

“Slaying the Dragon”
Revelation 12:1-17
January 11, 2008
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Chapter 12 amounts to another kind of parenthesis or interlude. In the chapter John explains the origin of the persecution of the church and its tribulations in the world. Once again John pulls back to survey the entire course of history and to explain it. We have already had intimations of this, but this is the first time John lays out in a systematic way the struggle between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the Evil One. In the last chapter, for example, the struggle was between the kingdom of the world and the kingdom of God. But here in chapter 12 we are reminded that the kingdom of the world is in fact more profoundly the kingdom of Satan, who Paul identifies as the prince of this world. The persecution, the tribulation of the church is the manifestation in history of a spiritual battle that has been underway from the beginning of the world. Satan has been defeated by Jesus Christ, but precisely because he has been defeated, he rages against the saints. John expects that by laying bare the real cause of the church’s persecution and tribulation, the followers of Christ will be nerved to withstand their tribulations and remain faithful through them.

Text Comment

- v.2 There is a longstanding debate largely between Roman Catholic and Protestant interpreters of the Bible as to whether this woman is Mary – because her offspring in v. 5 seems clearly to be Jesus – or she represents the ideal church, because in the rest of the chapter she seems to occupy *that* role. Later we will read that this woman is persecuted and flees into the wilderness and in v. 17 her offspring are said to be the saints. All in all, it seems clear to me that the woman is the church, the Israel of God. The twelve stars on her head represent the twelve tribes of Israel. The twelve tribes represented the church in chapter 7 as you remember. She appears in heaven, not on earth, not in Bethlehem, not in Nazareth. This is the ideal church or, as Paul puts it in Gal. 4, the Jerusalem that is above. A number of times in the OT Israel is said to be the mother of the people of God, even in travail as about to give birth. In the New Testament also the church is said to be the mother of believers (Gal. 4:26). As the church father, Cyprian once put it: “You cannot have God for your Father if you do not have the church for your mother.” [*De Unit. Eccl.* vi]
- v.4 The figure of the “Dragon,” an evil sea monster, is also taken from the OT where in several texts it serves as a dramatic symbol for the various kingdoms that at different times oppressed the people of God. John does not leave us in any doubt as to the identity of this dragon. In v. 9 he identifies it as Satan or the Devil. Once again, this is apocalyptic language and we should not take the dramatic imagery as in any way a literal description. Just as the woman was clothed with the sun but with a crown of stars on her head – impossible as a literal description because one cannot see stars in the sunshine – so with the dragon this is imagery intended to impress, even overwhelm, the imagination. The seven heads, the ten horns, the seven crowns, and the sweeping of stars out of heaven are all intended to convey the greatness of this being and his mighty power. Much of the

imagery of this chapter comes from Daniel. The dragon's sweeping the stars out of heaven is taken from Daniel 8:10; the fourth beast of Daniel's vision in chapter 7 also had ten horns and so on. There too the account was of the oppression of the people of God by spiritual powers.

- v.5 Israel gave birth to the Messiah and Satan was unable to defeat him. It may have appeared that Satan had won after Jesus' death on the cross, but the resurrection turned the tables and resulted in the total victory of Christ.
- v.6 The woman is no longer in heaven but on earth. Such sudden switches in perspective we have learned are characteristic of Revelation. Once again the church is said to be beset by tribulation for three and a half years, a period first found in the prophecies of Daniel 7, 9, and 12: a numerical symbol of a limited amount of time in which evil will be permitted to exercise great influence. In its use here, as in chapter 11 and in 13:5, the period of three and a half years, 1,260 days or forty-two months – all three forms of the description are found in Revelation – seems to cover the entire history of the church's life between the ascension of the Lord to heaven and his Second Coming, the period we are wont to call "the church age." The 42 months, the whole period of three and a half years, may derive from the 42 stages of Israel's progress through the wilderness (as listed in Numbers 33:5-49). Think of the wilderness as life in this world, whether the life of an individual Christian or the life of the church as a whole, in 42 units of time and you have the idea of the three and a half years, the 1,260 days and the forty-two months. The desert or wilderness was often in biblical history a place of spiritual refuge for the people of God.
- v.9 The war in heaven between Michael and his angels and the dragon and his angels should not be thought as an event in time but as the counterpart of the events that occurred on earth, the events related in vv. 1-6. It is an apocalyptic depiction of the triumph of the kingdom of God over the Devil's kingdom. The victory of the kingdom of God did not occur in angelic combat but at the cross and the empty tomb and then in the faithful life of the saints as we will read in v. 11.

The identification of the dragon as the *ancient serpent* identifies him with the agent of man's fall into sin in Genesis 3. After the fall, the Devil does in the entire world of mankind what he did in the Garden of Eden: he leads the whole world astray.

- v.10 The first verse of the great hymn closely parallels that of 11:15, another indication that this victory is the same one celebrated in the previous chapter.

The description of Satan as the "accuser of the brothers" suggests that he is constantly arguing that the saints do not deserve God's favor and that God is unjust to extend it to them. But, of course, his accusations are utterly insincere as he has himself been at work to induce human beings in general and the saints in particular to live in just that way that is not worthy of God's favor. The identification here of Satan as the accuser of the brethren is further indication that the angelic battle of vv. 7-9 was a metaphor for the struggle between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan. Here the same contest is depicted, not as a battle between groups of angels, but as a courtroom drama pitting two

lawyers against one another, with Michael perhaps understood as the advocate of the people of God as he is in some Jewish writings of the period. [Beale, 661]

- v.11 Remember the Lord Jesus, after his disciples' return from a successful preaching mission, said "I saw Satan falling from heaven like lightning." Satan falls and he is defeated when the church faithfully bears witness to the gospel, even unto death, and when salvation comes to men.
- v.13 It is the church's association with the male child, that is with Jesus, that so enrages the Devil.
- v.14 Exodus typology is woven throughout this narrative. [Mounts, 245, et al] Remember Israel was delivered from Egypt into the wilderness on eagles' wings (Exod. 19:4) and the Egyptians pursued Israel into the wilderness just as here the Devil pursues the church.
- v.15 In a number of places in the OT floodwaters are a metaphor for the persecution of God's people.
- v.16 Another allusion to the exodus history. The Egyptian army was also swallowed up. God can protect his people by whatever means and wherever they find themselves.
- v.17 There is uncertainty regarding the phrase "the rest of her offspring." How are these different from those whose persecution in the wilderness was described in vv. 13-16? Have we moved from the ideal church to the particular church? From OT saints to NT saints? From Jewish saints to Gentile saints? From the saints that are now secure in heaven to those who must face the Devil's wrath on earth? All different interpretations have been suggested. You are free to take your pick!

One of the bitterly tragic aspects of the Second World War was that even in its final throes, even long after it was perfectly obvious to thoughtful men that Hitler's armies had been defeated, his security forces and secret police continued, in a kind of malevolent rage and bizarre detachment from reality, to wage war on friend and foe alike. The gas chambers and ovens were full in the concentration camps. A political prisoner such as the pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer was taken from presiding over his last worship service in the prison and hanged just a few days before he would have been liberated by the advancing armies of the allies. Hitler demanded that Germany herself be destroyed rather than fall into the hands of the enemy. From his bunker, issuing orders to armies that no longer existed, he demanded vengeance on his internal opposition, retribution against subordinates who had failed to carry out his orders, and, to the very end dreamed of some crisis among the allies that would permit him at the last minute to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat. He was beaten and, at a certain level he certainly knew that; but thrown into fits of rage at his defeat he sought to bring as many others down with him as he could.

Well, it is something like that depicted here in Revelation 12. The defeat of Satan was decisive and irreversible. The Devil knows that. We read in v. 12 that "he knows that his time is short." But, enraged by his defeat, he has devoted his existence to doing his best to destroy the people of God while he still has access to them and to make whatever use, however cruel, of the people of

this world in his battle against the kingdom of God. So much cannon fodder so far as he is concerned.

For the thoughtful Christian this single fact that the Devil is spitefully at work in this world to defeat the kingdom of God and the people of God, explains so much that otherwise would remain inexplicable. For a long time now, as you know, belief in the devil or Satan has been regarded with polite contempt in much of the so-called educated classes of our society. The red imp with the tail and trident has become a standing joke, made the more ridiculous in our day by the cartoons of Gary Larson. Much appreciated as C.S. Lewis' *The Screwtape Letters* have been by two generations of Christians, when first published during the war years they aroused in polite society a great deal of thinly disguised amusement that so educated a man would take so seriously the existence of the Devil and demons. No doubt this is precisely the situation the Devil has been working hard to create. You remember one of *The Screwtape Letters* and the comment by the demon Screwtape about this very thing:

My Dear Wormwood,

I wonder you should ask me whether it is essential to keep the patient [the patient being the particular human being this junior devil, Wormwood, has been assigned to; whose new Christian faith he is responsible to undermine and to destroy] in ignorance of your own existence. That question, at least for the present phase of our struggle, has been answered for us by the High Command. Our policy, for the moment, is to conceal ourselves. Of course this has not always been so. We are really faced with a cruel dilemma. When the humans disbelieve in our existence we lose all the pleasing results of direct terrorism and we make no magicians. On the other hand, when they believe in us, we cannot make them materialists and skeptics." [VII]

In a culture such as ours Satan is able to exercise the greatest influence among people who are utterly unaware of his existence and utterly unconscious of his influence over them.

"During the last hundred years [in the West] he has engineered a world-wide collapse of evangelicalism in all the older Protestant denominations. The present spineless, powerless, unevangelical state of these churches, compared to what they were a century or more ago, gives heart-breaking proof of the skill and thoroughness with which he has done his job. The Bible is no longer fully believed, the gospel is no longer thoroughly preached, and post-Christian paganism sweeps through the world like wildfire. Not for centuries has Satan won such a victory." [J.I. Packer, *God's Words*, 83]

He may be in our Western world unrecognized, but he has not stopped working. The evidence of his hand can be seen everywhere. We are right to think that much of what we see in the world is genuinely "devilish," that is, it bespeaks the influence of a great, destructive, and vicious power at work in the life of mankind. Belief in Satan, so far from being superstitious or illogical, perfectly fits the facts we encounter and observe every day.

It is precisely these phenomena that so discourage us day after day. Take evolution and the grip of this godless theory of the origin and nature of human beings on our educated society. How is

it possible we may justly ask, that so many intelligent men and women actually believe that the breathtaking wonders and complexities of life – whose infinite wonder and astonishing complexity we understand far better than they did in Darwin’s day – that all of this arose by complete accident? That the wing of a bird, the sonar of the bat, the direction finding of the butterfly, the mind of a human being, the eye, the ear, the nose that fill up our lives with the amazing sights and sounds and smells of daily life, that all of this is the mindless result of the undirected dance of atoms. That the mind and heart with which we wonder over the wonders of nature, that this too is an accident. That the moral dimension of human life, the meaning we attach to our existence, the supreme value of love, the reality of human consciousness itself; that all of this grew up like topsy out of the pre-biotic soup. How is possible that so many of these bright and intelligent people, these curious and interested people, even when made aware of the staggering difficulties that have mounted up against this theory – it is, after all, nowadays possible to calculate the likelihood of at least a few of these so-called biological “adaptations”, a few among the virtually limitless number of mind-boggling adaptations required by the theory of evolution to explain the wonderful world in which we live and to explain ourselves, and the calculations leave us with a probability that such complexity could be the result of randomness so vanishingly small as to amount to a formal disproof of the entire theory – I say, how is it possible that people knowing such things are not troubled by so much as a moment’s doubt that there is no God, that nature has no designer, and that the stupendous marvels of life are all just so many accidents?

When Antony Flew, the life-long academic champion of atheism recently threw in the towel and argued that it was no longer possible to think that the life of the world was an accident, why didn’t vast numbers of other academics join him, or, if not join him, at least spend sleepless nights agonizing over how to reconcile their atheism with nature as we know it to be? Is this belief in evolution not an instance of an almost inconceivably great credulity? I remember reading long ago the observation of someone to the effect that credulity – the capacity to believe absolutely anything, however ridiculous, – is the only raw material no country need import! But why?

John Newton, in his day, once wrote, “Perhaps such a one as Voltaire would neither have written, nor have been read or admired so much, if he had not been the amanuensis of an abler hand...” Voltaire was the unwitting secretary of Satan and his books were dictated by a greater and more powerful mind: *that* is what Newton meant. In our day we might wonder the same thing of Richard Dawkins or the late Stephen Jay Gould. Is this not the reason so many blindly, religiously believe the absurd?

But not simply evolution. Think of what our so-called enlightened society has visited upon itself so willingly and enthusiastically over the past generation. All in an effort to liberate ourselves, to break the bonds that supposedly enchained us; we have broken down marriage and the family. Vast numbers of our children are now born to unwed mothers, marriages fail at an unprecedented rate, juvenile crime has exploded by thousands of percentage points over the past generation, and virtually no one in polite society grieves that we have made catastrophic errors in judgment or summons us somehow, someway to turn round and go back.

We have mainstreamed pornography and in so doing have cauterized and polluted the souls of our society's young men and left our young women to make do with what is left. Apparently, according to almost all studies and surveys, American women are not much impressed with what has become of the American male. But even they are not crying out for a counter-revolution. There is nowadays a conversation underway in some segments of the media as to what has gone wrong with the American man, why he has become such an unreliable, unadmirable, selfish twit, alternately silly and disgusting, in bondage to his lusts, preoccupied with his diversions, and of little use to other human beings. He seems both more passionate and more skillful at video games and fantasy sports teams than taking responsibility for a wife or for children. It has been noticed that no one is speaking of manhood any longer; no one even knows what it would mean in our society. Step aside ladies; the men must get to the lifeboats! But aware of a great loss, no one has wisdom to offer; no one a remedy. The once grand conception of liberty, thus debased, has left our men no longer noble, but small. Petty, sitting alone in front of a computer screen with little to offer others. Those who mourn the loss of what used to be are voices crying in the wilderness.

Here we are: an enlightened culture that is systematically unraveling the character of our people. Pornography, gambling, violence are still seen to be positively liberating to some and, however depressing, irresistible to others. And it continues. With marriage teetering on the brink of collapse in a society that has been repeatedly warned that it needs nothing so desperately as to restore the health of the institution of marriage, it seems to many of our cultural elite that what is really needed is to continue the dismantling of the institution by opening it to homosexuals and by adjusting the social policy of the state still further to erase the distinction between the married and the unmarried.

And so it continues. In a society now shaped by the sexual revolution, with unprecedented numbers of people with sexually transmitted diseases and high abortion rates, it is still impossible to convince many of the architects of this revolution that anything is wrong. We now have a political class that in largest part cannot be made to see that there is any real problem with abortion or promiscuity. A single generation has erased the moral consensus of 2000 years. In a society beset with a generation of young people who suffer terribly from a lack of impulse-control, self-discipline, and the willing acceptance of responsibility, so-called experts are pressing us to outlaw spanking. The very things that our culture is in greatest need of, such as the disciplined parenting of children, are the very things intelligent people of our culture are determined to jettison. This is their moral passion: to destroy our character! The very things that we have done that have brought the greatest misery upon our society are the very changes they are most loathe to undo. Hardly a second thought ever passes through the minds of those shaping this culture into the engine of human sadness and disappointment and unfulfillment that it has become and is still becoming, as Europe before it.

Is this not "devilish" in the truest, deepest most literal sense of the term? Are we not correct to think that there is a power at work here greater than that of mere social currents or human ideology? The blindness to the facts, the indifference to human woe and especially the woe borne by our nation's children, the inflexible loyalty to ludicrous ideas, the unwillingness even to contemplate the possibility that fundamental errors have been made, is all of this not evidence

that our society is in the grip of something more powerful than itself and that it is in thrall to a will outside of itself?

When Paul says that, as Christians, we do not wrestle with flesh and blood but against principalities and powers, forces of evil in the heavenly realms, is he not explaining the world we see every day. And when he says that he is not ignorant of Satan's designs and that it is imperative for Christians to stand against his wiles, what is he saying but that the world we live in each day is a world made more spiritually dangerous and difficult by the fact that it is inhabited by powers greater than those of mere human beings and that those powers are being employed to destroy, to corrupt, to unman, to blind, and to lead astray.

What the world ought to realize is that their malicious opposition to the will of God – that very will published in their own consciences – comes from someplace and from someone. The devil is our adversary, our accuser. He may disguise himself as an angel of light but he is actually pure, unmitigated darkness. This is one reason we have so much difficulty taking his measure. We do not see pure evil. It is always so in this world where God's presence is still felt; evil is always still mixed together with good. And the result is that we have difficulty even imagining such a being as Satan.

“No man is so far gone in sin that no vestige of goodness or truth remains in him; no man is wholly motivated by the hatred of others; no man has literally no aim in life save to wreck and destroy the creative achievements of another; no man ever says to himself in literally every situation and every sphere of value, ‘evil, be thou my good’; no man's character is integrated solely by the power of hate towards God.... We can never, therefore, form a really adequate idea of what Satan is like.” [Packer, 88]

But Satan's is the true anti-God state of mind. If David Livingstone's motto was “anywhere, provided it be forward,” Satan's is “anything, provided it be against God.” [Packer, 91-92] The maliciousness, the folly, the hatred, the rage, the malicious scorn of all that is good and true and pure, the perversion and the delight in evil: all of this we see only through a glass darkly. But this is the devil and this is what animates his work in the world. And that is one great reason why this world is such a dark and forbidding place and why there is so much misery in it, and as much today as there has ever been in the past. Education does not save us from it, technology has only made it worse. The Devil is miserable in his failure and defeat and wishes to make as many others like himself as he possibly can! He accuses; he seeks to harm and to steal from people what God has given them, he doesn't want God to do anyone good; he wishes all to be as bitterly miserable as himself.

This revelation of the malevolent power that works behind the screen that separates the world of men from the unseen world is intended to rid us of all complacency – we have an adversary of great power and cunning – and to nerve us to greater effort – we must withstand not only our flesh and the world, but the Devil himself if we are faithfully to serve the Lord. This will require terrible effort and a constant watchfulness on our part. It is also intended, I think, to soften our hearts toward the world whose foolishness and spitefulness toward the truth of God and man can easily provoke bitterness in a Christian soul. These people are in thrall to the Evil One and don't know it. They are doing the bidding of a cruel master and are utterly unknowing. These are

people not to be hated but to be pitied. They have no idea that they are part of that great company that the Devil has led astray to use in his futile battle against the kingdom of God. They find his leadership beguiling and cheerfully embrace his suggestions only because they have no idea what they are doing or what he is going to do with them when finally he can do his worst. They have made friends with one who wishes only to destroy them.

But here we are also reminded that the Devil is a defeated power. What work he does in the world is what God in his infinite wisdom and in his mysterious way and plan, permits him to do. As Luther put it, "the Devil" at the last "is God's Devil." All of that is powerfully suggested by the three and half years. He is allowed some time but only some and that time is strictly defined and limited: it will come to an end and when it does he will be cast into the Lake of Fire. Indeed, his rage against the church and the world is fueled by his own despair. He is lashing out in futile hatred and malevolent misery. The church's troubles, her worst and most severe persecution do not occur because the Devil is too strong for her but because he has been so decisively defeated that he can do her no lasting harm. So he will do what he can as long as he can.

This is the world in which we live. We have another description of our everyday world given us here in Revelation 12. There is a dragon seeking our harm. He has been defeated by our Captain but he does great damage in his death-throes. This is what is happening in our world. We know it; most of the world does not. And that should make a very great difference in how we live our lives, we who obey God's commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus.