

Commentary on Revelation 12

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Chapter 12

It is generally agreed by the most learned expositors that the narrative we have in this and the two following chapters, from the sounding of the seventh trumpet to the opening of the vials, is not a prediction of things to come, but rather a recapitulation and representation of things past, which, as God would have the apostle to foresee while future, he would have him to review now that they were past, that he might have a more perfect idea of them in his mind, and might observe the agreement between the prophecy and that Providence that is always fulfilling the scriptures. In this chapter we have an account of the contest between the church and antichrist, the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent.

I. As it was begun in heaven ([v. 1-11](#)).

II. As it was carried on in the wilderness ([v. 12-18](#)).

[Rev 12:1-11](#)

Here we see that early prophecy eminently fulfilled in which God said he would *put enmity between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent*, [Gen. 3:15](#). You will observe,

I. The attempts of Satan and his agents to prevent the increase of the church, by devouring her offspring *as soon as it was born*; of this we have a very lively description in the most proper images.

1. We see how the church is represented in this vision.

(1.) As a *woman*, the weaker part of the world, but the spouse of Christ, and the mother of the saints.

(2.) As *clothed with the sun*, the imputed righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ. Having put on Christ, who is *the Sun of righteousness*, she, by her relation to Christ, is invested with honourable rights and privileges, and shines in his rays.

(3.) As having *the moon under her feet* (that is, the world); she stands upon it, but lives above it; her heart and hope are not set upon sublunary things, but on the things that are in heaven, where her head is.

(4.) As having on her head *a crown of twelve stars*, that is, the doctrine of the gospel preached by the twelve apostles, which is a crown of glory to all true believers.

(5.) As in travail, crying out, and *pained to be delivered*. She was pregnant, and now in pain to bring

forth a holy progeny to Christ, desirous that what was begun in the conviction of sinners might end in their conversion, that when the children were brought to the birth there might be strength to bring forth, and that she might see of the travail of her soul.

2. How the grand enemy of the church is represented.

(1.) As a *great red dragon*-a dragon for strength and terror-a red dragon for fierceness and cruelty.

(2.) As *having seven heads*, that is, placed on seven hills, as Rome was; and therefore it is probable that pagan Rome is here meant.

(3.) As having *ten horns*, divided into ten provinces, as the Roman empire was by Augustus Caesar.

(4.) As having *seven crowns upon his head*, which is afterwards expounded to be seven kings, [ch. 17:10](#).

(5.) As drawing with his tail a *third part of the stars in heaven*, and *casting them down to the earth*, turning the ministers and professors of the Christian religion out of their places and privileges and making them as weak and useless as he could.

(6.) As standing *before the woman*, to *devour her child as soon as it should be born*, very vigilant to crush the Christian religion in its birth and entirely to prevent the growth and continuance of it in the world.

II. The unsuccessfulness of these attempts against the church; for,

1. She was safely delivered of a *man-child* ([v. 5](#)), by which some understand Christ, others Constantine, but others, with greater propriety, a race of true believers, strong and united, resembling Christ, and designed, under him, *to rule the nations with a rod of iron*; that is, to judge the world by their doctrine and lives now, and as assessors with Christ at the great day.

2. Care was taken of this child: it *was caught up to God, and to his throne*; that is, taken into his special, powerful, and immediate protection. The Christian religion has been from its infancy the special care of *the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ*.

3. Care was taken of the mother as well as of the child, [v. 6](#). She *fled into the wilderness, a place prepared* both for her safety and her sustenance. The church was in an obscure state, dispersed; and this proved her security, through the care of divine Providence. This her obscure and private state was for a limited time, not to continue always.

III. The attempts of the dragon not only proved unsuccessful against the church, but fatal to his own interests; for, upon his endeavour to devour the man-child, he engaged all the powers of heaven against him ([v. 7](#)): *There was war in heaven*. Heaven will espouse the quarrel of the church. Here observe,

1. The seat of this war-*in heaven*, in the church, which is *the kingdom of heaven* on earth, under the

care of heaven and in the same interest.

2. The parties-*Michael and his angels* on one side, and *the dragon and his angels* on the other: Christ, the great Angel of the covenant, and his faithful followers; and Satan and all his instruments. This latter party would be much superior in number and outward strength to the other; but the strength of the church lies in having the Lord Jesus for the captain of their salvation.

3. The success of the battle: *The dragon and his angels fought and prevailed not*; there was a great struggle on both sides, but the victory fell to Christ and his church, and the dragon and his angels were not only conquered, but cast out; the pagan idolatry, which was a worshipping of devils, was extirpated out of the empire in the time of Constantine.

4. The triumphant song that was composed and used on this occasion, [v. 10, 11](#). Here observe, (1.) How the conqueror is adored: *Now have come salvation, strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of his Christ*. Now God has shown himself to be a mighty God; now Christ has shown himself to be a strong and mighty Saviour; his own arm has brought salvation, and now his kingdom will be greatly enlarged and established. The salvation and strength of the church are all to be ascribed to the king and head of the church.

(2.) How the conquered enemy is described.

[1.] By his malice; he was *the accuser of the brethren*, and *accused them before their God night and day*; he appeared before God as an adversary to the church, continually bringing in indictments and accusations against them, whether true or false; thus he accused Job, and thus he accused Joshua the high priest, [Zec. 3:1](#). Though he hates the presence of God, yet he is willing to appear there to accuse the people of God. Let us therefore take heed that we give him no cause of accusation against us; and that, when we have sinned, we presently go in before the Lord, and accuse and condemn ourselves, and commit our cause to Christ as our Advocate.

[2.] By his disappointment and defeat: he and all his accusations are cast out, the indictments quashed, and the accuser turned out of the court with just indignation.

(3.) How the victory was gained. The servants of God overcame Satan,

[1.] *By the blood of the Lamb*, as the meritorious cause. Christ by dying *destroyed him that hath the power of death, that is, the devil*.

[2.] *By the word of their testimony*, as the great instrument of war, *the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God*, -by a resolute powerful preaching of the everlasting gospel, *which is mighty, through God, to pull down strongholds*, -and by their courage and patience in sufferings; *they loved not their lives unto the death*, when the love of life stood in competition with their loyalty to Christ; they loved not their lives so well but they could give them up *to death*, could lay them down in Christ's cause; their love to their own lives was overcome by stronger affections of another nature; and this their

courage and zeal helped to confound their enemies, to convince many of the spectators, to confirm the souls of the faithful, and so contributed greatly to this victory.

[Rev 12:12-17](#)

We have here an account of this war, so happily finished in heaven, or in the church, as it was again renewed and carried on in the wilderness, the place to which the church had fled, and where she had been for some time secured by the special care of her God and Saviour. Observe,

I. The warning given of the distress and calamity that should fall upon the inhabitants of the world in general, through the wrath and rage of the devil. For, though his malice is chiefly bent against the servants of God, yet he is an enemy and hater of mankind as such; and, being defeated in his designs against the church, he is resolved to give all the disturbance he can to the world in general: *Woe to the inhabitants of the earth, and the sea, v. 12.* The rage of Satan grows so much the greater as he is limited both in place and time; when he was confined to the wilderness, and had but a short time to reign there, he comes with the greater wrath.

II. His second attempt upon the church now in the wilderness: *He persecuted the woman who brought forth the man-child, v. 13.* Observe,

1. The care that God had taken of his church. He had conveyed her as on eagles' wings, into a place of safety provided for her, where she was to continue for a certain space of time, couched in prophetic characters, taken from [Dan. 7:25](#).
2. The continual malice of the dragon against the church. Her obscurity could not altogether protect her; the old subtle serpent, which at first lurked in paradise, now follows the church into the wilderness, and *casts out a flood of water after her, to carry her away.* This is thought to be meant of a flood of error and heresy, which was breathed by Arius, Nestorius, Pelagius, and many more, by which the church of God was in danger of being overwhelmed and carried away. The church of God is in more danger from heretics than from persecutors; and heresies are as certainly from the devil as open force and violence.
3. The seasonable help provided for the church in this dangerous juncture: *The earth helped the woman, and opened her mouth, and swallowed up the flood, v. 16.* Some think we are to understand the swarms of Goths and Vandals that invaded the Roman empire, and found work for the Arian rulers, who otherwise would have been as furious persecutors as the pagan had been, and had exercised great cruelties already; but God opened a breach of war, and the flood was in a manner swallowed up thereby, and the church enjoyed some respite. God often sends the sword to avenge the quarrel of his covenant; and, when men choose new gods, then there is danger of war in the gates; intestine broils and contentions often end in the invasions of a common enemy.
4. The devil, being thus defeated in his designs upon the universal church, now turns his rage against

particular persons and places; his malice against the woman pushes him on to *make war with the remnant of her seed*. Some think hereby are meant the Albigenses, who were first by Dioclesian driven up into barren and mountainous places, and afterwards cruelly murdered by popish rage and power, for several generations; and for no other reason than because *they kept the commandments of God and held the testimony of Jesus Christ*. Their fidelity to God and Christ, in doctrine, worship, and practice, was that which exposed them to the rage of Satan and his instruments; and such fidelity will expose men still, less or more, to the end of the world, when *the last enemy shall be destroyed*.