

A PLACE IN THE WILDERNESS

SERIES: WAKE UP



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Revelation 12:1-17
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Scott Grant
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Revelation 12:1-17

I saw that Steven Spielberg is doing a remake of the classic 1961 musical *West Side Story*, which sets the love story of Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet against the backdrop of gang culture in 1950s New York. In the musical, Tony and Maria, the two star-crossed lovers from rival gangs, the Jets and the Sharks, hope and sing:

There's a place for us
Somewhere a place for us
Peace and quiet and open air
Wait for us
Somewhere
There's a time for us
Someday there'll be a time for us
Time together with time to spare
Time to learn
Time to care
Someday, somewhere.¹

Is there a place for us in this world? Is there a place for you? We need a place because we see in Revelation 12 that we're in the middle of a war—not between rival gangs but between good and evil.

We learn in Revelation 12 that there's more going on in Revelation 1-11 than meets the eye. We learn about the depth of the problem. We learn about the presence and power of evil. We learn that we are caught up in a cosmic drama.

Woman with child

Revelation 12:1-2:

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.

The woman symbolizes the people of God as a whole, at this point in Revelation 12 faithful Israel before the coming of Christ. In Joseph's dream, the

sun, moon, and stars symbolized different parts of his family, which became Israel (Genesis 37:9-11).

In Revelation 1, stars symbolized the angels of the seven churches. Now the people of God as a whole are in view inasmuch as twelve is the number for the people of God (there were twelve tribes of Israel and twelve apostles of Jesus).

Dominion is also in view: the moon is under the woman's feet, and she wears a crown. First Adam, then Israel, and now the church have been commissioned by God to reign on earth as his representatives.

The woman's labor pains represent the tribulation, especially persecution, that faithful Israel endured, the so-called "messianic woes," prior to bringing forth the Christ (Isaiah 26:18, 66:7).

Hungry dragon

Revelation 12:3-4:

And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads 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.

The dragon symbolizes the devil, who is also called Satan (Revelation 12:9). Its red color means that it is murderous (Revelation 6:6, 16:4, 17:6, 18:24). The seven heads represent pretension to perfect sovereignty but the reality of imperfect sovereignty, granted to him by God for a while. The ten horns represent pretension to complete power but the reality of partial power, granted to him by God for a while.

The dragon is a parody of the Lamb, who is Christ (Revelation 5:6, 19:12). He echoes the fourth beast Daniel's vision, which represented

the consummation of opposition to the people of God (Daniel 7:7).

Satan, originally an angel of God, has been at war with God since the beginning. As part of his rebellion, he took with him other angels, who became demons, evil ministers. Thus, John sees the dragon sweeping down a third of the stars of heaven.

Satan, in the form of a serpent in the Genesis narrative, deceived the first humans, and humanity fell into sin: rebellion against God. God promised, however, that salvation would come through the seed, or descendants, of the first woman: first Israel and ultimately one descendant, Christ (Genesis 3:15). Therefore, John sees the dragon poised to devour the woman's child. Historically, this played out when Herod attempted to murder the Christ child (Matthew 2:1-18).

Scholar N.T. Wright comments on these verses:

Finally, with a swish of his majestic tail, the villain appears on the stage—the villain who, we quickly learn, stands behind all the trouble that we have seen in the earlier chapters. The dark secret is revealed: the real problem is identified; the curtain has risen on the drama—within-the-drama the central action which forms, now, the central scene in the whole book. The woman and her child are carrying the purposes of God for the world. The dragon is doing his best to snuff out those purposes before they can get under way. With the unveiling of the gospel of the lion-lamb there goes as well, the unveiling of the ultimate mystery of evil.²

Caught up to God

Revelation 12:5-6:

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.

In that the woman's child, now specifically identified as a male child, is to "rule the nations with a rod of iron," he will destroy his enemies, rejecting in the end those who refuse to submit to his loving rule (Psalm 2:9; Revelation 2:27, 19:15). The vision passes over the life, death, and resurrection of the child and goes straight to his ascension to the throne of God. The child is snatched from the jaws of the dragon.

Jesus, enthroned in heaven, is Lord of the world, even now. The apostle Paul says that when God raised Christ from the dead, he seated him on his heavenly throne, "far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come" (Ephesians 1:21).

The woman, now symbolizing the people of God after the first coming of Christ, flees to the wilderness, just like Israel of old when God released it from bondage in Egypt. Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, had tried to crush the Israelites, finally by killing their male children after they were born (Exodus 1:15-22). Nevertheless, Moses was rescued after he was born and led the Israelites to freedom.

The wilderness symbolizes this world, before it becomes the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ (Revelation 11:15, 21:1). The length of time, 1,260 days, the same as the forty-two months of Revelation 11:2, represents the time between the first coming of Christ and the final coming of Christ. Although the people of God will suffer tribulation up until the final coming of Christ, God has prepared a place for them in this world for spiritual nourishment.

The wilderness is an apt metaphor for this world. In the wilderness, nourishment is lacking. Think back to the Israelites in the wilderness after God rescued them from Egypt. At times they had no food and water, but then food and water came from the strangest places: the sky and a rock. God provided for them. In the wilderness of the world, spiritual nourishment is lacking. We are dependent on God for spiritual nourishment.

In verses 7-9, John gives us another look at the origin of Satan's war with God.

Deceiver of the whole world

Revelation 12:7-9:

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.

Now we learn that in the original, primordial battle, Michael, an archangel, and other angels fought against the dragon and prevailed. Michael is seen in the book of Daniel as the heavenly champion of the people of God (Daniel 10:13, 12:1). God employs angels to defeat Satan and his demons, and he employs humans as well, as we shall see. What Michael did to defeat the dragon John doesn't say.

Now we learn that when the dragon "swept down a third of the stars of heaven and cast them to the earth," it was cast down also. God prepared a "place" in the wilderness for the woman, but there was no longer any "place" in heaven for Satan and his angels.³

Satan is defined as "the deceiver of the whole world." Jesus defined Satan similarly as "a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44). The term "whole world" in Revelation is applied to unbelievers. It's not that Satan doesn't deceive believers; it's just that he's not defined that way here.

If Satan is the deceiver of the whole world, and virtually the whole world is now connected through the internet, then what do you think Satan is up to? To say that a more connected world is necessarily a better world, as some in the Silicon Valley have said, is hopelessly and, as we have seen in recent times, dangerously naïve.

Three-stage demise

Revelation 12:10-12:

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!"

Now the demise of Satan reaches the third stage. First, he was defeated in heaven and thrown to earth. Second, he was defeated in the birth and ascension of Christ. Third, he is defeated by followers of Christ.

With the ascension of Christ to his heavenly throne, the kingdom of God has come, even if there is still more to come, and as a result "our brothers," followers of Christ, conquer Satan "by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony"—that is, by their faith in Christ and their faithfulness to Christ, even when threatened with death. Of course, faith engenders faithfulness. If you believe that Jesus died for you, you'll be more inclined to follow where he leads.⁴

Satan, who was earlier depicted as a deceiver of unbelievers, is now identified as one who "accuses" believers constantly. Now because of the blood of the Lamb, however, those accusations have no merit. As Paul says, when God forgave our sins in Christ, he "disarmed" Satan and his demons, "triumphing over them" (Colossians 2:13-15).

On the one hand, this is the reason for believers, those who dwell in heaven—here described as the heavens—to rejoice. On the other hand, the "earth and sea," here a metaphor for unbelievers, those who dwell on earth, have no reason to rejoice, because the devil, having been defeated in three ways, is full of rage, first of all for God and then for humans, whom God has made in his image. The objects of God's love are the objects of Satan's wrath. The rejoicing of the earth-dwellers at the death of the two witnesses has turned into woe (Revelation 11:10).

These three defeats anticipate the final and complete defeat of Satan (Revelation 20:10). The devil himself knows that his time is short, but he's going to wreak as much havoc as he can in the time he has. If he's going down, he's going to take as many down with him as he can.

Satan's accusations

Although Satan's accusations against us before God have no merit because of the blood of the Lamb, he would still accuse us by getting into our heads. The mind is a battlefield of warring thoughts. In Martin Luther's great hymn, "A Mighty Fortress is our God," he says:

For still our ancient foe
Doth seek to work us woe;
His craft and power are great,
And, armed with cruel hate,
On earth is not his equal.

First, Satan and his demons want to first keep us from wholeheartedly embracing God's forgiveness

of us as espoused by Romans 8:1: “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” Second, they want to keep us from following Jesus in the way of sacrificial love. They do so by imparting to us their own interpretation of the stories of our lives in soul-specific ways.

All of us have been wounded, and Satan and his ministers know how to exploit our wounds and interpret them in a way to make us doubt God. In this respect, he’s like the offensive coordinator of a football team who calls for plays that exploit the weaknesses of the defense.

Brent Curtis explains in *The Sacred Romance*:

*The words and accusations that slide almost unnoticed into our consciousness are words we have heard before, sometimes from parents, peers, or the enemies of our youth. The voice (sometimes voices) that accuses us is so familiar we have learned to think of it as our own . . . It is the voice that constantly questions the wisdom of hope and the life of faith and love that flows from it . . .*⁵

He [Satan] accuses us through the words of parents and friends and God himself. He calls good evil and evil good and always helps us question whether God has anything good in mind in his plans for us. He steals our innocence as children and replaces it with blind naiveté or cynicism as adults . . .

This attack happens in the spiritual realm, using the sentences and voices we are familiar with from the past. We feel as if we are simply speaking to ourselves in our heads. And this is the enemy’s first deception: “I am not here. It’s just you struggling with these things.”

As nineteenth-century poet Charles Baudelaire said, “The devil’s finest trick is to persuade you that he does not exist.”⁶

Brent Curtis’s father left him when he was young. Then stepfathers came and went. Curtis explains how he became vulnerable to believing the evil one’s interpretation of his story. His father’s leavings gave the enemy a pernicious storyline to work with:

“You are on your own. There is no one to fall back on. You’d better figure out how to handle this. There’s something wrong with you. Other fathers don’t leave. It’s all going to end badly. You’re going to end up invisible and alone. Why don’t you just give up this foolish idea

*that God cares and at least enjoy life in the ways you know how you can.”*⁷

What’s your story? How have you been wounded? What voices are you hearing? Because we have a spiritual enemy who accuses us, we need a place for spiritual nourishment. God provides a place. What is it?

Angry dragon

Revelation 12:13-17:

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.

When we last saw the woman, she had fled to the wilderness, where a place had been prepared for her by God (verses 5-6). It turns out she needed that place, because the dragon was pursuing her and persecuting her.⁸

We get some more information about the woman’s flight: she flew to the wilderness with the wings of “the great eagle.” The woman’s flight echoes Israel’s flight from Egypt into the wilderness. God told the Israelites: “You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself” (Exodus 19:4).

Earlier, we saw that the woman was nourished in the wilderness for 1,260 days. That time is equivalent to “a time, times, and half a time”: three and a half years. As we saw earlier, the time of nourishment in the wilderness equates to the time between the first coming of Christ and the final coming of Christ.⁹

If the dragon was “thrown” from heaven, he literally “threw” a river of water at the woman. Again, this echoes the wilderness experience of Israelites, who were threatened by the water of the Red Sea as Pharaoh was pursuing them. Back then, the sea parted, helping the Israelites, who passed on dry ground. Here the earth helps the woman and swallows the water. The dragon was thrown to the earth, which becomes his domain, but the earth works against him. The dragon opened his mouth to destroy the woman, but the earth opened its “mouth” to foil the dragon.

The dragon can’t win. No wonder he gets angry again. This time, he’s furious with the woman, especially because it can’t destroy the woman. So what does he do? He goes off to war against “the rest of her offspring.” Her first offspring, of course, was the child who was caught up to God and his throne.

What are we to make of this part of the story? As we have seen, the dragon symbolizes Satan, and the woman symbolizes the people of God as a whole, first faithful Israel and now, at this point in Revelation 12, the Jew-plus-Gentile church. Satan can’t destroy the people of God as a whole. He wasn’t able to destroy faithful Israel, and he can’t destroy the faithful church. He can destroy churches, but he can’t destroy the church. And he is furious.

What then can he do? The offspring symbolize individual believers: “those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus.” Those who believe in Christ are “Abraham’s offspring” regardless of ethnicity (Galatians 3:29). Satan makes war with individual believers. How so? As a liar and the father of lies, he attempts to convince followers of the Lamb to believe lies so that they will not follow the Lamb and the sacrificial way of the Lamb.

God provides a place

If we are to believe and if we are to follow, and if Satan wars against us to keep us from doing both, if he pursues us and persecutes us, then we need a place of spiritual nourishment in the wilderness of this world. We learn in Revelation 12 that God brings us to such a place and prepares such a place. Perhaps the most important place of spiritual nourishment that God provides is the church.

The church has the Holy Spirit, the gifts of the Spirit, relationships, extraordinary personal

stories of redemption, songs, prayers, and the Lord’s Table, which, as Jesus said, is “true food” and “true drink” (John 6:55). Moreover, if Satan is a deceiver and an accuser, then the church can and should nourish us with the truth: the word of God.

I feel that I’ve been brought to different churches in my life, as if I had nothing to do with it, as if I was carried to these places on eagle’s wings. Wherever I moved, I never had to look for a church: it was obvious to me where I was supposed to be. Each church has been a place of spiritual nourishment for me.

When I was seeking training to become a pastor, I discovered the Cole Center for Biblical Studies in Boise, Idaho. I read that one of its aims was to train men and women to “nourish” God’s people with the word of God, and I thought to myself, “Yes, that’s what I want to do.” That’s what I’ve been trying to do as a pastor at PBC for the last twenty-five years.

Indeed, that’s what PBC as a whole has been endeavoring to do for more than seventy years now. That’s what we’re trying to do now as we preach the book of Revelation, which as spiritual nourishment goes, is more meat than milk. Nevertheless, it is part of the Scriptures, which means God has nourishment for us in it.

In studying Revelation 12, I was reminded of *The Screwtape Letters* by C.S. Lewis. In it, a senior devil advises a junior devil who is charged with influencing a human “patient.” The senior devil speculates that a particular church and preacher might be appropriate for the patient at this point:

In order to spare laity all “difficulties” he has deserted both the lectionary and the appointed psalms and now, without noticing it, revolves endlessly round the little treadmill of his fifteen favorite psalms and twenty favorite lessons. We are thus safe from the danger that any truth not already familiar to him and to his flock should reach them through Scripture. But perhaps your patient is not quite silly enough for this church—or not yet?”¹⁰

Our objective here is to nourish you with different genres, from narrative to poetry to epistolary to apocalyptic, from both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament so that you may be strengthened to fight this spiritual war in which we’re engaged. It’s a wilderness out there, and the fighting is strong.

What did Jesus say when he was in the wilderness, fighting the devil? “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4).

Perhaps you feel as if you’ve been carried to this place on eagle’s wings. Perhaps you feel that God has provided for you this church as a place for spiritual nourishment in the wilderness of this world. I hope so. You have a spiritual enemy; you need a place of spiritual nourishment. Feed on the word. Eat the book.

There’s a place for us, and the place is the church.

Participate in God’s victory over evil

It’s amazing to think that we are actors in the cosmic drama. After God twice defeated Satan, first in heaven and then in Christ, we take the stage. We participate in the final victory of good over evil.

When Jesus sent out seventy-two followers, they returned to him and reported, “Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!” Jesus told them that they were participating in the defeat of Satan: “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven” (Luke 10:17-20).

First, we participate in God’s final victory over evil first of all through faith in Christ, by believing that the blood of the Lamb means that God forgives our sins, accepts us, and does not condemn us. Second, we participate in God’s final victory over evil through faithfulness to Christ, following him in the way of sacrificial love.

Again, and finally, listen to Martin Luther:

And though this world, with devils filled,
Should threaten to undo us,
We will not fear, for God hath willed
His truth to triumph through us:
The Prince of Darkness grim,
We tremble not for him;

His rage we can endure,
For lo! his doom is sure,
One little word shall fell him.

Endnotes

- ¹ West Side Story Lyrics, *Somewhere* (Hollywood: Columbia Masterworks, 1961), <https://www.westsidestory.com/lyrics>
- ² N.T. Wright, *Revelation for Everyone* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 108.
- ³ The story of the king of Tyre in Ezekiel 28:11-19 tells the larger story of the Satan’s rebellion.
- ⁴ What follows the word “for” in verse 10 does not explain why the kingdom has come; what follows explains how the brothers conquer the accuser now that he has been thrown down.
- ⁵ Brent Curtis and John Eldredge, *The Sacred Romance: Drawing Closer to the Heart of God* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1997), 99-116.
- ⁶ The line was immortalized, in a slightly reworked version, in the 1996 movie *The Usual Suspects*, when Roger “Verbal” King said, “The greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn’t exist.”
- ⁷ Curtis and Eldredge, 115.
- ⁸ The word translated “pursued” can also be translated “persecuted.” Probably both ideas are in view: The dragon both pursued and persecuted the woman.
- ⁹ The expression “a time, times, and half a time” comes from Daniel 7:25 and 12:7, where it refers to the last days, which began with the first coming of Christ.
- ¹⁰ C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (Uhrichsville, OH: Barbour and Co.), 82-83).