

19

REVELATION 12

WATCH OUT FOR THE ANGRY DRAGON

If you have read Tolkien's book "The Hobbit", you have also met the great dragon 'Smaug'. You may have seen a picture of Smaug sleeping in this huge pile of silver, gold and precious stones, in a cave deep in the mountains. He guards his stolen treasures, but as long as he sleeps he is okay.

If you have watched the second part of the movie-series "The Hobbit", called "The desolation of Smaug", you have also seen this dragon. Slowly he wakes up, an enormous, vile monster, ready to kill and destroy. But he fails to kill the hobbit Bilbo and the Dwarfs, and in a vicious mood he heads for Lake Town.

In this chapter we also meet a dragon. It is a huge, fiery, blood-red, fire-breathing powerful dragon, a frightening monster.

But this one is not sleeping and guarding his treasures. No, this one is wide awake, and he is angry, really angry. He is furious!

Let us be realistic. You would not like to run into a dragon at the best of times. They are pretty unpredictable. That is why in "The Hobbit", Bilbo Baggins is so careful. He tries not to wake up the sleeping Smaug when he sneaks into the Lonely Mountain.

But running into a dragon who is filled with fury and rage is definitely not a good idea. You do not want to be in his way.

Well, this furious dragon here in Revelation 12 is after you and me. He wants to kill us. He wants to kill God's people, Christian believers. He hates those *who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus*, it says in v.17.

Why is that? Why is he trying to get you? We find out in John's vision in this chapter. It shows us the background history that led to the fierce and destructive anger that we are facing in this raving mad and dangerous dragon.

Today, we need to take note that three times already this dragon suffered a humiliating defeat when he tried to reach his goal. And he knows that he is running out of time.

A CHILD

You will remember that the first effect of the seventh angel sounding his trumpet was encouraging. In Rev. 11:15–18 we heard heavenly songs of praise, because of the never-ending reign of the victorious Christ. It shows that this seventh trumpet blast marks a key moment in the developments pictured in Revelation.

Now the end is really, really close.

But we are not there yet. The narrative continues. In Rev. 15 we will see how the seventh trumpet triggers the next sequence of seven: seven angels carrying seven bowls, filled with the seven plagues of God's wrath, more frightening judgments the world is facing.

But before we get there, John's visions will give us an in-depth overview of what is going on behind the scenes. We must be aware of the powers that are at work in this world behind the powers that seem to be at work in this world. We need to have a picture of this, so that we better understand the seriousness of God's judgments.

But it will also help us not to despair of the final outcome of what is going on in the world, and to know what to watch out for!

John's vision pictures Satan's fiercely aggressive activities by means of three animals: the dragon (Rev. 12), the beast out of the sea (Rev. 13a) and the beast out of the earth (Rev. 13b).

We look around in this world and we see a lot of aggression, war, civil war, cultural or religious violence, racism, oppression, and persecution. Well, the view we get here, the perspective from above, shows us that the real clash, the real war is not between world-powers or civilizations. It is between Christ and Satan. And that war spills over in the war between the church and the world.

Here we meet the first one of these powers, the dragon. And as was mentioned earlier, he is really mad, furious. Rev. 12 is kind of unique as its vision scans all of history from above, in an extremely compact way, to make clear why this dragon is so angry. At the same time, although the vision should make us careful, we learn why we shouldn't worry too much about it.

The dragon represents or symbolizes Satan, the devil. He is the one who *prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour* (1 Peter 5:8). That also reflects his anger and frustration.

Now we know that Satan was not only present at the fall into sin (Genesis 3:1-7), but the LORD also addressed him, when he said, after the fall: *I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel* (Genesis 3:15). Satan remembers this, of course. Rev. 12 demonstrates that Satan sees how the fulfilment of this promise is unfolding, and he can do nothing about it. He tries to stop it, but he cannot. It is really maddening, frustrating.

In the first part of his vision John sees three characters: a woman, a dragon and a child. The conflict or enmity is between the first two characters, the woman and the dragon. However, what is really at the centre is the child. As it turns out, this child, in the end, is the cause of the conflict, the key person in the hostilities. That is Jesus.

The main characters are linked by the word "sign". The woman is *a great sign*, whereas the dragon has a lesser status. It is merely called *another sign*. The word "sign" stresses how important it is that we look at these things as symbols that point at another reality.

The woman symbolizes the church, the one community of God's chosen people in Old and New Testament. Although, in v.5 the emphasis may be more on God's people in the Old Testament, the people of Israel, later on that shifts somewhat more to God's New Testament people.

And as we saw already, the dragon symbolizes Satan, the devil. That is even said with so many words in v.9, where he is also called *that ancient serpent*. This reminds us again of the dirty role he played in Genesis 3. In this way the dragon symbolizes the one supernatural power that is behind all evil.

Well then, the first thing John sees is *a woman*. It is a view of stunning beauty. She is wonderfully adorned with a robe that has the shining splendour of the sun. She stands on the moon as her celestial pedestal, and is crowned with a royal diadem with twelve stars. She is full of majesty. She is the glorious queen of the universe.

The brilliance of the heavenly reflection shows that she belongs to God – the Holy and Awesome One, who dwells in unapproachable light.

There is another woman in the Book of Revelation. But she is the exact opposite. The stark contrast with the purple and scarlet clothing and the glittering jewelry of that one is striking. She is also called “great”. But she is “the great prostitute”. We will meet her in Revelation 17 and 18. Both women appear as queens, but the one is nothing but an ugly and satanic perversion of the other.

The woman John is seeing is nine months pregnant and in labour. She is about to give birth and cries out in painful agony. Giving birth is always a vulnerable moment for a woman, sometimes filled with tension.

In this case the tension is made a lot worse by what we see when the other sign appears. We see *a great red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and on his heads seven diadems*, or crowns. That sounds like a frightening monster. Imagine running into something like that. The colour ‘red’ indicates its malicious and bloodthirsty character. He is so powerful that his tail is like a weapon of mass destruction; it swept one third of the stars out of the sky.

His seven crowned heads and ten horns give the impression that this dragon is a powerful ruler. But that is deceiving. He is trying to mimic God's power

and God's authority, but he is really nothing but a violent and very destructive oppressor, wreaking havoc throughout the universe.

By now we know him as the devil, Satan, the one who is filled with hatred against God and against those who belong to God. With his power he is constantly opposing God's plans. In whatever way he can, he will always try to prevent God from accomplishing the salvation he has promised. And this is still his goal today in your and my life. He has not changed, other than that he becomes angrier all the time.

And then the scenario becomes extremely tense..... *The dragon stood before the woman..... so that when she bore her child he might devour it.* The closer it comes to the moment of delivery – the more intense is his hatred and hostility. It's actually a horrible picture. Think of it. A 9 months pregnant woman in labour is no match for a big dragon ready for the kill.

And there is no misunderstanding as to the intentions of this dragon. He is just waiting to kill and devour the child the moment the woman would give birth. You can feel how the tension is mounting during the dramatic stand-off between the woman and the dragon until the child is born.

For where does this fierce confrontation come from? It is rooted in God's words in Genesis 3:15, God's promise of the Messiah, Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the world. The future of heaven and earth is at stake. The future of life is at stake.

The woman, the church – and here with the focus on the Old Testament people of God – was given the role, the task to bring forth the Christ. This makes the entire history of the Old Testament the story of the conflict between the woman and the dragon, because of the child.

Here we get in a few strokes, the view, the perspective from above of what happened in Bethlehem, at Golgotha, including Jesus' resurrection and ascension into heaven, the final act in the mighty drama of Old Testament history.

The promised child, the Saviour of the universe, Jesus the Christ, who will crush the devil's head, is about to enter this world. But the dragon is determined to prevent this from happening. After all, he is this devil; he is this

serpent who was told that one day the Son of the woman would destroy him. He will do whatever he can to thwart his own defeat.

Is he successful? No, he is not! As a matter of fact, he does not have a chance. God himself interferes. As soon as the woman gives birth to her child, it is immediately *caught up to God and to his throne*. Some translations say, “snatched up”.

It ‘was snatched up’. Who did that? God did! The holy and almighty God is the hidden actor in this drama. He seems absent. But he is there. Not only as the initiator of the plan, outlined in Gen.3:15, but also as the enactor, he remains in control of the fulfilment of his own words. This is why this whole chapter is so comforting. God’s purpose can never be frustrated. He restricts the devil’s rage.

When God snatches this male child up to heaven and has him *installed as king to rule all the nations with a rod of iron* (v.5), we hear the echo of Psalm 2, the victory song of the Messiah, Jesus the Christ. It is the same song where we also hear that *the One enthroned in heaven laughs. He scoffs at his enemies.....!*

In Rev. 12 we hear the triumphant laugh of God almighty, which triggers the fierce anger of the dragon. He failed to reach his goal. Oh, he hates this child that just escaped him. One day he will again have to face the Son who will destroy him.

In this conflict between the woman and the dragon God gives us this view from above to show us the real scope, the real nature of the conflict between good and evil. It also shows us the outcome of this conflict. From here, from our earthly perspective, it is hard to see. The church is more and more marginalized. The evil powers just barge ahead and no one seems to be able to stop it.

But the view from above teaches us two things. Be on your guard. An angry dragon is a dangerous enemy. But also: Be encouraged. He is not invincible.

A N ANGEL

What happens next? The second act in this dramatic vision shows a different scene. It is a war scene. In the v.7–9 John’s description of what he

sees is full of violent language. We are witnessing a fierce and intense battle. Of course, we do not know what kind of weapons these armies were fighting with: missiles, fighter jets, swords, bow & arrow, who knows?

But a battlefield is always a place with lots of loud noises, shouting, clanging and banging, fire, smoke and explosions. We are again getting a view from above of what's going on, to warn and encourage us here below.

The new character in this act is Michael. We know this Michael from Daniel 10 and 12. There we read about him as God's *chief prince*, the heavenly army commander, who at that time led the fight against the evil power behind the Persian Empire. He is always ready to defend God's people in critical circumstances.

So, we see two powerful military leaders with two armies of angels facing and opposing each other. The one from heaven, the other from hell. God's arch-enemy the dragon meets God's arch-angel Michael! It is not the last battle we read about in Revelation, but it is definitely the most significant battle.

But we may wonder, what triggered this battle, where Michael and his angels are fighting against the dragon and his angels? Why does the dragon not give up after his first defeat, when he did not catch the child? He will no longer be able to get the child he was after anyway.

Well, this dragon, whom we already know as *the ancient serpent, the devil, Satan and deceiver*, he is also called: *the accuser of our brothers* (v.10). The word for "accuser" is a judicial term that is used only here in the New Testament. It is similar to what we would call a "prosecuting attorney". Where does that title come from?

You may remember from Bible chapters like Job 1 and 2, and Zechariah 3 that for a long time Satan always had access to heaven to accuse God's children of their sins before the throne of God.

But with the child in heaven, that is over! Now Satan is barred. Try to picture for yourself how General Michael with his army of angels is standing on guard to enforce this, to deny the dragon access to heaven and to block his way when he tries to storm the gates.

In the bitter battle triggered by this confrontation, the dragon loses his claim for a place in heaven, and *he is thrown down to the earth*, together with all his demons.

This expression “thrown down to the earth” reflects that it was a brutal, violent act and it is used repeatedly to emphasize the humiliation of this defeat at the hand of God’s archangel. This is the moment Jesus himself refers to when he says in Luke 10: 18 *I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven*.

But the question is: why? Why does it turn out this way? Why does Satan no longer have access to heaven and why is this the outcome of the battle?

The answer has to do with this child. Remember, after he was born, he was “caught up to God and his throne”. Christ is not mentioned in v.7–9, but he still plays the decisive role. We hear about this in the song that John hears in v.10–12. After all the violent noises of the battle have died out, John *hears a loud voice in heaven*. Again – it is loud. As mentioned before, Revelation is a noisy book.

Despite all kinds of speculations, we do not know who this loud singer is. But in his song he reacts to Michael’s glorious victory and it is important to listen to him because, as we have seen a few times already in this book, what John hears usually explains or interprets what he sees in his visions.

Here too, the song in v.10–12 interprets the war in heaven. And it reveals the spiritual reality that is behind the outcome of this heavenly battle. We learn that the victory of the archangel is actually a celebration of the fact that Jesus Christ has achieved his decisive victory.

Think of this. What we are seeing (through John’s eyes) is a vision. And what takes years or decades in real life, can happen instantly in a vision. We hear in v.10, that *now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ have come*. It appears that the child snatched up to God is no longer a child. Now he turns out to be the powerful Ruler, Jesus, the glorious Christ, ascended into heaven and seated at the Father’s right hand.

But here is the clue. We know that Jesus ascended into heaven after he died on the cross and arose from the dead. In other words, this dragon sees himself confronted, not just with a new-born child, but with Jesus’ death and

resurrection; with the blood of the Lamb of God, the blood that paid for all the sins of God's children!

And that is incredibly powerful because it is this blood that makes Satan's accusations null-and-void, invalid, futile. They just bounce off Jesus' sacrifice. Sure, the devil will continue to tempt you to sin and accuse you. But Jesus' reconciliation sets you free. *Who shall bring any charge against God's elect* (Romans 8:33,34)?

Here is the great turning-point. By the blood of the Lamb, Jesus Christ, and by the testimony of those who rely on this blood, the monstrous dragon suffered a terrible defeat. The arch-angel Michael did so, empowered by the victory of Jesus Christ. In other words, the victory in this cosmic battle, when the dragon storms the gates of heaven, this victory was achieved at Golgotha, on the cross.

Shout for joy because of this. Because of Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension, heaven could be swept clean. Praise the Lord! Satan has been defeated, again!

At the same time, do not forget that the full realization of this victory is waiting for the final unravelling of the plot of our history. Today we are still in occupied territory, where Satan is free to roam around, filled with fury as he is. That is dangerous! Do not underestimate him because he knows that he cannot afford to lose any time. Watch out for the angry dragon. He does not give up.

A WOMAN

The conflict intensifies as it comes closer to home. This dragon does not like being humiliated. And this is now the second time. He cannot stand it! Flung down to the earth, he hits the ground, smashes into rock or dust or dirt, or whatever it is, but he gets up again, and scrambles to his feet, raving mad, seething with anger.

He must do something. The crucified and risen Christ is out of his league. The final confrontation with him will come at the end of history. That is in

Rev.20. So, what else can he do in the time that is left? Who else can he find to vent his rage on?

Then we see that this angry dragon turns to the woman who had given birth to the child. That frustrating reminder is enough to pursue her (v.13). He hates her, the church of Jesus Christ in this world. And his goal is to get rid of her, to annihilate her. He can only be satisfied, at least to some extent, when he has entirely eliminated her.

However, it does not work. She is beyond his reach. That is a great comfort for God's people. Yes, there is persecution. Many try to silence the message of the church and to declare it irrelevant or even illegal. But God's church will survive and complete her journey. Christ will continue to gather people till the end of the ages.

So, what is happening to this woman?

In v.6 it says already that immediately after her child was born, *she fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, in which she is to be nourished for 1260 days*. Verse 14 gives us the same picture. Here it says that *the woman was given the two wings of a great eagle, so that she might fly into the wilderness, to the place where she is to be nourished*.

This whole picture is filled with allusions to Israel's exodus out of Egypt and its journey towards the Promised Land. They were beyond the reach of the Pharaoh, taken care of, protected and nourished by God in the desert.⁹ It reinforces the promise that God's church will not perish in the wilderness of this world, but will reach her eternal destination. Even the "eagle's wings" reflect what the LORD says in Exodus 19:4: *How I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself*.

Trust that God will take care of his church, all the time! From our earth-bound perspective the church often lives in a barren desert, at the margins of our society, a place of affliction and persecution, a struggling wilderness community. You wonder what her future is like.

⁹ The story is in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy

But from the perspective from above she is the glorious and splendid heavenly queen.

God will continue to protect her, provide for her, and nourish her for 1260 days (v.6) or “for a time, times and half a time” (v.14). That is the same length of time. And it is also the same length of time mentioned in Rev. 11:2,4. It’s the in-between time, stretching from Jesus’ ascension into heaven till his return in glory, the day of the final victory, when she will be ushered into her heavenly home.

But the dragon does not give up. Out of his mouth he spews a stream of wild water, a strong, destructive torrent. It is not necessary to see this river as a metaphor of something specific. Just as God’s river of life gives life, so Satan’s river of death brings death and destruction.

But the dragon fails again. In a sudden and unexpected move the earth helps the woman by swallowing up all that water. Here is another allusion to Israel’s exodus, when the LORD parted the water of the Red Sea, to protect his people, and drowned their hostile pursuers. Here God is again the hidden actor and powerful Saviour. He uses his creation to frustrate Satan’s plans and protect his church on her way to the glorious new heaven and new earth.

It says that *the dragon became furious* when he saw what happened. He is beside himself with raging anger. This is his third defeat. Now what? He does not seem to get anywhere and he knows that the clock is ticking.

But he still does not give up. He adjusts his strategy and now he turns to you and me personally, children of the woman, Christian believers *who keep God’s commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus*. He knows each one of us. He knows when and where you and I are vulnerable. He knows our weaknesses.

This makes us all part of this story. It is the paradox of your Christian life. Jesus victory over Satan triggers his anger against you, against all those who follow Jesus.

But remember, these are the last convulsions of a monster that has been defeated three times already.

Yes, as long as our home is the wilderness, the power of evil is still present and affects us all. That is a threatening scenario. Take the warning to heart.

But be encouraged on your journey towards the new Promised Land: Satan will find his final destruction.

names mentioned? Why are these names significant for the future of the church?

3. Read Revelation 11:13. In what way is this verse encouraging for the believers not to give up doing what.....?
4. The Christian church is a community of 'witnesses'. What does it mean to be a 'witness'? What is characteristic for 'witnessing' in the New Testament?

Chapter 18 – Revelation 11:15-19

1. In verse 18 we read about the effect of the fact that God Almighty, with the Glorified Christ, rules as King, and that the time has come for rewards and for judgments. How does (or how should) this affect your life today?
2. Is fact that Almighty God governs the whole world and everything that happens, including the things that are going on in our lives, comforting for you, or encouraging, or unsettling, or scary, or upsetting? Discuss God's sovereignty.
3. As Christians we have a deep desire for others to be saved by turning to Jesus Christ. At the same time there is also a strong longing for justice, for evil to be punished. How does the Book of Revelation help us to hold on to both?
4. When we reach out to people outside the church, do we make it clear that the Christian message is not only the good and happy news of salvation, but do we also share that it includes that the judgment of unrepentant wicked and evildoers is unavoidable?

Chapter 19 – Revelation 12

1. After Jesus' ascension into heaven (verse 5b) and the war mentioned in v. 7 and 8, it says in verse 8 that *there was no longer any place for them* [meaning: Satan and his angels] *in heaven*. Can you find indications in the Old Testament that this was still the case before this moment?
2. How do believers become conquerors of the power of Satan, as mentioned in verse 11? Look at the three ways given, and discuss how we can apply these in our lives as Christians.

3. In verse 16 it says that *the earth came to the help of the woman*. How does God use the earth, his creation to protect or sustain his church?
4. When the dragon [Satan] cannot destroy the church, he turns to the believers individually and personally (verse 17): *those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus*. See also 1 Peter 5: 8, 9. How can we personally protect ourselves against those attacks of Satan?

Chapter 20 – Revelation 13

1. The beast from the sea represents the evil, antichristian political powers, inspired by Satan to resist God's authority and driven by the desire to destroy God's work and God's people. How does this square with the words of the apostle Paul in Romans 13:1-7?
2. Imagine that the efforts of the two beasts will be successful, in the sense that they will be able to create a world without war, without poverty and hunger, without racism and other social injustice. Would that make the church, faith in God and in Jesus Christ, as well as Christian living superfluous? If you think so, why? If not, why not?
3. Read 2 Thessalonians 2:3-12 and 1 John 4:1-6. How do these passages help us better understand Revelation 13?
4. The ultimate difference between Christians and non-Christians is a difference in worldview. What is a worldview and what makes a Christian worldview different from other worldviews? In the big picture of God's plan and providence, what was the purpose of the coming of Jesus Christ in the world? How does this affect your worldview? And how does your worldview affect you personally?

Chapter 21 – Revelation 14:1-13

1. In reference to the beginning of this chapter (the story of Ryan Bell), what difference does God make in your life?
2. The 144,000, mentioned in Rev. 14, are called (v.4) *redeemed from mankind as firstfruits for God and the Lamb*. In the O.T. 'firstfruits' represent the whole harvest still to come (see Leviticus 23:9-14). Would this suggest that the 144,000 are only a fraction of the whole,