

9. What is happening in the last days?

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[0 : 00] Now let's pray for a moment as we begin to look at Revelation 12. God our Father, when your word speaks to us in picture and in symbol, the meaning is often very difficult and obscure.

We pray for the light of your gracious Holy Spirit to be shed on this passage. We may come with prayer and contemplation and see how in Scripture Christ is known.

And so Father, take my words, use them faithfully to unfold the written word, and so lead us to the living word, Christ Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.

And if we could have our Bibles open, please, at Revelation 12, that would be a help.

It's said that when the Titanic went down, the Aberdeen Press and Journal reported the event under the headline, Aberdeen Woman Lost at Sea.

[1 : 09] You might think that's a very parochial way to look at the sinking of the Titanic. And of course it's very easy to poke fun at local newspapers, regard a coffee morning somewhere as more important than a meeting of NATO.

However, we very often, when we approach Christmas, are extremely parochial, extremely limited in our understanding of it.

Edward was pointing out at the lunchtime service on Wednesday, as he preached on those great words, and the beginning was the word, For many people, Christmas begins at Bethlehem.

This is where they imagine Jesus Christ began. And indeed, for many people, it ends at Bethlehem as well. It's not surprising then, that as children grow up, little Lord Jesus is consigned to the nursery along with Santa Claus.

Here we have a Christmas message, here in Revelation chapter 12, because this is about the coming into the world of the Son of God.

[2 : 14] Revelation is showing us what is happening in the last days. And by the last days, I mean the whole time between the comings. I don't know, neither does anyone else here know, when that coming will take place.

But we know we are in the last days. That's what the letter to Hebrews tells us. God, who spoke to the fathers by the prophets, has in those last days spoken to us by his Son.

And here we have the whole drama, his birth, his death, his ascension into heaven. We are taken behind the scenes. The seals, the trumpets, the bowls, all these judgments are being poured out on the unbelieving world.

How is the church faring? And why are things the way they are? Now, the chapter, I think you'll agree, is not immediately straightforward.

It doesn't immediately yield its secrets on a first reading. Nevertheless, the structure is rather clear. It obviously develops in three movements.

[3 : 23] And these are indicated by the two phrases in verses 1 and 7. And then the phrase in verse 13. In verse 1 and in verse 7 we read, In heaven.

And then in verse 13, Down to the earth. First two scenes take place in heaven, and the third scene, as it were, takes place on earth.

And therefore, what's happening here is we are shown that what happens in this world of time and space, in this visible world, is controlled by what is happening behind the scenes.

We have a glimpse here of the high command of good and evil. And so my title is, What is happening in the last days? So it seems to me this chapter is about.

So let's look at it then, and try to understand something of what the apostle is saying. First of all, in verses 1 to 6, we have the event which divides history.

[4 : 27] Verse 5, She gave birth to a male child. I'd like you, when you go home, to read once again Luke 1 and 2, those wonderful, glorious chapters about the birth of the male child.

Read these. These are true accounts of what happened. But read them along with this chapter, and we are shown the tremendous drama of what these events meant.

Because, first of all, we have the universal background of that birth. The whole universe is the stage for this drama. Lo, within a manger lies he who built the starry skies, he who throned in heights sublime sits amid the cherubim.

The whole of the universe. As one character in Narnia says, Once in our world there was a stable which had something in it that was bigger than the whole world.

He sense the excitement of John's words here. The words revealed to John. This drama is more than a birth of a child.

[5 : 36] This involves the whole universe. Now this, of course, is not unprecedented. Remember the star of Bethlehem. Now, it's pointless talking about whether this star was Halley's comet or a conjunction of the stars of the planets Jupiter and Saturn.

It was his star. God set this star in the sky to herald the birth of his Son. The whole universe is involved when the Son of God stepped into time and space.

The background is the whole universe. But the background is also the whole of the story of salvation history. Look at the characters. Background, the universe, the backdrop as well, the whole of salvation history.

A woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and her head, a crown of twelve stars. Now, who is this woman? This woman, I want to suggest, is Zion.

You read about her having birth pangs in Isaiah 26, also in Micah 4. And yet, that particular woman, one of the daughters of Zion, Mary herself, who is to be, who is to be the one, who is to bear the Son of God.

[6 : 58] See, read Luke 1 and 2 again. The hopes and fears of all years are met in you tonight. But you see, that catches up the whole of Old Testament history in it.

The story did not begin in Bethlehem. The story didn't even begin, as I say, in Old Testament history. It begins long before that, before a star shone in the sky, before anything was made that was made.

Jesus was there. She is clothed with the sun. This suggests the radiance of God himself. And Gabriel says to Mary in Luke chapter 1, the Holy Spirit will overshadow you.

And the word used to overshadow in the Greek Old Testament is the word used for the glory of God dwelling on the tabernacle, particularly dwelling on the Ark of the Covenant, the mercy seat, where God met with his people.

This is where God is visiting his people. And Mary herself becomes the Ark of the Covenant as she carries that child who is to be born. The moon, probably a symbol of dominion over the created order.

[8 : 11] I would suggest the twelve stars in the apocalyptic imagery represents both the past and future people of God, the twelve tribes and the twelve apostles.

The universe, the whole course of salvation history. And another sign, verse 3, appeared in heaven. Behold, a great red dragon with seven heads and ten horns.

Now in Psalm 74, you can read about the dragon on the waters whose heads are destroyed. His seven is probably a claim to universal power.

Because in the book of Revelation, the number seven is the number of completeness, the number of God himself. We'll see this next week when we come to the mysterious 666 at the end of chapter 13.

So the devil is claiming authority over the universe and authority over the child. And ten horns probably taken from the book of Daniel, the beast that rises out of the sea with ten horns on his head.

[9 : 19] And notice he stands before the woman so that when she bore her child he might devour it. Read Old Testament history, you'll find plenty of that. Think of Pharaoh, think of the book of Esther, the attempt to destroy the Jewish people.

But more particularly, think of Matthew chapter 2 again, Herod's attempt to destroy him. See once again the earthly event of Herod trying to destroy all the children in Bethlehem.

But behind it is the attempt of the dragon to destroy the male child. And this must surely be the shortest life of Christ ever written. The end of verse 5, Her child was caught up to God and to his throne.

We go straight from Bethlehem to the throne of heaven. Not of course because John is ignoring the other events but showing the completeness of this event.

This event that's going to divide time into B.C. and A.D. There is no A.C. There is no after Christ because such a time will never come.

[10:29] And they echo here of Sam 2, one who is to rule the nations with a rod of iron. This event begins the last days which stretch from then until he comes again.

And the woman fled into the wilderness which is a place prepared by God. Now obviously once again going to Matthew 2 we have the flight to Egypt where the child's life is preserved from Herod's anger.

Now what's this about nourished for 1,260 days? And later on we're going to find in verse 15 a time, times and half a time.

Now if you want to understand that we really have to go back to the book of Daniel. Daniel speaking and ministering and prophesying in the exile in the 6th century B.C.

also talks about a later period in the 2nd century B.C. at a time when the Syrian emperor Antiochus Epiphanes takes over Jerusalem and sets out systematically to destroy drive underground the worship of the true God polluting the temple by offering pig's flesh on the Holy of Holies and setting up a statue of Zeus in the in the Holy Place.

[11:57] The period of 1,260 days is approximately three and a half years which and this is also referred to in a time, times and half a time. This was the period when Antiochus reigned supreme in Jerusalem until he was driven out by Judas Maccabeus.

And I want to suggest that is taken in the apocalyptic writings in Revelation to refer to the last days. That time between the comings when there's extended but limited time when the dragon rages in great power.

Notice the woman goes to a place prepared by God overruled by God. The echo here I think is of Elijah being kept safe from the anger of Ahab as he goes into a desert place and is fed by ravens and so on.

She is nourished notice cared for. So you see in this very brief but very powerful very rich passage the whole of the gospel flows through this background of the universe the Lord of heaven the word who was in the beginning who became flesh.

The story of God's people throughout the centuries the attack of the devil the attack particularly when he was born as he stands before the woman to destroy him and then he turns his fury as he is unable to destroy the child who ascends into heaven and there reigns and one day will reign over the whole universe.

[13:34] And that leads on to the second movement which is the event which changes history. The birth is the event which divides history. Here we have the death of Christ the blood of the lamb verse 11 which changes history and again we have a great drama in heaven.

Michael and his angels fought against the dragon. Now this is clearly not the original fall of Satan which we have in hints and in suggestions in the Old Testament passages like Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28 which tell us how the created being the highest created being rebelled against God and was removed from his place.

And of course his tactic his strategy ever since and you see this in the Garden of Eden was to dethrone human beings from their place as well saying as he had said you will be like God.

But it does appear that this he is now denied access to heaven in a way that he had before. Read the book of Job for example where he appears among the sons of God but now he is thrown out of heaven and his antagonist is Michael the black angel.

Now Michael is the guardian of God's people you read about him in the book of Daniel. In Jude he contends with the devil over the body of Moses and Michael clearly is the highest of the angels and the important thing to remember is as C.S. Lewis pointed out long ago the opponent of Satan the opposite of Satan is not God but Michael.

[15:26] Satan is in no way equal with God. Satan is in no way another God although he tries to be and the one who leads the heavenly armies against Satan and his armies is Michael the great archangel.

We're left in no doubt about who this ancient dragon is. Verse 9 the great dragon that ancient serpent who is called the devil and Satan the deceiver of the whole world.

every if you like is the history of Satan. Once again salvation history who is he? He is the devil he is Satan he is the deceiver and notice of the whole world we'll notice this next week in chapter 13 the devil has a particular hatred for God's people but he wants to deceive and destroy the whole world and that's tremendously important I think this is the culmination of that battle that began in Genesis 3.15 where the descendant of the woman is going to crush the head of the serpent.

That's why it's so right for carol services to begin there in Eden the descendant of the woman will crush the head of the serpent what's sometimes called the proto-evangelium the first announcement of the gospel the crucial battle here is lost by Satan now I'm suggesting this is the heavenly counterpart of the death of Christ as Jesus dies as he defeats the hosts of hell this is a reflection of Michael and his angels as he defeat the devil and that leads us so often to revelation to an outburst of praise verse 10 I heard a loud voice in heaven saying that loud voice may be the angel Gabriel I suggested when we were doing chapters 10 and 11 that the mighty angel who came down from heaven with the scroll unfolding what was to happen was probably Gabriel Gabriel associated with announcing the gospel to Mary and now publicly announcing it to the universe but be that as it may this outburst of praise a sign of triumph it said that the cavaliers trembled when Cromwell's ironsides raised their psalms and so here the devil and his angels tremble at the shout of praise in heaven and notice verse 11 not only do Michael and his angels conquer the dragon that victory is passed on to the Lord's people they conquered him by the blood of the lamb now what's that mean it doesn't mean they repeat it as a mantra

Satan I defeat you by the blood of Jesus it means because of the blood of Jesus they can face the devil as we sang a few moments ago be thou my shield and hiding place sheltered near your side I may my fierce accuser face and tell him tell him what tell him oh leave off me it's tough for me at the moment tell him I'll do better the next time he'll only laugh no I may my fierce accuser face and tell him you have died he cannot stand against the victory that the Lord Jesus Christ won at Calvary when Jesus died on that cross satisfying the wrath of God and opening the kingdom of heaven to all who believe the devil was defeated but notice not only by the blood of the lamb but by the word of their testimony now John himself is exiled on Patmos because of the word of God and the word of his testimony and in chapter 6 the martyrs under the throne speak once again of the word of their testimony how is

[19:29] Satan defeated he is defeated by the blood of Christ but he is also defeated by the word of their testimony by continual proclaiming of the gospel which announces Christ's victory and his defeat as people listen to the gospel as the message penetrates their darkness as then Satan's empire begins to crumble that's the way to defeat him by the Acts talks about filling Jerusalem with our teaching we defeat the devil and we fill our towns and cities and villages with this teaching as he saw his dark empire crumbles by the blood of the lamb by the word of their testimony so we have the event which divides history the incarnation the coming of the son of god what we call christmas we have the event which we secondly have the event which changes history the death of the lord Jesus Christ his resurrection and his ascension and finally we have the continuing battle you see if that's true why is it that things often seem to be worse after the death and the ascension than they were before why is it that we are not living in continual victory and continually rejoicing why is it that so often what we do seem so ineffective our struggles with sin so pathetic our efforts at holy living eluding us why is that and the phrase

I think that I identified as the key to the third section he was thrown down to the earth the reason things are worse is because Satan is even more dangerous because he knows that his time is short now short doesn't tell us anything of the length of time except that it's limited 2,000 years and more have passed and he is more active than ever you see Christ has won but the final victory is still to happen in the years following the second world war scholars used to talk about the now and the not yet the victory that is won now but is still to be won and compared it to D-Day when the Allies landed on the Normandy beaches that effectively was the battle that won the war but until V.E.D.

war raged ferociously some of the most fierce fighting some of the most desperate encounters still had to come Satan is alive Satan is active and his real target is Christ he cannot reach Christ in heaven so he turns against his people remember Acts chapter 9 Saul of Tarsus on the way to arrest God's people imagining he was doing God's work and blinded by the light from heaven he gasps who are you Lord and the reply is I am Jesus whom you are persecuting when the devil attacks God's people on earth he is trying to attack Christ in heaven but once again the continuity of God's people is emphasized this chapter tremendous sense of the whole bible pouring its way through this

kind of hourglass passage the imagery used the woman was given the two wings of the great eagle she might fly into the wilderness the imagery used in

Deuteronomy of the exodus led you on the wings of the eagle imagery picked up in Isaiah 40 will mount up with wings like eagles the renewed strength and the prepared place and of course the pursuit echoes pharaoh's pursuit of God's people at time as well and the flood flood is a symbol of trouble Isaiah 43 again when you pass through the floods I will be with you but the earth came to the help of the woman and the earth opened its mouth quite a difficult verse to interpret I want to suggest that the whole created order ultimately is on the side of its creator now the created order is fallen it's under the curse I think this is suggesting that in the great battle creation of course is to be redeemed as well creation is to be restored creation is to be renewed and notice verse 17 which is a very important verse the dragon became furious with the woman went off to make war on the rest of her offspring now the rest of her offspring is clearly pointing well beyond

John's day and to the people who are still to come on those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus once again the worldwide nature of this now we've been seeing this as we've gone through Romans and Acts haven't we and once again here it is the very end of our Bibles the devil is always going to oppose the spread of the gospel wherever the church begins to wake then the devil wakes up when the church is moribund only concerned with navel gazing with its own parochial interest the devil can ignore it safely once the church begins to wake up once it begins to take the gospel seriously and to spread that gospel and the dragon is going to become furious he's going to pursue he stood we are told the dragon stood on the sand of the sea and just a point here

[25 : 33] I'll come back to this when we reach chapter 14 the dragon stands on the sea on a foundation which is inherently unstable whereas in chapter 14 the lamb stands on mount zion you see all the way through we are being told that the decisive victory has been won so as we finish to make two points first of all expect opposition that will be our subject next week where satan's strategy is unmasked it's not going to be persecution it's not going to be destruction it's certainly going to be propaganda and lies and false teaching so expect that if it's not happening then we must ask ourselves are we truly preaching and living the gospel the second thing I want to say is this though get satan in perspective he is a terrifying enemy he is not to be belittled but as someone said the most important thing about the devil is that

Jesus Christ has defeated him hold on to that grasp onto that in times of difficulty many years ago a man called Gordon Rupp who used to teach theology in Manchester wrote a book called Principalities and Powers a very masterly and helpful exposition of Ephesians 16 the fighting not against flesh and blood but against principalities and powers in that book he talks of a visit he made to Berlin towards the end of 1945 after the Hitler regime had fallen it was a sunny day and as he passed the ruins of Hitler's chancellery that place where so much evil where so much wickedness had been hatched and from which so much sorrow had flowed he saw sitting on the wall beside it a woman and her child as the woman fed her child the child threw back his head and left and his shadow fell across

Hitler's chancellery shadow of the child across that place of wickedness of death and of evil and so Rupp says the shadow or rather the light of another child falls across history and there lies the gospel and that is what we are going to be celebrating at Christmas the birth of the male child who is to rule the nations with a rod of iron the one who has defeated the devil and opened the kingdom of heaven to all who will believe Amen let's pray God our Father we praise you for the victory of the Lord Jesus Christ over the devil and his angels and for the availability of that victory to all who will believe we are not complacent we do not underestimate his great power to destroy and to deceive but in the words of the apostle Paul thanks be to

God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ victory which means that all labour done in the Lord will not be in vain may that be our song and our hope this Christmas and beyond in Jesus name Amen men so hearts to drink there