

We have divided up Revelation chapter 12 into three different parts. In the first part we saw a great sign in heaven: the woman who gave birth to the child being pursued by the dragon. And we saw that it was a general picture of everything that the Church has to go through, everything that she suffers in this life. And the second section of this chapter was a more detailed picture of the great war in heaven, a symbol of God silencing Satan so that he was no longer able to accuse the saints of God. And now in this third and last part, we see another detailed picture, one that shows us why Christians suffer for being Christians in this life.

So John tells us, beginning in verse 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." We heard in the previous section that Satan had been cast down out of heaven, and apparently John tells us it happened so fast, it took a moment for him to realize what had even happened. This is why he says that he saw that he had been thrown down. It was like one minute he was in heaven, and the next minute he wasn't. Again, this is a picture of his being silenced, of his being locked out of heaven. It was as if he was trying to get back up into heaven and found the doors locked. God had changed the locks. He was no longer able to get back in. He couldn't accuse the saints the way that he had done before.

But that doesn't mean that Satan gave up. He didn't sulk away, thinking he could do nothing. No, he decided to do something else. He pursued the woman who had given birth to the child. He goes after the Church. I think we can understand this first part as an attempt by Satan to kill the Church. He wants to destroy her. Because if there is no one alive who believes in Jesus, then there can't be a Church, at least in his mind. And don't we see an example of this in the martyrs, those who gave their lives for Jesus, those who paid the ultimate price because of what they believe? Even down to this day, Christians, there are Christians around the world who are killed simply for being Christians. Satan is going after the Church.

But God will not allow Satan to fully destroy the Church. This is why we hear in verse 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." God gives the Church two wings like an eagle, which looks back to the book of Exodus when Israel came out of Egypt. God said to Israel in Exodus chapter 19: "You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself." So Egypt, then, was like the dragon. Egypt was like Satan seeking to destroy God's people. Pharaoh tried to eliminate Israel. Pharaoh tried to destroy them, but Pharaoh could not do it. God did not let him do it. Just as Satan cannot do it, because God would not let him destroy the Church either. God protects her against the assaults of Satan. And God even brings her into the wilderness where he provides for her, just like he did for Israel long ago, feeding her with manna, feeding her with the bread of heaven, so that she is taken care of throughout the whole time of her time on earth. Satan is not able to destroy the Church of God, because God does not let him do it.

But Satan doesn't give up. John tells us in verse 15: "The serpent poured water like a river out of his mouth after the woman, to sweep her away with a flood." Now, water is often used as a symbol of evil, especially in the Psalms in the Old Testament. We see a good example of this in Psalm 69, where it says this: "Let not the flood sweep over me, or the deep swallow me up, or the pit close its mouth over me." So evil here is compared, then, to a raging river, threatening to

destroy everything in its path. Or like deep water threatening to swallow somebody up, so that they go down without ever finding a bottom. Evil is depicted in this way. So the river which comes out of the mouth of the dragon is a river of evil.

But because it's coming out of his mouth, Christians, it shows that it is also a river of words, a river of lies. Satan tries to destroy the Church by deceiving her, by leading her into false belief. Because if he can convince the Church to believe a lie, he will lead her away from God. Because when we believe falsely, when we don't have the right truth about God, that kills the soul. That's exactly what Satan wants to happen. He wants to lead us away from the Lord. And so false teachers and false doctrines come into the world, all threatening to destroy the Church, all threatening to lead astray. How often do we see this happen, especially in these days?

But God does not allow him to destroy the Church in this way either. Verse 16 says: "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." This actually looks back to the Old Testament again with Korah in the wilderness. Korah was a man who tried to take the place of Moses. He rebelled against him. He wanted to be the one who was the leader of Israel. And he convinced many people to follow after him. He deceived them with his lies, even claiming to speak for God. But God punished him in a new way, when we hear in Numbers chapter 16: "And the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, with their households and all the people who belonged to Korah and all their goods." So God eliminated the evil in Israel by swallowing up Korah into the earth. He was no longer able to deceive the people as he had done. And so it is also here. God preserves his Church. He does not allow the lies that come out of Satan's mouth to overwhelm her. He keeps his Church pure from age to age, so that there are always those who believe in the truth.

And in both of these ways, Christians, we see Satan attempting to destroy the Church. But God does not let him do it. God prevents him from succeeding. God will never allow his Church to perish. Jesus makes this very clear when he says in John chapter 10: "My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand." And Jesus also again says very clearly, Matthew 16: "On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." So the Church will endure, Christians. It will never perish. No matter how bad things get, no matter how badly Satan attacks her, the Church will never disappear. Even if she is small, even if she is getting smaller, God will keep her safe until the Last Day. Satan cannot finally destroy the Church, because she belongs to God.

But Satan still tries. And so he goes after the one thing that he can go after. Verse 17 of our reading says: "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." So if the woman is the Church, we can think of her offspring as being individual Christians. The Church can never perish. God will not let her perish. But individual Christians can still suffer. That's why Satan focuses on individuals. That's why he goes after each and every one of us. As Peter says, he is a roaring lion, seeking whom he can devour. Sometimes he tries to devour us by force. He might not be able to kill the Church, but he can certainly kill us. Sometimes he tries to devour us with lies, deceiving us into believing that lie. We'll see examples of this, especially in the next chapter.

But Satan mainly tries to devour us by fear. He wants us to think that there is no hope. He wants us to think that the Church is dying, that everything is going downhill, that there's no use in hoping for anything because it's all going not the way that it should go. The culture is becoming worse. The world seems to be getting worse all the time. How can we ever think that we are going to win? There's only bad things in the news, only bad things in the nation. Satan wants us to despair.

But we have to remember, Christians, he is a liar. He has always been a liar. He lies when he says that the Church is dying. Even if the church is getting smaller, she cannot die. God will not let her, because the Church belongs to God. Satan lies when he says that there is no hope. Even if things are bad, the Church will endure. The Church has come through many bad times, some frankly worse than this one, and she has often come through them stronger than she was before. And Satan lies when he tries to convince us to give up, to think that there is no hope. Because the promises of God cannot fail, Christians, and God promises us victory through Jesus Christ. And more than this, Satan is already defeated. Christ has silenced him on the cross. Christ will crush him under his feet. Satan cannot win, no matter what he does. And remembering that will help us to withstand all of his attacks, no matter what they may be.

So stand firm, Christians. Satan is persistent. He will not give up. His attacks will continue until the Last Day. But he is already defeated. He cannot truly win. And even if he attacks you, even if he comes after you individually, do not listen to him. Listen instead to what Peter says, 1 Peter 5: "Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you." God will strengthen you for the fight, so stand firm in him!

Let us pray. Lord Jesus Christ, who resisted all the temptations of Satan in the wilderness for our sake, be with us in the hour of temptation and drive the devil far from us, so that we may stand firm in the truth of your Word forever; for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.