

## Rev 12

### Getting Started

God's purpose for Revelation is as much pastoral as prophetic. This, however, doesn't diminish its prophetic significance. Noting these twin purposes only serves to enhance the Revelation's overall teaching value. Pastor John's writing to the seven churches so they hear and respond to what God says. How does he do this? He uses ancient literary forms like apocalyptic prophecy, to tell the story. What story? The story of God's final vindication and redemption of his people from evil and the establishment of his eternal kingdom. Apocalyptic prophecy is perfectly suited to achieve John's pastoral purpose because of its ability to paint riveting indelible pictures in the mind's eye. These pictures will stay imprinted on the minds and hearts of God's people much longer than dry dusty lectures.

And Rev. 12-14 is no exception. Its images are riveting and intense. But there is a difference between Ch.1-11 and 12-14. The tone, structure, and content change. Absent here are the patterns and cycles we are now used to seeing. The scroll & trumpet judgements are done, and the bowl judgements haven't yet begun. So, how should we read 12-14?

### Why the difference?

Many scholars point to Ch. 12 -14 as more or less the literary center of the book. If Ch. 12-14 is different, what might John want to communicate to his readers, what's the message?

Bruce Metzger offers this insight,

**“Chapter 11 of the Book of Revelation concludes with references to judging the dead, rewarding the servants of God, and opening God's temple in heaven. Although this scenario would make a fitting end to the book, John has still more to reveal to the reader. To present this further material (Ch 12-14) he returns to an earlier stage and, so to speak, begins all over again. Chapter 12 can be characterized as a flashback, telling of the birth of the Messiah and the attempt of King Herod to kill Jesus soon after he was born. However, instead of telling this as a historical narrative in a straightforward manner as Matthew does (Matt 2), John presents a heavenly tableau of characters that are portrayed with sensational Near Eastern imagery. In describing the tableau John borrows from old apocalyptic motifs (themes), some of which have their roots in a dim and distant past. Striking parallels have been found in Babylonian, Persian, Egyptian, and in astrological lore. The important question, however, is not what sources John may have used, but what use he now makes of them. Because of the unusual kinds of imagery that are combined here, it's not surprising that many readers found this chapter to be one of the most bizarre in the book.”**

### John's use of Rev. 12 – 14

Think about Chs 12-14 as a flashback in which John provides a more complete theological foundation and overview of why things are happening as they are? As one scholar has noted, while John answers more of the “what” and “how” questions by detailing creation's reversal and the suffering and protection of God's people in ch 1-11, he hasn't revealed much about the deeper “why” for all this. In 12 -14 he lays out, as the book's center, a more complete answer to the deeper “why” question.

In this section John momentarily changes direction to show the seven churches in apocalyptic form, between the trumpet and bowl judgements, a panorama of truths they need to keep in mind as they watch God at work.

**Overview of Ch. 12-14**

<b>The war with the Dragon Ch.12-14</b>		
<b>Ch.12</b>	<b>Ch.13</b>	<b>Ch.14</b>
<b>The war’s cosmic origin</b>	<b>The war’s earthly extent</b>	<b>Winning the war</b>
V.1-6 – The nativity of Jesus V.7-9 – The war in heaven V.10-12 – The hymn of victory V.13-17 – The war expands	Filled in study Ch. 13	Filled in study Ch.14

As we engage Rev. 12 we must remember that theology, not chronology, is John’s concern. Revelation is laying out a theological framework through which to think about life, not a chronological framework. Because of this, seeking precise detail here will be frustrating, and a timeframe will be equally difficult.

**The place of the action:**

Please note in Ch. 12 the place of the action. At least three times in Ch. 12 John carefully identifies “heaven” as the place where the signs occur. This immediately tells us to shift our point of view. As our viewpoint shifted in 4:2 with John being lifted to heaven to view what is being discussed, so here we must also shift our viewpoint. The movement of the action originates in the heavens and eventually involves the earth.

**The Core:**

**(12:1-6) Jesus’ nativity**

Eugene Peterson observes,

**“This is not the nativity story we grew up with, but it is the nativity story all the same. Jesus’ birth excites more than wonder, it excites evil: Herod, Judas, and Pilate. Ferocious wickedness is goaded to violence by this life. Can a swaddled infant survive the machines of terror? Can promise outlast horror? We want to live, we long for this rule but is it possible in this kind of world? Are not the means lacking? But we overestimate the politics of Rome and underestimate the politics of grace. St. John’s imagination is adrenaline to us of little faith, and we are again dauntless, unimpressed by dragon bluster, sure of God’s preservation. The child survives, salvation is assured. God’s rule is intact.”**

Think about Peterson’s idea of Jesus’ nativity from a different point of view. V.1-6 show us the behind the earthly scene reality of the struggle that ensues Jesus birth. Think about Herod’s plot to kill Jesus. The seven churches need to keep a clear picture of the true source of their trouble. In a time of incredible distress/suffering we want answers to the “why” question.

It’s not hard to wrongly assign blame for our trouble. Think about the seven churches and who they might blame for their suffering. They could’ve blamed Rome. But is Rome the

enemy? They could've also easily blamed each other. The compromising churches could've put pressure on the faithful churches hoping they would back away from their obedience to God and so lessen Rome's backlash against them. But they could've also blamed God. Here John takes time to clarify the source of churches problem by going back to an earlier time.

### **The Actors in the story**

John lays out the major figures that they need to know, a woman (V.1), a child (V.1), a great red dragon (V.3), Michael (V.7), and the women's children (V.17). And as Ch. 12 develops he details their interaction.

The woman revealed in 12:1 has been variously identified as Mary, Israel, or the church. Most evangelical commentators reject Mary as the woman. Depending on approach, the woman is either a symbol of Israel based on Gen 37:9, or, in some way, an idealized symbol of God's whole faithful community (Jew and Gentile).

The child in 12:1 is generally accepted as a symbol of Jesus and the great red dragon is generally accepted as a symbol of Satan.

What dominates this part of the story is a severe conflict between the woman, the child, and the dragon **(V.1-4)**. The dragon's goal is to eliminate the child. What's encouraging in V.5, 6 is that God thwarts all the dragon's attempts to eliminate the child as the child is snatched up to God and his throne. And the woman flees into the desert where God cares for her over an extended period of time. There is little doubt that the child is Jesus, and his safe arrival at God's throne in heaven sounds very much like Jesus post-resurrection ascension. The identity of the woman is less certain though. Some view her as the faithful remnant of Israel being cared for in the great tribulation prior to Jesus' return. Others see her as the idealized community of God being cared for by him following the churches scattering after Jesus' ascension. While identify varies, one thing is certain, God cares for the child and the woman in a miraculous way. Only his supernatural intervention provides a haven from the dragon.

The reference to 1260 days (V.6) comes out of Dan 7:25 and 12:7 regarding a 42 month period known as "a time, times and half a time." This reference's original application was certainly to Israel. However with Revelation's intended audience as the seven churches, one wonders if John isn't reinterpreting Daniel's application to include the churches in the reference to Israel. John has already done this in Rev 1 regarding the churches serving God as a Kingdom, as priests (another OT reference originally applied to Israel).

When we see 1260 days we immediately think chronology but as Craig Kenner points out, 1260 may more accurately reflect the "kind of time" 1260 days is. John may be reapplying Daniel's 1260 days to the churches as a general reference to a time of intense suffering, a time of trouble for God's faithful people both Jew and Gentile in the context of the church. While not 100% certain, it is a legitimate possibility.

Paul certainly highlights the unique role of Israel in God's plan in the book of Romans. However in Eph. he also includes Jew and Gentile in a combined entity called the church under banner of Christ. Paul was thoroughly Jewish, so his recognition of the church as a new expression of God's people including Jew and Gentile is legitimate from the early NT days.

However we approach this, let's not miss John's central point - God supernaturally intervenes and protects both the child and woman from the dragon's attacks.

### **(12:7-9) the war in heaven**

John then describes a further element of the story of which the churches are unaware involving the dragon and the angels of heaven (12:7-12). John includes Michael here as a carry forward from Daniel because, as Beale points out, "Michael helps this "son of man" fight against the malevolent angelic forces." "Likewise", he adds, "Dan 12:1 has Michael as Israel's latter day deliverer. The main point is the spiritual conflict and the dragon's removal from the heavenly realms. Several elements of this war are imperative for the churches, 1. The dragon and his angels lacked ultimate strength. 2. There was no place in heaven for them. They are excluded. 3. The dragon and his angels were thrown down. These are statements of defeat and demotion. Craig Keener notes that while a place of refuge was found for the child and the woman, no place was found for the dragon.

### **(12:10-12) Heaven's Hymn**

This hymn is puzzling. Bruce Metzger's insight is helpful,

**"The dragon's defeat and eviction from heaven are the cause of great rejoicing by the remaining heavenly dwellers."**

In this powerful hymn John lays out the essential authority and kingship of God and the authority of Christ, the defeat of the evil one, his war against the saints (brethren), and the saints victory over the evil one because of the Lamb. Even more, the brethren aren't afraid to face death in V.11 which reads,

**"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."**

This is an interesting phrase because it looks back to what John has said in Ch. 1 about his relationship with the churches and their being fellow partakers in the tribulation, kingdom, and perseverance which are in Jesus. And in Ch.2-3 the churches are directed to overcome. Here in 12:11 the brethren have overcome the dragon because of the blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony. In fact, Craig Kenner observes that this phrase is the thematic link with Ch.2-3 which serves to advance Revelation's teaching on the issue of overcoming.

12:12, the final portion of the hymn, calls attention to the whole creation and its antagonistic relationship with the dragon. The dragon's time is short but make no mistake, even as a defeated enemy the dragon takes advantage of whatever he can to deceive the world.

## **(12:13-17) the Fight Expands**

V.13 continues the story. Actually one could read the end of V.9 and skip to V.13, omitting the hymn in V.10-12 completely without missing a beat in the story. Obviously the hymn is an interjection to make sure heaven's reaction to the evil one's eviction and the triumph of God's people are highlighted. With V. 13 the dragon continues his relentless pursuit, this time featuring the woman. As the story highlights, the dragon is unsuccessful in his plan to eliminate her. She is (V.6) miraculously cared for and the dragon is thwarted at every turn. Failing to eliminate the woman, the dragon next turns his attention to the woman's other children. These are not identified except that they keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus. These folks are probably the church.

### **Making it real:**

However you choose to interpret Rev 12, several themes are clear. 1. The woman, the child, and the woman's children all come under the dragon's attack. They are the focus of his relentless assaults. 2. The child (a son) is a ruler who will rule the nations and is safe because he has been caught up to God and to his throne. 3. The woman, though persecuted, is cared for and endures the assault of the dragon. 3. The dragon is a defeated enemy, whom the brethren can overcome. The overcoming is not due to their inner resources but solely due to the blood of the Lamb.

For the seven churches John's teaching is essential as a spiritual warfare primer. John sets out everything they need to know about the spiritual nature of their fight. As we noted earlier, "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of wickedness in the heavenly places." Here John applies more fully for the seven churches what Paul was talking about in Eph. 6.

Paul told the Corinthians, **"And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God."** (2 Cor 4:4) With this kind of persistent and pernicious blindness all around us can you see how the world would respond to the church as it does? When Jesus was hung on the cross of Calvary, some of his final words are instructive, **"Father forgive them for they know not what they do."** (Lk 23:34).

### **12:1-6.**

It's hard to know how to fight your enemy, until you know your enemy. Here John pulls back the curtain so the churches can see their true enemy and the reasons why their life of obedience and faithfulness to God are hard. It happened to Jesus before it happened to them. In John 15 Jesus said to his disciples,

**"If the world hates you, you know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, 'A slave is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you; if they kept my word, they will keep yours also."**

On an encouraging note, mixed in with the reasons for why the Christian community in Asia Minor faced the hate they did, the churches also see some incredibly bright spots. They see God's supernatural ability to protect and watch over what is his. The woman and the child are sustained amid incredible persecution.

**Who your actual enemy is? How did Jesus respond to those who put him on the cross? Who was Jesus' enemy? Why did he not incite a backlash against the Roman and Jewish leaders?**

### **12:7-9.**

One thing we must remember is that although Satan's a master deceiver, he's been defeated. And while Satan is no wimp, he isn't the spiritual powerhouse he's often made out to be. Satan's most effective weapon is deception. If he can get followers of Jesus to believe lies and half-truths he can turn nation against nation, church against church, believer against believer. When Paul addresses the Ephesians on the matter of spiritual warfare, he says this about the source of their trouble,

**"Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the full armor of God, so that you might be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. For our struggle *is not against* flesh and blood, *but against* the powers, *against* the world forces of this darkness, *against* the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the full armor of God, so that you will be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand firm therefore, having girded your loins with truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace; in addition to all, taking up the shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God." (Eph. 6:10-17)**

### **12:10-12.**

This hymn echoes through the heavens the eviction of the evil one and proclaims a powerful message to the churches in how to deal with the evil one. In fact, for five of the seven churches Rev 12:10-12 is a powerful corrective to their less than faithful behavior. For the two faithful churches, this is a powerful encouragement to remain as they are. They are also encouraged by the fact that the time the evil one has available to him is limited.

Even more important, part of the way the dragon makes war against God's people is to deceive them and divide them and make them weak in their witness. The only way for the seven churches to prevail in the face of the evil one's onslaught is to heed the hymn that heaven sings in Rev 12:10-12 and to heed the provision that God makes for the woman and the child.

### **12:13-17.**

John told the churches in Revelation that they were under attack by the master deceiver. The world's been blindly deceived into attacking the light of the gospel. He is at war with God's people through those he's deceived and blinded. So when the churches began to lose their homes, their livelihoods, their families, in fact their very lives, they knew who the real enemy

was. It wasn't Rome, it was the master deceiver who blinded them to the truth. **If this is the case, how do we respond to those who make our lives hard?**

As Eugene Peterson has said, Revelation is designed as a "sursum corda" (lift up your heart), an encouragement to faithfulness among the churches. Rev 12 is certainly this.