

Revelation 12

An Apocalyptic View of the Birth of Christ

And she brought forth a man child, who was to rule all nations...v. 5

It's really quite amazing to see references to the birth of Christ in places where you don't normally look for them. We usually think of the birth of Christ the way it's described in Mt. 1 or in Lk. 2. It is in those chapters that we're given the historical narratives that refer to the fact of Christ's birth and there is certainly much in those accounts to instruct and encourage us. We looked at the account in Lk. 2 in our last communion service earlier in the month and we paid particular attention to the testimony concerning Christ that came from heaven.

Sometimes we think of Christ's birth in terms of the prophecies that foretell his birth. So we read in Isa. 7:14 *Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a Virgin shall conceive, and bear a Son, and shall call his name Immanuel.* Or Isaiah 9:6 *For unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given.* I was reading Spurgeon on that text earlier this week and he made the interesting observation that in this prophetic statement about Christ we find reference to his humanity and his deity. *A child is born* – there's his humanity; *A Son is given* – As God's Son he could not be born, but he certainly was given. There's his deity, therefore. Or how about the book of Micah where the very place of Christ's birth is foretold. So in Micah 5:2 we read a statement that pertains to the place of his birth as well as his eternality. *But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting.*

These are the familiar references to the birth of Christ and they certainly serve to demonstrate to us that we're worshipping the right person when we worship Christ. He is the Son of God and the Son of Man. He has come forth in accordance with those prophetic statements that speak of his birth.

There are, however, in addition to these familiar passages some other passages that refer to his birth also. One of my favorite references to the birth of Christ is the place in John's gospel where Christ himself makes reference to his birth when he is put on trial and appears before Pilate. So we read in Jn. 18:37 *Pilate therefore said unto him, Art thou a king then? Jesus answered, Thou sayest that I am a king. To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth. Every one that is of the truth heareth my voice.*

We considered some of the truths that Christ bore witness to at the precise moment that he made that statement. He certainly bore witness to the truth that all have sinned and come short of the glory of God. He also bore witness to the truth that the Son of God must suffer before entering into his glory. Just as in his birth he bore witness to the truth of the prophets that foretold his birth so in his death he bore witness to the truth of the prophets also – most notably Isaiah 53 and Psalm 22 which speak in vivid detail of his death.

Now we find yet another reference to his birth in Rev. 12:5. And as difficult a book as the book of Revelation may be, I believe we find in this chapter a clear statement pertaining to Christ that is too plain to miss. Look again at what it says: *And she brought forth a man child, who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron.*

The reference to Psalm 2 is too plain to miss. And it is in that Psalm that God himself says beginning in v.6 *Yet have I set my king upon my holy hill of Zion. I will declare the decree: 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; thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.* (vv. 6-9).

The entire chapter of Rev. 12 conveys to us the truth of Christ's birth and Christ's rule in the form of a sign or to be more precise *a great wonder in heaven*. Within this sign or this wonder we are given a panoramic view of the history or the course of redemption. I believe such panoramic views occur often in the book of Revelation and indeed I think one of the primary purposes of this book is to enable the follower of Christ to understand history, to understand the present day in which he lives and to understand the future.

At the very outset of this book (1:3) the man is pronounced blessed that reads and hears and keeps the things that are written in this book. I believe that much of that pronounced blessing comes through learning what to expect in the world in which we live as well as the certain outcome of all history which will ultimately be the triumph of Christ – or perhaps I should say the triumph of the gospel of Christ.

What I would like to do this morning is to look at this statement in chp. 12 that pertains to the birth or the coming forth of Christ in the general setting of the book of Revelation. The book of Revelation has been called an Apocalyptic book. You sometimes hear it referred to as “The Apocalypse.” An apocalypse is an uncovering or a revelation of something that previously had been covered or hidden.

If, in the gospels, we have the historical narrative pertaining to Christ's birth, you could say that in the book of Revelation we have the apocalyptic account of Christ's birth. And that's what I want to draw your attention to this morning.

Lessons from an Apocalyptic View of Christ's Birth

I. A History Lesson

This great wonder that was revealed to John serves to help us understand the entire scope of history. It also serves to show us that the initial coming of Christ is the focal point of all history.

Note who it is that brings forth this man child in the opening verses of the chapter. Verse 1 describes for us *a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars:*

We know, of course, from the historical narratives in the gospels that Christ was miraculously born of the Virgin Mary but this heavenly vision is not describing the Virgin Mary. The scope of this great wonder is much broader than that. It's describing, rather, the people of God. It's describing the Old Testament church and it anticipates the New Testament church. I like the explanation given by Jameson, Faucett, and Brown in their commentary. It says with regard to this vision — *the Church, Israel first, and then the Gentile Church; clothed with Christ, "the Sun of righteousness." "Fair as the moon, clear as the sun." Clothed with the Sun, the Church is the bearer of divine supernatural light in the world. So the seven churches (that is, the Church universal, the woman) are represented as light-bearing candlesticks in Rev. 1:12,20.*

I also like the explanation that is given by some commentators who see this vision of a woman clothed with the sun having the moon under her feet as a vision of the New Testament church in comparison to the Old Testament church. The Old dispensation was a dispensation of types and shadows. The moon is a fitting emblem of the inferior light of that time period while being clothed with the sun would indicate a time of much greater light. The church is thus clothed with a greater light while at the same time supported by the lesser light.

And so the lesson is conveyed that when Christ came forth, born of a virgin made under the law, he came forth from his people and he came forth for his people. In this respect Christ is referred to twice in Paul's epistles as *the firstborn of every creature* (Col. 1:15) as well as *the firstborn among many brethren* (Rom. 8:29).

Doesn't such a vision of Christ put Old Testament history in its proper perspective? From the calling of Abraham to the multiplying of the Israelites in Egypt to their coming forth out of Egypt to the conquests of Joshua and the times of Judges, through the times of the Kings leading up to the Babylonian captivity and the return to the land after that captivity, the purpose of the Jewish race was to bring forth the Messiah.

Viewed in that historical light it makes the statement in John's gospel all the more ironic that says in Jn. 1:11 *He came unto his own, and his own received him not.* But if that statement is ironic and tragic – how much more so those that receive him not today? They certainly show that they don't understand history. They have missed the focal point of history. They have missed the whole purpose of history.

Isn't it interesting that within the scope of this single verse in Rev.12:5 we find the ministry of Christ from his incarnation to his ascension into heaven. Look at it again: *And she brought forth a man child, who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron: and her child was caught up unto God, and to his throne.* Within that span of time the righteousness of the law was fulfilled in Christ's life and our debt to the broken law was paid in his death – So much so that in v. 10 John hears a loud voice – do you get that? – a loud voice which makes it a point of emphasis and certainty. Note what it says: *And I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, Now is come salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and*

the power of his Christ: for the accuser of our brethren is cast down, which accused them before our God day and night.

Salvation accomplished and our accuser cast down. And if our accuser is cast down, Paul is able to ask the question in Rom. 8:33 *Who shall lay any thing to the charge of God's elect? Who indeed when it is God that justifieth? And in a verse that aligns itself to the scope of our text in Revelation we read in Rom. 8:34 Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us.*

Before we leave the history lesson of this great wonder we should note one more thing that ties into our experience that is conveyed to us by this wonder in heaven. Would you note in v. 2 that this woman with child is revealed crying, travailing in birth and pained to be delivered.

The imagery of our Savior's birth is thus used to convey to us the burden of every true child of God. Before Christ was born there was a longing, a painful travailing, if you will, for him to come. Those that were spiritually minded in the Old Testament dispensation longed for salvation to be accomplished. They knew the depth of sin. They longed to be free from sin's dominion.

In the New Testament dispensation the desire for Christ to come again continues to be a travailing pain within our hearts. So Paul expresses the common Christian longing in Rom. 8:22,23 *For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now. And not only they, but ourselves also, which have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body.*

This same kind of painful travailing also applies to our desire in our own lives and in the lives of our fellow believers to advance in sanctification. So we read in Gal. 4:19 Paul's desire for the Galatians when he writes *My little children, of whom I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you...*

So this wonder in heaven that sets presents us with an apocalyptic view of Christ's birth has history lessons to teach us. Indeed it teaches us how to bring a proper focus to the entire scope of history. The coming of Christ is foundational to a right understanding of history. If you would live your life with a Biblical worldview then you must appreciate the meaning and importance of this man child being brought forth.

But would you note with me next that we not only receive a history lesson from this vision but we also see:

II. A Prophetic Lesson

Note the statement in our text that speaks of the destiny of this man child that is brought forth by the woman. *And she brought forth a man child, who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron: and her child was caught up unto God, and to his throne.*

There is a sense, of course, in which this statement has already been fulfilled. It was shortly before his ascension into glory, you may recall, that Christ made the statement to his disciples that all power had been committed unto him in heaven and on earth (Mt. 28:19).

But it's also true what we read in Heb 2:8,9 *Thou hast put all things in subjection under his feet. For in that he put all in subjection under him, he left nothing [that is] not put under him. But now we see not yet all things put under him. But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honour; that he by the grace of God should taste death for every man.*

All things are put in subjection under him but we do not see it being realized yet but we do see Jesus, the One who has had all power and authority placed at his disposal. To me – this is the most encouraging aspect of the book of Revelation and the thing, I believe, that we ought to look for above everything else.

They who search this book in order to see how it aligns itself with tomorrow's headlines miss the point of the entire book. It is, according to Rev. 19:10 *the testimony of Jesus that is the spirit of prophecy.* And doesn't that statement indicate to you that whatever you can or cannot figure out in terms of prophetic schemes, you ought to be looking for Christ. I said in my introduction that those that read and hear and keep the words of this prophecy are pronounced as being blessed in 1:3.

And certainly the blessing of this book comes to us through seeing Christ, the man child who has come forth who takes up his reign over the nations. He is the One that directs the unleashing of the judgment plagues upon a rebellious world. He has, by his death, earned the right to take the sealed scroll and break its seals. He directs the unleashing of the trumpet judgments and the bowl judgments.

He is the One who goes forth on a white horse in chp. 6:2 conquering and to conquer. He is the One before whom all the nations are assembled before his judgment bar. He is seen throughout this book as with his church and for his church and this is a book, therefore, that ought to bolster the people of God especially during the times of trials and challenges that come upon us due to the rebellion of an ungodly world against Christ.

Some time ago when we studied the books of Acts you may recall that on a couple of occasions I drew analogies between the book of Acts and the book of Revelation. Indeed there is a sense in which the historical narrative of Acts is given to us in the apocalyptic language and symbols of Revelation.

And what did we see in the book of Acts? We saw Christ ruling and reigning and advancing his church. We saw the power of the gospel and the power of the Holy Spirit overcoming the intense animosity of those that were against Christ and against his gospel. You see the very thing that is depicted in the symbolism of this 12th chapter of Revelation. The church prevailing even though it meets with intense resistance and persecution. Basically what you see is Christ ruling, his church advancing, and a Christ-rejecting world that hates the church and attacks the church.

And so the prophetic lesson of our text teaches us what we should expect in this world. And what we should expect is that this world will be no friend to grace or to Christ but that Christ's cause will, nevertheless, prevail. I sometimes think that many students of the Bible and especially students of the book of Revelation become too taken up with difficult prophetic details. The very fact that there are varying millennial views and varying explanations for the apocalyptic symbols and language of this book is a clear indication that this book does bear certain difficulties when it comes to interpreting it.

But when you step away from any particular tree in order to gain a panoramic view of the forest the book doesn't become nearly as difficult to understand. Christ rules and reigns and Christ will subdue this rebellious world. Whether or not you want to view a millennial reign coming before Christ's returns or after Christ returns or whether or not you can even see a millennial reign of Christ is really not a matter of serious consequence as long as you get the big picture that this book presents.

And the big picture is expressed very succinctly in this great wonder that John beholds in chp. 12. A man child comes forth – the very One who is born unto us – the very Son who is given unto us. He comes forth as the One who is destined to rule all nations. Keep that in mind when you contemplate that babe in the manger. He has come from his church and for his church and he has and therefore will prevail.

Salvation and strength and the kingdom of our God and the power of his Christ has come. Salvation has been accomplished and in our day salvation is being applied. So we have a history lesson in our text. We have a prophecy lesson in our text and there is a sense in which the prophecy lesson is based and grounded on the history lesson. It remains for us to consider finally.

III. The Reality Lesson

Between the history lesson of our text and the prophetic lesson of our text there can be found an unchanging constant that spans them both – that is the constant of our spiritual warfare.

Notice from v. 4 how the other wonder in heaven, the great red dragon that symbolizes the devil stands ready to devour the man child brought forth from the woman as soon as it is born. *And his tail drew the third part of the stars of heaven, and did cast them to the earth: and the dragon stood before the woman which was ready to be delivered, for to devour her child as soon as it was born.*

Verses 7,8 tell us that *there was war in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon; and the dragon fought and his angels, And prevailed not; neither was their place found any more in heaven.* The devil is conquered in heaven and is cast down to the earth and on earth it becomes the duty and privilege of the church to further this conquest over the devil. So we read the familiar verse – v. 11 *And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony; and they loved not their lives unto the death.*

Verse 17 shows us how this theme runs through and completes the chapter: *And the dragon was wroth with the woman, and went to make war with the remnant of her seed, which keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ.*

Does it not bring to mind the words of Christ in Mt. 10:34 *Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword.* Spiritual warfare is the Christian's portion all the while he walks in this world. The same accuser of the brethren that stood ready to devour the man child the moment he was brought forth *walketh about as a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour* (1Pet. 5:8).

And so we may draw the reality lesson that the coming of this man child Christ places the Christian squarely in the midst of spiritual warfare. The encouraging thing about the vision, however, is that in calling the Christian to war the Lord also provides all that is needed for the Christian to prevail in that war.

They overcame him v. 11 reads which means literally *they conquered him*. This theme of conquering runs through the opening epistles to the 7 churches.

- *To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God.* Rev. 2:7
- *He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death.* Rev. 2:11
- *He that overcometh, and keepeth my works unto the end, to him will I give power over the nations:* Rev. 2:26

So while spiritual warfare is our reality, victory in that warfare is our reality as well. And no wonder – everything is provided that we need for such victory. We have the testimony of Christ. We know that through the conquering power of the blood of the lamb the devil is disarmed and has no leverage against us. And our consecration to Christ is such that we know to look ahead to a new heaven and a new earth to the point that we are enabled to love not our own lives here in this sin-cursed world even unto death.

We are the recipients of Christ's power and Christ's protection as Christ himself provides us wings to fly into the wilderness where we are sheltered and nourished. When you get a clear view of the reality presented by this apocalyptic vision then you can also appreciate that the thing in our lives that can mar the picture and contribute to our defeat is friendship with the world.

This is why James is so blunt in his epistle when he writes in 4:4 *Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God.* May God help us, then, to be overcomers of the world rather than friends with the world.

What a comprehensive vision, then, is given to us in this 12th chapter of Revelation. Aren't you glad this morning that we commemorate the coming forth of this man child who is to rule all nations with a rod of iron – this man child who has been caught up to heaven?

As you think on the birth of Christ today – indeed as you think on the birth of Christ on any day (for we are not bound by the day but we are happily bound by the truth of Christ's incarnation). As you think on his birth it is good to reflect on the angelic message of Lk. 2 *Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.*

I wonder this morning – has Christ been born unto you? Spurgeon points out that the way you know that this child has been born unto you is that you have been born again unto him. Just as surely as a Son is given, so those to whom he has been given give themselves to him. Have you given yourself to Christ?

It's also good to think on the meaning of his name that was given to him by the instruction of the angel of the Lord in Mt. 1:21: *Thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins.* He was born that we might be delivered from sin's guilt and sin's dominion. What a glorious truth to reflect upon on any given day.

So as you think on the incarnation of Christ, remember the message of the angel and remember the purpose of his name and also remember the apocalyptic view of his birth given to you in Rev. 12. He has come forth from the church and for the church. He is destined to rule all nations and you are destined to overcome just as he overcame.

As you think on all that is encompassed in the vision of this chapter and as you enjoy genuine communion with him you will also find yourself fulfilling the earliest part of this vision by clothing yourself in the light. The sun, the moon, the stars – all taken together certainly present the picture of the Christian and the true church being the light of the world. May we shine brightly for our Savior and bring much glory to his name.