

“A Christmas Drama”
Revelation 12:1-6
December 24, 2006

INTRODUCTION:

As we come today to the end of our one-year survey of the Bible, there is a significant truth about the Bible that we are now ready to appreciate. It is the fact that the Bible is written in the form of a story. It is not a series of propositions coming from God to us. It is not arranged topically like an encyclopedia so that we could look up a topic like marriage and go to the “M” section of the Bible and read everything there is to read about that subject. The Bible is a story, a story complete with characters, conflict, a plot and a conclusion. The plot of the Bible is a classic one, beginning with the description of paradise in the opening chapters of Genesis. But then conflict enters and the result is that paradise is lost and everything is ruined. A hero comes forth in order to restore things and even make them better than they were before. His quest, however, is fraught with danger and it looks at any moment as if everything might be lost. And then at the darkest moment a wondrous victory is won and everyone lives happily ever after. That’s the story of creation, fall and redemption.

It is absolutely crucial that you get this story straight, because until you know the story well and know your place in it, your life will be devoid of meaning. Everyone lives in light of a big story into which their own lives fit. The big story, called by philosophers a metanarrative, is simply the big picture that we use to organize and make sense of our lives. The big story in your mind affects you more than you know because it is the way you understand your place in life. It defines your interpretation of the past and your hopes for the future.

Let me give a couple of examples. For some people, the big story is one in which they are always victims of other’s sins against them. Everything is someone else’s fault and never this person’s. So in this big story, the main character always casts himself as a victim, and various other people scroll through the plot as the next victimizer. The characters and circumstances change, but the basic plot remains the same. It’s not hard to see how this big story, this metanarrative, affects the person embracing it. He will inevitably be full either of self-pity and self-loathing, or of anger and bitterness toward others. He will not be able to form close relationships because if you let people get close enough, they will become the new victimizer.

Another example of a big story that is frequently repeated this time of year, but common throughout the year for many, is the story in which I work hard to distinguish myself from others and then look to God to give me good things in payment for what I have done. Isn’t that the Christmas myth told by many? Santa is making a list and checking it twice, to see who’s been naughty or nice. Good gifts come to the nice and coal in the stockings of those lacking niceness.

Illustration: A boy wrote a letter to Santa that went like this: “Dear Santa, there are three little boys who live at our house. There is Jeffrey; he is 2. There is David; he is 4. And there is Norman; he is 7. Jeffrey is good some of the time. David is good some of the time. But Norman is good all of the time. I am Norman.”

If your big story is be nice and God will be nice to you, it will have the same affect on you it had on Norman—you will want to point out the faults of others and boast in your own worthiness.

Revelation 12 tells us again what the big story of the Bible is all about. In case you missed it throughout the first 65 books of the Bible, here it is in summary form. It’s a story with four main characters, with conflict and suspense and with a glorious concluding chapter. Let’s look now at these three parts to this story, which is really the true story of Christmas. It is only as you are able to locate yourself in this story that you will experience the life Jesus came to bring.

I. The Characters

Many stories begin with beautiful young women, and this is one such story. The beauty of this woman is seen in her clothing. She is “clothed with the sun,” which is an image of splendor. We learn something of her identity in the description of the crown of twelve stars that is on her head. The number twelve is often used in Revelation to refer to Israel, because of the 12 tribes of that nation. I believe, however, that this woman is to be identified not exclusively with Old Testament Israel, but more broadly with the people of God throughout the Old Testament, even before Abraham.

This woman is pregnant and about to deliver her child. Her pregnancy is in its very last stages, because she is already experiencing labor pains. Verse 5 leaves us in no doubt about the identity of this child. **“She gave birth to a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron.”** So this male child is the hero of the story, the rightful king who will bring justice and prosperity to the land. This is a clear reference to our Lord Jesus, who is indeed the true King of the earth.

Every story needs a bad guy, and the bad guy of this story is a monstrous tyrant. Again, the identity of the dragon is not left to speculation. In verse 9 we read, **“And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world.”** Notice several things about the tyrant of the story. First, a dragon is a type of monster, and that is exactly what Satan is. God did not make this monster, but he became monstrous in his selfish ambition. This ambition is indicated by the seven heads, each with a crown on it. But he is an imposter. The crown doesn’t rightly belong to him, but to the child born of the woman. This explains the second thing about him, his red color. Red is the color of blood, and this dragon secures his reign through violent means. His violence is aimed chiefly at the child of the woman, the one to whom the crown belongs. As long as the child lives, the dragon’s claims to the crown are threatened.

Third, this dragon has great power, as indicated by his ten horns. A horn is a symbol of power in the Bible, and he has not just a few of these, but ten.

It is selfish ambition that makes monsters of us all. Satan's sin, and the sin of the human race, was nothing less than a mutiny against the Creator. It is the desire for greatness apart from God that brings such monstrous evil upon the world. A quick application is necessary before moving on. Is there present in your life any of this selfish ambition? It doesn't have to be a desire to rule the world. It could be something as simple as wanting to have everyone like you. It could be the desire for the nicest house or the next promotion. Selfish ambition occurs anytime we seek greatness apart from the way God has said it should be achieved—through submission to him and service to others. Satan did not seek it in that way, and he became a hideous monster as a result.

II. The Conflict

These are the main characters, and we are now ready for the central conflict of the story. Every story has an element of conflict, and this one is no different. There are actually three conflicts in this story. The first one is the conflict between Satan and God in the form of this warfare in heaven. Verse 7 and following describes this. Satan had his following through a third of the angels that had believed his lies and joined in the mutiny against God. The result was a huge heavenly battle resulting in the expulsion of Satan and his evil angels to the earth.

The second conflict is centered on the desire of the dragon, Satan, to destroy the child of the woman. This child is the true King, and as long as he lives, Satan's rule cannot be established. The great dragon is far more powerful than the woman, and he is hovering over her in order to destroy this child. She is just a pregnant woman in labor, and in her weakness she is no match for this great monster. It seems that the death of the true King is a certainty. This conflict between Satan and the child of the woman is a longstanding one. It began back in the third chapter of the Bible where, right after Adam and Eve sinned, God gave this promise in a word addressed to the serpent, who is Satan. **“I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel”** (3:15). Satan's desire throughout the remainder of the Old Testament was to kill the child of the woman before he could crush the head of Satan. At first, he thought that Cain or Abel would be the one to accomplish that. It became evident that Cain, Adam and Eve's firstborn, was more suited to the dark side of evil than to righteousness. So he focused his attention on Abel, with the result that Cain, under the influence of Satan, murdered his brother, Abel. Satan next attempted to erase the godly line by intermarriage between the godly and ungodly, with the result that the godly were slowly being erased. When only one godly family was left, Noah and his household, God delivered through the great Flood. The kings of the Old Testament were frequently targeted by the nations surrounding them, as Satan attempted to discover who this deliverer was in order to wipe him out. Finally, in the pages of the New Testament, it became evident that the promised child would be born in Bethlehem at the time indicated by the appearing

of the star. Satan then led Herod to the murderous plan of killing all the babies in Bethlehem. Though he managed to kill many children, he was not successful in killing *the* child, the Messiah born to be the King of all kings.

His lack of success led to the third conflict, described in verse 17. **“Then the dragon became furious with the woman and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus.”** This is where we come into this great story. We are the rest of the woman’s offspring. Remember from last week that this book has a pastoral purpose, to bring comfort and encouragement to those who were suffering persecution at the hands of the Roman emperor Domitian. The ability to place yourself in the big story is a key part of knowing the meaning of life. We are part of this great drama, and for us this is a time in which we can expect some suffering, which is brought by the fury of the dragon against the rest of the woman’s offspring.

III. The Conclusion

The final part of every good story is a resolution to the conflict. The book of Revelation does indeed show us the future, and when we read it, it is like turning to the last chapter of the book to see how things turn out. I notice three things about the way God brings this all to a conclusion.

First, he delivers his people to the wilderness, which in the Bible is a place of deprivation and supernatural provision. Remember how God used the wilderness to protect Israel in the Old Testament. He would not let Israel’s enemies pursue them there, and not many wanted to go there anyway. But God provided for his people there, sending daily manna and bringing water from rocks. It may be that you are in the wilderness right now, only having enough manna for today. You find yourself in a situation where if God doesn’t show up with supernatural strength for you each day, you don’t think you will be able to make it. You need to understand that God has put you here, and he has done so in order to deliver you from the evil one.

A second way I see God’s ability to bring this conflict to a resolution and to deliver his people is through his complete sovereignty over the dragon. Notice that the dragon has been given ten horns, symbols of his great power. Numbers have significance in Revelation, and Anthony Hoeksema says that the number ten signifies “the measure of time or space or power as it is allotted and limited to any creature by God’s decree.” What he means by that is the same thing that is commonly taught throughout the rest of the Bible. Satan’s schemes against God are in the end only used to further God’s great and good ends. He is like a puppet on a string. He is like the kings in Psalm 2, of whom it is said, **“The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and against his anointed, saying, ‘Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us.’ He who sits in the heavens laughs”** (v. 2-4). God laughs because in all that they do they only serve God’s greater purposes. That can be seen most clearly in the death of this child of the woman, our Lord Jesus. Though Satan failed in his attempts to kill the child when he was a baby, 33 years later he

succeeded, as the Roman and Jewish authorities conspired and succeeded in crucifying him. But this only accomplished what God had decided beforehand should happen, as Jesus became the sacrifice that paid for the sins of all who trust in him. The moment Satan considered his greatest triumph became in fact his greatest defeat. God's power is so great that he can use even his enemies, and your enemies, to bring about God's good purposes.

This brings us to the third way God brings to a conclusion this conflict. God extends grace to his former enemies, offering cleansing and forgiveness through the blood of Jesus. Notice verses 10-11. **“Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death.”** What does it mean for us to conquer Satan by the blood of the Lamb? It means that we fight to hold on to the grace of God that comes to us through the cleansing blood of Jesus. Satan fights us through guilt and through his accusations. In the first century, there was a well-known and well-hated figure called the *delator*, the paid informer. He made his living by accusing people before the authorities. He was a professional tattle-tale. That's what Satan does. His whole life is taken up with a rehearsal of our sins. If you want to defeat the evil one in your life, you must move past being like Satan and having your whole life taken up with that rehearsal of your sin. Instead, you must rehearse the glorious good news of the blood of the Lamb and the grace of God given to you. Your life must be defined by grace.

At the God's House Christmas program this week, I referred to that well-known Christmas story, *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*, about the Herdman family. The author describes the Herdman children like this:

The Herdmans were absolutely the worst kids in the history of the world. They lied and stole and smoked cigars—even the girls—and talked dirty and hit little kids, and cussed their teachers and took the name of the Lord in vain, and set fire to Fred Schumacher's old, broken-down tool house. The tool house burned right down to the ground, and I think that surprised the Herdmans. They set fire to things all the time, but that was the first time they managed to burn down a whole building.

The last place you would expect to find the Herdmans is in church, but they come there because a boy named Charlie said to one of the Herdmans who had just stolen his lunch, “I don't care, because I get all the goodies I want in Sunday School.” So they all show up to Sunday School on the day that happens to be audition day for the Christmas pageant. The Herdmans threaten the other children until they let Herdmans take all the main parts. They begin to find themselves interested in the story. And then on the night of the performance, Imogene, the worst of the Herdmans, who is playing the part of Mary, suddenly understands. As they sing the words to the song, “Silent night, holy night... Jesus, Lord at Thy birth,” she gets it and begins to weep for the first time since she was a baby. This is the story of God's grace. Hardened sinners can be changed by the blood of the Lamb. This is the story of Christmas. May it be the story of your life!