

WOMAN AND THE SERPENT

by Ray C. Stedman

If any of you are immigrants to this country and you entered through the port of New York, you will remember that the first sight you had of this land was of a great statue of a woman holding a torch in her upheld arm. That was not an advertisement for underarm deodorant! It was the Statue of Liberty, a symbol of the freedom that America enjoys.

Chapter 12 of the book of Revelation also opens with the symbol of a woman. In fact there are three symbols here:

- The woman,
- Her son, and
- A great red dragon.

It is our business this morning to try to interpret these and to understand what John was shown in this vision.

A great and wondrous sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth. Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on his heads. His tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth. The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that he might devour her child the moment it was born. She gave birth to a son, a male child, who will rule all the nations with an iron scepter. And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne. The woman fled into the desert to a place prepared for her by God, where she might be taken care of for 1,260 days. {Rev 12:1-6 NIV}

The question that leaps at us from these verses is, "What is meant by these great signs? What or whom do they symbolize?"

Two of them are relatively easy to identify, and once we find who those two are the third one will be unmistakable. The dragon is the easiest to identify, because later, in Verse 9, we are told exactly who he is. The verse says, "The great dragon was hurled down -- that ancient serpent called the devil or Satan, who leads the whole world astray." Here, then, is the devil, appearing as a great red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns upon his heads. We are also told that he is the ancient serpent, the very one who appeared in the Garden of Eden to Eve, deceived her, and introduced sin into the human race. He appears here as a dragon, which is simply a super-serpent and a symbol of satanic worship in many countries of the world yet today.

His work is described also in Verse 9: The entire career of the devil is engaged in deceiving the whole inhabited earth, i.e. lying to the human race. We will see much more of this as we go on in this book.

The male child that is born to the woman is the next easiest to identify because we are told in Verse 5 that he is the one "who will rule all the nations with an iron scepter," or "a rod of iron." Many of you will recognize that the latter phrase is taken from the Second Psalm, which is quoted or referred to four different times in Revelation. In some ways Psalm 2 is the basic Scripture out of which the whole book is expanded and grows. The psalm speaks of God establishing his kingdom on his holy hill of Zion: "I will set my King on my holy hill of Zion" {Psa 2:6 KJV}, and "he will rule the nations with a rod of iron," {cf, Psa 2:9 KJV}. Clearly that is a reference to our Lord Jesus.

The reference to a rod of iron always indicates a millennial scene, the thousand-year reign of Christ on earth. He reigns with a rod of iron (with strict justice), because, though it is a time of worldwide blessing and

prosperity and the curse is at least partially removed from nature, it is also a time when sin is still manifest to some degree. Righteousness reigns in the earth, but it has to be enforced. We will see more of that too as we go on in this book. When we come to the new heavens and the new earth, which John will be shown in the closing two chapters of this book, then Christ no longer reigns with a rod of iron because sin has been fully dealt with; nothing evil will enter that scene at all. There he appears as a tender, loving Shepherd, ministering to his people personally and showing great kindness to them.

This brings us to the identity of the woman. Who is this strange woman who appears clothed with the sun and the moon under her feet and twelve stars in a crown around her head?

The Roman Catholics say it is Mary, since she was the mother of Jesus, as this account shows the symbolic woman to be. But the problem with that theory is that there is no way you can fit Mary into Verse 6! There we learn that "the woman fled into the desert to a place prepared for her by God where she might be taken care of for 1,260 days." That never happened to Mary, and it never will. This is not a picture of an individual but rather of a group of people.

Some commentators say she symbolizes the church. The church is pictured at the close of Revelation as the bride of Christ, i.e. as a woman. But it is impossible for this woman to represent the church because the church did not produce Jesus. It is quite the other way around. It was the Lord who produced the church -- the church is born out of the wounded side of Jesus. Therefore that symbolism does not fit the picture here.

We must, therefore, look at the clues that are given us to know the identity of this woman. She is clothed with the sun, the moon is under her feet, and a crown of twelve stars around her head. The only other place where those three symbols are used together in this way is in Genesis 37, the story of Joseph as a young boy who has a dream. He dreamt one night that the sun, the moon and 11 stars came and bowed down before him. He made the mistake of telling his dream to his father and mother and his brothers, and they were very upset by it. His father rightly interpreted it to mean that Joseph was to be exalted in some way, and the whole family would come and bow down before him. We know from subsequent history that this actually did happen. Joseph became the second ruler of Egypt and his father and mother and his 11 brothers all came and bowed down before him.

It is clearly then a description of the nation of Israel. (Joseph would make the twelfth of the stars.) The Apostle Paul says of the Jews in Romans 9:5: "To them is traced the human ancestry of Christ." It was Israel that humanly brought forth the Christ. That is why Jesus told the woman at the well of Samaria, "Salvation is from the Jews," {John 4:22 KJV}. It comes to Gentiles by that route. So the woman here is Israel, brought to prominence again. As one commentator well describes it, "Thus she is seen clothed with the glory of the sun -- that is of Christ himself as He will presently appear in supreme power as the Son of Righteousness (Mal 4:2); for the sun is the ruler of the day. As a consequence, her glory of old before the day -- dawn, the reflected light of her typical system, is like the moon under her feet. Upon her head the crown of 12 stars speaks naturally of her twelve tribes, planets now around the central sun."

In order to understand this chapter we must remember that we are being shown earthly scenes from heaven's point of view. In Chapter 4 John was caught up to heaven and shown all the things that follow in Chapters 4 to 19. And when you look at earthly events from heaven's standpoint, time is never a factor; it is not a question of sequence or chronology but simply of occurrence. In this chapter there is a telescoping together of events that were widely separated in time. From heaven's point of view we are shown *what* happens, not *when* it happens. If you will remember that, this chapter will make sense.

Along with the woman and her son is the great red dragon, this fantastic, fire-breathing serpent who has seven heads, ten horns and seven crowns. It sounds like a monster movie, does it not? I am not going to interpret those seven heads, ten horns and seven crowns at this point because in the next chapter this dragon will appear again in a slightly different role which will have significance for us, and I will leave the interpretation for that chapter. It is enough at this point to see this great dragon crouched, watching Israel intently and ready to devour her long-promised Son when he makes his appearance on earth.

In point of time, this takes us back to the birth of Jesus, to the days of the Roman Empire and its subjugation

of Israel, and to the time of King Herod the Great and his enmity against this predicted birth. We can easily see that the events of that time are symbolized here for us. Already we are told that the dragon swept a third of the stars from the sky with his tail. Now we have seen already in Revelation that stars, used symbolically, are pictures of prominent leaders among men, specifically here among Israel. In Isaiah 9, that great prophetic chapter, the prophet says specifically, "The prophets who teach lies are the tail" {Isa 9:15b NIV} -- i.e. the means by which Satan exercises his deceiving and destructive work. So in this symbolic action the stars are captured by the tail of the serpent (lying prophets) and cast to earth. It is a symbol of the leaders of Israel, deceived by their own teachers and prophets, who fall from their moral position before God. The dragon of world power of that day, the Roman Empire, waits to destroy the Son through its puppet king, Herod the Great, when the child is born. We know how God prevented that from happening. Historically, Joseph and Mary took Jesus on a secret flight to Egypt and thus evaded the enmity of Herod. Here it is reported that the child was "snatched up to God and to his throne." The symbol jumps from the birth of Jesus to his ascension some 30 years later, skipping over his life and ministry, his death and resurrection. John is shown the birth of our Lord and his ascension into heaven, the beginning and ending of his earthly ministry.

But there arises a problem here in understanding this because the ascension of Jesus, as recorded at the end of the Gospels and in the opening of Acts, was not in order that he might escape harm from his enemies on earth. The resurrected Lord was far beyond his enemies' reach by that time -- they could do him no harm. So there is no need for Jesus to ascend into heaven in order to escape the wrath of the dragon.

But -- and here is where it gets a bit tricky -- there is an aspect of our Lord which found deliverance from danger by being snatched away into heaven. How many of you have guessed what it is? It is the church, of course. All through the New Testament the church and the Lord are regarded as one. Remember when Saul was converted on the Damascus Road Jesus appeared and said to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" {cf, Acts 9:4}. Paul was actually persecuting the church, but Jesus said, "That is me!" In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes, "The body of Christ is a unit. It is made up of many parts but it is one body --," {1 Cor 12:12a NIV}. And then he added this significant phrase: " -- so also is Christ," {1 Cor 12:12b KJV}. The church and the Lord are together the body of Christ. So the whole history of the church is involved here, including the rapture. It is interesting that the term used here for the child is that he was snatched up to God. That is the very term that is used for the rapture of the church. It is the Great Snatch! That is what the young people used to call it in the Body Life times of the '60s -- the Great Snatch, the rapture of the church, to occur before the dragon begins his persecuting work. Verse 6 carries us forward to this time. There is an eclipse of centuries here covering the whole church age. The woman, we are told, fled into the desert to a place prepared for her by God where she might be taken care of for 1,260 days, which places this at the beginning of the great tribulation.

Suddenly the scene changes. We are led to look away from earth to heaven, to a scene of conflict, invisible to earth but taking place in heaven.

And there was war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven. The great dragon was hurled down -- that ancient serpent called the devil [the accuser] or Satan, [the adversary] who leads the whole world astray. {Rev 12:7-9 NIV}

This is the first reference to Michael in this book. Who is this Michael? We can tell by what he is doing. He is not rowing his boat ashore but he is fighting against the great red dragon. The prophet Daniel was told, "Michael is the great prince who stands for your people Israel," {cf, Dan 12:1}. Unmistakably, Israel is in the forefront here, symbolized by the woman -- the believing remnant of Israel.

From this scene we can draw the conclusion that up to these last days of history Satan has access to heaven. In the book of Job he appears before God and requests permission to assault the body of Job. In the book of Zechariah he is also seen accusing the saints of God before God, in heaven. And Paul tells us in Ephesians 6 that we believers today "do not wrestle against flesh and blood" {cf, Eph 6:12 KJV}, i.e. other people are not really our problem. It is what the devil is doing to people that makes them oppose us; it is through wicked spirits which he calls "spiritual forces of evil in heavenly places," {Eph 6b NIV}. So throughout this present

age Satan still has access to heaven.

But at this point of Daniel's seventieth week, God has had enough of the presence of the devil in heaven. He sends Michael, the great archangel, with his angels, and together they force the devil and his angels out of heaven and hurl him to the earth. We have already seen a description of this in symbol in Chapter 9:1, where we saw a great star fall from heaven onto the earth, and from it emerged one who came from the bottomless pit. Other accounts of this fall of Satan are to be found in Ezekiel 28 and Isaiah 14.

In the next verses the reaction of heaven to this casting out of the devil is recounted.

Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say:

**"Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God,
and the authority of his Christ.**

**For the accuser of our brothers,
who accuses them before our God day and night,
has been hurled down.**

**They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony;
they did not love their lives so much
as to shrink from death. [That is a rather awkward translation. It should say, "They did
not love their lives unto death."]**

Therefore rejoice, you heavens and you who dwell in them!

**But woe to the earth and the sea,
because the devil has gone down to you!**

He is filled with fury, because he knows that his time is short." {Rev 12:10-12 NIV}

This loud voice that the apostle hears seems to come from the martyrs of Chapter 6 who were given white robes, and who are seen under the altar crying out to God, "How long, O Lord, before you avenge our blood upon the earth?" {Rev 6:10 NIV}. They are the ones who now rejoice that the devil has been cast out of heaven. They speak of the "accuser of our brothers who accuses them before our God day and night." The "brothers" here would be the believing Jews, the remnant of Israel, who are yet on earth during those days. The white-robed saints in heaven announce that the time has come for the Lord to reign over the kingdom long ago promised to Israel.

Verse 11 is very important because it shows how the saints of any age can overcome the wiles of the devil. We too are assaulted by the devil continually. Lies and misleading propaganda pour into our ears from every side today. Philosophies that are wrong and hurtful are widely believed. We are being accused before the presence of God, and in our own hearts we hear these accusations by the devil. We need to know how to answer. There are three steps to take:

First, "they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb." Have you ever heard the devil accusing you? Did you ever hear in your inner ear a voice saying, "What kind of a Christian are you? Look at the way you have acted. God could never love you! What makes you think you are acceptable in his sight? You are a mess!" How do you handle that? According to this text you ought to admit it. It is true. We mess up all the time. We believe lies, we act selfishly, we are malicious and self-indulgent at times, we hurt others thoughtlessly. It is all true. Admit it! But then, remind the devil of the blood of the Lamb, the cross of Christ. There on that cross Jesus bore our sins so that we are no longer to be judged or even accused before God. That is why Paul can say in Romans 8, "Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus!" {Rom 8:1 NIV}. Years ago I ran across a wonderful poem written by a dear, godly woman whom I had met. She describes her own experience in these terms:

I sinned, and straightway, posthaste, Satan flew
Before the presence of the Most High God,
And made a railing accusation there.
He said, "This soul, this thing of clay and sod,
Has sinned. 'Tis true that he has named thy Name,
But I demand his death, for Thou hast said,
'The soul that sinneth, it shall die.' Shall not

Thy sentence be fulfilled? Is Justice dead?
Send now this wretched sinner to his doom.
What other thing can righteous ruler do?
And thus he did accuse me day and night.

And every word he spoke, O God, was true!
Then quickly One rose up from God's right hand
Before whose glory angels veiled their eyes.
He spoke, 'Each jot and tittle of the Law
Must be fulfilled; the guilty sinner dies!
But wait!
Suppose his guilt were all transferred To Me,
and that I paid his penalty.
Behold, my hands, my side, my feet! One day
I was made sin for him, and died that he
Might be presented faultless at Thy throne."
And Satan flew away. Full well he knew
That he could not prevail against such love,
For every word my dear Lord spoke was true!"

That is the meaning of the blood of the Lamb. There is no way to handle Satan, and avoid the guilt and shame of which he accuses us, without resting upon the work of the Cross, the blood of the Lamb! When Jesus makes you a new creature, Satan can accuse you only of something that is past and gone.

The blood of Christ is sufficient for your own problems with guilt, but how do you help others? There are millions of people today whose lives are lonely, empty and fear-ridden. All around us they are trying to overcome some inner sense of guilt or shame. They seek to lose themselves in pleasure, drugs, alcohol, sex, or whatever. How do you help them? The answer is, "by the word of their testimony." Christians need to share with others the freedom into which Christ has brought them. How many among us here have come to Christ because some person you had been watching told you one day that at the cross he or she found forgiveness of sins, and that you could have that, too? They witnessed of the joy and peace the Lord had brought into their life -- it was "by the word of their testimony" that you came to Christ.

Third, Satan was overcome because "they loved not their lives unto death." They would give up anything but Christ. They cared more for his honor and truth than all their possessions, all their status before men -- even their own lives! It was apparent from their actions that nothing was worth more to them than Christ's presence in their lives. They would rather die than deliberately to bring shame to his name. That is the way to overcome Satan. It means that you have not only exercised faith in the blood of the cross, and love towards others who are bound by Satan's lies, but also you are laying hold of the hope of a Christian -- the fact that death is rendered meaningless because you have been promised an inheritance beyond.

Faith, hope, and love! Have you heard those words before? That is the way to overcome the great enemy!

Now that causes great rejoicing in heaven, as these words reveal -- but increased pressure for those left on earth! The devil is enraged by this resistance. He realizes that his time is short. In just 3-1/2 years he is going to be bound and thrown into a bottomless pit. So he moves quickly and the final events follow immediately. When the dragon saw that he had been hurled to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child. The woman was given the two wings of a great eagle, so that she might fly to the place prepared for her in the desert, where she would be taken care of for a time, times and half a time (one year, plus two years, plus half a year = 3-1/2 years), out of the serpent's reach. Then from his mouth the serpent spewed water like a river, to overtake the woman and sweep her away with the torrent. But the earth helped the woman by opening its mouth and swallowing the river that the dragon had spewed out of his mouth. Then the dragon was enraged at the woman and went off to make war against the rest of her offspring -- those who obey God's commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus.

We must realize that this woman does not represent the whole nation of Israel -- all the Jews on the earth -- but she is really a representation of the remnant, the believing part of Israel in those days. Already there have been

judgments upon the Jews, as promised in the prophets. This is "the time of Jacob's trouble," and the apostates have been eliminated; only the remnant escapes here. Many think they will flee to the city of Petra, south of the Dead Sea, that strange, rock-hewn city that some of you have visited. Perhaps that may be the place. I am not sure.

But the point made here is the care of God over this believing remnant. They are "borne on eagle's wings." That is the very phrase God employs when the nation, led by Moses, comes out of Egypt. God says, "Have I not borne you on eagle's wings and taken care of you in the wilderness?" So it is a picture of God's loving protection and care of the remnant of his people in that day.

A "river of water" is very likely a symbol for the huge host of soldiers that were sent by the Antichrist after Israel. We have seen that symbolism before. But the very earth protects her. It is probably a reference to the natural disasters that occur during these days -- earthquakes, a hailstorm, and such, that we have seen several times before in the book of Revelation. They divert the attention of Satan so that he cannot pursue this woman to destroy her, but instead he turns his attention to what are called here "the rest of her offspring."

That would mean they are also Jews, and are identified as those who "obey God's commandments and hold fast the testimony of Jesus." I believe that to be a reference to the special band of 144,000 Jews that we first met in Chapter 7, and will meet again in Chapter 14. "Christ's commandos" we called them, who move throughout the earth, preaching the gospel of the Kingdom to all the nations. The devil gives his final attention to this group because of their witness to the world.

That brings us to the close of Chapter 12.

Next week we shall come face to face with the two great antichristian powers that the devil will use in that day. I am sure that you have been struck, as I have, with the swiftly moving pace of world events today. Things are happening with breathtaking speed. Even the secular prophets are amazed. It is almost like moving on a river that is approaching a cataract. As we near the cascade the current speeds up. We may well be coming close to the days described here.

The great question that this chapter leaves hanging before us is: "How are you doing in your personal battle with Satan? Have you learned to overcome him, to live as an overcomer in the midst of the declensions and the desperate conditions of this day?"

That is the great question we must each answer. We can overcome him only by the blood of the Lamb, by the word of our testimony, and by loving not our lives unto death. Nothing should be more important to us than the ministry our Lord has given to us in this day, to live within our families and before the world as he enables us to live.

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