



Years ago Scott Peck wrote a book called *The Road Less Traveled*. He began that book with these memorable words: "Life is difficult. This is a great truth, one of the greatest truths. It is a great truth because once we truly see this truth, we transcend it. Once we truly know that life is difficult—once we truly understand and accept it—then life is no longer difficult. Because once it is accepted, the fact that life is difficult no longer matters."

What's interesting about this quote is that as followers of Jesus Christ we should know life is difficult. Jesus told us it would be. He said "*In this world you will have tribulation...*" (Jn. 16:33). Paul agreed when he said, "*Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God*" (Acts 14:22). We also know that at the end of the age the church will go through the most intense persecution of her history. Jesus spoke of "*a great tribulation, such has not been seen from the beginning of the world until now, and never will be*" (Matt. 24:21). So we've been warned beforehand that our life as believers will be anything but a cakewalk.

Unfortunately many of the trials and hardships we face are our own doing; the result of our own foolish choices. Few of us actually suffer specifically because we follow Christ. This of course wasn't true when John wrote the book of Revelation. Nor is it true in some countries today like Indonesia, Pakistan, and Turkey. In these countries following Christ can be costly.

But even if that's not our experience, we still wonder, why is life so difficult, especially for the believer? Why is it so hard to make those everyday choices that are conducive to growing in our walk with God and loving our neighbor as ourselves? Why does it feel like we're always having to run uphill? Why do we so often feel defeated?

We come this morning to Revelation 12 where these very questions are addressed. Chapter 12 begins a new section of Revelation. We just finished with the sounding of the seven trumpets in which God asserted his sovereignty by pouring out judgments on those who worship the beast. The sounding of the seventh trumpet brought an announcement of the end when "*the kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ*" (11:15). But now in chapter 12 John describes in more detail what will happen before the end actually comes. He reveals what's really behind all the tribulations and sufferings of God's people. He parts the curtain separating earth from heaven to depict a great warfare in the spiritual world. The experi-

ence of the church in suffering tribulation is the manifestation of a larger spiritual battle.

### **John sees a "great sign" which involves three characters**

In v.1 John says he saw "*a great sign*" in heaven. He then goes on and introduces us to three main characters, each of whom are symbolic of someone or something else. The three characters are a pregnant woman entering labor, the child she gives birth to, and an enormous red dragon.

There is no question about the identity of the dragon. Down in v.9 John identifies him as "*the serpent of old who is called the devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world...*" His seven crowns and ten horns symbolize his powerful empire.

Nor is there any question about who the child is the woman gives birth to. We learn down in v.5 his destiny is "*to rule all the nations with a rod of iron.*" This is clearly pointing to the Messiah—Jesus. Psalm 2:9 says the Messiah will "*break them with a rod of iron*" and "*shatter them like earthenware.*"

But who is the mother who gives birth to the child? Some say this is none other than Mary, the mother of Jesus. But there are several problems with this. In this story, the woman is persecuted and flees into the wilderness. As far as we know none of that happened to Mary. The story also speaks of the woman's offspring who were under attack by the dragon. Again, that doesn't really fit with Mary. Almost everyone agrees that this woman doesn't represent just one person but the whole people of God throughout history. In the Old Testament she would represent Israel and in the New Testament she and her offspring would represent the church.

### **John's three visions describe the defeat of Satan, the victory of Christ, and the persecution of the church**

Now that we know who these three main actors in the drama are, we're ready to look at the story. The story can be divided into three visions which all tell the same story of the defeat of Satan, the victory of Christ, and the persecution of the church.

#### **The woman, the child and the dragon**

First comes the vision of the woman, the child, and the dragon.

**"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. Then 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. Then the woman fled into the wilderness where she had a place prepared by God, so that there she would be nourished for one thousand two hundred and sixty days" (Rev. 12:1–6).

As the woman goes into labor, the dragon stands over her. He's determined to devour the vulnerable child the moment he's born. We can't help but think of the various threats Jesus encountered during his lifetime. It began with the determination of Herod to murder the Christ child, continued through his temptation in the wilderness, and culminated in the crucifixion. Satan was determined to devour Christ. Remember how Genesis spoke of the enmity that would exist between the serpent and the woman and her seed? But look what happens. The child is born but he's immediately snatched up by God and delivered to the throne. And then the woman flees to the wilderness to a place prepared for her for 1260 days. We've seen the number 1260 or 42 months before. It's the number representing the period of evil at the end of the age when Satan will try to frustrate the plan and purposes of God. Don't forget that to the Jewish people the wilderness was a place of testing but also a place of God's provision and closeness. This first vision is really a beautiful condensation of the gospel story from Jesus' birth to his resurrection and ascension, and on to the persecution and protection of the church.

### War in heaven

The second vision is one of warfare that takes place in heaven.

**"And there was war in heaven, Michael and his angels waging war with the dragon. 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" (verses 7–9).**

Michael, a leading archangel, together with his army of good angels, takes on the dragon and his demonic forces in all-out war. The dragon and his forces aren't strong enough and so they're thrown out of heaven and down to earth. This isn't describing some kind of fall of Satan that took place at the dawn of time. Rather this is a symbolic picture of how Satan has been defeated

through the work of Christ. It's not like he's coming to earth for the first time; he's been deceiving people all along. But because of what Jesus accomplished in his death, resurrection and ascension, Satan's power has been limited. It's like he's lost a massive amount of territory. He no longer has access to heaven. He's been confined wreaking havoc on earth.

And all of this is celebrated in a song John hears someone singing in a loud voice in verses 10–12.

**"Then 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, he 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 when faced with 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.'"**

What's celebrated here? Salvation is now available through Christ. Not only that, his power and his kingdom and his authority have come. Why? Because **"the accuser of our brethren has been thrown down."** Not only is he a deceiver but he's an accuser. Like a seasoned prosecuting attorney, he accuses us before God, like he did concerning Job. He takes your sin and flings it before God and before your own conscience to discredit you and discourage you. But now through the blood of Christ, all his grounds of accusation before God in heaven are gone. So there is joy in heaven. **"Rejoice, O heavens and you who dwell in them."** But that's not the end of the story. He also says **"Woe to the earth and the sea, because the devil has come down to you."** He's not a happy camper; he's ticked off!

### War on earth

This brings us to the third vision in which the dragon, filled with fury, takes all his wrath out on the woman and her offspring.

**"And when the dragon saw that he was thrown down to the earth, he persecuted the woman who gave birth to the male child. But the two wings of the great eagle were given to the woman, so that she could 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. But the earth helped the woman, and the earth opened its mouth and drank up the river which the dragon poured out of his mouth. So the dragon was enraged with the woman, and went off to make war with the rest of her children, who keep the commandments of**

## God and hold to the testimony of Jesus" (verses 13–17).

Hurled down to earth, furious over his defeat in heaven, the devil relentlessly pursues the woman. Again, she flees into the wilderness. This time she flies on the wings of eagles. In the Old Testament when God brought Israel out of Egypt and into the wilderness he said to them, *"You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings, and brought you to Myself"* (Ex.19:4). It's the same here. God is protecting his people! This makes the devil even more angry and so he tries to destroy her again by drowning her with a river of water flowing from his mouth. When that fails he becomes even more enraged and makes war with the rest of her children, who *"keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus."*

All three of these visions tell one story. The dominant theme is the defeat of Satan. You might say he has struck out. Strike one—He fails in his attempt to devour Christ, who instead was snatched up by God. Strike two—He fails to defeat Michael and his angels and instead is hurled down to earth. Strike three—He fails in his attempts to destroy the woman, who was rescued by God.

## **Though the crucial battle has been won through the work of Christ, Satan continues to harass the people of God**

I would like to step back from this and make three observations that will help us understand how this applies to us.

### **We are part of a cosmic battle between Satan and God**

The first thing that jumps out at us is the simple truth that we're in a battle. Specifically, we're part of a cosmic battle that's been going on through the ages between Satan and God. Don't get this wrong. It's not like Satan is God's equal. It's not the two are fighting it out like two brothers and we're not sure who will win. Satan is nothing more than a created being; a fallen angel. For some reason we can't completely comprehend why God puts up with him for a time. Meanwhile, we're caught up in the battle. Do you accept that?

C.S. Lewis said we can fall into two equal and opposite errors concerning the devil. We can either take him far too seriously or not take him seriously enough. The devil is happy with both a Christian whose mind is preoccupied with the him all day long and with one who hardly gives him a thought. Most of us in the American church fall into the latter error—we don't take him seriously enough. We must understand he's living. He's crafty. We wonder why there is so much violence on our streets and in our homes. Why so much greed. Why our sexuality is so bent. It's him! The main thing is he's out to hurt Christ and Christ's cause. You personally are of no interest to him. It's only in your relationship with Christ and his cause that he cares about you and will

pay attention to you. Before you became a Christian his main interest was to blind you to the truth about Christ and to seduce you further into his own terrain. But now he'll do everything he can to render you ineffective for Christ and his cause.

There several ways he works, which are seen right here in this story. He tempts, he accuses, he deceives, and he devours.

**You will be tempted.** The kinds of temptation will change for each person and for each stage of your life. He knows how to push your buttons. It might be the need for a relationship, or the desire to achieve, or lust for more things. Temptation will never go away, whether you're 14 or 40 or 84. J.C. Ryle wrote many years ago, "We are too apt to forget that temptation to sin will rarely present itself to us in its true colors, saying, 'I am your deadly enemy, and I want to ruin you forever in hell.' Oh no! Sin comes to us like Judas, with a kiss; like Joab, with outstretched hand and flattering words. The forbidden fruit seemed good and desirable to Eve; yet it cast her out of Eden. Walking idly on his palace roof seemed harmless enough to David; yet it ended in adultery and murder. Sin rarely seems like sin at first beginnings. Let us then watch and pray, lest we fall into temptation." The fact you're tempted is not all Satan's fault. James says, *"each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own desire"* (Jms 1:14). When Satan tempts there is something in you that echoes back. The Bible call it "the flesh." Being tempted is not sin in and of itself. Jesus was tempted. It's how we deal with the temptation. Luther said you can't stop birds flying about your head, but you can stop them from building a nest in your hair.

**You will be accused.** He's the accuser of the brethren. God's Spirit will convict you of sin in order to bring you back into fellowship with God through confession and repentance. The devil will accuse you of sin in order to destroy your fellowship with God. He'll take that which is confessed and covered by the blood of Christ and use it to discourage you and defeat you and make you feel as if there is no way God could possibly want to have anything to do with you.

**You will be deceived.** He's called in this passage the one *"who deceives the whole world."* He began by deceiving Eve with these words, *"Did God really say that?"* Paul describes Satan as the *"the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving, that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ..."* (2 Cor 4:4). Deceived by TV ads and university educations and self-help books. John White writes, "Satan the deceiver understands his business well. Anyone who can keep you feverishly hunting for the perfect deodorant without letting you realize what an ass you are is supremely competent."

Finally he will seek to devour you. That's what he tried to do to Christ and to the woman and that's what he wants to do with us who follow Christ. Jesus called him a murderer. If he can't kill you he will harm you. Paul said, *"there was given me a thorn in*

*the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me*" (2 Cor. 12:9). God allowed it and God used it, but Satan sent it. Satan can't hurt you unless God allows it, and he can't kill you until your task for Christ is complete, but he will try. And when he gets to the place where he's trying to kill you, he's reached the peak of his frustration. He knows Christ in his death won his greatest victory.

### **Because of the work of Christ, Satan is a defeated foe who lashes out at God's people**

This leads me to the second observation I want to make. Because of the work of Christ, Satan is a defeated foe who lashes out at God's people. Don't miss this! According to this story, why is Satan down here? Why is he so mad? Why is he furiously chasing after and harassing the woman and her offspring? Because he's a loser! Because he couldn't defeat Christ, and he can't devour Christ's people. That's why Martin Luther could sing, "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." Let me encourage you, take him into account, respect the damage he can do, beware of him, but do not fear him. He shudders at the name of Jesus. Whether he seeks to tempt you, or deceive you, or accuse you, or devour you, God will always provide a way of escape. God will lead you on eagles wings to a place of protection and provision and closeness with him.

### **God's people will prevail through the blood of the lamb, the word of their testimony, and not loving their lives unto death**

The last observation I want to make is that God's people will prevail through the blood of the lamb, the word of their testimony, and not loving their lives unto death. *"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 when faced with death"* (v.11).

We prevail through the blood of the lamb. This isn't an invitation to some kind of religious incantation acted out around the sacred words "the blood of Jesus." These words have no magic in them; this isn't a spell. Blood in scripture symbolizes death. John is telling us here that we overcome the devil through the death of Jesus. The blood of the lamb is that which Jesus shed for all of our sins—past, present and future. That same blood cleanses our conscience (Heb 9:14). God's answer to your guilty conscience is the blood which Jesus shed for you; your answer to your guilty conscience is usually something you do for God. But nothing you do for God is enough to pay for your sins and give you a clear conscience; only the blood of Jesus will do. The writer of Hebrews said, *"Let us draw near with a sincere heart in full*

*assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience"* (Heb. 10:22).

But that's not all. We also prevail through the word of our testimony and not loving our lives even when faced with death. What does that mean? Maybe an example from history will help. Just 15 years after John wrote Revelation in A.D. 111, a guy named Pliny the Younger was appointed governor of Bithynia. He found himself confronted with the problem of what to do about Christians brought before him for trial. He wrote this to the Emperor Trajan, "I have never participated in trials of Christians. I therefore do not know what offenses it is the practice to punish or investigate. Meanwhile, in the case of those who were denounced to me as Christians, I have observed the following procedure: I interrogated these as to whether they were Christians; those who confessed I interrogated a second and a third time, threatening them with punishment; those who persisted I ordered executed. For I had no doubt that, whatever the nature of their creed, stubbornness and inflexible obstinacy surely deserve to be punished. There were others possessed of the same folly; but because they were Roman citizens, I signed an order for them to be transferred to Rome."

Trajan replied, "You observed proper procedure. They are to be punished, with this reservation, that whoever denies that he is a Christian and really proves it—that is, by worshiping our gods—even though he was under suspicion in the past, shall obtain pardon through repentance."

Even though many of these dear believers of the second century died, they still overcame. They overcame because through their death they received life. Most of us won't have to make that choice. How much more then, should we be willing to confess Christ to those around us? We may not lose our lives, but what if we had to lose our job? Or what if we had to lose a friendship? Or what if we had to narrow the choices of who we could marry? Holding fast to the word of your testimony, spoken with love, seasoned with grace, is still the way we overcome the enemy.

This past week I spent a day in Guam and swam near the spot where Shoichi Yokoi was found on the evening of January 24, 1972. He was a Japanese soldier who for 28 years hid in an underground jungle cave, fearing to come out of hiding even after finding leaflets declaring that World War II had ended.

That's a lot like Satan. He knows he's lost the war, but he won't surrender until he's forced to. In the meantime, he will do as much damage as he can. But as followers of Christ, we mustn't fear him, but overcome him by the blood of the lamb, the word of our testimony and by not loving our lives even unto death.

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Catalog No. 1342-16