

“She Gave Birth to a Male Child” (Revelation 12)

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This past week, my sons and I watched the original *Star Wars* trilogy. We don't normally watch many full-length movies—certainly not three in a week. But I've been very tired, physically and mentally, and as we come to the end of the year, we let our boys have a little more screen time than usual. Also, my boys had heard about the *Star Wars* movies and I figured it was time to introduce them to the originals. I think it's good to introduce kids to good stories.

What makes a good story? A good story usually starts with some sense of normalcy, or equilibrium. Things seem to be okay. In the case of Luke Skywalker, he had a normal life on the planet Tatooine, living with his aunt and uncle. A good story then introduces conflict of some kind. Usually, there's bad a guy, or a group of bad guys, who need to be defeated. Luke and his uncle happened to purchase two droids, C-3PO and R2-D2. R2-D2 just happened to have a message from Princess Leia intended for Obi-Wan Kenobi. So, R2-D2 goes looking for Obi-Wan, and Luke and C-3PO go to find R2-D2, only to get attacked by the sand people. Kenobi rescues them, and then he tells Luke about the Force, how he had trained his father, and how Darth Vader killed him. He also listened to Leia's message and asked Luke to join him on his journey to her planet of Alderaan. Luke doesn't want to go at first, but when he comes home, he finds that the Empire, looking for the droids, has killed his aunt and uncle. This conflict is what makes Luke the unlikely hero of the story.

Of course, a good story must have resolution to that conflict. In *Star Wars*, the Empire must be defeated. The Death Star must be destroyed, Darth Vader must be faced, the Emperor must be killed.

While *Star Wars* has its own definite plot, many other great stories feature those basic elements: equilibrium, conflict (usually involving a bad guy), and resolution, with good winning out over evil.

It's no surprise, then, that the greatest story ever told has those basic elements. Do you know what the basic story of the Bible is? Kill the dragon, get the girl. If you thought that came from some comic book or fantasy novel, you're mistaken. It was first found in the Bible. And Christmas is a key plot point in that story.

There are a lot of ways of telling the story of the birth of Jesus Christ. We could home in on the stories of Jesus' birth that are found in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. I've done that before, and you can find sermons about those stories on our website (wbcommunity.org/jesus and wbcommunity.org/luke). Another way to understand the birth of Christ is to zoom out and look at the story that came before. My original plan was to look at many of the Old Testament prophecies that talked about a coming child of Eve, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Judah, a prophet who would speak God's words, a son of David who would be king, a child who would be called Mighty God, one born in Bethlehem to a virgin, and so on. But then my plans changed this week when I was listening to a podcast. Several theologians were talking about which texts they would use to preach an Advent message, and one of them said he would use Revelation 12.¹ And I thought about it a bit and changed my mind.

So, this morning we're going to think about the birth of Jesus in a very different way. We're going to zoom out a bit further and see the birth of Jesus in its larger context. We're going to see not a sentimental story of a little baby. Instead, we're going to see how Jesus' birth comes in the middle of a war. And, whether we realize it or not, we're caught up in this war, too.

Before I start to read Revelation 12, I want to describe very briefly this last book of the Bible. Revelation is a very different type of book of the Bible. You may not realize this, but the Bible is a collection of diverse writings. It has histories, poems, proverbs, hymns, prayers, laws, and letters. Most of these types of writings we can understand, though a lot of us are less familiar with how to make sense of poems. But the Bible has another type of literature, something called "apocalyptic," which is very different. This type of literature tries to get us to see realities that we can't see right now. It tries to show us what is going on in the spiritual realm, and in heaven. Because we have never seen these realities before, apocalyptic literature tries to convey these realities through pictures that we can understand. These images might seem fantastical and strange, and that's part of the point—they're illustrating something that we have never seen before, but something that is very real. Apocalyptic literature enables us to see those realities in a shocking light. To understand this kind of writing, we have to understand its symbols and decode them. I'll try to do that for us today, but I'll be focusing on the most important details.

A lot of people think that the book of Revelation (not "Revelations"!) is all about the future and what happens when Jesus returns. That's not really true. It tells us what happens

¹ Andrew Wilson said this on an episode of *Mere Fidelity*: <https://mereorthodoxy.com/mere-fidelity-texts-advent>.

between the first and second comings of Jesus, too. And chapter 12 gives us a sense of what happened when Jesus was born—and what happened afterwards.

Without further ado, let's read Revelation 12:1–6:

¹ 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. ² She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pains and the agony of giving birth. ³ And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads seven diadems. ⁴ 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. ⁵ 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, ⁶ 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, you may be thinking, “What in the world is that about? There's a woman who gives birth to a male child, but other than that, what does that have to do with Christmas?” I get it, I do. Remember that this is a heavenly reality, something that we can't see now. The book of Revelation is like removing the veil that blinds us to supernatural realities. Last week, I said that there is more to reality than meets the eye. Revelation lets us see that reality.

To understand this story, first we need to understand the characters.

First, there's a woman. The details about the sun and the moon and twelve stars remind us of Joseph's dream back in Genesis 37:9–10. What this means is that the woman represents Israel, the people of God. The twelve stars stand for the twelve tribes, though it's possible that the woman represents the people of God, and the twelve could also stand for the twelve apostles. This “woman” is wearing a crown because she is royal—she's associated with the King. And she's about to give birth to a special child, the Messiah. This is the child promised in the Old Testament. If this were *Star Wars*, the woman would be the Alliance, the group of rebels, the good guys.

Second, this story has a bad guy, “a great red dragon.” Some of the features of this dragon are strange to our eyes and ears. He has seven heads and ten horns. In ancient mythologies, there was an evil seven-headed sea monster. The Bible says, “These myths grasped something true. There is an ancient evil being.” But as we'll soon see, this ancient dragon is Satan, a rebellious angel. On its seven heads it wears seven diadems, or crowns. It claims to have royal authority, but it doesn't. Later in Revelation, we read that Jesus is the “King of kings and

Lord of lords” (Rev. 19:16) who wears “many diadems” on his head (Rev. 19:12). The ten horns are an allusion to something in the Old Testament book of Daniel (see Dan. 7:7–8, 20, 24). Horns were a symbol of strength—think of animals that use their horns as weapons. The point is that this dragon is the enemy of God’s people, he is powerful, and he is trying to usurp the authority of God.

We also see that this dragon “swept down a third of the stars of heaven and cast them to the earth.” The stars probably represent angels. The idea is that Satan, a rebellious angel, led other angels into rebellion. I’ll explain what that means in a bit. The key thing to see is that this bad guy was ready to destroy the child that the woman was about to give birth to. If this were *Star Wars*, the dragon might be Darth Vader, and the fallen angels might be the forces of the Empire.

Third, we have the male child himself. He is “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.” The one who will rule all nations is the Christ, or Messiah, which means anointed one. He is the true King, the Son of David who will reign forever. This is Jesus. Now, this chapter of the Bible doesn’t give us a full picture of who Jesus is. It telescopes his life on earth, which means that it sees the big picture but skips over a lot of details. It skips right past his death and resurrection. Instead, it focuses on his ascension back to heaven. But elsewhere in the book of Revelation, Jesus is called the Lamb, which means that he was a sacrifice for sin. (If you were expecting me to say that Jesus is like Luke Skywalker, please don’t. Jesus is much more than Luke Skywalker. Perhaps a better metaphor would be that Jesus is like George Lucas entering *Star Wars* and sacrificing himself—almost like Obi-Wan—to save the Alliance.)

So, what does this all mean, and what does it have to do with Christmas?

According to the Bible, there is a war going on. And we have all been part of it. The Bible says that we are at war with God. God made the universe for his glory, to demonstrate his greatness. And he made human beings to be in a very special relationship with him. The Bible says that God made us in his image and likeness (Gen. 1:26). That means that we were made to reflect God’s glory, to represent him, to rule the world by coming under his rule, to worship him, and to love him and obey him like perfect children would relate to a perfect father. But we don’t do that. From the beginning, humans have lived life on their own terms. They have rejected God’s authority. Some of us have been hostile to God. Others are just apathetic, ignoring God

without any feelings of ill will. But either way, we're rejecting God because we're rejecting the very reason why we exist. Really, we've rebelled against God. We're at war with him.

But this war reflects a greater war, one that we're only given glimpses of. Satan is a shadowy figure in the Bible. His origins aren't very clear. We know from the book of Job that he was an angel in heaven. But he questioned God's goodness and authority. Jesus said that Satan "was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44). He's a murderer from the beginning because he tempted the first human beings to rebel against God, and their sin brought death into the world. So, before we were at war with God, Satan was at war with God.

Satan isn't the only one warring against God. He led a number of angels to rebel against God. Some people think this happened at some point early in the creation, before God created human beings. But the way this vision is described, and from what we see in the rest of the Bible, Satan is actually in heaven until he is "thrown down" at the time of Jesus' death and resurrection. So, perhaps he led these angels to rebel against God at roughly the time when Jesus was born. That would account for the heightened presence of demons during Jesus' time on Earth. We don't read much about demons in the Old Testament, and suddenly, in the Gospels, demons are afflicting and possessing people.

Now, at this point, I want to address an objection that some people have to the Bible. Some people think the idea of the supernatural is nonsense. Just yesterday an atheist said on Facebook that I was incapable of rational thought because I believed in "magic." (I don't believe in magic, though I do believe in miracles.) Is there really such a thing as the devil and demons? Well, in this month's issue of the magazine *The Atlantic*, there's a story about how exorcisms are on the rise. In this story, the author, who is clearly skeptical about the existence of demons, says that the percentage of people who believe in the devil has risen in recent decades. According to Gallup polls, 55 percent of Americans believed in the devil in 1990. That number was 70 percent in 2007.² Most of the story concerns a woman who has a history of strange occurrences that can only be described as demonic oppression. Though most secular psychiatrists would try to describe this kind of behavior in scientific terms, believing that it was "dissociative identity

² Mike Mariani, "Why Are Exorcisms on the Rise?" *The Atlantic*, December 2018: 64. The article can be viewed online: <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/12/catholic-exorcisms-on-the-rise/573943>.

disorder,” even this woman’s secular therapists realized that what was happening to her was beyond any scientific explanation. Such behavior might include speaking in languages the person never learned, possessing abnormal strength, and being hostile to anything associated with God.

I firmly believe that there are realities that cannot be explained in scientific terms. There are things that happen that cannot be explained by a secular, naturalistic, materialistic worldview. What the Bible says about preternatural evil makes sense of what we see in the world. And the more that people are hostile to Christianity, the more that what the Bible says about our rebellion makes sense.

Now, back to the story: Satan must have known that this male child, the Messiah, was God’s plan to defeat him and to reconcile sinners back to him. So, Satan wanted to devour the child when he was born. That happened primarily when Herod the Great tried to destroy Jesus by having the male babies in Bethlehem slaughtered (Matt. 2:1–18). However, Jesus was taken by Joseph and Mary to Egypt until he was 2, avoiding Herod’s murderous plan. But when Jesus was an adult, Satan still had his designs on him. He tried to attack him through the religious leaders of the day, who didn’t believe that Jesus was the Messiah, much less the Son of God. They had him killed because he claimed to be equal to God. This was Satan’s plan. But it was also God’s plan. God sent his Son, who has always existed, to become a man so that he could live the perfect life that we don’t live and die the death that we deserved. God is a perfect judge, and a perfect judge makes sure that all crimes are paid for. The amazing thing is that Jesus paid the penalty for the rebellion of every enemy of God who would lay down his or her arms and come to Jesus for salvation.

Jesus then rose from the grave on the third day in a resurrected body, one that can never die again. He did this to show that his death was a sacrifice acceptable to God. He did this to show he has power over sin and death. He did this to foreshadow what will happen at the end of history as we know it: all of God’s people will live forever in resurrected bodies that can never die.

Jesus then ascended into heaven. And now “the woman,” the people of God, is in “the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, in which she is to be nourished for 1,260 days.” The wilderness is outside of Paradise, but it’s also a place of protection. In the Old Testament, God rescued the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. He brought them into the wilderness, where he provided for them. The “1,260 days” is three-and-a-half years, which is

symbolic for a definite and limited period of time. The period of time might be very long from our perspective, even thousands of years, but it won't last forever. God is protecting his people from Satan. Satan cannot tear God's people away from God.

But Satan does his best to thwart God's plans. Yet he has been defeated. We see that in the next paragraph. Let's read verses 7–12:

⁷ Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon. And the dragon and his angels fought back, ⁸ but he was defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. ⁹ And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called 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. ¹⁰ 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 have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. ¹¹ 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. ¹² 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!”

Again, we're getting a glimpse of a heavenly reality, something that we couldn't normally see. We're told there was a war between the archangel Michael and his angels and the dragon, Satan, and his angels. Notice that Satan is no match for God. He doesn't fight God—that's not a battle he could possibly win. But he fights Michael and he loses. And he is then cast down from heaven. I think this happened at the time of Jesus' death and resurrection. It matches what Jesus says when he was about to die. He said, in John 12:31, “Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out.” The apostle Paul writes that when Jesus died on the cross, instead of Satan winning, Satan was actually defeated. He writes about Jesus, “He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him” (Col. 2:15).

So, though Satan tried his best to attack God's army, he was whapped. He was thrown down. And, at that time, a loud voice from heaven declared, “Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God.” This reveals more of who Satan is. The word “Satan” literally means “adversary.” The word “devil” means “slanderer” or “accuser.” One of the things that Satan does is accuse us of our sin. (This is pictured quite beautifully in Zech. 3:1–5.) But God already knows our sin, and if we are united to

Jesus by faith—if we trust that he is who the Bible says he is and that he has done everything we need to be reconciled to God and that he is the only one who can make us right with God—then our sins have already been removed. Jesus paid for them when he died. There is no more guilt.

That’s why, in verse 11, it says of Christians that “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.” How do we conquer Satan? Not through our own power or cleverness. Not through willpower and moral living. We conquer him through the blood of the Lamb, through Jesus’ sacrifice. We conquer him through “the word of [our] testimony.” Now, in Christian circles, you often hear people talk about their “testimony,” which is usually a story of how they came to faith. But the Bible doesn’t stress our personal, subjective stories. This testimony isn’t our subjective experience of faith. No, it’s the objective story of Jesus. It’s the gospel. The gospel means “the good news.” It’s the core message of Christianity. It’s what I have been saying about God creating us to live in a certain way, our rebellion against God, and the salvation offered through Jesus. It’s good news because we deserve to be condemned, yet God gives us salvation as a gift, something that we could never earn. It simply has to be received. Those who receive it realize it is a priceless gift, worth more than life itself. That’s why we’re told that Christians “loved not their lives even unto death.” Real Christians would rather die than renounce their faith in Jesus Christ. They would do this—and they do this today in certain parts of the world—because they know that death isn’t the final part of the story. There is a life beyond death. Jesus once said, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live” (John 11:25).

What Jesus has done for us is a cause for rejoicing. That’s why we rejoice at Christmas. The angel Gabriel told Joseph, “She [Mary] will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21). The name Jesus basically means “God saves.” And he saves through his perfect life of obedience and his sacrificial death. His perfect righteousness is credited to his believers, and he takes on their sin. This is called the “great exchange.” This salvation and this conquering of Satan is a great cause for celebration in heaven and among God’s people. That’s why in verse 12, it says, “Therefore, rejoice, O heavens and you who dwell in them!” Yet it also says, “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!” Satan, though defeated, is still active. He knows he can’t win, but he’s doing everything in his power to mess with God’s

plans. He is so powerful that he is called “the ruler of this world” (John 12:31), “the prince of the power of the air” (Eph. 2:2), and the “god of this world” (2 Cor. 4:4). In the next paragraph, we see how he tries to attack “the woman.”

Let’s now read verses 13–17:

¹³ 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. ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ The serpent poured water like a river out of his mouth after the woman, to sweep her away with a flood. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ 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.

Satan tries to attack “the woman,” which represents God’s people, the “Israel of God” (Gal. 6:16). Yet God gives “the woman” “two wings of the great eagle” so that she can fly away from Satan and into the wilderness, where God nourishes her. Again, this period of time is described as three-and-a-half years. It’s a time that’s limited. It won’t last forever. Elsewhere in the Bible, we’re told that God has prepared a table for his people in the presence of their enemies (Ps. 23:5; 78:19).

Still, Satan tries to destroy God’s people. We’re told that he tried to sweep away the woman with a flood of water that came from his mouth. This might represent his lies. Satan can disguise himself as an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:14). He says things that sound good. But they are lies. And God thwarts Satan’s attacks. Here, we’re told that the “earth opened its mouth and swallowed the river that the dragon had poured from his mouth.” This might be a subtle allusion to what happened when Pharaoh’s army tried to capture the Israelites at the Red Sea. God miraculously parted the waters, and then the waters closed in on the army. Moses’s song of victory says, “You stretched out your right hand; the earth swallowed them” (Exod. 15:12). God turns back his enemies.

Yet, still, the dragon is furious and wants to attack “the woman.” He tries to make war with “the rest of her offspring,” all those who come to Jesus in faith. These are the people who “keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus.” Real Christians hold fast to the gospel message. They believe the Bible is God’s word, even when it says unpopular

things. And they obey this word. To be clear, we do not become Christians through obedience. We don't become acceptable to God because we're so good. No, we become Christians because we realize we're so bad that God had to become a man and die for our sins. But once we come to faith, we start to obey God, even if imperfectly. Jesus said, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me" (John 10:27). He also said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15).

The real message of Christmas isn't some sappy, sentimental story of a little baby and cute little angels. It's a war story. The war had been raging on for millennia. "But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons" (Gal. 4:4-5). God chose to do what almost no one saw coming. He entered into his own creation in the form of a vulnerable baby in order to defeat a dragon. And one day, he will slay that dragon and "get the girl," "the woman," his bride. This will happen when Jesus comes to Earth a second and decisive time. When that will happen, we do not know. But it will. God has promised it.

Before that time, we must decide which side of the war we'll be on. Will we be on God's side? If so, we must receive the gift of salvation by faith. We must realize we cannot rescue ourselves from death and condemnation. Only Jesus can. But if we accept this gift, we must realize that Jesus isn't just a baby. He isn't just a man. He's God. And he's the King of kings and Lord of lords, the one who will rule the nations with a rod of iron. When we have a relationship with Jesus, we follow him. We obey him. We would rather die than betray him.

If we reject this, we are on the side of the dragon. I'm not saying you're Satan incarnate or demon-possessed. But if you reject Jesus, whether you're apathetic or hostile, you're on the dragon's side, and you will lose.

The message of Christmas is one of comfort and joy, but only for those who are on the side of the one born to die. If you're on that side already, hold fast to the gospel. Keep Jesus' commands. Follow him even to death, if that should come. Jesus has already conquered the devil by outwitting him. Satan can accuse you, but you're not guilty. Nothing can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

If you're not yet on the side of Jesus, I urge you to switch sides now. There is no neutrality. There is no spiritual Switzerland. You are part of this war, whether you like it or not. And if you don't love Jesus more than you love your own life, if you aren't keeping his

commands, then you're not on Jesus' side. Don't fool yourself. If you're not sure where you stand with Jesus, if you want to learn more about him, if you want to know how you can follow him, I would love to talk to you.

Jesus came to get his girl, and one day he will kill the dragon. This is the story of Christmas. And we can be a part of it if we turn to Jesus.