

Crushing the Serpent

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- [0 : 00] Well, we're going to turn out to our reading this morning, and you'll find that we're reading in two places. First of all, in Genesis chapter 3, Genesis 3, verse 15.
- Just these two verses, sometimes called the Protevangelium, the pre-gospel, or the first gospel really, where God's word comes to the man and the woman and to the serpent.
- And here we are in Genesis 3, verse 14. The Lord God said to the serpent, Because you have done this, cursed are you above all livestock and above all beasts of the field.
- On your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. 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. Now if you turn right to the end of the Bibles, or nearly to the end of Revelation chapter 12, And we're going to read the first six verses.
- [1 : 23] And here we meet again, the woman, and that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, or the dragon.
- 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 twelve 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.
- [2 : 35] 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.
- Amen. And may God bless to us his word. Now, before we turn to the word, let's have a moment of prayer together.
- Father, as we draw near to you, we pray that you would most graciously draw near to us, and that you will open your word to our hearts and our minds, and that you will open our hearts and minds to your word.
- In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. It's alleged that when the Titanic went down, the Aberdeen Press and Journal reported the event under the headline, Aberdeen Woman Lost at Sea.
- A very, perhaps, parochial way of looking at that event, which has burned itself into people's consciousness ever since.
- [3 : 55] It's very easy to mock local newspapers and their headlines. I often think that we treat Christmas in a very parochial way. We often see it in isolation.

Jesus is born in Bethlehem. He grows up. And that's it. We see it as a story for children. Of course, it is a story for children, but it's a story for far more than children.

If we see it simply as an isolated event about children and for children, it's no surprise that when children grow up, little Lord Jesus, you know, the one who didn't cry, he is consigned to the nursery along with Santa Claus.

Christmas. But Christmas is about the whole Bible. It's about Advent, about the coming. In the early centuries, when the church established the season of Advent from late November, early December leading up to Christmas, it wasn't primarily a preparation for Christmas at all.

It was primarily to fix people's eyes on the last things, on death, on judgment, on the coming, on heaven and hell. This is well illustrated in Archbishop Cranmer's great prayer, the English reformer, when he talked about the one who came to visit us in great humility and who will return on the last day in his glorious majesty to judge the living and the dead.

[5 : 28] And that's our theme today. Where does Christmas belong in the story? Advent belongs to the whole story. Indeed, Advent is the whole story.

And that's why we read from the bookends of the Bible, if you like, about the serpent and the one who is to crush the serpent. And that's our title for this morning, crushing the serpent.

That's ultimately what Christmas is about. This is the one who came to undo the works of the devil, to undo the curse. Remember, we sang this where Eden's curse is found.

He has come to remove the curse. So, two things this morning. First of all, salvation announced in Genesis 3, 4 to 15. I enjoy listening or watching the nine lessons and carols from King's College, Cambridge on Christmas Eve.

It's very interesting to see how that begins. In the first reading, which is actually Genesis 3, the dean of the college usually reads the preamble, from the first days of our disobedience until the glorious redemption brought to us by this holy child.

[6 : 43] See, the whole Bible story. The first days of our disobedience for the glorious redemption brought to us by this holy child. So, in 315, the Proto-Evangelium, we have the first announcement of Christmas and of the second coming.

I often ask the Cornhill students, where is the second coming first mentioned in the Bible? Well, it's not just the second coming. It's both comings. Advent in Genesis 3, 15.

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.

Salvation is announced, and with it there is a parting, a dividing of the ways. There are to be the offspring of the serpent. Not obviously literal offspring, but those who follow his ways.

And you meet the first prominent one of these, don't we, in chapter 4, Cain. It's no accident that Jude calls the way of the serpent, the way of Cain.

[7 : 47] And John, in his first letter, also speaks about Cain who was of that evil one and killed his brother. So we have the way of the serpent, the way of Cain, the offspring of the serpent.

And then we have the offspring of the woman. And this question, who is the serpent crusher, is the story of the whole Old Testament. Often it appeared as if he had come.

Now, you'll notice the very careful language. I will put enmity between you and the woman, between your offspring and her offspring.

There are going to be many descendants, many of whom will look like the serpent crusher and indeed point to him. Many others, unknown and nameless, who will battle with the serpent and with the way of Cain.

And yet, there is to be one descendant who is going to accomplish this. He shall bruise your head and you shall bruise your heel.

[8 : 51] Let's suggest one descendant, one son, who does not fail and who will disarm the flaming sword at the end of this chapter. If you read on in the chapter, you'd find Adam and Eve expelled from Eden, the flaming sword, bearing the way to the tree of life.

But one day, someone would come who would disarm that sword, take on him the anger of God and open the way to the kingdom of heaven for all his brothers and sisters who would believe in him.

The whole of the Old Testament, who is he? When will he come? Would it be Enoch that he's taken to heaven? Noah, starting well but making a rather spectacular mess up at the end.

Moses, David, all these great figures, the prophets, they all failed but they all pointed to him as do the whole series of visual aids in the Old Testament, the tabernacle and in particular the Ark of the Covenant.

The Ark of the Covenant where the glory of God dwelt. What does John say? The word became flesh and lived among us and we saw his glory. Same word.

[10 : 03] In the temple, in the sacrifices, in the wisdom books which point to him who is the wisdom of God and in the prophets. This is he of whom the prophets promised in their faithful words as we sang.

until the day when old Simeon held the baby in his arms and said, my eyes have seen your salvation. And Simeon prophesied, of course, there will be a sword piercing through Mary's heart.

And the Baptist stood on Jordan's bank and said, he's here, this is the one, behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. There is to be one descendant and there is to be a great battle.

Look at verse, once again, verse 15, I will put enmity. And you'll notice this battle's outcome is not in doubt.

If God initiates the battle, God is ultimately going to win it. You'll notice how careful the language is. Not there will be enmity, but I will put enmity between you and the woman who knew her offspring and her offspring.

[11 : 13] And ultimately, two champions would fight it out. Ultimately, the one, the descendant of the woman would fight it out with the dragon. And he would be terribly, indeed, mortally wounded.

Now, obviously, suffering is also going to be the experience of the other offspring of the woman. And we'll come to Revelation in a moment. And that's what you read about in the rest of that chapter.

Chapter 12. The dragon foiled in his attempt to destroy the child turns his attention on the woman and her other descendants. There will be pain, but God's purpose is not halted.

That's so important to remember. God does not curse Eve with barrenness, which would have ended the story very abruptly. God says, my purpose is going to continue. I'm going to fill the world with images of myself.

I'm going to call out from the nations a bride for my son. And so, here begins the glorious redemption brought to us by this holy child.

[12 : 19] And surely, this is the right place to begin, isn't it? The announcement in these early days amid the coming of sin, of the curse, and the activity of the devil.

The glorious redemption brought to us by this holy child. And then, at the other end of the story, let's look now at Revelation. Salvation accomplished.

Salvation announced in Genesis 1. Salvation accomplished in Revelation 12. This is rather off the beaten track, you might think.

It seldom features in Christmas readings. Nevertheless, it's a vivid and dramatic account of the great battle, isn't it? The battle, I will put enmity and the bruising and the crushing.

Indeed, this is the event on which history turns. And it's described as a sign. Now, John, in his gospel, and I believe John is also the author of this book, Book of Revelation, John uses the word sign as something that points to the end.

[13 : 33] The raising of Lazarus points to the day when all who are in the graves will hear the voice of the Son of God and will come out. The feeding of the 5,000 points forward to the days of the Messiah when there will be no more hunger.

So, here is Christmas. But not Christmas as most people know it, is it? And I want to say two things about Revelation 12, 1 to 6. We could spend a great deal of time on this, but I just want to draw out some of the detail.

Two details. First of all, this is a cosmic drama. It involves the whole universe. A great sign appeared in heaven.

Once in our world there was a stable with something in it that was bigger than the whole world. So says Narnia. And you'll notice the drama here, in fact, if you read the rest of the chapter, the drama circles around the two words in heaven and on earth.

These give us the clue to what's happening. This is the heart of the story. Heaven invaded earth. The prince of glory, the serpent crusher, landed incognito behind the enemy lines, met the serpent dragon in deadly battle, was himself wounded to death, but gave the serpent dragon a blow which he would never recover.

[15 : 05] God revealed in deadly fight, conquering the devil's might, as we sang at the beginning. You notice the dramatic coming together of earth and heaven.

What's happening on earth? A cold night. Some shepherds on the hillsides or on the plains watching their sheep. A young woman having her baby.

That is, of course, is true. That is what happened. But out there, a great conflict developed in verse 7. Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon as God enters time and space.

And, of course, there are hints of that already in Luke 2. Suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly hosts. The angel choir couldn't restrain itself as it burst out into worship and praise.

To you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior who is Christ, the Messiah, Christ, the Lord. This is he whom the prophets spoke about. This is the one who will crush the serpent.

[16 : 11] So it's a cosmic drama. It's not just a little domestic tableau, although that happens. By the way, when you go home, read Luke 2 in the light of Revelation 12.

The same story, isn't it? Verse 2, she was pregnant and was crying out in birth pains and the agony of giving birth. A normal pregnancy and a human baby who is also, of course, the Lord of glory.

So it's a cosmic drama. But secondly, it's the climax of history. Not only is the backdrop, if you like, the stage, the whole universe, the whole of history passes through this passage.

It's an hourglass passage, if you like. The whole of the Old Testament flows through this one event. A baby in an ox's stall, as Betjeman said, the maker of the earth and sea becomes a babe on earth for me.

The whole of history flows from it. The woman, clothed with the sun, shining with the light of God himself. If you read the beginning of the book, you'll find that when the risen Lord appears to John on Patmos, his face is shining like the sun in full strength.

[17 : 29] This is God's intervention. This is nothing less than the God Almighty stepping into time and space. And the woman is Zion. The daughter Zion, as she's called in the Old Testament, but especially that daughter of Zion, Mary, who is to bear the Messiah under the moon, under her feet, once again, showing this child will have dominion over the created order.

So important. And the twelve stars, almost certainly, as in the rest of the book of Revelation, the twelve tribes and the twelve apostles.

This is an event, as I say, to which history leads up and from which history flows. As I say, read Luke 2 again and wonder and adore. This is something I always find particularly, particularly amazing.

If we had been present in the lowly kettle shed as the child was born, and I say this with fear and trembling, what we would have seen would have been the same as any other baby being born.

It was not a sanitized place and she was crying out in birth pains and the agony of giving birth. And yet, this is Christ the Lord.

[18 : 55] Isn't that so important? We need a saviour who is not us. We need God. But we also need a saviour who is us. Not us, personally, of course, but one of us.

That's what's happening here. And against her, the great red dragon with seven heads, ten horns on his head, seven diadems. The seven, of course, is the number of universal dominion.

This dragon is claiming everything for himself as he's claiming universal power. And he stands before the woman so that when she bore her child, he might devour it.

And you can read about that, of course, in Matthew chapter 2. His earthly instrument was Herod, who set out to destroy the child. This is something that happened before this to the other descendants of the woman.

The time of the Exodus, when Pharaoh tried to destroy all the boys. The time of the exile once again, when the people seemed to be completely doomed.

[20 : 00] Of course, perhaps above all in the book of Esther, where the whole of the nation is to be destroyed. These have to be seen as the activities of the devil. Where is the devil in the Old Testament?

You tell me where he isn't. He's there everywhere. His footprints are there, even when he doesn't actually appear. And you'll notice here the shortest life of Christ in the New Testament.

Verse 5. He gave birth to a male child and a child was caught up to God and to his throne. He was straight from the incarnation to the ascension.

Now that's deliberate, I think, because John is telling us here that all these events belong together. The birth, the death, the rising again, the ascension to heaven, the sending of the Spirit, the returning in glory to bring in the kingdom.

All these belong together. And to mention, if you like, the two bookends of his earthly life, the incarnation and the ascension is to tell us what was happening.

[21 : 09] And then they won't stop to talk about this now. Verse 6. He's taking us beyond that into the last days, the 12, 60 days, sometimes called three and a half years, sometimes a time, times, and half a time in the apocalyptic writings.

I believe that's the whole time between the comings during which the church will be persecuted, the serpent will be active because he knows his time is short.

So you see how the whole of the universal drama and the climax of history, you see how big it is? It's not just Bethlehem and Nazareth that's the backdrop, although they were.

It's the whole of time and space. This is for all ages. This is not a Christmas we'll grow out of. We won't consign this one to the nursery.

The serpent crusher will not be put away with the Christmas toys. I think the second thing I want to say is a story like this tells us how to get Satan into perspective.

[22 : 13] I can't remember who it was who said it, but someone said the most important thing about Satan is that Jesus Christ has defeated him.

Remember that in the battle, in the conflict. He is defeated. He's dangerous not because he's going to win, but because he knows he has lost. I read some time ago a story of a man who was visiting Berlin in 1945 just after the fall of Hitler and the collapse of the German Reich.

And he was, he was, it was a day like this actually, a winter day but quite a decent day and he was walking through the ruins of Berlin and he came to Hitler's chancelry.

He came to that place where so much evil, so much wickedness, so much of the work of the serpent had been hatched. As he passed there he saw a mother with a child and she was feeding the child just sitting on a bench just opposite the chancelry.

And as he passed a gleam of winter sunlight came out and the child threw back his head and left and his shadow fell over the ruins of that evil empire.

[23 : 30] And so it is that Jesus Christ, the child who brought us his redemption, this is the one who has triumphed over that evil empire. Who is the Christ we celebrate at Christmas?

Who is he in yonder stall at whose feet the shepherds fall? Is the Lord a wondrous story? You see, the Christ whom we celebrate and worship now is not just the baby in Bethlehem, it's the promised, he is the promised serpent crusher.

The Christ who died, who rose again, and who ascended into heaven and whom we look for to come in his glorious majesty. And we finish with the words with which the book of Revelation falls silent and the scriptures fall silent.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus. Amen. Let's pray. Almighty God, give us grace to put off the works of darkness and to put on the armor of light here in the time of this mortal life when our Savior came to visit us in great humility so that on the last day when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge the living and the dead, we may be made like him, in his eternal kingdom where he lives and reigns with you and with the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Amen.