

With chapter 12, we now come to the heart of the book of Revelation, because in this section we see a summary of everything that happens. In this section we see a picture of God's people and their suffering. In this section we see a picture of the great enemy and how he tries to destroy the church. But in this section we especially see what God is doing about all of it. So when we understand this section of the book of Revelation, starting in chapter 12, we will begin to understand the entire book.

John begins in verse 1 of our reading. He says: "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." John calls this a great sign, so that's a signal to us that we should pay close attention. Because nothing else up to this point in the book of Revelation has been called a great sign, no matter what it was that John saw. So we need to listen carefully to what's happening here.

But this great sign is a woman in heaven. Who is she, and what is she doing there? Everything that John tells us about this woman tells us who she is. She is no ordinary woman. Everything about her points to the fact that she is a symbol of the people of God. She is a symbol of the Church. Take, for example, the twelve stars which are said to be like a crown around her head. Twelve is a number of the Church, like the twelve apostles, the twelve tribes of Israel. And the sun and the moon and the stars together also show that she is God's people, because they point back to one of the dreams of Joseph in the book of Genesis. In Genesis chapter 37 we are told that Joseph "dreamed another dream and told it to his brothers and said, 'Behold, I have dreamed another dream. Behold, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me.'" And in that same chapter in Genesis, Jacob rightly understands what this dream means. He rightly recognizes that he, Jacob, is the sun, that Joseph's mother is the moon, and that the stars are his brothers. They would all come and bow down before him. So for those same symbols to be used here in Revelation shows that they also point towards God's people. They're another way of showing that they are the tribes of Israel, that they are the people of God. And she is clothed with the sun, we are told, which means she's clothed just like Christ. She looks like him. Because if you remember in Revelation chapter 1, Jesus is described as having a face which shines like the sun in full strength. This woman herself does not shine, but her clothes do, because she is clothed with Christ. She is clothed with his righteousness. And the crown which she has on her head is a victory crown, a wreath of victory made of stars, because it is a symbol of the victory that will be hers in God. All of these things together show us that this woman in heaven is a picture of God's Church.

But she's not just standing in heaven. John goes on to say in verse 2: "She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pains and the agony of giving birth." How should we understand this? First of all, we need to remember and always remind ourselves that what John is seeing is a symbol. He's not looking at something that happened at a specific point in time. This woman is a picture of the entire Church of God in every time and in every place. And when we keep that in mind, it helps us to see that these birth pains are a symbol of her suffering, a symbol of the struggles that she is going through. This is the things that she suffers at the hands of the world. In fact, that word "agony" could also be translated as her "torment." She is a picture of the persecuted Church. And like a woman in hard labor, everything seems to be uncertain. How long until she is delivered from this agony? Does she have a future? What is going to happen to her? Will she live? Will she die? How long must the saints of God suffer in this world? All of these things together are the first part of the great sign that we see here in Revelation 12.

But it's not the only thing that John sees. Verse 3, he says: "And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads seven diadems." John will tell us in the next part of this chapter, which we'll get to next week, plainly that this is a picture of Satan, the great deceiver of the world. And the first thing that John tells us about him here is that he is like a dragon, but we do have to be careful with that. Because I know that we have very specific ideas of what we think dragons look like, mostly because of movies. Dragons to us are these great beasts with wings that breathe fire, and they fly around destroying things. That's usually what we think of when we think of dragons. But you'll notice that John never said anything about wings, and he also doesn't say anything about breathing fire, so if we want to understand this picture we have to understand what John meant by a dragon. We have to understand the picture that was in his mind. Dragon in Greek is something more like a snake. In fact, the word "dragon" was sometimes used in other places outside the Bible simply to describe certain kinds of snakes. So in other words, what John sees here is a great serpent, a giant snake, which is very fitting, considering it was by a serpent that Adam and Eve were deceived and fell into sin.

And this great serpent, we are told, is red in color, because red is the color of blood and of destruction. If you remember back in Revelation chapter 6 with the second horseman who rode a red horse, he was given authority to take peace from the earth. It's the same thing here. Satan has come to bring destruction. And he has heads and horns as symbols of his great power. Because a head is often a symbol of a king or a kingdom. So in this case, it's as if a whole bunch of kings or a whole bunch of kingdoms were all rolled into one, as if he has all of their power, as if he has all of their might. And a horn is a symbol of strength. Think of the horn of a bull, for example. To have many horns like this is to be as strong as many bulls. He is a mighty creature indeed. And seven and ten are complete numbers, which shows that his power seems overwhelming. It seems like there is no one like him. On earth is not his equal!

And he's also described as having seven diadems as symbols of his authority. Because a diadem is a crown, but it's not a wreath crown. It's not a victory crown, the kind of thing given to an athlete, which is the kind of crown we've seen the most often throughout the book of Revelation. A diadem is a kingly crown. It is a symbol of royal authority. And he has seven of them because his power seems to be perfect. His authority seems to extend over all things. He claims to rule all things and to have all things belong to him. Which is actually fairly easy for us to understand. If you just look at the world today, it certainly seems to be under the power of Satan. Evil seems to be in control. Evil seems to be the one that's winning all the time. Satan seems to be the king of all. And so this is the picture that John gives us of Satan here in Revelation 12, and it may tempt us to ask: who is like him and who can fight against him?

But Satan is also not just standing around doing nothing. John goes on to say in verse 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." The tale sweeping down the stars of heaven is probably referring to the angels that follow after Satan. He deceived them and tricked them into rebelling against God along with him. But this again shows his great power, because not only did he deceive the angels that follow him, but he's also the commander of this great army. And if one angel can destroy armies, how much power would a third of all of the angels have, especially with Satan as their commander? We see a very terrifying, very frightful, very powerful beast. And he now stands before the woman, waiting for

her to give birth, waiting that he might devour the child. Because he wants to destroy the Church, Christians. He wants to take away every hope that she has. Satan would be pleased if her suffering came to nothing. Satan would be pleased if she continued to be tormented with no end in sight. All he wants to do is to destroy us. So the crucial moment has now come. What is going to happen to the people of God, especially faced with such a powerful enemy?

I think Isaiah says it best when he says in Isaiah chapter 9: "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." Even though Satan wanted to stop it, Christ has now been born. Hope has come for the Church. Her future is now secure. And this child will rule the nations with a rod of iron, as we heard in our Psalm for this evening. This child has been caught up to God. Jesus has ascended into heaven where he now sits at the right hand of the Father forever. And as Isaiah again says: "Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end."

This is our hope, Christians. This is why we can face all things. We have hope because we know that Jesus reigns as King forever. We have hope because we know that Jesus has ascended into heaven where Satan cannot throw him down. We have hope because we know Jesus has ascended into heaven and his reign will never come to an end. No matter what happens, Jesus is King. And we can look through all of our suffering, we can look through all of our torment to the throne of God where this male Child now reigns forever. And we can wait for his complete victory when his reign will extend over all the world, from one end to another.

But we do still have to wait. John says in verse 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." We are wandering in the wilderness, Christians, wandering just as Israel did for forty-two years, the 1,260 days as John puts it. We wander because we have no home here on earth. We wander because we are suffering much at the hands of the world. But even though we wander, God still cares for us. He still watches over us. He has not cast us off, but has prepared a place for us. And he nourishes us just like Israel was nourished in the wilderness all those years with manna. But he does not give us only manna, but the true manna, the bread of life which is Jesus Christ our Lord. And fed with that bread, that bread which brings us eternal life, we can know that our time of wandering will not go on forever. We can know that the 1,260 days will come to an end. The kingdom will come and be established forever, and Christ will be all in all.

So take heart, Christians. Jesus is King. Man with God is on the throne. Even though Satan fights against us, even though Satan wants to destroy us, he's already lost. He cannot defeat us, because Christ is in heaven. So take heart, because Jesus has overcome the world!

Let us pray. Lord Jesus Christ, who has ascended far above all the heavens so that you may fill all things, lead us through the wilderness of this world to the kingdom you have prepared for those who love you, so that we may join in singing your praises forever; for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.