

Lesson 5: Revelation 12

Opening Question: Have you ever had a time in your life when the work of Satan seemed very real?

Opening Prayer, from the hymn “This is My Father’s World”:

This is my Father’s world. O let me ne’er forget
Though the wrong seems oft’ so strong, God is the ruler yet.
This is my Father’s world: why should my heart be sad?
The Lord is King; let the heavens ring! God reigns; let the earth be glad!

Read aloud Revelation 12:1-17

Read aloud Wright:

In the present chapter, there is one clue in particular which John has let slip, just in case we might have missed the point completely. The child whom the woman bears is the boy 'who is going to rule all the nations with a rod of iron' (verse 5). That is an obvious reference to Psalm 2.9. As we saw in the previous passage (11.18), John is applying that Psalm explicitly, as many other early Christians had done, to Jesus himself. He is the Messiah, the one whom God calls to bring the nations into line (even though we, with chapter 5 behind us, know that Jesus' own way of accomplishing that end is very different to that imagined by the violent Jewish nationalist movements of the time).

This small but vital clue has led some to suggest that the woman in the story is Mary, the mother of Jesus. But this is too hasty by far. That's not how this kind of symbolism works, and John tells us explicitly that she is a 'sign', not a literal mother. It is far more likely that two figures stand behind her. First, there is Israel herself, frequently in scripture referred to as 'daughter Israel', the bride of YHWH. She is here seen not as the faithless Israel rebuked so often by the prophets, but as the true, faithful Israel, the nation that had struggled to stay in God's path and follow his vocation. It is from this faithful Israel, admittedly ultimately through the 'virgin daughter of Israel', Mary herself, that the Messiah is born. But this woman, who now takes centre stage in God's purposes for his world, is the 'priestly kingdom, holy nation' of Exodus 19.6. She represents the entire story of God's people, chosen to carry forward his plans for the nations and indeed for the whole creation. That is why the sun, moon and stars form her robe, her footstool and her crown. That is why, too, the forces that range themselves against the creator God are determined to strike at her, and at her child. Finally, with a swish of his majestic tail, the villain appears on stage - the villain who, we quickly learn, stands behind all the trouble that we have seen in the earlier chapters. The dark secret is revealed; the real problem is identified; the curtain has risen on the

drama-within-the-drama, the central action which forms, now, the central scene in the whole book. The woman and her child are carrying the purposes of God for the world. The dragon is doing his best to snuff out those purposes before they can get under way. With the unveiling of the gospel of the lion-lamb there goes, as well, the unveiling of the ultimate mystery of evil. The second image behind the woman in this passage may well be Eve, the original mother of all human life. It is Eve, after all, who is told that her 'seed' will crush the serpent's head (Genesis 3.15). The two identities go together. If the woman is 'Israel', she is for that reason the one in whom God's purposes for humanity are to be realized. And that purpose includes, as a central and necessary part of the agenda, the crushing of the ultimate power of evil. The destroyer is to be destroyed (107-108).

The stage is set. The Woman will be with us, in one way or another, right through to the end of the book, though there will be another Woman, a horrible caricature of this one, who will occupy plenty of attention along the way. The Dragon, too, will be with us much of the way, and part of the whole point of chapters 12-20 is to enable the church for whom John is writing to understand how he operates and how, therefore, his power must be overthrown. The church needs to know that its present struggles and sufferings are not a sign that God has gone to sleep on the job. They are the sign that a great, cosmic drama is being staged, in which they are being given a vital though terrible role to play (109).

Once again John is positioning his hearers on the map of the great cosmic drama. They are to know, and celebrate, the great victory which has already been won: 'the accuser' has no place any more in heaven, because the death of Jesus (who claimed in Luke 10.18 that he had seen the satan fall like lightning from heaven) has nullified the charges which the celestial Director of Prosecutions would otherwise bring. But he will do his best, in the time remaining, to attack the woman who has fled to the wilderness, even though, as in Exodus 19.4, God has given her eagles' wings so that she could fly away. What follows only just avoids descending into a comic-strip cosmic car chase. The dragon spits out a jet of water like a river to carry the woman off; the earth opens its mouth to swallow up the river; the woman escapes; and the dragon, angry, turns his attention elsewhere - precisely to the woman's 'children', further defined as 'those who keep God's commands and the testimony of Jesus'. In other words, once again, you too (John is saying to his readers) are part of this drama. Don't be surprised that the dragon is out to get you, with more of his foul but powerful accusations, spat out like a flood. Trust that the God of creation will look after you. (It's fascinating that it is the *earth* that comes to the woman's rescue; creation itself is shown to be on the side of God and his people, rather than working alongside the dragon.) You must expect, though, that more is to come: more persecution, more attacks, more false accusations. 'Woe to the earth

and the sea' (verse 12) 'because the devil has come down to you in great anger, knowing that he only has a short time.' The decisive battle has been won, and the devil knows it; but his basic nature of 'accuser' is now driving him, more and more frantically, to the attack, to accuse where it's justified and where it isn't, to drag down, to slander, to vilify, to deny the truth of what the creator God and his son, the lamb, have accomplished and are accomplishing. This is the ongoing battle in which all Christians are engaged, whether they know it or not. The picture John has sketched in this chapter, to encourage and warn his readers and all those who, even today, read his book, is just the opening scene. More is to come. The dragon ends up standing on the sand beside the sea. And the sea, as all ancient Jews knew, was the dark place out of which monsters might emerge (112-113).

Leader: read aloud Revelation 12:17.

Optional Discussion Questions

1. Where do you see the Christian church under attack around the world today?
2. How does this affect how we pray? How often do we hear and offer prayers for the Church around the world in public worship?
3. Do you think the Church is under new threats in the 21st century, or do you think there is nothing new under the sun and the people of God have always been vulnerable?
4. How do we see "the dragon" making war with those who keep the commandments and holding to the testimony of Jesus?
5. How do you experience this in your own life?

Closing Prayer: The dragon seeks us out, O God, longing to accuse and destroy. It is his voice that tells us that we are unworthy of love, that we will never amount to anything, and that we are not good enough. Silence him, mighty God, and remind us that the dragon is already defeated because of the blood of the Lamb. Remind us that we are precious and holy in your sight, forgiven of all our sins, and given new life in Jesus. Speak loudly to us, so that the voice of the accuser will be drowned out by the voice of Truth. We ask this through Jesus, the Lamb of God. Amen.

