of twelve stars. The number twelve and its multiples is regularly associated with the communion of saints in the book of Revelation. The letter to the Ephesians speaks of the church as built upon the apostles and prophets, and in the twenty-first chapter of Revelation the walls of the heavenly city are built upon twelve foundations and on the twelve foundations are written the names of the twelve apostles. The city has twelve gates and on the gates are written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. The city measures 12,000 furlongs in length and breadth and height. The walls measure, very likely in width, 144 cubits. It will be noted that twelve is the basic number in all these figures.

So also in Chapter seven of Revelation, the complete number of those who are sealed, of those whom God claims as His own, is 144,000, 12,000 from each of the twelve tribes. That the elect should all be described as belonging to the twelve tribes is not at all unusual. As you know, St. Paul regularly speaks also of the church of the Now Testament as Israel, and he says, "They which are of faith, they are the children of Abraham." The number 144,000 is repeated again in chapter fourteen, when it is given as the number of the redeemed.

Throughout the book, we read repeatedly of the twenty-four elders (4:4-10; 5:8-11; 5:14; 11:16; 19:14). These twenty-four elders are the representatives and the leaders of the church. That they are men and not angels is clear from the fact that they are distinguished from the angels and that they confess that they were redeemed with the blood of the Lamb (5:8-11). To read of twenty-four elders sitting upon thrones before the throne of God does not strike us as strange when we remember that the Savior told His apostles, "Ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel." (Matt. 19:28). And when we read of these twenty-four

elders, therefore, we can scarcely avoid being reminded of the fact that there were twelve patriarchs in the Old Testament and twelve apostles in the New.

At the very beginning, therefore, when we read that this woman wears a crown of twelve stars we begin to suspect that she may have some relation to the church. And the last verse of the chapter leaves us in no doubt about the woman's identity. Her children are those who "keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ." The "testimony of Jesus Christ" is the testimony about Jesus Christ, or, as John puts it in another place, "the record that God gave of His Son." It is the Word of God, the Holy Scriptures, through which alone Jesus Christ is revealed to us. This testimony of Jesus Christ is found in the church. Those who have it are the members of the church.

But mere outward possession of the Word is not enough to make one a child of this woman. Her children also keep the commandments of God. At first glance it may seem that she has no children on this earth, for all have sinned and come short of the praise that God gives to those who obey His commands. But by faith men make the vicarious obedience of Jesus Christ their own, so that we who believe can claim perfect obedience to all the commandments of God in and through the obedience of our Substitute. Moreover, since the very first requirement of the Law of God is that we should love the Lord, and since the carnal mind, the attitude of the flesh, is enmity against God, and is, and cannot be, subject to the Law of God on that account, and since only those who have known the love of God in Christ through faith can even begin to love the Lord and thus begin to keep the commandments in the spirit as well as in the letter, therefore it follows that only true believers in the Savior can claim to be the children of this woman.

And this identification is in harmony with the treatment of the church in the rest of Scripture. The Bible uses many figures of speech to portray the church. It is the holy city. It is Jerusalem and Mt. Zion. It is the temple of the Lord. It is the family of God. It is the body of Christ. But by far the most common picture of the church is that which presents it as the wife of Jehovah in the Old Testament and the bride of Christ in the New Testament. It will not be necessary to speak of this in detail. All of us will immediately be reminded of the forty-fifth psalm, the Song of Solomon, the book of Hosea, the custom of the prophets who accused Israel of adultery when they followed after idols, the custom of the apostles and evangelists who called the Lord Jesus the bridegroom, and countless other passages of a like nature. Most of all, perhaps, when we read of this woman travailing with child, we are reminded of the words of Isaiah, "Sing, O barren, thou that didst not bear; break forth into singing and cry aloud, thou that didst not travail with child; for more are the children of the desolate than the children of the married wife saith the Lord."

And of all the children of the woman with the crown of twelve stars the greatest is the child whose birth is immanent at the time the vision begins. The identification of the child presents no difficulties. The child is described as "a son, a male, who is to shepherd all the nations with an iron rod." The apostle says of Him also that he was "caught up to God and to His throne."

In the second Psalm, David had written of the Messiah, "The Lord hath said unto Me, Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten Thee. Ask of Me, and I shall give thee the heathen for Thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for Thy possession. Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron." There is therefore no doubt that this child of the woman is the eternally begotten Son of God the Messiah. In chapter 19 of Revelation the same phrase occurs, "He shall rule them with a rod of iron," and the antecedent of "He" is "the Word of God." The description cannot possibly fit anyone else for here is the only King of whom it can be said that He rules over all the nations. And when the apostle sees the child caught up to God and to His throne, we are reminded, of course, of our Savior's ascension and session at the right hand of God as King of kings and Lord of lords.

Someone may now feel that we ought to retrace our steps and identify the woman who gave birth to this child as the Virgin Mary. But there is no word in Scripture which speaks of Mary as the mother of those who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ. Moreover, when the text tells us that the woman received two wings enabling her to fly away into the wilderness, it is made clear that we are here dealing not with a historical but with a symbolic person.

As, we, therefore, read of this woman crowned with twelve stars who was with child and pained to be delivered, we may think of the church of the Old Testament longing for the day when the promised Messiah was to be born. In the birth pangs of this woman we hear the sighings and the groanings of the people of God in ancient times who died with their lips framing the words, "I have waited for Thy salvation, O Lord," and who said with yearning, "O that the salvation of Israel were come out of Zion."

Having spoken of the woman and her impending deliverance, the apostle now introduces the third main character in the drama, the villain of the piece, a "great fiery dragon, having seven heads and ten horns and upon his heads seven diadems and his tail drew the third part of the stars of heaven and cast them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, in order that, when her child should be born, he might devour it."

There can be no doubt either about the identity of the dragon. He is the only main character in the vision who is specifically identified. In verse 9, he is called "that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan." As we see this picture of the great red dragon waiting for the child to be born so that he might devour it, we see in symbolism all the efforts of Satan to bring to naught the work of Him who was manifested to destroy the works of the devil,—the attempt of Satan to lead Him astray in the wilderness, the intensified activity of the devil during our Savior's life here on earth manifesting itself in demoniac possession, the devil's entry into the heart of Judas moving him to betray his Lord, his use of the mouth of Simon Peter to dissuade the Savior from the path of suffering, his testimony to the deity of Christ and his redemptive work in a diabolical attempt to discredit Him, and all his other activities by which he opposed the Savior's work.

The Victory Of The Child

But all his efforts are in vain. The child is caught up to God and to His throne and the woman, who is left on earth, flees into the wilderness. In the fashion of Hebrew literature we have here a summary of the account which is to follow. But it is a remarkable picture that the apostle draws for us here, a great red dragon, so fierce that he has no pity or mercy even for women and children, so large and so powerful that one swish of his tail can knock one third of the stars out of the sky, and yet unable to overcome a little baby and a woman.

The conquest of the child over the dragon is then more fully portrayed in verses 7-12:

And there was a war in the sky, Michael and His angels fighting with the dragon. And the dragon fought and his angels, and they were not strong enough, neither was their place found any more in the sky. And the great dragon was cast out, the old Serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole earth, he was cast into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him. And I heard a great voice in the sky saying, Now has come salvation and power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of His Christ, because the accuser of our brothers is cast out, who accused them before God day and night. And they were victorious over them because of the blood of the Lamb and because of the Word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives unto death. Therefore rejoice, ye skies, and they that dwell in them; woe to the earth and the sea, because the devil has come down to you, having great wrath, knowing that he has little time.

There is much dispute among commentators in regard to this battle. But as Dr. Stoeckhardt used to say, "What others have said about this you can look up for yourselves." For myself, I am convinced that these words do not refer to some imaginary battle that took place at the time of the fall of the devil into sin, an event of which the Scriptures know nothing. We take it rather as a reference to the conquest of the devil by the cross and open tomb of our Lord. This interpretation is in harmony with the clear passages of the Bible, whereas the other cannot be supported by any clear passage.

In the Gospel according to St. John we read of the devil being cast out. Two days before His crucifixion the Lord Jesus spoke of His impending death and said, "The hour has come that the Son of man should be

glorified...Now is the judgment of this world. Now the prince of this world will be cast out. And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, shall draw all men to myself (John 12:23, 31, 32.)". In this passage, the casting out of the devil is looked upon as an event that is to take place in the immediate future, when the Son of man is lifted up. Thus this picture fits beautifully into the whole structure of the teaching of the Bible.

And there is also good reason for believing that Michael is here a name given to the man-child. Michael is mentioned only a few times in Scripture, three times in the book of Daniel (10:13; 10:21; 12:1), and once in the book of Jude (Jude 9), and nowhere else except in this passage. In the book of Daniel He is spoken of in terms that could very easily be applied to the Savior. Daniel does not call Michael an archangel, and, Keil-Delitzsch to the contrary, there is nothing in the text which definitely forces us to distinguish him from the Son of God. The one phrase which causes me some difficulty is the characterization of Michael as "one of the chief princes," but this may be translated as "the first of the chief princes" (Dan. 10:13). Otherwise he is described as "Michael your prince," and as "the great prince which standeth for the children of Thy people." And these descriptions of Michael correspond with the description of the Savior in the foregoing chapter in Daniel, where He is called "Messiah the Prince" (9:25), and with the description of God in an earlier chapter as "the Prince of princes" (8:25), and of Jesus of Nazareth as "a Prince and a Savior" in Acts 5:31.

Jude, it is true, calls Michael the archangel, but this does not carry too much weight as an argument against this interpretation if we keep in mind that the angel of the Lord is identified with Jehovah in the Old Testament. Rather significant in this connection is the fact that the only archangel identified in the Bible as an archangel is Michael, whose name means "Who is like God?" (Jude 9). The word archangel is used only twice in Scripture and in the second of the two passages it is not at all necessary to distinguish the voice of the archangel from the shout of the Lord. It is a passage with which we are all familiar, "The Lord Himself shall come down from heaven with a battle cry, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God."

If we then take Michael in our text for the Lord Jesus Christ, surely this picture of our Lord leading His angels to victory in this battle against the devil and his angels is much more in harmony with the clear teaching of Scripture which from Genesis on speaks of the Savior as the conqueror and destroyer of the old serpent. We shall, therefore proceed on the assumption that the battle spoken of here is the battle which our Lord fought with the devil in Gethsemane, on Golgotha, and in the garden of Joseph of Arimathea and that Michael, the leader of the angels of the Lord, is none other than our Savior.

This assumption agrees very neatly with the context. When the devil and his angels are defeated, the apostle hears a loud voice saying, "Now is come salvation and power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of His Christ." That such a song should be sung at any other time than at the victory of our Savior over sin and the devil at the time of His death and resurrection seems to be completely out of order, for the victory is described in this way, "The accuser of our brethren is cast down, which accused them before God day and night. And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony."

The "accuser of our brethren" is an apt description of Satan. He accuses us before God day and night, casting up our sins, and demanding that we should be punished with him in hell for our transgressions. But the blood of the Lamb which was shed to atone for and to cover all our sins and which cleanses us from all the wrongs that we have done, gives us the victory over the devil and his accusations. Thus we overcame him by the blood of the Lamb.

The second weapon by which the saints overcome the devil, the slanderer, is the "word of their testimony." Both Paul and John speak of the Gospel of salvation as "the testimony of Jesus Christ." We have already noted its use in the last verse of this chapter. In the first chapter of Revelation, John tells us that he was on the island of Patmos for the testimony of Jesus Christ. In his last letter, Paul wrote to Timothy, "Be not thou ashamed of the testimony of our Lord" (2 Tim. 1:8). Here the testimony of Jesus Christ is called "their testimony," just as Paul spoke of it as "our testimony." (2 Thess. 1:10). In these cases we are dealing with a subjective genitive. The testimony concerning Jesus Christ has become the testimony, the confession, of their hearts and lips. This testimony they are ready to seal with their own blood, "for they loved not their lives unto death." In days of open persecution these words must have meant more to God's people than they mean to us

today. They knew by bitter personal experience what it meant to resist unto blood, something which some of us may be called upon to do also if the course of history goes on unchecked in the direction in which it is pointed today. But in those days, singing their hymns of praise, repeating to themselves the words and promises of God reminding themselves of the ineffable love and mercy of Him who had loved them, unto the end, and who had Himself gone down into the valley of death to bring them the promise of everlasting life, the children of God knelt courageously in the arena and waited for the lions. Thus they overcame all the efforts of the devil to destroy them, their seeming defeat in death was their victory in glory, and the angels choirs give their joy over this victory expression as they sing, "Rejoice, ye heavens, and ye that dwell in them."

The Victory Of The Woman.

But we left the woman on earth in the wilderness, and of this we are reminded in the second half of the transition verse that carries us back once more to verse six and describes in detail what is there indicated in brief outline. As verses 7-12 expand on the thought expressed in verse 5, so the remaining verses of the chapter expound the topic sentence of verse 6. We have here a typical example of the common custom of Hebrew literature, which often summarizes a story in the very first sentence.

When the dragon saw that he was cast unto the earth, he persecuted the woman that had brought forth the man-child. The devil unable to destroy Christ personally, now seeks to bring His work to naught by directing his rage against the church. But, John continues, to the woman, an were given two wings of a great eagle that she might fly into the wilderness, into her place. "Her place" had been described in verse six as the "place prepared of God" for her. It is not a city with walls of precious stones and gates of pearl and streets of gold, as we find it portrayed in a later chapter of the book. It is a place in the wilderness, and we might take note and remember what the place of the church is in this world. We may sometimes think, as we see the great power and influence of the church in our time, that the world is being won for the church. But the words of our Lord are still true, "If ye were of the world the world would love his own." (John 15:19). A church which is loved by the world is a church which has become worldly, a church, which, if it has any light left., has learned to hide its light under a bushel. A Gospel which is no longer foolishness to the unconverted world is no longer the proclamation of the things of the Spirit of God, and a cross which is no longer an offense to men is not the cross of our Lord. So the church must learn to be satisfied with her place in the wilderness, and any attempt on the part of the church to come out of the wilderness is an attempt to leave the place prepared for her of God.

But this is the church's place of safety. There in the wilderness, in the place prepared for her, she is nourished. As the church goes her lonely way in a crowded world, she is sustained in all her tribulations and strengthened in all her trials and temptations by the nourishment she finds in the wilderness. What this nourishment is we are not told in this text, but the church lives by faith, and faith comes and is preserved by the hearing of the Word of God. The Word is the church's food, whether it comes as the bare, spoken, Word, or as the Word joined to water and bread and wine in the sacraments. There is certainly no justification anywhere in Scripture for limiting the nourishing of the church to the eating and drinking that takes place in the sacrament of the altar. The bodily eating and drinking that takes place there may graphically portray the nourishment of the church, but the eating and drinking by which the church is truly nourished is that which takes place when by faith we eat the bread of life and drink the water of life. And those who would make the Holy Supper the only food and even the chief food of the church should sit down and read through the New Testament and see how little, how very little, is said of the sacrament of the altar. This is no plea for a lower estimate of the Lord's Supper. Such a precious Gift of God as the blessed sacrament, instituted on the night of His betrayal as the last great gift of the Lord to His church, in which He gives us His own body and His own blood to eat and to drink, such a gift can never be overestimated. It does nourish and strengthen us, but it is also true that we can say things about it which the Scriptures do not say about it, we can indulge in all sorts of idle speculation about the meaning of the sacraments, we can take superficial resemblances and dubious analogies, we can build these up into imposing systems of quasi-theological thought, and take lightly what Scripture says about the preaching of

the Word. I do not know of a single Bible passage that would limit the nourishment of the church to the sacrament of the altar, and while I am sure that none of our theologians do this theoretically, yet some of our sacramentarians do this practically, when they say, for example, "There is no true discipleship without the communion." It is the Word, whether heard and read in the Bible, or seen in the Sacraments, that nourishes the church as it is faith which eats this holy food that is set before us on this table spread for us by the grace of God.

This nourishing of the woman continues for a time, and times, and half a time. Luther translates, on the basis of the context, "a time and two times and a half." The period is given in verse six as 1260 days. The 1260 days are mentioned also in chapter 11:3, and in verse two of that chapter the period is given as 42 months. Forty-two months, or 1260 days, are three and a half years, which accounts for Luther's translation. This is the period of the church's sojourn in the wilderness and since we know from the clear testimony of Scripture that the church will remain a kingdom of the cross until the end of time, we say that the three and a half years are the whole period of the New Testament.

But even there in the wilderness, the woman is not free from the attacks of the dragon. "The serpent cast out of his mouth after the woman water as a river, in order that he might make her to be carried away by the river." Here we may think of the countless false teachings that have assailed the church, the spawn of the devil's mouth, which like a flood of water have threatened to destroy the church.

But we read, "The earth helped the woman and the earth opened her mouth and swallowed down the river which the dragon cast out of his mouth." This is certainly a great comfort as we see how the church in our time is assailed from within and without, by false doctrine. For myself, I often grow discouraged and dismayed when I see those who are to be watchmen on the walls of Zion become trembling apologists who think that they can defend the church and the heart of its doctrine by coming to terms with modern unbelief. But though the church is a helpless woman, yet the earth opens up her mouth to swallow the flood, and we may be sure that as the optimistic Hegelianism of the last generation was swallowed up by the earth so that now it has practically disappeared, so the Kierkegaardian pessimism which threatens to become the plague of the church in our generation will also be swallowed up; the scientism which is making so many of the leaders of thought in the church today run timidly for cover like a bunch of frightened rabbits will go down the drain someday; the dialectical docetism of neo-orthodoxy will go the way of the unbelieving Arianism of the past decades; the Unitarianism of the second person of the Holy Trinity which is so popular in our time will follow the old Unitarianism; the philosophizing and rationalizing which results in the theological gobbledegook which is one of the chief curses of the ecclesiastical world of our day, the lack of confidence in the Word that drives us to use all sorts of tricks to simulate what passes for Christian experience, the damned ecumenism which consistently mistakes ambiguous phraseology for true Christian unity, the veiled unbelief that hides under semantic trickery with the old theological terminology, the pretended concern for truth with a capital T, which rejects every truth set down in human language because truth, as they say, belongs only to God if there is a God, and which covers up its own inadequacies and indolence and ignorance by reducing all disagreements to "semantic problems," and all the other trends and tendencies which make us so often sick at heart, all these in God's good time will go down the sewer where they belong. We may weep for those we love who will go down the sewer with it, the individuals and the church organizations that fall prey to the devil and the lies that come out of his mouth, but this comfort we have,—the church will never perish, and God always has his 7000 in Israel even if they cannot always find each other in the wilderness and among the worshippers of Baal, but they will find each other when they are caught up to God and to His throne to meet the Lord in the air.

The vision then ends on what seems to be a note of pessimism, "And the dragon was angry with the woman, and went away to make war with the rest of her seed, which keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ." This simply means that here on earth the battle is never won. Much of our trouble stems from this that we want to see the victory here and now, we want to see right in the saddle and truth on the throne, but we must learn to walk by faith and not by sight. As long as we live, this is what we shall see, the dragon wroth with the woman and going out to make war with the remnant of her seed.

But the final victory is assured. The children of the woman who are attacked by the dragon have the testimony of Jesus Christ. This is the last word in this part of the vision of John. With this word the brethren who are already in glory overcame. We have also the blood of the Lamb by which we can silence the accusations of Satan and if we have ears to hear, we can hear even now the words of the heavenly song, "Now is come salvation and power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of His Christ." The man-child whom the great dragon could not destroy, even though it must have seemed before the delivery that a new-born, helpless babe would surely fall prey to a great red dragon who can pull the stars out of the sky, this man-child is our Savior and our Lord, the Christ of God. His strength is always made perfect in weakness, and He has promised, "On this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." We might say that this chapter of Revelation from beginning to end is a commentary on that passage.