

What kind of Christmas are you preparing for?

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[0 : 00] Now if we could have our Bibles open please at that passage, that would be a great help. And let's have a moment's prayer before we come together to the passage.

Lord God, now as we turn from the praising of your name to the preaching of your word, we pray indeed that the gracious Holy Spirit will throw a flood of light on these words written by the Apostle. Not only words written to the church of his day, but words written to all those who will come after them, to all those who will live in the world and profess your name before the Saviour returns. Lead us to Christ. Lead us to the living word to whom the written word so faithfully points. As we ask this in his name. Amen.

And so we come to Revelation 12. It's alleged that when the Titanic went down, the Aberdeen Press and Journal reported the event under the heading, Aberdeen Woman Lost at Sea.

[1 : 11] There is a parochialism often about local papers and about local news. But you know there is often a parochialism as well about the way we look forward to Christmas.

And when we fail to see the reality in this season of Advent of what is actually happening. And that's my first point. Revelation 12 is about what happened on Christmas Day.

Look at verse 5. She gave birth to a male child. One who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron. Nothing about the shepherds.

Nothing about the later visit of the wise men. These matter of course. These are enormously important. But here the veil is thrown aside. This is what is happening behind the scenes.

A great invasion of God into the events of this planet. And the evil powers poised, desperate to destroy this. God himself visits earth.

[2 : 19] As John Betjeman said, God was man in Palestine. And when that happened, as you can see, the dragon stood before the woman, verse 4, who was about to give birth, so that when she bore her child, he might devour it.

This is the story that begins in Genesis 3.15, when it's announced by the Lord that the descendant of the woman will crush the head of the serpent.

And the story that culminates when Christ returns. So we have in this chapter a tremendous sweep between the comings. The coming to Bethlehem in great humility and pointing to the coming again in glorious majesty to judge the living and the dead.

Now, apocalyptic writing like Revelation and Daniel, very often the details are obscure and difficult. But the broad sweep is not all that difficult to grasp.

I probably told already the story of the American college students who were studying apocalyptic literature at their seminary. They were finding it distracting.

[3 : 29] They were finding it difficult. They were finding it, frankly, bizarre. And they were glad when the bell rang they went off to play basketball. As they went in to play basketball, they saw the old caretaker, Joe, who was sitting reading a book.

What are you reading, Joe? They said, He replied, I'm reading the book of Revelation. You can't possibly understand that. Even we don't understand it.

You notice the kind of user-friendly soundbite. We don't understand it. How can you possibly understand it? And Joe replied, It's rather simple. Jesus wins.

And that is what the book of Revelation is about. Now, of course, there's more to it than that. But that is the fundamental message. That is the fundamental message of Christmas.

That's why I'm calling this sermon, What Kind of Christmas Are You Preparing For? When the early church celebrated the season of Advent, it wasn't the shopping days till Christmas.

[4 : 30] It was looking ahead to the coming again. He came once. He will come again. He will come in glory, as the Apostles' Creed says, the judge, the living, and the dead.

So as we look at the chapter, let's keep that in mind. Jesus wins. He came in great humility. He will return in glorious majesty. So the chapter, very naturally, it seems to me, develops in three scenes, three acts, if you like.

Verses 1 to 6, I'm going to call, God is in control. That's verses 1 to 6. Then verses 7 to 12, the devil has been defeated.

And then finally, verses 13 to 20, the devil is still dangerous. These are the three things we're going to look at. God is in control, but it doesn't seem like it, does it?

As we look out into the world, as we look at our communities, as we look into our own hearts, there is precious little peace on earth and goodwill, as we approach another Christmas.

[5 : 39] But here, John is, as I say, taking aside the curtain. The whole universe is the stage for this great drama. On the first Christmas day, it wasn't just a baby who was born in Bethlehem.

God himself invaded the world that he had made. The young prince of glory landed incognito behind the enemy lines. John describes it as a great sign.

As in his gospel, a sign is something that points to the deeper reality behind the scenes. What was happening when the shepherds came and saw the baby in the manger.

John says, this is actually what was happening. The woman clothed with the sun. Now, the woman is Zion, God's people in the Old Testament and in the New Testament, and of course, more particularly, that member of the city of Zion, the girl Mary, who was herself to bear and give birth to the Son of God.

She is clothed with the sun. In other words, God's light shines around her. And the moon is under her feet. I suppose meaning that since the moon simply shines by the reflected light from the sun, that this woman is the centre of the drama that is happening.

[7 : 04] And she is, we are told, she had a crown of twelve stars. Probably the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve apostles. This is all of God's people this woman symbolises.

And she is pregnant with the Messiah. The hopes and fears of all the years in one of our carols, which we will probably sing over the Christmas period. The hopes and fears of all the years are met in you tonight.

The dragon is Leviathan, mentioned in Job and in the Psalms. The great dragon, the powerful enemy of God and of his people.

Verse 3, a great red dragon with seven heads. Seven in Revelation is the number of God, the number of God's authority. Just stemming ultimately from the seven days of creation.

So this dragon is claiming universal power. This dragon is claiming God-like status. In verse 4, he has ten horns.

[8 : 08] You can read the book of Daniel, the fourth beast, the terrifying evil monster that emerges from the abyss also has ten horns. So you see, this is the power of the devil throughout history.

Beginning in Genesis 3, where he deceives the man and the woman and where sin and death enter the world. and right through Old Testament history, he's trying to destroy God's people.

The Exodus, the exile, and the book of Esther. You can read right through the Old Testament as the tale of this great battle as the dragon tries to destroy the woman, basically, and the woman's descendants.

But she gave birth, verse 5, to a male child. This is the child the king mentioned in Psalm 2 who is going to rule the nations. And surely, this must be the shortest life of Christ ever written.

In verse 5, she gave birth and he was caught up to God and to his throne. We go straight from the incarnation from the birth in Bethlehem to the ascension in heaven.

[9 : 14] Not that John is ignoring what's in between, but these are the critical points. He is born into the world, but he ascends to heaven as a sign that he has won the victory and that the dragon has been defeated, sweeping straight from birth to ascension.

And then, verse 6, the woman fled into the wilderness where she has a place prepared by God and she has been nourished for 1,260 days. Now, I wouldn't ask all this about, 1,260 days.

If you glance back just to the, in fact, to the page, it's on the same page, chapter 11, verse 3, God says, I will grant authority to my two witnesses and they will prophesy for 1,260 days.

And the two witnesses here, once again, like the woman, are symbolic of all the people of God throughout all of history. But the 1260 days, which later on in verse 14 is called a time, times, and half a time, approximately a period of three and a half years, period that Daniel prophesies about when Antiochus, the king of Syria, was to oppress Jerusalem, to try to make it basically into a, into a

pagan city.

He offered up pig's flesh and the Holy of Holies, set up a statue of Zeus, the head Greek god, in that same place. That's what Daniel calls the abomination that causes desolation, which Jesus also refers to when he prophesies the time of his coming to the disciples on the Mount of Olives.

[10:58] Now that is taken by the prophetic and apocalyptic writers, this limited but extended period. This is, I suggest, in the book of Revelation, the whole period between the comings, when the church is on earth and when the devil is persecuting it.

So, what verse 6 is really talking about is that the child has ascended to heaven but the woman still on earth, the woman who are his people and they are persecuted by the devil and by his agents but they're also nourished by God.

So, they would be nourished for 1260 days. The wilderness, the desert, a place of testing but also a place of divine protection, a place where the Israelites had experienced manna from heaven, a place where Elijah had similarly experienced help from God, a place where Jesus himself had been tempted by the devil.

So, that's the first thing then, God is in control. The whole sweep of history symbolised here by the 1260 days, by the time, times and half the time, during that time the devil is active but God is in control.

But that brings us on to verses 7 to 12 that the devil is defeated. War arose in heaven. Here's a headline for you.

[12:22] War in heaven. Now, Satan as always wants to usurp the place of God and in the Old Testament we have glimpses of the fall of Satan.

In Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28, Isaiah talks about the king of Babylon, great military power. Ezekiel talks about the prince of Tyre, the great commercial power and he talks about them in language that goes far beyond any human ruler or any human regime.

And like Willie was saying last Sunday morning, that behind human regimes, behind human presumption is the demonising of society. The fact that the devil is active and working through those regimes that rise on earth.

And they are glimpses of his original fall. But what happens here appears to be something different. In the Old Testament we learn that Satan still had access to the heavenly courts.

Read about this in Job. The sons of God appeared before God and Satan also appeared among them. Something has happened that has dislodged Satan.

[13:34] And that something surely is mentioned in verse 11. They have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb. when Jesus died on the cross, when he rose again, the serpent, the devil, was given a deadly blow from which he will never recover.

We learn here that the one who is to crush the serpent has come and he's won a major victory. Now that's what happened on earth. When people looked at the cross on earth, this is not what they thought was happening.

What they thought was happening was if they were sympathetic, a good man crushed by the evil of the world, they were unsympathetic, mockery, ridicule. That's the end of him.

But here we're shown the heavenly counterpart of the death and resurrection of Christ. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon. Michael, the archangel, the leader of the heavenly hosts, mentioned in Daniel as the one who is the protector of God's people against their enemies, mentioned in Judah as the one who guarded Moses against the devil.

At the time when presumably the devil was trying to destroy Moses by basically saying Moses has failed. He can't possibly be a godly man any longer.

[15:04] It was Michael who contended with him. Remember always that Satan is not the enemy of God in the sense that he is equal to God in any sense.

As C.S. Lewis pointed out, the opposite of Satan is not God but Michael, Michael the great archangel who leads the hosts of heaven. And in 1 Thessalonians 4 we learn that when the Lord returns it will be heralded by the voice of the archangel, the voice of Michael himself.

And of course we are left in no doubt here of the identity of the enemy. Verse 9 This verse which in many ways is a summary of the whole Bible teaching on Satan. The great dragon was thrown down.

The great dragon, the monster of the deep, Leviathan, the monster who is the enemy of God and of his people, the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world.

He was thrown down to the earth and his angels were thrown down with him. He is the deceiver. Above all he is the deceiver and the accuser. But notice here that not only does Michael defeat the devil, that victory is available to God's people.

[16:21] Look at verse 11. They have conquered him. How do God's people conquer the devil? And here we are given two ways. They overcame him, we are told, by the blood of the Lamb.

That's the first way which we conquer the devil. By the blood of the Lamb. That's what Newton was talking about in the hymn. Be you my shield and hiding place that shall forth near your side. I may my fierce accuser face and tell him. Tell him what? Tell him it's been difficult for me, it's been tough for me, you really ought to lay off me. Tell him that if you knew the kind of circumstances I had to face, you would leave me alone.

Of course not. The devil will simply laugh. What do we say to the devil? May my fierce accuser face and tell him you have died. That is the ground of our confidence.

Christ has died because he has died. He has taken away our sins. And therefore, we can face the accuser. The accuser who accuses us day and night.

[17:28] But there's a second way. By the word of their testimony. In other words, by preaching and teaching and sharing the word. How do we defeat the deceiver?

There is of course a place for apologetic, for there is a place for engaging with people who attack the word of God.

People like Dawkins and others. But the best way we defeat the devil is simply by preaching the gospel. By filling... The apostles talked about filling Jerusalem with their teaching.

How do we defeat the devil? In Glasgow, we fill Glasgow with our teaching. We keep on again and again and again preaching the gospel. That's how Satan the liar is defeated.

You defeat a liar ultimately by telling the truth. That's what's happening here. So God is in control. Satan is defeated. Now why, if all this is true, does it often seem worse since Christ has ascended to heaven?

[18:32] Why is it not easier? Why is the Christian life so tough? Chapter 13 we read about how the devil summons from the sea the beast of persecution, the arrogant, evil beast.

He also summons the second beast from the land, the beast of propaganda and lies, the beast which has been so enormously successful in the western world the last two centuries.

How does the devil attack the church in Britain and in the western world? He attacks it largely through making sure that the gospel is not preached and that heresy is preached.

That is how the devil works. But he's still dangerous because he knows, verse 12, woe to you because he knows that his time is short.

That brings us to the third point which is the third section. Although he is defeated he is still dangerous. He's failed to destroy the child so he turns on the woman and her offspring.

[19:37] The real hostility though is to Christ himself. As Saul of Tarsus pursued the Christians along the road to Damascus blinded by the light that shone from heaven you can imagine his dismay when he heard the words I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.

Paul you're not persecuting my people you're persecuting me. That's what Paul was told. But God is not inactive. The woman verse 14 was given the two wings of the great eagle so you might fly from the serpent into the wilderness.

This is an echo of earlier Old Testament passages in Deuteronomy 32 God's people are carried as on eagles wings. Basically saying the God who rescued you at the time of the exodus will rescue you again.

These words are echoed in the well-known words of Isaiah 40 those who wait on the Lord will mount up on wings like eagles. In other words in the time of the exile as well.

And at the end of verse 14 she is nourished for a time times and half a time. That's the period I mentioned already the 1260 days which is the period between the comings the period in which we are still living the period that the author of Hebrews calls the last days.

[20:59] Remember we've been living in the last days since Christ ascended to heaven. So if someone comes and tells you we're living in the last days and we have a special message for them you say to them good for you so do we.

Here is the message this is the message for the last days the word of the prophets and of the apostles the unchanging enduring word which is able to make us wise for salvation and able to keep us from falling.

