

Jesus came to trample the great dragon

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[0 : 0 0] Good afternoon, everyone. Glad I got your attention. Welcome to our Wednesday lunchtime Bible talk.

It's really lovely to have you with us. We're just about to start a two-part series just over this next couple of weeks in the run-up to Christmas, looking at the darker side of Christmas, which sounds very ominous, but is really looking at the lesser preached, perhaps unsettling parts of the Bible that talk about the Christmas message. So please do come along next week for the second part if you're not too scared after the first part this week. And next week we will be having a carol service here, so things will be slightly different. We will be singing a carol at the end of this service today, but next week we'll have a couple of extra carols as well. So please do bring people along to that. And the one thing you need to remember about that is there won't be sandwiches next week, but there will be mince pies. So you will get something in your tummies and flyers. Flyers for that are on your seats and for the rest of the Christmas events too.

But please do open your Bibles to Revelation chapter 12. That's where we're going to be today. And we'll be reading the whole chapter together. Excellent. That's on page 1034 in our Bibles if you're struggling to find it. Good. And a great sign appeared in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of 12 stars. She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pains and the agony of giving birth. And another sign appeared in heaven. Behold, a great red dragon with seven heads and ten horns, and on his head seven diadems. His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and cast them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she bore her child, he might devour it. She gave birth to a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron. But her child was caught up to God and to his throne. And the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God in which she is to be nourished for 1,260 days. Now, war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon.

And the dragon and his angels fought back, but he was defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. And the great dragon was thrown down, the ancient serpent who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the world. He was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him. 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 has come. For the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. And they have conquered him by the blood of the lamb and by the word of their testimony. For they love not their lives, even unto death. Therefore, rejoice, O heavens, and you who dwell in them. But woe to you, O earth and sea. For the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short. 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. 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. The serpent poured water like a river out of his mouth after the woman to sweep her away with a flood. 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. 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. And he stood on the sand of the sea.

What is Christmas really all about? It's an important question, isn't it? Because people have very different views on it. If I was to walk out into Buchanan Street and to survey passers-by, I think we'd come up with a lot of different answers. Some would say it's all about family or showing goodwill to others, love perhaps, warmth, solidarity with common man. And as well-meaning as those answers

are, they come nowhere near close to what we find in our passage this lunchtime. Here in Revelation 12, we find a sentimentalism of Christmas stripped all the way back and a window opened up into heaven to show us what God thinks about the coming of his son, the Lord Jesus, into our world.

[6 : 18] And what we find might be quite surprising to some of us, and perhaps even slightly unsettling. For when we see Christmas from that heavenly perspective, from God's perspective, there's no room left for empty, vacuous sentimentalism. We can't neuter Christmas any longer and make it into something safe and comfortable and warm. For according to this passage we've just read, Jesus didn't come into the world just to give us mince pies and mulled wine, caroling and open fires and pigs in blankets. As wonderful as those things are, he came to bring us something far greater, something vital and truly magnificent. So let's see what he came to do. Our first point for this afternoon, the great war. Satan wars against the seed of the woman. It might surprise you, but the narrative of world history according to God is that of a great war, a conflict that has spanned the years from the earliest man, Adam and Eve, right until our modern day. Who's that war between?

Well, we see the participants in this war in verses one to four. Verses one and two reveal the first participants. A great sign appeared in heaven and a woman clothed with the sun and the moon under her feet and on her head. We're given a vision of a radiant woman with a crown of 12 stars on her head who is crying out in birth pains. Now, if you remember the story of Joseph and his brothers, he had a vision, didn't he, of the sun, the moon and 11 stars, his brothers bowing down before him, representing all the family, all the people of God at that time. And here in this passage, that allusion to the sun, moon and stars is doing the same thing, telling us that this woman represents God's people, his church throughout history.

And God's church has been in agony and waiting for a birth of a child who would change their fortunes, for they have always been hard pressed and on the ropes up until the moment when Jesus came, for they faced a very terrible enemy. Verse three.

Another sign appeared in heaven. Behold, a great red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and on his heads, seven diadems. His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and cast them to the earth.

This woman who depicts God's people faces an ancient enemy who is depicted as a mighty dragon.

[9 : 40] He is red with the blood of his enemies that he has devoured. He is depicted as having seven heads, symbolizing his complete ferocity. Seven is the number of completion in the Bible. And here we're saying you will not find a more ferocious enemy than him. It's a complete package. He has incredible power depicted by his ten horns on his head. And so terrifying is he that he just sweeps his tail and a third of the stars from heaven. And a third of the stars from heaven fall to the earth.

He swats supernovas away like we swat away flies. He's both formidable and terrifying. And on his head sits seven diadems, crowns. He's arrogantly set himself up against God and claims to be the supreme ruler of the universe instead of God. And as we see when we get to verse nine, this great dragon is no other than the ancient serpent, the devil, Satan, the deceiver of the world.

He hates God, the true ruler of the universe, and thus hates all that he has created as well. And as a result, in the very beginning, the ancient dragon goes out and deceives Adam and Eve in the garden. And as a result brings pain and anguish and heartache into a world that had never known it for the first time. He wanted to wreck God's world and the relationship that he has between himself and humanity. And from that first rebellion onwards, God's people would always be at war with the dragon and his seed. At that moment, humanity was split into two camps. Some would repent and turn back to God, but many would find themselves deceived by this great dragon and find themselves unwittingly fighting on his side against God's people. The great dragon plagues mankind's existence. He spiraled the world into misery and despair. There would always from now on be a war between the woman and her seed, God's people, and the serpent and his seed.

Genesis 3.15 tells us a bit more about this.

We get a quote here of God speaking to the ancient serpent, this dragon. And he says, I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your offspring and her offspring.

He shall bruise your head and you shall bruise his heel. Continual warfare through the ages was what was promised. But did you notice the ray of hope too? Eventually, one of Eve's offspring would come into the world and crush the head of that ancient serpent, that great harasser of God's people.

[12 : 54] And the promised birth of that child, well, it filled this ferocious, terrifying dragon with absolute fear.

Let's see why. What would happen when this child was born? Verse five. The woman gave birth to a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron.

But a child was caught up to God and to his throne. This child would rule the world and then be enthroned in heaven. The whole of heaven and earth would recognize him as the true king of the universe.

And the devil hated that idea completely. This verse alludes back to Psalm 2, which prophesied about the coming of a messianic king who would defeat all of God's enemies and finally bring them the peace and the rest that they have so longed for for all these years. And in this vision that were given in Revelation, that description, that title of messianic king is placed firmly on this child of this woman.

The male child in this vision is the one who would finally bring an end to this relentless war between the seed of the woman and the seed of the dragon. He would trample the dragon under his foot and verse six, usher his people into a place of safety, the place of the wilderness.

[14 : 28] And it's for this very reason that the dragon stands ready to devour this child at his birth. This child is the great threat to the great dragon's earthly rule. Destroy the child and the plans of God would fail. Destroy the child and the plan to deliver God's people would lie in absolute tatters.

And so we see the enemy attempt to do that time and time again all throughout history. All through the Old Testament, the great dragon, the devil, was at work trying to snuff out the coming of this great king who would be his downfall. Cain, Adam and Eve's son, mastered by sin, wipes out half of the woman's seed in just one swoop when he murders his brother. Abraham and the other patriarchs were constantly wrestling against threats to the line of promise too, from fertility problems to problems with envious and murderous brothers. The line was always under siege. God's people were persecuted and oppressed in the land of Egypt. Pharaoh licensed genocide against them and then finally tried to trap them up against the Red Sea that he might annihilate them altogether. But they escaped. And when the promised king was prophesied to come through David's family line, there was no end to assaults on his family and his household from without and from within.

Absalom, his son, murders many of his siblings. And years later, Queen Athaliah takes the throne and wipes out the whole royal family. Apart from one child, Joash is hidden away. The line is preserved. The seed of the woman is preserved. And of course, when we get to the actual birth of Jesus, well, Herod just acts like the dragon, doesn't he? And like Pharaoh generations earlier and calls for every infant child to be murdered in the area of Bethlehem, the hope of killing this king who had been prophesied. The devil rears his head again and again throughout history, attempting to stamp out this promised king who would bring an end to this great war and free God's people from his terrible tyranny. But the dragon fails.

2,000 years ago, the war was still raging on. God's people were feeling the harsh conditions of warfare. Hope was dwindling. The forces of darkness seemed to be well and truly on top. In fact, demonic activity was so widespread across the promised land. That's the picture we're given when we open up the gospels. God's people were so utterly under the thumb by the devil, but demonic activity was all over the promised land. But into this dark world of war and pain, the promised child did come. The devil's best efforts couldn't thwart his coming. Into a stable, a king is born who would turn the tide of this great battle. And that leads us on to our second point, the tipping point. Jesus conquers Satan and secures victory. In every war, there is a tipping point where the war is decisively won, but not yet fully worked out. During World War II, historians suggest that the turning point was when the Russians defeated the Nazis at Stalingrad. Once the Nazis surrendered there, the battle on the east front was decisively won.

The tide of the war had turned. That didn't mean that there wasn't still battles to be fought, but the outcome of the war was assured. Something similar is happening in our passage this afternoon. In verses 7 to 12, we're given further insight into what is happening on the grand scale with Christ's coming. And we're told that he came to deal a critical blow to the enemy and to secure victory for his people. Verse 7, we're given another heavenly picture, this time of the angel Michael fighting against this malicious dragon. Michael wins, and the devil is banished from heaven. Verse 8 and 9. The ancient serpent, the deceiver, was thrown down, cast down to earth. Now, I think it would be tempting, wouldn't it, to ask, then, why do we bother so much to celebrate the coming of Jesus at Christmas? If here we're told that Michael's the one that casts the devil down. Why are Christians

so obsessed with Jesus at Christmas? Well, hear the voice from heaven from verses 10 to 11. 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 has come. For the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. 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.

[20 : 19] Though the battle is depicted as being up in heaven between Michael and Satan, it's actually won here on earth. The people of God conquer their ancient foe, not by Michael ultimately, but by the blood of the lamb. It is the cross that wins the battle against our greatest enemy. At Christmas, we celebrate Jesus coming in a cradle, but the infant in the cradle would later go to the cross to disarm Satan of his greatest weapon against us and win the battle for us. And that weapon that he disarms was the ability to accuse us before God because of our sin that has stained us and clung to us ever since that first rebellion in the garden. And we see that in verse 10. We're told that Satan accused us night and day before God.

Our sin made us deserving of God's eternal wrath. And yet God for millennia refrained from sending his people to hell, didn't he? Satan could therefore stand in the heavenly court before God and call him unjust and accuse him. He could point to us, God's people, the people of faith, and remind God that we deserved hell. And yet God just seemed to cover over our sin, sweep it under the rug for millennia. But in the coming of Christ and his death on a cross, the accuser was robbed of his voice. For in Jesus's death, he took the penalty of sin upon himself. He bore God's wrath for the people, not just after him, but all through the ages.

Justice was finally served. Wrath was poured out upon sin that had seemingly been covered up for millennia, as God himself bore the condemnation that we deserved in the person of his son.

The great dragon was disarmed. Victory was made certain, and the tide was irreversibly turned.

That is what Christmas is all about. And it's glorious. Far more amazing than what we usually think Christmas is about. Christmas is all about Jesus dropping into enemy territory, surviving all the attacks of the devil throughout the ages, and then finally disarming the enemy general.

At the cross, Jesus Christ tramples the great dragon under his feet. The serpent's head is finally crushed. The critical blow is landed.

[23 : 10] Jesus wasn't born into a stable merely to identify with our humanity. No, he comes in human flesh to be the champion that we need.

To make our souls secure forever. To flatten our great enemy who would have us dragged to hell and accuse us of so. To put an end to the supernatural evil we face in this world.

And that is the message we need to hold out this Christmas to our friends and to our family. Our friends and family will naturally import all sorts of sentimentalism into Christmas.

And in so doing, neuter it and tame it of its power. And that might be purposeful. It might not be.

Some people will intentionally try to tame the Christmas message so they don't have to live with the implications of it.

Some people just won't be aware of the magnitude of the message in the first place. But to both, we need to be clear what Christmas is really all about. And cut through the social facade.

[24 : 15] For people need this. They need this truth. And the truth is they actually want it. They don't want it just to be about mince pies and mulled wine. People want a world without warfare.

Only Jesus can bring that. People want a world without evil. Only Jesus can bring that.

People want a world without lies and accusations. We see that at the moment with the election coming up. Jesus is the only one who can bring that.

But here's the tough part of the message. He only brings it to the seed of the woman. The church. Those who trust in him as their champion. But the wonderful thing is that Jesus isn't exclusive, is he?

[25 : 14] He bids even his enemies to join his side. In fact, he actively seeks out his enemies. For he doesn't want them to be deceived by the enemy any longer.

So he's always holding out peace terms, isn't he? To those who set themselves against him. And the only condition on those peace terms is to come to him for forgiveness.

And to join him. That's it. It's a gracious offer from a king who has already won the victory. Who has already disarmed the enemy.

He even wants his enemies to share in his victory with him. So gracious and kind is he. Well, finally, our last point.

It's obvious that this battle isn't all over yet, isn't it? The world isn't yet perfect. Evil still lingers. Life as a Christian is still tough in this world.

[26 : 19] So why is that if the dragon has been defeated? Well, the answer comes in verse 12 onwards. Satan makes a last stand.

And that's our last point. The last stand. Satan attacks God's people in desperate rage. After being thrown down from heaven.

Being dealt this critical blow through Jesus' death on a cross. The devil isn't yet finished. In fact, as a result of being cast down and defeated.

He's filled with even more wrath and venomous activity. Verse 12. Because he realizes that his end is near.

The war didn't stop, did it? On the days that the Allies took Stalingrad. It carried on for many more months after that great victory.

[27 : 17] Victory was assured. But fighting still continued. And so it is with the great war that we're all caught up in. The cosmic battle we've been looking at this lunchtime.

And the result is that there is still going to be pain and agony in this life. Right up until the time when the enthroned Jesus, as he's described in verse 5, comes back and finally brings ultimate and complete victory.

Verse 12. The heavens rejoice for Satan is cast down. But woe to you, O earth. For the devil has come down to you in great wrath.

Because he knows his time is short. And verse 15. Satan thus pursues the woman who we saw in that first time.

The people of God. But why? Because she gave birth to this child that he so hates and who has defeated him. The devil now directs his fury at those associated with the male child.

[28 : 19] Who stands now as the undisputed champion of heaven and earth. If you like, the devil makes a last stand. In old westerns, you'd often see villains make a last stand, wouldn't you?

There comes a point when the villain knows that he is being defeated. His time is up. All hope of victory is gone. But so enraged is he at his circumstances.

So angry is he that he wants to cause as much damage as he possibly can before his time is finally up. And that's what we see here in our passage too.

The devil wants to bring as much harm as he possibly can to God's people. But mercifully, those attacks are restrained by our God.

Verse 14. God helps his people to escape his terrible attacks by bringing them to a place of safety.

The devil, the serpent, pursues the woman and pours out lies like a torrent to sweep her away.

[29 : 26] To help make her not hold fast to the testimony that she keeps to the Lord Jesus. But God just will not allow that to happen. He won't allow his people to be wrenched from him.

To be torn away from the winning side. In verse 17. The devil's rage escalates. He targets the rest of the offspring. He continues to go after us.

And that explains the narrative we find ourselves in now. We're still caught up in the end of the war. We're still facing the devil's last stand. But he can never bring us ultimate harm.

His only real and effective weapon has already been dealt with. It's already been disarmed. He can't accuse us any longer. Verse 11 is very sobering, isn't it?

They conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of the testimony. For they loved not their lives even unto death. For all those who hold to the testimony of Christ.

[30 : 33] Trust in their champion. Then the devil might even take our lives. So much is his power and the harm he can cause to the people of God. But he can never rob us of the victory that we have in Christ.

And sadly, that does happen around the world today, isn't it? Christians are slaughtered every day for holding fast to their testimony of belonging to Christ. The devil does great harm, but he can never rob them of victory.

For they are on the champion's side. In fact, in so murdering them, all he does is speed them to their champion's side. And the wonderful assurance we have now is this.

That when we face suffering as Christians in this world for the sake of Christ, it doesn't point us to an enemy who has the upper hand. It points us to an enemy who is defeated and absolutely furious that that is the fact.

Our suffering for Christ in this world declares to us that Jesus has won. The dragon has finally been trampled. And the battle is over. That is the glorious message of Christmas.

[31 : 41] So when you look into the manger this Christmas, I hope you'll see a champion as well as a child. And make Christmas about salvation rather than sentimentalism.

That's what we and our friends and family so desperately need. Well, let me pray for us and then we'll sing together. Father God, we do thank you so much for the Lord Jesus, the one who holds the rod of iron, who rules the nations.

We thank you that that is our reality. Thank you that he has defeated our greatest enemy. And we thank you we can celebrate that together this Christmas. And help us, we pray, to hold out that message to our friends and family.

For you really are the only answer to the world's problems. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.