

A War for the Ages

Revelation 12:1-17

Studies in Revelation #20

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“Spiritual warfare.” What do those two words bring to your mind? For some of you young Christians, not much. For some of you newer Reformed Christians, what you’ve heard other friends talk about. For many of us, these words bring to mind a whole host of teachers, books, and practices that we once followed. And modern spiritual warfare books are all about convincing you that behind every closet door, behind every tree as you go for a jog, and inside every unbeliever you face is a demon just waiting to take you down. Now, you’ve heard me teach on spiritual warfare from Ephesians 6, so you know I believe whole-heartedly in it. The difference is that modern ideas make the battle exclusively about our personal struggle versus the forces of evil while I believe Scripture makes it about the age-old struggle between the seed of the woman versus the seed of the serpent. But that just doesn’t sell many books!

As we turn again to Revelation, chapter 12 teaches us about true spiritual warfare: it is *a war for the ages* between the devil and Christ. We’ve been reading a lot about the world persecuting the church in the first 11 chapters. The question is why? We’re experiencing sustained attacks on the reliability of the Bible, on the truth about Jesus, and on Christian godliness in our culture by New Atheism and

by politicians. Why? Revelation 12 takes us behind the scenes to the “director’s cut,” so to speak, to explain to us what we see on the surface of our lives.

1. *The War Against Christ (vv. 1–5)*
2. *The War Against Michael (vv. 7–10)*
3. *The War Against the Church (vv. 6, 11–17)*

The War Against Christ (vv. 1–6)

This war for the ages is first of all a *war against Christ* in verses 1–6. John says a **great sign appeared in heaven** (v. 1) and we’ll see this again in verse 3. Keep in mind that a **sign** is something that points to something else. When you see a blue sign on Coast Highway with a huge wave on it that is saying nearby there is a tsunami shelter. The sign isn’t the tsunami. It’s pointing to something else. And again keep in mind that these signs are **in heaven**; again, John is giving us a glimpse of the true identity of certain things down here on earth. So what does he see?

He sees a **woman** and she is **clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars** (v. 1). Is it Eve? Is it the Virgin Mary, as Rome says? No. This is a sign of the people of God. All the way back in Genesis 37:9–10 Joseph had a dream in which all of Israel signified by the sun, moon, and stars, were bowing down to him. And this woman **was pregnant and was crying out in birth pains and the agony of giving birth** (v. 2). That leads to the second sign.

John sees a **great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads seven diadems** (v. 3). Just like in the Old Testament, the people of God's enemies were described as the creature Leviathan (Ps. 74:13, 14). In fact, in Ezekiel 29 and 32 Leviathan symbolized one of Israel's greatest enemies, Egypt. And this dragon has seven heads—a head is a symbol of a leader—it has ten horns—a horn is a symbol of power—and it has seven crowns—a symbol of authority. And it sweeps one-third of the stars from heaven (v. 4). All this symbolizes the dragon's great power. Then John sees this dragon **before the woman...that when she bore her child he might devour it** (v. 4). Big deal, right? Then we read who this child is: **She gave birth to a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron** (v. 5). There is only one Son whom this describes. This is the Son whom Psalm 2 praised: "You are my Son; today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron" (Ps. 2:7-9). But notice that John says **her child was caught up to God and to his throne** (v. 5), which is speaking of the ascension of Christ to heaven.

The War Against Michael (vv. 7-10)

The devil fights Christ but when he can't in he turns his attention to another. We see also that this war for the ages is also a *war against Michael* in verses 7-12. Now children, let me pause and ask you, "What's an angel?" Maybe

you've heard a teacher or your grandma say, "You're such an angel!" Maybe you've seen a movie or seen a picture in a book that had what someone thought an angel looks like. I want you to forget all that! Angels are not little chubby babies with wings. Angels are special creations of God that serve him. The Bible describes them as looking like men, clothed with white, and with three pairs of wings at times. And in the Bible there are different kinds of angels. One of the most special is Michael, who fights Satan and his demons.

So John sees something else here, a war in heaven (v. 7). But I want you to see that it's not a completely different scene from before. Verses 1–6 describe the spiritual war between Satan and Christ in a summary way then verses 7 to the end come back and fill in the details. It's like how a movie character quickly describes a battle then later on around a fire he tells his friends more of the details.

In this **war in heaven...Michael and his angels fought against the dragon. And the dragon and his angels fought back** (v. 7). But we read that the **dragon was defeated, and there was no longer any place for** he and his angels **in heaven** (v. 8). And so he and all his angels were **thrown down to the earth** (v. 9). Here the dragon's tail sweeping a third of the stars to earth in verse 4 is explained. And notice how now more detail is added about **the great dragon**: who is he? He is **that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world** (v. 9). This takes us all the way back to Genesis 3, doesn't it? True spiritual warfare begins there, in the Garden, between the serpent and Adam, and after that, between the serpent's seed and the woman's seed, who

would crush the serpent's head and have his heel bruised in doing so (Gen. 3:15)—symbolizing that by being wounded so to speak on the cross Christ would crush the devil.

So how were Satan and his forces cast out of heaven? By the resurrection of the Son, who was bruised on the cross! By his ascension to heaven where he was crowned with glory and honor. Listen to verse 10: **And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, "Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come."**

The War Against the Church (vv. 6, 11–17)

This war for the ages is finally a *war against the Church* in verses 6, 11–17. Notice how verse 13 picks up at verse 6, where the child was caught up. In verse 6 we read that **the woman**, that is, the church, **fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, in which she is to be nourished for 1,260 days**. Verse 13 goes on to say: **And when the dragon saw that he had been thrown down to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child**. Satan fights the church **but the woman was given the two wings of the great eagle so that she might fly from the serpent into the wilderness, to the place where she is to be nourished for a time, and times, and half a time** (v. 15). The serpent's fight is described in the Old Testament terms of a flood of waters: **The serpent poured water like a river out of his**

mouth after the woman, to sweep her away with a flood (v. 15). But notice God's protection is described: **But the earth came to the help of the woman, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed the river that the dragon had poured from his mouth** (v. 16). Then we read of his further fury—and notice how the woman and her offspring are described in terms of the church, the people of God—**Then the dragon became furious with the woman and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus** (v. 17).

I want you to see a couple of applications here, beloved. Just like we saw in chapter 11, the church was symbolized by the two witnesses who were described in terms similar to Moses and Elijah, so too here John sees the church flee into a place a safety like Moses from Pharaoh, like Israel from Egypt, and like Elijah from Ahab and Jezebel. We learn here that as much as the devil and the world that is inspired by him persecutes you as God's people, so much more do God protect you. As we sing:

And though this world, with devils filled,
should threaten to undo us,
we will not fear, for God has willed
his truth to triumph through us.¹

And when the Devil causes us to flee even from our homes, we learn here that God will always provide for us as his dear children.

¹ From the hymn, "A Mighty Fortress is Our God."

Also, notice how the heavenly choir switches from celebrating the victory of the Son in verse 10 to the victory of his seed—you and me—in verse 11: **“And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death.”** We learn here a truth about spiritual war for us. Not only did Christ defeat the Devil, but we are told that when he accuses us (v. 10), we too can conquer and defeat him. Note that accusing us is all he can do. Satan cannot touch you just like he couldn’t touch Job (Job 1). He’s a wild dog that barks, that runs back and forth, that tries to intimidate, but he’s on a leash, behind a fence! Let him bark as loud as he wants because we too can silence him! How?

We silence the accusations of the Devil **by the blood of the Lamb**. When the Devil accuses you, you tell him, “But God doesn’t!” When the Devil says you deserve death for your sins, you tell him, “But Christ is my death!” When the Devil accuses you of being so disobedient to God and his laws, you tell him, “I see my disobedience on the cross!” As we sing:

When Satan tempts me to despair
And tells me of the guilt within
Upward I look and see Him there
Who made an end of all my sin
Because the sinless Savior died
My sinful soul is counted free
For God the Just is satisfied
To look on Him and pardon me.

We silence the accusations of the Devil **by the word of our testimony**.
What is this? John explains: **for they loved not their lives even unto death.**

Because the blood of the Lamb testifies to us of God's great love for us, we love him in return. We love him more than our lives. We love him more than our comforts. We love him more than our families. This is our **testimony**.

Let goods and kindred go,
this mortal life also;
the body they may kill:
God's truth abideth still;
his kingdom is forever!

As another translation says:

And thought they take our life, good, fame, child, and wife,
Though these all be gone, they yet have nothing won;
The Kingdom ours remaineth.

Conclusion

A war for the ages. It has raged since the Garden. It raged against Israel. It raged against Jesus. It rages against the apostles. It rages against the ancient church. It rages today against you and throughout the world. It will rage until the seed of the woman, our Lord, returns to put it to its final end. Be confident in that today! One thing we need to know above all others in our time with the assaults on the church is that Jesus wins! Amen.