

Defeating The Dragon

Series: Theology In Pictures

by Steve Zeisler

In line with the statement made in Rev.1:11, where John is told to "Write in a book what you see," I suggested last week that the Book of Revelation is like a slide show; the pictures are of a country you have read about before but have never seen. Turn with me now to chapter 12 where we have two more slides to view.

Their context is not an ordinary living room "What did we do on our vacation"-type slide show, but rather an intelligence report given to soldiers in the field, soldiers who are active in a spiritual war. As all of us know, effective battle requires knowing the nature and strengths and weaknesses of our enemy. If we extend this metaphor, we might say that the first slide, in Rev.12:1-6, is taken from a long distance away. It is a shot of events, but the details are clouded because of the distance, resulting in a distorted impression of the way things really are. In effect, the first picture of the events we will study is from the point of view of Satan—not lying directly, but deceiving us as to the impact of what we are seeing. The second slide in the last half of the chapter is taken with a telephoto lens, which zooms in on the details. It allows us to see clearly and corrects the distortion so that we have a proper foundation to stand on. Here is the first section, Rev.12:1-6:

And a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars; and she was with child and she cried out, being in labor and in pain to give birth. And another sign appeared in heaven: and behold, a great red dragon having seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads were seven diadems. And his tail swept away a third of the stars of heaven, and threw them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she gave birth he might devour her child. And she gave birth to a son, a male child who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron; and her child was caught up to God and to his throne. And the woman fled into the wilderness where she had a place prepared by God, so that there she might be nourished for one thousand two hundred and sixty days.

There are three main characters in our first picture. The first is a woman who clearly pictures for us the nation Israel. In Genesis 37—Joseph's dream in which he described the family of Israel in terms of the sun, the moon, and eleven stars—helps us to identify this woman. She is not only glorious and prominent, but also suffers pain and labor. Both those conditions, her glory and her pain, are the result of her being used as the instrument of God to bring the Messiah to the world. Because she had that honor and responsibility, she is glorious and yet she suffers.

The second actor in this drama is the male child. Again, it is quite clear who this is; Jesus, the Messiah, incarnate among us. His destiny is to rule with a rod of iron, and at the end of his ministry on earth he was caught up to heaven into the presence of God.

The third character is the most finely drawn of the three. We have more detail in the picture of the dragon, who is Satan. This description also has greater impact than any of the others; it says about him, "Behold, a great red dragon having seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads were seven diadems." This word for "red" is a word that is often used in Scripture to describe fire, and the word that is translated "great" is the Greek word "megas", from which we get our word "megaton". The dragon that John saw, then, was a fiery red megadragon, scary and authoritative.

He has the crowns of a king on his heads, and ten strong horns to rend and tear his opposition. The description

continues with his massive tail sweeping away a third of the stars. If you have ever been in the Sierras on a clear night and seen the Milky Way, the incredible beauty of the star-laden heaven, you can imagine this dramatic dragon reaching up with his tail and sweeping aside a third of the stars. It is the impression that picture leaves us with that is the source of the distortion, or deception, about the things we see here. They are not factually untrue at any point, but they leave us with a wrong feeling.

For instance, in what is said about the Lord, we are given only the briefest possible description of his ministry. He was born; he was carried away to heaven following his resurrection; and nothing else about his earthly ministry is mentioned. His destiny, eventually, is to "rule...with a rod of iron." It would seem that we are deliberately being kept from seeing him very clearly by this abbreviated description. Further, we are told that the woman flees, runs for her life to the wilderness, which might suggest that the removal of the Messiah to heaven also has the quality of escape. It is not obvious that he is in heaven because he is the victor. Rather, if we think about only what we see here, it would seem that he is there because he had to run for his life; he has escaped the power of the megadragon, the great, impressive, magnificent enemy of God. If all we had were these verses, I think we would be left with the impression that Jesus has retreated to the heavenly sidelines, while the center stage of the real world—our emotional, psychological, and physical experience—is dominated by the enemy of God.

We often hear this type of orthodoxy regarding the facts. Jesus was born. He ascended into heaven. He will rule someday. Israel was the instrument through which Messiah came to earth. Israel has been persecuted by the enemy of God. The facts are clearly stated, but the added impression is that despite the facts, the real winner and the real power in life is Satan, the enemy.

This is not an uncommon perspective for Christians to have. Perhaps you are lonely, unappreciated, tempted, facing pressures that you have no hope of alleviating. Maybe your life consists of physical pain or the horrible psychological pain that comes when we believe that we are failures and are caught up in a web of self-hatred. The center stage in the "real" world is occupied by the devil. Whatever will be true someday, whatever Christ is doing in the distant heavens, right now his enemy is magnificent and invincible. Let us look, then, at the second slide for more information that will help us to combat that condition. Rev.12:7:

And there was war in heaven, Michael and his angels waging war with the dragon. And the dragon and his angels waged war, and they were not strong enough, and there was no longer a place found for them in heaven. And the great dragon was thrown down, the serpent of old who is called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole 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 have come, for the accuser of our brethren has been thrown down, who accuses them before our God day and night. And they overcame him because of the blood of the Lamb and because of the word of their testimony, and they did not love their life even to death. For this reason, rejoice, O heavens and you who dwell in them. Woe to the earth and the sea; because the devil has come down to you, having great wrath, knowing that he has only a short time." And when the dragon saw that he was thrown down to the earth, he persecuted the woman who gave birth to the male child. And the two wings of the great eagle were given to the woman, in order that she might fly into the wilderness to her place, where she was nourished for a time and times and half a time, from the presence of the serpent. And the serpent poured water like a river out of his mouth after the woman, so that he might cause her to be swept away with the flood. And the earth helped the woman, and the earth opened its mouth and drank up the river which the dragon poured out of his mouth. And the dragon was enraged with the woman, and went off to make war with the rest of her offspring, who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus.

Revelation 12:7-17 are essentially a more detailed replay of two events we saw in the first six verses. Verse 6 tells us of the flight of the woman to the wilderness and Rev.12:13-17, I think, cover the same subject. We are told in the second half that she was in the wilderness for a period of "a time and times and half a time." Almost all commentators read that as "one year, two years and half a year," for a total of three and a half years, which is the same period of time mentioned in verse 6: 1260 days. I think John tells us that to help us see that he is talking

about the same period.

Almost certainly these events refer to the role of Israel in the final days of human history, but the same kind of protection by God and hatred by the enemy has been true of Israel since the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. Jews have been scattered throughout the world into the wilderness of the Gentiles ever since Rome sacked the city and dispersed the Jewish nation. Satan has tried valiantly through the centuries to destroy the nation of the Jews, to physically exterminate them. He has not been able to accomplish this, almost certainly because of their dispersion; they have never been physically located in one place. We saw the awful attempt of the Nazis in Germany to destroy Jews in World War II, but they could not get their hands on all of them. By being in the wilderness they have been protected from extermination. Satan has poured forth lies from his mouth, lies about the character of God and the character of man that might have undermined Judaism, taking away any reason for its continued existence. The Gentile world, however, has swallowed the lies of Satan so thoroughly, applying them so aggressively to themselves that they have not forced Israel, in particular, to fall apart. The earth has drunk in the lies poured forth from his mouth and protected the nation. What the Lord has done in allowing John to see this replay is to fill in the information so that we can see more clearly what is happening to the woman.

There is an additional important note given to us in Rev.12:1-17 concerning the utter frustration of the serpent. Rage at not being able to do what he intends to do makes up the life of God's enemy. He is consumed by rage. He is angry beyond description, precisely because he is prevented from carrying out his intentions. We will see in a moment how important that is.

Chapter 12:7-12 tell us of another event that was mentioned in the first six verses: the fall of Satan. The serpent who "swept away a third of the stars of heaven" in the first picture is identified here as Satan, and I think what we see is a reference to his fall. The greatest of the angels led a rebellion of a host of other angels against God. Although we might get the impression in the first half that he chose to drag his retinue to earth, what we are told in verses 7-12 is that Satan and the fallen angels (who are demons in our world today) are on earth precisely because they have been thrown out of heaven. This was not Satan's idea. It was not a dramatic stroke of power that brought him to earth; he is a loser, a failure, unable to accomplish his intention. He has been banished to the earth because he has no place any longer before the throne of God to accuse those who know Christ. It would serve his purposes a great deal better if we were to live soft, untroubled lives, 80 or 90 years long, and then proceed straight to hell. If he could successfully accuse us before our Father he would accomplish infinitely more than he can by causing us pain and depression and anguish right now.

Let me suggest two things. The first picture we saw might lead us to conclude that the "real" world is the earthly sphere of our relationships, including our psyche, our emotions, and our bodies, and that the "heavenly" world is the sidelines somewhere in the distance, where Jesus has gone. I think, though, that verses 7-12 correct that thinking by showing that the "real" world is the "heavenly" sphere. The supremely important issue at stake is whether or not men have a place before God. Since Jesus is victor in the real world, he is also victor on this earth and we are protected, while here, from being tempted beyond anything we can endure. Satan, however, is restricted to only this world because he cannot accuse us in heaven. It is exactly the opposite of the truth to think that what I am going through right now is reality and most important and supremely true while what Jesus is doing in the presence of God is distant and unimportant and unreal. Satan is on this earth, but even so, he has only a short time. He is furious because he cannot do the very things he longs to do.

The second observation we ought to make then, is that you can be positively built up in your faith by suffering, believe it or not, if you recognize that the reason the enemy of God is allowed to make us suffer is precisely because he cannot destroy our relationship with God. It ought to encourage us to suffer the hurts of our earthly life because we know with a certainty that those are all Satan can do. He is prevented from doing the damage that he longs to do to us and to the heart of God. He can only break your leg. He can only take your job, but he cannot destroy your relationship with God. He has no place to accuse you any longer before the throne of God.

The question we ought to ask at this point is, "How do we take advantage of all this? We have seen it displayed before us in pictures, but how do we appropriate it?" Let me first summarize what we have seen and then look at a

verse that speaks about appropriating these truths. We have looked at two pictures of Satan and his work in the world. The first one presents him as an invincible, fiery red megadragon with Jesus escaped to the sidelines. The woman has run for her life into the wilderness and we are vitrually chained to the necessity of being overwhelmed by Satan. The second picture tells us rather that Satan is the victim. He is the failure. The real issues have been settled in our favor, and an enraged, frustrated antagonist who has only a short time, the Scriptures say, is bending his every intention to make us suffer because he cannot really hurt us. Now how do we make these things real in our experience? Verse 11 refers to the brethren who "overcame him". They overcame him "because of the blood of the Lamb and because of the word of their testimony, and they did not love their life even to death."

Three things are said in that verse. First, they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb. They did not try to defeat the serpent by advancing on him with their own little sword, hopping on their own rickety horse and charging off like St. George to kill the Dragon. Nothing that any of us has can make us, by ourselves, stand against this enemy. The blood of the Lamb can. It is when we retreat to what Christ has done for us on the cross that we can overcome the lies and distortions and cloudiness that Satan brings to our lives. I am convinced that one of the dictums of hell is, "You shall know the truth, skewed and out *of* proportion, and that truth will make you slaves." We overcome his deceptions not by tough-minded clear thinking on our own part, but by appealing to the blood of the Lamb. In the Book of Jude, Michael was in competition against Satan and it says that even he, the archangel, would not on his own bring judgment against Satan. Michael himself retreated to this statement, "The Lord rebuke you." If the archangel is no one-on-one match for the devil, certainly we are not either. It is first of all the blood of the Lamb that makes us overcomers.

The second way they overcame was by "the word of their testimony." I think what he means there is that Christians who never speak up, who never ever declare themselves as servants of God, are likely to crumble when the heat is on. People who are never willing to suffer embarrassment or ostracism or misunderstanding because they name the name of Christ, people who have never testified of him are apt to bail out of their faith when the pressure comes. On the other hand, people who have already named his name in public, have already stood for him, already been willing to speak on behalf of the Lord, will have some experience with "the word of their testimony," and when pressure comes they will realize they can count on him.

The third thing we are told to help us apply the truth here is, "They did not love their life even to death." That is a curious thing to say. Real Christians, godly Christians, are not masochists. John is not saying that people are somehow looking forward to the grave—but that those who overcome the serpent are people who love something more than they love even their own lives. They love doing the will of God even more than they love protecting themselves, and it is this kind of person who is able to deal with the wiles and the power and the strength of the great red dragon. Look at this passage from Hebrews 2:14:

Since then the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil; and might deliver those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives.

These people, who fear death, are the opposite of those mentioned in Revelation, who "did not love their life even to death." Hebrews tells us that people who are terrified of dying will be enslaved by Satan. If we are afraid of dying, afraid of every inch of death's approach, we will be playing into Satan's hand. If every time we are restricted or opportunities are lost to us, if every time pleasures are denied, we sense death coming closer and closer, we will do anything, promise anything to the slave master to keep us from having to face that impending death. We will lie. We will steal. We will cheat, commit adultery, crush other people. Slowly but surely we will become slaves of the devil. That is what Hebrews says. The opposite of that attitude is presented here in Revelation. These people do not love their life so much that they love doing the will of God less. It is when we can be people who want something more than we want even life itself that we can have victory.

Let me suggest a practical way in which this comes up in our lives. In Ephesians 5:25 Paul says "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her." He is saying that husbands are to

your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her." He is saying that husbands are to love their wives as Christ went to the cross, allowed himself to be put to death, for the sake of his bride. There is the subject of death again. Husbands who are afraid to die, who need to be flattered and pampered and paid attention to and to always win the arguments and have everything go their way, these husbands will be tyrants in their marriage. Husbands who do not love their wives even to death are the ones who will be willing to sacrifice themselves for the sake of the growth of their wives.

Let me recall for you the three steps that John sees that produce victory over the distortions, the deceptions of the dragon. The blood of the Lamb is their strength. What Christ has done is our weapon, not anything we could ever do ourselves. Second, "the word of their testimony:" people who have spoken up and borne in some measure the brunt of the world's hatred for Christ early in their lives are the ones who are strong enough to take the awful pressure at the end. "They did not love their lives," he says, finally, "even unto death." People who care more about God's love for them in doing His will, than they care for their own lives, are the ones who overcome the enemy.

We have talked about "seeing" these things displayed as slides on a screen. There is a prayer of Paul in Ephesians 1 that is also about seeing things. Before we come to that prayer, look briefly at Ephesians 1:20:

...which He brought about in Christ, when He raised Him from the dead, and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places...

That is the real world, remember; the key subject of all of human life is this: What place do we have in the heavenlies? Jesus is seated there. Jesus is victor there. Satan is removed, thrown out, denied access there. Look back now to verse 18 at this prayer, which is about seeing that truth, about enlightenment, about being able to believe these things so that they come true in our experience. Let us pray together:

I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe. These are in accordance with the working of the strength of His might which He brought about in Christ, when He raised Him from the dead, and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age, but also in the one to come. Amen.

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, we want to thank you for the tremendous victory that you have carried out. We praise your name for that and for letting us share in that victory. We are blessed that you have provided us with a means of knowing about it, and we ask that you place it on our hearts and keep it before us as we go forward this week. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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