

CHRISTMAS DAY - God's Perspective on Christmas

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[0 : 00] Now, in technical language, that's a theologian. That is a thinker, a preacher about God and his ways in his world. Now, let me tell you that I find Christmas one of the most hardest times to think about God clearly.

I'll tell you why that is. You see, I'm usually dead tired at the end of another busy year. And I'm also a year older, which means I'm not quite as resilient as I was the year before.

And God thinking is sort of crowded out by everything that happens at this time of year. Reflection on God is crowded out by the urgency of arranging family events, you know, writing to people that I haven't written to for a year, sending out cards, buying gifts, the usual rush that all of us get into.

And the few perspectives on God that come to us from the surrounding world largely come by loudspeakers, you know, blaring forth what's largely froth and bubble and Christian jingos.

And then, you know, thoughts of sleighs and snow and deer sort of push themselves upon us and crowd out our thoughts while we're sort of trying to struggle amongst the increasing numbers of flies in the growing warmth of the Australian summer.

[1 : 11] So, and a few songs that have reflections on God urge us to think about images of a child who doesn't cry, held by a woman who hasn't gone through the pain of labour, staring at a tiny barn, out of a tiny barn, you know, surrounded by sanitised animals that never defecate, on straw that looks like it's been washed in Dettol.

So, you know, in my experience, sort of Christmas is a difficult time to think about God. It's difficult to reflect upon God and to reflect upon His ways and to think, what exactly is this all about?

So I thought today we'd go to an unusual part of the Bible in order to have a look. We're going to go to a passage that I think is an advanced theological, advanced God-thinking passage about this event.

In many ways, I think this passage we're going to look at this morning grants us access into God's mind on exactly what it is that is happening at Christmas.

The passage comes from Revelation chapter 12, which is the passage read to us earlier on, and you should have received a little slip of paper that has it on so that you can follow it with me. Before we take a look at it, let me just give you a bit of background to Revelation.

[2 : 29] It's a strange book in many ways, but it has a title. And the title is there in the very first verse, not of this passage, but of chapter 1 of Revelation. It says, the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Now that word revelation actually means sort of an unveiling or a disclosure. So the book of Revelation is an unveiling of God and His purposes in His world.

It's God's disclosure. It's God saying, this is what I'm on about in my world. However, when you get to the book of Revelation, the way it does that is really quite weird.

You see, people are often represented in the likeness of animals. Historical events sort of take the shape of natural phenomena. Colors and numbers have all sorts of hidden meanings to them.

And because this book is so different, and because I've chosen to preach on it on Christmas Day, I need to give a bit of explanation as we go. So please bear with me, because I think if we look at this passage well, we'll be richly rewarded by it.

[3 : 29] So let's get started. We are, in Revelation 12, going to go behind the scenes of heaven into the very mind of God Himself. And we're going to see what He has to say about these events surrounding Christmas Day.

Now, so have a look at it in front of you there. And the first thing I want you to notice is that the chapter begins with two great signs, or portents, as it's called there. The first portent, or sign, is a sign of a woman.

And verse 1 there says, she is clothed with the sun. The moon is under her feet. And on her head, she has a crown of 12 stars. But that's not all we're told about her.

Because if you look there in the passage, in verse 2, we're told, this woman is pregnant, and she's about to give birth. She's caught in the labour pains of birth. She's in very deep agony.

So we wonder, don't we, well, who could this woman be? And at first glance, we are naturally tempted to think, well, this must be Mary, who gave birth to Jesus. Or we could think about other women from biblical history who have struggled to give birth, you know, like perhaps Sarah, Abraham's wife, or Hannah.

[4 : 38] And I think we're meant to think of such women. But I think that's not the main purpose of, that's not the main identity of this woman. The main thing that's about this woman is that she's got this crown.

And that crown has 12 stars. 12 stars represents the people of God. So what I think is happening is this woman in some way represents or encapsulates all of God's people who long for God's purposes to be fulfilled.

Their struggle, their pain is the struggle and pain of all pious people throughout all history. So there's the first sign. A woman. Clothed with the sun.

The moon under her feet. This crown of 12 stars on her head. Caught in the agony of giving birth. And in verse 2 we're introduced to a second sign.

Now, we're told that this poor tent appears in heaven. And this poor tent is that of a great and awesome, terrifying red dragon. Verse 2 says, this red dragon, well he has seven heads.

[5 : 40] He has ten horns. And on each of his heads there is a diadem or a crown. These seven heads and these seven crowns, just like the things with the woman, they're representative. You see, seven is the number of God.

Heads, well that represents wisdom. Crowns, that represents rule. So what are we being told by this red dragon? We're told here is someone, a beast, who has pretensions.

Pretensions of divine wisdom and power. A beast of terrifying proportions. That's made clear in verse 3 where we're told that his tail alone is capable of sweeping away a third of the stars of heaven and casting them down to the ground.

So we wonder, don't we, who could this red dragon be? Well, he's obviously the enemy of the people of God. You'll see that as the passage goes on. But he's also the enemy of God himself.

Look at verse 9 in the passage. His identity is actually spelt out by the writer here. The dragon is the serpent of the book of Genesis. The one that's called the devil, Satan, the deceiver of the world.

[6 : 50] That's who this beast is. Then in verse 4, the drama heightens, you see, because what happens is the pregnant woman, the red dragon, they're thrown into this incredible cosmic conflict.

Look at what happens. Notice the focus of the conflict. On the first level, it's a conflict about a child, isn't it? And this dragon seeks to devour the child.

But that's not the full story. See, fundamentally, this is a conflict about the purposes of God. That's what's going on here. You see, God has a purpose for his world. His purpose is tied up with this woman and this child.

Satan says, I don't like that and sets himself against the purposes of God, just as he has always done. He seeks to stop God's purpose, to devour it, to obliterate it, to wipe it out.

The second thing is about where this conflict occurs. See, it occurs in two places, our passage makes clear. On one hand, it occurs on earth.

[7 : 48] You see, on earth, what happens? Well, Satan sends his representatives. You can imagine who they might be. Herod, or the Jewish authorities, or the Roman rulers, or even the disciples of Jesus.

And they try and stop the purposes of God. How does Herod do it? Well, we hear in the Christmas story that he tries to kill every male child under two. How do religious authorities do it in the life of Jesus?

Well, they might do it out of jealousy for Jesus as they try to kill him. The Romans might try to crucify Jesus to appease religious authorities. The disciples try to do it by saying to Jesus, don't go to the cross.

On the other hand, if the conflict occurs with real people in real historical situations, there's a deeper reality going on behind the scenes of heaven.

And this passage lets us into that reality. It shows us that behind the people on earth and behind their situation, there stands an eternal reality.

[8 : 48] And behind them stands a conflict in heaven between the people of God and the devil, between Satan and God himself. So let's have a look at what happens.

Verse 4 following. Look at it there. There's this conflict between Satan and God. And it narrows down to one purpose, to one central person in all of history.

A male child. And this male child we know is clearly Jesus Christ. Let's look at what the passage tells us about him. First thing we're told about this child is that he is one who will rule all the nations of the earth.

You see, he is the one to whom God will give all authority and power. He is God's appointed and anointed king. He is the one who has been the focus of God's great purpose since history began.

He is the one God had in mind when Adam was given rule over the earth. He is the one God had waiting in the wings when Adam failed and God promised he would stomp on the head of the serpent.

[9 : 53] He is the one God was looking toward when he appointed David as king. And then when all the kings of Israel failed, he is the one God was looking toward. One who would rule the people of God with justice and fairness.

Second thing we're told in verse 5 is that this child will be snatched up. That is, caught up to God in his throne. That's probably a reference to the ascension. That is to him being caught up and joining God after his death.

In other words, but we're reminded that this is the same one who shed his blood. Because verse 11 talks about the blood of a lamb. Can you see what's being said?

We're being told about this male child who died, but who will rule the nations of the earth. He will die at the hands of the evil one and his representatives.

But God will vindicate him and sweep him up into heaven to the right hand of God, the victor of a cosmic conflict. You see, Revelation is very clear when you look at it in this way.

[10 : 54] The birth of this male child is God's instrument of victory. You see, this male child is the one through whom Satan is defeated.

This male child is the culmination of the conflict between God and the evil one. And he is the means of victory. His coming into the world as we celebrate today represents God's final and devastating assignment.

Salt on the kingdom of Satan. He is God's trump card. And therefore the birth of this child is cosmic in its proportions. Look at it in verse 8.

The ancient serpent, the devil, Satan, the deceiver of the world and his cohorts are thrown down. And a great voice proclaims. Now has come salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Messiah.

For the accuser of our comrades has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. But they have conquered him by the blood of the lamb and by the word of their testimony.

[12 : 00] For they did not cling to life even in the face of death. Rejoice then, you heavens and those who dwell in them. But woe to the earth and the sea. For the devil has come down to you with great wrath because he knows that his time is short.

Friends, I wonder if you can hear what this voice is saying. It is screaming out to the entire world in all of time that in Christ God has forgiven sin.

And with sin defeated, the hold of Satan is ended. And with his hold on the world ended, the end is nigh. And so it is that in his death row, Satan sets himself against the people of God.

And he does it in a couple of ways. Look at verses 13 to 17. He attacks those who have given birth to the male child. I suspect that's a reference to Jewish people who believed in the purposes of God in Christ.

Jewish Christians. Second, he pursues the rest of the offspring of the child, we're told. In other words, he wages war, I think, on Gentile Christians. And now look at how the chapter ends.

[13 : 02] There is this great red dragon. He stands ominously at the edge of the Mediterranean Sea. He looks toward distant lands, scanning them, scanning the world and all history, perhaps for looking out for those who will keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus.

So there's Revelation 12. That's a terrifying chapter, isn't it? Images of a painful birth, of beasts, of war, of dragons and angels, of kings and devils.

It's kingly and cosmic in its trauma. But it's not only terrifying. I think it is strikingly vivid, isn't it? This chapter has presented a powerful and strong and true picture of the world that you and I live in.

It has unlocked heaven for us and given us a perspective from God. The reality it portrays is that we live in the midst of a great and cosmic conflict. A conflict greater than any world war that has been or will be waged.

It is a war in which God, the cosmic warrior, battles the forces of evil in heaven and on earth. And the focus of this battle is in one place.

[14 : 24] The birth, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. Revelation 12, therefore, functions, I think, as a little bit of an alternative view to the birth of Jesus recorded in Luke and Matthew's Gospels.

You see, when you read Luke and Matthew, they tell you what's happening on the ground. They tell you these prophecies are being fulfilled. They give you a hint of what the purposes of God are.

But Revelation, it unlocks heaven. And it offers some developed God thinking about Christmas. And it, therefore, offers us something very different from the normal picture of Christmas.

You see, there's no twinkling stars here, is there? There's no peaceful images of shepherds and sheep and angels announcing glad tidings. No grand pictures of these wise kings offering gifts.

No sheep and cattle staring at silent infants in sterilized, sanitized mangers. No. Instead, there's this pious Jewish woman in pain with all the agony and failure of sinful humanity.

[15 : 36] There's a lonely Jewish woman giving birth to a child. A helpless infant unable to fend himself for himself lying in a food trough.

God's potential hero sucking dependently at his mother's breast. And this chapter tells us that this helpless child is the culmination of God's great battle plan.

And it tells us that even if we don't know it, Satan knew it. And Satan saw himself threatened.

Revelation 12, you see, lets us into the stable. And it tells us what really crouches over the manger. You see, what crouches over the manger is not a stray cow.

It's not a sheep. It's not a goat. No, it's this great, terrible, dreadful red dragon ready to release all his forces.

[16 : 42] It is the evil one himself. And that, friends, is the reality of Christmas. And today I want you to remember this reality with me. You see, as you celebrate Christmas, I want you to ask, is this how I really see things?

Do you look beyond the baby to the great and eternal battle line set in heaven? Do you see that this male child born here will hang on a cross and the angels of God will punch the air in victory as they see God's battle won?

Do you watch this child and his life and death and join with the angels in their eternal song? Now has come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Messiah.

For the accuser of our comrades has been thrown down who accuses them night and day before our God. But they have conquered him by the blood of the lamb and by the word of their testimony. For they did not cling to life even in the face of death.

Rejoice then, you heavens and those who dwell in them. Do you see that great red dragon who is the evil one standing on the sand of the sea eyeing us off and plotting against all of us who hold to the testimony of Jesus?

[18 : 08] For friends, you may not see him, but he is there. And he does scheme against those who hold to the testimony of Jesus. And he does threaten our world.

But friends, today I want to tell you, do not be afraid. For the resources of the God of heaven that vindicated his son are at our disposal.

Victory is assured. For we have a saviour in heaven. A lamb who was slain. But one who stands victorious.

And who will throw down this dragon and welcome us into God's presence. And cast aside all accusations from us. Friends, this Christmas, don't be fooled by the tinsel and the trinkets.

This chapter gives us the truth. It gives us God's perspective on Christmas. And it is strong. It is bold.

[19 : 08] And it is real. For this is God's view of what this day means. Let us pray. Father, as we celebrate the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ, we thank you for this insight into your purposes in him.

We thank you for the victory that he won. We thank you for the victory that he won.

We thank you for the victory that he won't be able to do the victory that he won't be. We thank you for the victory that he won't be. Thank you for the victory that he won't be. That through his blood, we, as those who hold to the testimony of Jesus, have conquered.

Please help us to keep the word of testimony about Jesus. To be willing not to cling to life in the face of death, but to rather cling to the Lord Jesus.

And help us this day, Father, to rejoice with you and with all the heavens in the great victory that you have won through this man that we celebrate the birth of today.

[20 : 26] For, Father, we know that he is your son and that his victory is assured by his death. We thank you for this. In the name of the Lord Jesus.

Amen. How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given.

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