

CHRISTMAS DAY - A Woman, Her Child and a Dragon

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[0 : 00] Well, friends, I want to begin today by being very frank with you. I'm a person that has been trained to be, if you like, a thinker about God.

That is, and I've spent most of my life doing God thinking. In many ways, I'm a professional God thinker. In technical language, that means I'm a theologian, a thinker and a preacher about God and his ways.

Now, let me tell you that I find Christmas one of the hardest times to do that sort of thinking about God and to do it clearly. You see, a whole lot of factors come into play. I'm usually dead tired at the end of another busy year.

I'm a year older, therefore not quite as resilient as I was in previous years. And God thinking is just naturally crowded out by Christmas itself. Reflection on God is crowded out by the urgency of arranging family events, perhaps writing to some friends that we haven't communicated with for a year, sending out cards, buying gifts, all those sorts of things.

And the few perspectives that come on God to us largely come via loudspeakers blaring out froth and bubble, jingoistic stuff, aren't they?

[1 : 11] Thoughts of sleighs, snow and deer, I think in Australia, incongruously crowd out thoughts as we shop amongst increasing numbers of flies in the growing warmth of an Australian summer.

And the few songs that do reflect on God urge us to remember such images as a child who doesn't cry, held by a woman who hasn't gone through the pain of labour, staring out of a barn, surrounded by sanitised animals that never seem to defecate, standing on straw that looks as though it's been washed in Dettol.

You see, in my experience, Christmas is a very difficult time to think about God. It's difficult to reflect upon God and his ways. And for that reason, I thought we might try to break through the barrier today.

And you can see that I've set you very weird passages in one sense for Christmas. I thought that we could go to this passage in Revelation that talks about the birth of Jesus, but a passage that I don't know that I've ever heard read at Christmas, except when I've set it, let alone preached on.

So I'm going to have a go this morning. It's a passage, I think, full of advanced thinking about God about this event. And it's a passage that grants us access into God's mind as to what he actually thinks, exactly thinks is happening at Christmas.

[2 : 32] It's found in Revelation 12. And if you're looking for it in your Bibles, you can turn to it on page 1245. 1,245. And I would encourage you to follow with me.

Although Andrew's just told me I've got some of the numbers wrong in my verses, but you'll be okay. You'll be able to find them. Okay. So let me give you just a bit of background to the book of Revelation.

So you know a bit about what it's about. First, let's think about the title of the book. The very first book, verse of the book calls it the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Now, the original Greek word here means an unveiling, a disclosure. That's the first thing to know about the book of Revelation. It's a book of disclosure, the unveiling of God and his purposes in his world.

Second, let's think about the character of the book. It is a weird book in so many ways. But it's particularly weird because of the way it presents people and events. People are often represented in the likeness of animals.

[3 : 31] Historical events take the form of natural phenomena. Colors and numbers have secret meanings. Because the book's so different, we're going to have to do some work if we want to understand Revelation 12 properly.

But if we do, we'll be rewarded well. So let's get started. Let's, as it were, go behind the scenes and find out what God has to say about the events of Christmas Day.

So, first thing I want you to notice is the chapter begins with two great signs. The first is the sign of a woman. Verse 1 says she's clothed with the sun.

The moon and the, and the moon and the, sorry, she has moon and then there are things under her feet.

On her head, she bears a crown of 12 stars. But that's not all we're told about this woman. Verse 2 indicates she's pregnant and she's about to give birth. She's caught up in the labour pains of that birth.

[4 : 26] She's in deep agony. But who is the woman? At first glance, we're naturally tempted to think of Mary who gave birth to Jesus. Or we could think of all the other women in biblical history who've struggled to give birth.

Women such as Sarah or Hannah that we've looked at the last couple of weeks. I think we're meant to think of such women. But this passage is clear that it's not the identity of the woman that is important.

What's important is the crown with 12 stars. 12 stars probably represent the people of God. They encapsulate all of God's people who long for God's purposes to be fulfilled.

Their struggle, their pain is the struggle of all pious people throughout all ages. That's the first sign. A woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, crowned with the crown of 12 stars, caught in the agony of giving birth.

Then in verse 2, we're introduced to a second sign. We're told of a portent that appears in heaven. And that portent is great and awesomely terrifying. It is that of a great red dragon.

[5 : 30] Verse 2 says, he has seven heads and ten horns. And on each of his heads, there is a diadem or a crown. The seven heads and the seven crowns are representative.

Seven, you see, is God's number. It represents wisdom. Crowns represent power and rule. So we're being told that this beast has enormous pretensions.

He is a beast with pretensions to divine wisdom and power. He's a beast of terrifying proportions. That's made clear in verse 3, where we are told that his tail alone is just capable of sweeping away a third of the stars of heaven and casting them to the earth.

So who's the great red dragon? Well, he's obviously the enemy of the people of God. He's also the enemy of God himself. Look at verse 9. His identity is spelled out. He's the serpent of Genesis 3.

The one who's called the devil. Satan, the deceiver of the world. And in verse 4, the drama heightens. For the pregnant woman and the great red dragon are thrown into a terrible cosmic conflict.

[6 : 33] And look at what happens. First, I want you to notice the focus of the conflict. It's about a child, isn't it? The dragon is seeking to devour this child. But that's not the full story.

You see, fundamentally, the conflict is about the purposes of God. That's what's going on here. You see, God has a great purpose in his world. It's tied up with a woman and her child.

And Satan sets himself against this purpose just as he's always done. He seeks to stop it, to devour it, to obliterate it. Second thing about this conflict is where it occurs.

Our passage makes clear that it occurs in two places. On the one hand, it occurs on earth. On earth, you see, Satan sends his human representatives such as Herod, the Jewish authorities, Roman rulers, even the disciples of Jesus himself.

And they try to thwart the purposes of God. The religious authorities might do it by jealousy over the success of Jesus. Herod does it by trying to slaughter innocents and so on.

[7 : 32] And on the one hand, this conflict occurs with real people in real historical situations. But as real as these people and situations look, there's a great and deeper reality going on.

And this passage lets us into it. It shows us that behind these earthly people, there stands an eternal reality. Behind them, there is a cosmic conflict in heaven between the people of God and the devil, between Satan and God himself.

And in the midst of that, let's return to the conflict. Verse 4, look at it. Conflict between Satan and God narrows down into the central person of all history, a male child.

A male child is clearly Jesus. Let's see what this passage tells us about him. The first thing we're told is that this child is the one who will rule all the nations of the earth.

He's the one to whom God will give all authority and power. He is God's appointed and anointed king. He's the one who's been the focus of God's great purposes from before all history began.

[8 : 35] He's the one God had in mind when Adam was given rule over the earth. He's the one God had in waiting in the wings when Adam failed and God promised one who'd stomp on the head of a serpent.

He's the one God was looking forward to when he appointed David as king. He is God's holy and anointed one. That is the one who is waiting here.

And I want you to just follow in your Bibles and see what happens to him. So we read. When the dragon saw that he had been. Sorry.

I'll read from verse seven. There was war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon and the dragon and his angels fought back.

But when he was not strong enough for he was not strong enough and they had their. I'm sorry. And they lost their place in the heaven and the great dragon was hurled down that ancient serpent called the devil or Satan who leads the whole world astray.

[9 : 35] He was hurled to the earth and his angels with him. And then I heard a loud voice in heaven say 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 brothers and sisters who accuses them before our God.

Day and night has been hurled down and they triumphed over him by the blood of the lamb and by the word of their testimony. And they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.

Therefore rejoice you heavens and you who dwell in them. But woe to the earth and the sea because the devil has gone down to you. He has filled.

He is filled with fury because he knows that his time is short. And when the dragon saw that he'd been hurled to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child.

And the woman was given the two wings of a great eagle that she might fly to the place prepared for her in the wilderness. And she would be taken care of for a time, times and half a time.

[10 : 37] And that means a limited period of time. And then I saw this is verse 13. Then from his mouth, the serpent spewed water like a river to overtake the woman and sweep her away with the torrent.

But the earth helped the woman by opening its mouth and swallowing the river that the dragon spewed out of his mouth. And then the dragon was enraged at the woman and went off to wage war against the rest of her offspring.

Let me tell you what I think is going on here. This is about the birth of Jesus into the world. And what happens is God is saying all the forces of evil are arrayed against her.

They are arrayed against her son. Why? Because God's purposes are focused in this birth. And Satan seeks to do everything he can to thwart it.

He tries to oppose the woman. He tries to do away with the child. He tries to do away with the Jewish Christians. He then tries to do away with Gentile Christians.

[11 : 43] He tries to do away with everything because he knows that if he does not, he will be like. The king of Babylon. The king of Babylon. That we read about in Isaiah 14 and will be done away with.

Friends, I want you to think about Christmas. What do you think about when you think about Christmas? Do you think about those sanitized mangers? Do you think about the stray cow that wanders in?

The lamb? The other animals that are there. And you think, isn't this lovely? Well, do you know what is crouched above that crib?

It is a dragon. It is the evil one himself. He is seeking to do away with this child.

He will think he has won his day when that child is crucified as an adult. But actually, as he dies, he will bind that evil one forever.

[12 : 56] But then the evil one, thinking he's still got some room, will go off to wage war on the people of God. Now, friends, do you know in the last hundred years in the world, more Christians have died of persecution than all the 19th centuries before them?

This year, we've seen Christians persecuted around the world. We've seen the devil wage war on them, as it were.

That is, the forces set against God's people. Friends, Christmas is not our sanitized images. No, Christians.

Christmas is about a dragon. Crouched over a crib. And its mother seeking to devour. And it's about God rescuing.

And it's about God promising victory for his people. And so I want to close by reading to you from verse 10. Can you see what the angels are declaring when they sing this song?

[14 : 10] Now, 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 brothers and sisters who accuses them before our God day and night has been hurled down.

They triumphed over him by the blood of the Lamb. That is, by the death of Jesus. And by the word of their testimony, their confession that he is Lord.

They did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death. Therefore, can you hear this? Therefore, rejoice you heavens. And you who dwell in them.

But now, woe to the earth and the sea. Because the devil has gone down to you. He is filled with fury because he knows his time is short. But, friends, his day is ended.

It was ended by the death that we celebrate in just a few months. So both are tied together. The birth of a Messiah and his death to end the reign of evil.

[15 : 22] That's what we celebrate at Christmas. That's what we'll celebrate at Easter. That is the core of who we are. And that's why we gather as God's people today.

And that's why we pray for God's people around the world who are feeling the force of this. So I'm going to close by praying for them this day. So let's pray. Father, we thank you for this miraculous birth of your son into the world.

Father, we thank you for the promise of victory that this passage paints for us. Father, we pray for this day.

And we particularly pray for our persecuted brothers and sisters around the world. who face a force of evil that causes them harm.

And that we, in one sense, here in Australia don't see. We pray for these, our brothers and sisters today. That you would fill them with comfort and encouragement through the birth of your son.

[16 : 38] Knowing that his life will end with a death that will give an eternal victory. That will never pass away. And that will cause them to be able to wipe away their tears.

So, Father, we pray also for ourselves. We pray that as we talk to our friends, as we celebrate Christmas, we remember these eternal realities that you've led us into by going behind the scenes for us in Revelation.

So we thank you for these things. And we praise your name for your son. In whose name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen.