

Revelation 12 “The Christmas Story We Seldom Read” [**](#)

Main Idea: We learn how to appreciate the real meaning of Christmas in Revelation 12. To appreciate Christmas we must affirm two truths that are so easily neglected at Christmas.

I. Christmas is part of a bigger story.

A. Scene #1: John sees a pregnant woman (1-2).

B. Scene #2: John sees an enormous, red dragon (3-6).

1. He's powerful (3).

2. He wanted to kill the child (4).

3. His plot failed (5-6).

C. Scene #3: John describes an angelic war in heaven (7-9).

1. Michael and his angels fought the dragon and his angels (7).

2. The dragon lost and was hurled to the earth (8-9).

3. The identity of the dragon is clarified (9).

D. Scene #4: John records the reaction of heaven (10-12).

1. God's kingdom has come (10).

2. The accuser has been hurled down (10b).

3. The key to the dragon's defeat is identified (11).

4. What is gain for heaven will result in pain for the earth (12).

E. Scene #5: John records the reaction of the defeated dragon (13-17).

1. The dragon pursued the woman (13).

2. The woman fled to a prepared place for three and one-half "times" (14).

3. The dragon tried to destroy the woman, but failed (15-16).

4. The dragon then sought to make war against the woman's offspring (17).

II. Christmas is all about a special Son.

A. He was born as a man (5a).

B. He was caught up to God (5b).

C. He is being worshipped in heaven (10-12).

1. He died for His people.

2. He sustains His people in the present battle.

3. He will rule the world.

Take Inventory: Make sure you know the real Son!

Intro to Scripture Reading :

Christmas is a week from tomorrow. A common event in many homes (and a good one) is for family members to gather together and read the Christmas story. Churches do the same thing in December, they read the Christmas story. The Bible is opened to Matthew 1 & 2, or Luke 2, the story of the Savior's birth is read. Once in awhile folks turn to John's account in John 1, where a theological perspective of the Son's birth is given.

But there's another Christmas-story passage that I've *never* heard read at Christmas. To be honest with you, I myself have never read it at Christmas. Indeed, I never even thought of it as a Christmas-story text until this past week. But it is and I believe reading and studying it will help us immensely as we seek the true meaning of Christmas. I'm talking about *Revelation 12*.

READ: Revelation 12

Intro to Message:

I could have entitled this message, "*Telling the Christmas Story for an iPod Generation.*" Even in a casual reading, we quickly notice that Revelation 12 is full of images and word pictures: a pregnant woman clothed with the sun, a seven-headed dragon, a child that's snatched up to heaven, an angelic warfare, and so on. What's going on? Revelation 12 doesn't merely *tell* a story. It *shows* one but uses words rather than pictures. That's because Revelation uses a genre of literature called *apocalyptic literature*, which was popular two centuries B.C. and a century or so A.D., and then sort of died out.

We must always approach the study of God's Word with humility, a teachable spirit, and with a vital question in mind: *What was the author's intent* when he wrote the text I'm reading? That question is ever so critical in studying the book of Revelation. What did John mean when he wrote what he wrote? What was his *intent*?

The first phrase of the book helps answer that question. Revelation 1:1—"The revelation of Jesus Christ..." This book, then, according to John, is the *revelation of a person, Jesus Christ* (1:1). It's intent is to reveal Christ to us.

When interpreting any book a *text* must be seen in *context*. We're about to look at chapter 12. So what's the context? What's been said in previous chapters?

The Setting:

In chapter one John actually sees and describes Christ in His glorified state. In chapters 2-3 he records seven letters that the Glorified Christ sent to seven local churches in Asia Minor in the first century. These churches were facing persecution and the Savior sent messages both to encourage and warn them. That's important to remember when studying Revelation. It was written to a *persecuted church*. How do you encourage people who are losing their properties, businesses, and maybe their lives? You let them know that this isn't the end, that there's more to life than meets the eye!

In chapters 4-5 we see a Lamb (that's Christ) approach and take a scroll, the title deed of the universe, from the Almighty. In chapters 6 and following the Lamb begins to open the seals, thus enacting the contents of the scroll and bringing about God's judgment on the earth. And so, in chapters 6-11 we see the terrible judgments that God will pour

out on the earth.

Then comes chapter 12, and what a chapter it is...

In a sermon preached on Revelation 12 over a century ago, C. H. Spurgeon began with this disclaimer: “It is not my main object at this time to expound the chapter before us. I scarcely consider myself qualified to explain any part of the Book of Revelation, and none of the expositions I have ever seen entice me to attempt the task, for they are mostly occupied with a refutation of all the interpretations which have gone before, and each one seems to be very successful indeed in proving that all the rest know nothing at all about the matter. The sum total of substantial instruction in nearly all the comments upon the Revelation amounts to this, that our heavenly Father has said in his word some mysterious things which few of his children can yet comprehend. This is just what we might have expected when the infinite God speaks to finite men, and it is no doubt intended to humble us and draw forth our reverent adoration. Happily there is a blessing to those who read and hear and keep the words of his prophecy, for had that blessing been confined to those who understand it, few would have obtained the benediction. The Revelation is a most blessed book, but its unfolding has yet to be accomplished.” [1]

I can relate to Spurgeon. To borrow his words, *I scarcely consider myself qualified to explain any part of the Book of Revelation*. And yet, if we’re willing to live with some unanswered questions, I believe there’s much we can gain from Revelation, namely, we can gain a fresh and fuller appreciation of Christmas from Revelation 12. To do so we must affirm two truths that are so easily neglected at Christmas.

I. Truth #1: Christmas is part of a bigger story.

So often we miss this as December 25 approaches. “Yes, God sent His Son into the world,” we say, “...to show His love for me and to save me from my sins.” That’s true, but that’s not the only reason Jesus came, to save you and me. God had a bigger agenda involved in Christmas, a *cosmic* agenda. In other words, the ultimate meaning of Christmas is a whole lot bigger *than you and me*. The fact is, there’s a war going on in the cosmos, a universal conflict. That’s why Jesus came.

You say, “I’d like to know more about that!” Good! We need to know more about that! It will change the way we approach not only Christmas but the rest of our lives! Revelation 12 gives it to us. In Revelation 12 we see the story behind the story.

Verse 1 begins: “A great and wondrous sign appeared in heaven.” John actually saw two ‘signs’ in chapter 12, this one described in verses 1 & 2 and another described beginning in verse 3. Please keep in mind that John says that the signs he saw were *in heaven* (1, 3, 10). But by its very nature a “sign” is something that points beyond itself.

It’s very difficult to follow the chronology of John’s vision. Some even suggest that the vision does not flow in chronological sequence. George Ladd observes, “This is not a vision of an event which is to take place at the end; it is a vision in highly imaginative terms of the heavenly warfare between God and Satan, which has its counterpart in history in the conflict between the church and demonic evil. As such, the vision completely transcends the usual categories of time and space. It is not meant to be a foretelling of history but a representation of the struggle in the spiritual world which lies behind history.” [2]

Let’s examine what John saw in Revelation 12. In so doing we’ll discover that there are five scenes in the story behind the story...

A. Scene #1: John sees a pregnant woman (1-2). “A great and wondrous sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth.”

We don’t have time to develop the particulars of this scene or of those that follow. My aim is to take a panoramic view of this vision, to get the plot of the story behind Christmas. John describes a woman. Notice three

details about her...

1. *She's clothed with the sun.*
2. *She's wearing a crown of twelve stars.*
3. *She's about to give birth.*

Who is this woman? Some think it refers to Mary, the mother of the Lord (e.g. Roman Catholics), but the description of this woman in this vision certainly doesn't fit Mary. Others say this woman is the *Church*, but the church didn't give birth to Christ, rather Christ founded the church. Mary Baker Eddy was conceited enough to claim this woman represented *herself*.

Who is she? Opinions vary.^[3] But notice the imagery, particularly the reference to the sun, the moon, and twelve stars. Where else do we see these images in the Bible? In Joseph's dream in Genesis 37. There Joseph saw the sun, moon, and eleven stars bowing down to him. It was through Joseph's father, Jacob, and through Jacob's twelve sons that God formed the nation of Israel. And it was through this nation, Israel, that God later brought (*birthed*) the Messiah into the world.

So the woman, it would seem, refers to the Jewish people. A scene to follow will suggest the woman isn't a reference to *all* Jewish people, but to a particular segment of Jewish people.

Something particular catches John's eye as he watches this woman. She's pregnant, he says, and her due date has arrived. In fact, she's screaming in pain. Yet at that point the first sign ends and another appears.

B. Scene #2: John sees an enormous, red dragon (3-6). Verse 3—"Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on his heads."

Keep in mind that apocalyptic literature is filled with Old Testament images. In order to make sense of the word pictures, we must check out the Old Testament background. For instance, in the Old Testament monstrous beings like dragons are used metaphorically to refer to the enemies of God and His people (e.g.—Ps. 74:14; Isa. 27:1; Ezek. 29:3). We're given three details about this dragon, this enemy of God here...

1. *He's powerful (3).* How much so? The seven heads seem to represent his great wisdom and the ten horns his great power.^[4] His seven crowns would suggest he possesses authority.
2. *He wanted to kill the child (4).* Verse 4—"His tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth. The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that he might devour her child the moment it was born."

Note the position of the dragon. He's right there in front of the woman. His intent is to kill the newborn child.

3. *His plot failed (5-6).* "She gave birth to a son, a male child, who will rule all the nations with an iron scepter. And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne. The woman fled into the desert to a place prepared for her by God, where she might be taken care of for 1,260 days."

We'll take a closer look at the child later, but for now notice what happened to the child. The dragon was right there ready to pounce on the child—he couldn't miss, he was right in front of the delivering mother—but he did miss. His attempt failed. The child was snatched up to God.

Consequently, the dragon turned his aggression on the woman who, according to John, fled to the desert, to a place of protection prepared for her by God. There she stayed for 1,260 days.

Earlier I suggested that the woman isn't a reference to *all* Jewish people, but to a particular segment of Jewish people. Here we learn it refers to those who had to flee because of their association with this special male child.

Which Jewish people experienced Satanic attack *after* Jesus' birth and because of their association with Jesus? That description fits *believing Jews*, those Jews who believe that this special Son is the Messiah (Messianic Jews).

Just who are these believing Jews that God takes care of for 1,260 days (that's 42 months, or three-and-one-half years)? I'm not sure! Some feel the imagery is strictly symbolic. Others take it literally but suggest it refers to Jewish Christians who fled to Pella in A.D. 66 to escape the Roman destruction of Jerusalem. Another literal approach says it refers to a yet future time when believing Jews will be preserved during the Tribulation period, a view I favor. But what happens to the woman in this vision goes beyond the aim of this message which concerns the child.

It's at that point that, all of a sudden, scene two ends. We will see this woman again, but not until scene five. The focus shifts dramatically in scene three...

C. Scene #3: John describes an angelic war in heaven (7-9). Verse 7 begins, "And there was war in heaven." When was this war? Was it after the child's birth and after the child's return to heaven? That's what we would conclude if the scenes are progressive in a chronological sense. But that's not necessary, not in apocalyptic literature. Nor is it likely.

In fact, it's more likely that the battle in heaven we're about to read about explains why the dragon was after the child in scene two in the first place.

Who participated in this battle? Here were the sides...

1. *Michael and his angels fought the dragon and his angels (7).* "And there was war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back." Wow! This dragon is a fierce character. And audacious, too. He's putting up a fight in heaven itself, the very dwelling place of God. But as the drama continues John sees the dragon's outcome...

2. *The dragon lost and was hurled to the earth (8-9).* "But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven. The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him."

So the dragon 'was not strong enough.' As a result, he and his cohorts 'lost their place in heaven' [they used to live there]. But in this battle they were 'hurled down.'

Now we can begin to understand why this dragon is so upset at this child, why he wants to devour him. As we'll see in scene four, the dragon's defeat and casting out of heaven is connected with the authority of this child. Lest there be any doubt, in verse 9...

3. *The identity of the dragon is clarified (9)...* He's the 'ancient serpent,' the energizing force in Genesis 3 that turned mankind against his Maker. He is called the 'devil,' or 'Satan,' a term that means 'the accuser.' And he is the one who 'leads the world astray.' If you want to know why the world is in the shape it's in, here's why. This dragon, this foe who himself rebelled against God, is also the one who has turned the world away from and against God.

So ends scene three in the story behind the story. In the first three scenes John records what he *saw*. In scene four John *hears* something. Verse 10—"Then I *heard* a loud voice in heaven..."

D. Scene #4: John records the reaction of heaven (10-12). The anonymous voice he hears announces the significance of the victory over the dragon, the enemy of God. What he says is a poetic hymn that contains four thoughts...

1. *God's kingdom has come (10).* "Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ." Notice what they're talking about in heaven—not how the stock market is going, nor how the Bengals are playing—the subject that matters is the kingdom of God. The voice says that the salvation and kingdom of God *have come*.

Back in 11:15 John heard another message that loud voices in heaven proclaimed, “The kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever.” But that hasn’t happened yet. The kingdom of this world has not yet become the kingdom of our Lord. How can this heavenly voice say it *has*? He can say that because it *has* and it *will*.

On earth we’re limited by time and space. Not so in heaven. To us, the kingdom of this world becoming the kingdom of our Lord is *yet future*, but that’s from the perspective of time. As far as heaven is concerned, it’s as good as done. When King Jesus came to earth as a baby 2,000 years ago, He came on a mission. He came to reclaim this fallen world and restore it to its rightful Owner. And He succeeded! Through His perfect life, His sacrificial death, and His triumphant resurrection, King Jesus broke the power of sin and death. Hebrews 2:14 says He destroyed the one who holds the power of death, that is, the devil. He inaugurated His kingdom and now rules inognito in the lives of His followers (Luke 17:21). One day, maybe today, King Jesus will return in glory and establish His kingdom for all to see.

My friend, this is the story behind the story! Indeed, this is the goal of history, the *climax* of God's redemptive plan. It’s the subject that heaven is rehearsing and anticipating even now—John heard the heavenly announcement—*God’s kingdom has come!* That’s not all he heard. The voice communicated a second thought...

2. *The accuser has been hurled down (10b)*. “For the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down.” Here the dragon, the enemy of God, is called *the accuser*. Who does he accuse and where? He accuses the “brothers,” another family term in Revelation 12—we’ve seen ‘mother,’ ‘son,’ and now ‘brothers.’ The accuser tries to get at God by attacking His family members. But the voice says the dragon has been ‘hurled down.’

I don’t think this is referring to Satan’s original expulsion from heaven. This ‘hurling down’ seems to be connected with Christ’s work at the cross, as we’ll see in verse 11. Colossians 2:15 offers this helpful comment, “And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, *triumphing over them by the cross.*”

As we just saw in scene three, the war in heaven talked about in verse 7 in which Michael and his angels fought against the dragon resulted in the dragon being ‘hurled down (9).’ Now the voice in verse 10 uses the same word, saying the accuser has been ‘hurled down.’^[5] The voice seems to be talking about something that happened when Christ died.

Now, by what power did Michael overcome the dragon, and by what power do the brothers withstand the dragon’s accusations? We’re told in verse 11, “They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.” Here’s thought #3...

3. *The key to the dragon's defeat is identified (11)*. How is the accuser overcome? By the ‘blood of the Lamb’ and by the ‘word of their testimony.’ The Lamb’s death on the cross provides the power for the defeat of the dragon. Those covered by the Lamb’s blood are victors. That doesn’t mean, however, the battle is over. Those protected by the Lamb’s blood may need to shed their own blood, but as the voice affirms, they’re more than willing to do so—“they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.”

The heavenly hymn concludes on a solemn note in verse 12, “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 is filled with fury, because he knows that his time is short.” John learned this sobering fourth thought...

4. *What is gain for heaven will result in pain for the earth (12)*. The dragon is cast out of heaven. Hooray for heaven! But where does he go? To the earth. And so verse 12 announces, “Woe to the earth!” The dragon knows he’s on a short leash, but like a rabid wild animal, he fights to the very end. That brings us to the final scene.

E. Scene #5: John records the reaction of the defeated dragon (13-17). First...

1. *The dragon pursued the woman (13).* Verse 13—“When the dragon saw that he had been hurled to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child.” Remember, the mother represents, I’ve suggested, *believing Jews*, for it was through the Jewish people that the Son was born into the world. The dragon failed to kill the male child so now we see him taking out his fury on the male child’s mother.

Why is there anti-Semitism in the world? Here we see it’s source. Satan hates the Jewish people because he hates God and knows that God chose them to be the instrument for His redemption plan. And he particularly hates those who believe in the male child and pursues them with intent to kill. As the scene continues...

2. *The woman fled to a prepared place for three and one-half "times" (14).* “The woman was given the two wings of a great eagle, so that she might fly to the place prepared for her in the desert, where she would be taken care of for a time, times and half a time, out of the serpent’s reach.”

The phrase ‘time, times, and half a time’ seems to be synonymous with the 1,260 days mentioned in verse 6. As I mentioned when commenting on verse 6, this three-and-a-half-year event seems to be referring to a portion of the yet future time period called the Tribulation. Anti-semitism will reach its ugly climax during those forty-two months.

But know this. Whether then or now, God takes care of His own. Sometimes He delivers His people *from* tribulation. At other times He takes them right *through* tribulation. Remember, John is a Jew, a Jewish believer. What John saw here must have encouraged him greatly, for the vision makes it clear that God will never let His people go.

Verses 15-16—“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 had spewed out of his mouth.” Once again John’s vision makes it clear that...

3. *The dragon tried to destroy the woman, but failed (15-16).* The ‘earth helped the woman by opening its mouth’—perhaps an allusion to Numbers 16 where the earth opened and swallowed up Korah and his God-defying men.

But even with his end in sight, the dragon doesn’t give up. As the final scene ends...

4. *The dragon then sought to make war against the woman's offspring (17).* “Then the dragon was enraged at the woman and went off to make war against the rest of her offspring—those who obey God’s commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus.”

Who is ‘the rest’ of this woman’s ‘offspring’? If the child was Christ, and if the woman referred to believing Jews, the rest of her offspring would seem to refer to Gentile believers. Remember, the first church was Jewish, but after ten years or so the gospel spread to non-Jews. Gentiles believed in Jesus Christ. And so the woman, the Jewish believers, gave birth to Gentile believers. John learns their identity at the end of verse 17—they are ‘those who obey God’s commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus.’ John also learns that the dragon will try to do to the rest of the woman’s offspring what he tried to do to the woman and her son. But as the rest of the book of Revelation will show, the dragon will fail. God’s kingdom will prevail. That is the story behind the story!

That’s the first truth we must keep in mind if we’re going to celebrate the real meaning of Christmas. Christmas is part of a bigger story. It’s not just about God saving you and me. It’s about God reclaiming creation itself, His creation. It’s about establishing His kingdom and dealing justly with all rivals to His kingdom. That’s the story, the bigger story that stands behind the story we’ll celebrate next week.

There’s a second truth, one certainly related to the first, which Revelation 12 likewise calls us to affirm.

II. Truth #2: Christmas is all about a special Son.

Who is this son? We’ve commented about Him throughout this message, but to conclude I’d simply like to

reiterate three facts about Him revealed in John's vision.

A. He was born as a man (5a). "She gave birth to a son, a male child." God did not send angels to rescue creation. God Himself entered creation. He became *a man*.^[6]

B. He was caught up to God (5b). "And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne." There's no mention in this vision of any detail concerning this Son's life, His death, or His resurrection. John didn't need those details, nor do we—we can read them in the Gospel accounts. What God wanted John to remember was this. This amazing Son that came to earth is now in heaven. He was "snatched up" (the same verb describes the rapture of the church in 1 Thes. 4:17). He has ascended back to His throne in the presence of God.

What's happening to this Son now? Revelation 12 makes that clear...

C. He is being worshipped in heaven (10-12). What's the subject of conversation in heaven? Hear the voice again in verse 10—"Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority *of his Christ*." And in verse 11—"They overcame him by the blood *of the Lamb*."

The subject is the Son! Heaven is marveling at the Son's accomplishments, three in particular...

1. *He died for His people.* Note that heaven is talking about His *blood*.

2. *He sustains His people in the present battle.* Again, heaven acknowledges that He does so by the power of His *blood*.

3. *He will rule the world.* Verse 5 again, "She gave birth to a son, a male child, *who will rule all the nations with an iron scepter*."

Do you see what's happening in heaven? They are talking about the Son! They are *worshipping* the Son! They know that what matters is the Son! Here's the point. What's happening in heaven *ought* to be happening on earth. One day it will. One day the Son will rule on earth. But the question is this. Is He ruling your life now? Are you worshipping the Son now? I urge you to take inventory...

Take Inventory: Make sure you know the real Son!

Not simply a weak baby in a manger, but the baby we meet in Revelation 12. Make sure you know and have put your trust in Him!

**Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church . It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

[1] Taken from online message, "How They Conquered the Dragon," May 30, 1875, C. H. SPURGEON, www.biblebb.com

[2] George Ladd, p. 166.

[3] Ladd says it refers to the "ideal Zion," that is, "the Jerusalem which is above" referred to by Paul (Gal 4:26; p. 167). Donald Grey Barnhouse (in Strauss, pp. 229ff) says the woman represents "the spiritual Israel" and not merely the nation of Israel. She is "the elect of the race." The *NIV Study Bible* says it's probably "a symbolic reference to the believing Messianic community." Lehman Strauss says the woman represents *Israel*, for it was from Israel that the Messiah came.

[4] Observation taken from the *NIV Study Bible* footnote.

[5] Alan Johnson comments, “At the time of Christ’s death on earth, Satan was being defeated in heaven.” *Expos. Bible Commentary*, p. 517.

[6] Commenting on this son C. H. Spurgeon said: “If you refer to the expositors you will find that they discover in this passage the dragon-ensign of pagan Rome, and its removal from its position by Constantine, who set up the cross in its stead. I do not believe the Lord took any more interest in Constantine than in any other sinner, and it seems to me little short of blasphemous to say that he was the man-child who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron, and was caught up into God and to his throne. His adoption of Christianity as the state religion was not a thing for glorified spirits to rejoice in, but a dreadful calamity, fitted only to make sport for Pandemonium. No one ever did the church a worse turn than he who first joined her to the state. The act was a piece of state policy and kingcraft and no more, a business utterly unworthy of record by an inspired pen.” Taken from online message, “*How They Conquered the Dragon*,” May 30, 1875, C. H. SPURGEON, www.biblebb.com