

When the Bible Gets Weird and Wonderful

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[0:00] All right, so to continue our series today, what I want to do is take us to a different part of Revelation. In a second, I'm going to ask you to pull up Revelation 12. I'm going to read it.

Actually, you may want to go ahead and do that now. So this is Revelation 12. It is something I'm going to ask us in community to look at a little more closely.

So Revelation 12. I'm going to start us off by just reading from the screen. A great portent appeared in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and on her head a crown of twelve stars.

She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pangs in the agony of giving birth. Then another portent appeared in heaven, a great red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven diadems on his head.

His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and threw them down to the earth. Then the dragon stood before the woman who was about to deliver a child so that he might devour her child as soon as it was born.

[1:20] And she gave birth to a son, a male child, who is to rule all the nations with a scepter of iron. But her child was snatched away and taken to God and to his throne.

And the woman fled into the wilderness where she has prepared, where she has a place prepared by God. So there she can be nourished for one thousand two hundred sixty days.

And war broke out in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon. The dragon and his angels fought back. But they were defeated.

And there was no longer any place for them in heaven. The great dragon was thrown down that ancient serpent who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world.

He was thrown down to the earth and his angels were thrown down with him. Then I heard a loud voice in heaven proclaiming, Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Messiah.

[2:29] For the accuser of our brothers and sisters has been thrown down who accuses them day and night before our God. But they have conquered him by the blood of the lamb and by the word of their testimony.

For they did not cling to life, even in the face of death. Rejoice then you heavens and those who dwell in them.

But woe to the earth and the sea for the devil has come down to you with great wrath because he knows that his time is short. So when the dragon saw that he had been thrown down to earth, he pursued the woman who had delivered the male child.

But the woman was given the two wings of the great eagle so that she could fly from the serpent into the wilderness to her place where she is nourished for a time and times and half a time.

Then from his mouth, the serpent poured water like a river after the woman to sweep her away with the flood. But the earth came to the help of the woman.

[3:36] It opened its mouth and swallowed the river that the dragon had poured from his mouth. Then the dragon was angry with the woman and went off to wage war on the rest of her children.

Those who keep the commandments of God and hold the testimony of Jesus. Please pray with me. God, thank you so much for the Holy Scriptures that record so vividly and eloquently the struggles of our world from the ancients until now.

God, thank you so much for the Holy Spirit. That record stories of perseverance and hope so that we might learn to persevere and have hope. I pray, Lord, that in this service there would be something that speaks to every single heart present. that gives us a sense of peace in a world of chaos and turmoil. In the name of Jesus Christ, we pray these things. Amen.

[5:10] All right, so here we have this passage of scripture that fits pretty well into our perception of the book of Revelation. On screen, it contains these cosmic characters, a mysterious woman, a dragon that is lurking.

And both of them are clothed with what maybe we have come to expect from this final book of the Bible. They're clothed in this kind of strange way. The passage also contains a mysterious chorus of voices singing somewhere off screen, but proclaiming this uproarious, joyous victory. In some ways, too, then, the passage fits well into this time of year. A time when we are soon to see goblins and ghouls and princesses and pirates alongside all manner of creative costumes meant to parody the particulars of our present moment.

All of that is just at first glance. When we look closer, we find that we are actually dealing in this passage with a nativity.

Like Merry Halloween, I guess. Yet the collage of images in this chapter actually sums up the message of the entire book of Revelation.

[6:42] And that, in turn, in some ways sums up the entire message of the Bible. And that makes sense when we consider what Eugene Peterson reminds us of in his brilliant book, *Reverse Thunder*.

Here's what he says, and I hope that you can always honestly hold this when you think about, in the future, the book of Revelation. I, he says, do not read the Revelation to get additional information about the life of faith in Christ.

I have read it all before in law, in prophet, in gospel, in epistle. Everything in the Revelation can be found in the previous 65 books of the Bible.

There is nothing new to say on the subject, but there is a new way to say it. I read Revelation not to get more information, but to revive my imagination.

So if the book of Revelation puts the whole message of the Bible in high definition, then Revelation 12 helps us boil down that message to some of its most essential elements.

[7:50] See, in Revelation we get to see the breadth and height and depth of evil. We also get to see the breadth and depth and height of hope, of good and evil, of death and of resurrection.

If you're a fan of the film version of *Lord of the Rings*, that trilogy, how many people, who am I dealing with in this room? Okay, some people, all right.

There's this really pretty famous quote that Sam says in the film version of *Two Towers*, and it's exactly in the key of Revelation and Revelation 12, what those two are doing.

It's like in the great stories, Mr. Frodo, the ones that really mattered, full of darkness and danger they were, and sometimes you didn't want to know the end.

Because how could the end be happy? How could the world go back to the way it was when so much bad happened? But in the end, it's only a passing thing, this shadow.

[9:02] Even darkness must pass. A new day will come, and when the sun shines, it will shine out the clearer.

Those were the stories that stayed with you. That meant something, even if you were too small to understand why.

All right. So as you talked about this passage, you may have noticed that it contains this scene in heaven. It contains a scene on earth, and it contains a poetic song that divides those two things. In the first scene in heaven, we get this sign right off the bat, the sign of a cosmic woman who is clothed with the material of creation. The sun, the moon, and the stars.

And don't forget that in apocalyptic literature, there's this reliance on contrasting categories. So this cosmic woman contrasts the harlot woman in Revelation 17 that represents Rome of John's time and the Babylon of every time.

[10:18] The cosmic woman here is clothed with the materials of creation, whereas the woman in Revelation 17 is clothed with the luxuries of empire

that are only gained through exploitation.

Whereas the woman in Revelation 17, whereas the woman in Revelation 17 is dependent on the beast, the woman of Revelation 12 is dependent on God. One is a distortion of the other.

The cosmic woman cries out in the pain of labor. And the language of childbirth in the New Testament is almost always tied to the rupture and pain of birthing the new creation of God, the world that is contained within God and which God longs to bring to earth.

And I'll admit that I have only seen two children born. But that was enough to let me know that childbirth is always serious business.

It always brings the possibility of death, a fact that we sometimes sanitize in our society. But this woman does give birth to a son only to have that son immediately threatened by the dragon.

[11:36] And indeed, the dragon is the second sign that John sees in heaven. The dragon desires to devour the son, but instead the son is snatched away, taken to heaven, and the woman escapes into the wilderness to be nourished by God.

So we get this cosmic woman. And like a lot of characters in Revelation, she morphs. She's tied to a lot of other biblical characters.

Eve, for example, whose offspring will crush the serpent's head as the serpent bruises her heel. Israel and Mary, who give birth to a child, is to rule all the nations with a scepter of iron, as the psalmist proclaims.

Then in the second part of the passage, where the dragon pursues the woman on earth, she's also connected to the church. Now, I want to pause here.

Because I suspect that for some of us, we are far more comfortable believing in this cosmic woman. We may not always be able to verbalize that, but more comfortable than taking seriously this character of the dragon.

[12:58] In chapter 12, this character has a lot of different names. The creature is called the dragon, that ancient serpent, the devil, Satan, the deceiver of the whole world.

And the accuser. An accuser who matches the night and day worship of the saints with the night and day denunciations of the people of God.

But I want to suggest that we cannot understand the story of Scripture or even this chapter. I want to suggest that it's difficult to deepen in our faith beyond a certain point unless we grapple with this character of the dragon.

This very real presence in the drama of creation and liberation. If we ask ourselves, what is the origin of evil?

That's a question about which the biblical authors really don't seem to be that concerned. It's not really something they get at a lot. But if we ask what is the nature of evil and what are we to do about it?

[14:15] That is a question about which our Bible offers many, many thoughts. For me, Richard Beck is one of my favorite authors to go to when thinking about the dragon, the devil.

He's a psychologist, a Christian writer. And he says in his book, *Old Scratch*, something that I think is just so, it's so true. That for many of us, modern, progressive Christians, we tend to, and here's his language, Scooby-Doo-ify evil.

Have you ever watched Scooby-Doo? I know I actually watched the original show, which probably tells you something about my age. But anyway, that is that in every episode of Scooby-Doo, basically, you know, there's this idea that there's a, oh, it's a ghost or it's a monster or something. Well, then they got to investigate what's going on. But it's always revealed to be like the greedy man downtown or the neighbor down the street. It's like unmasked is this person that's right in their midst.

But Revelation 12, along with several other parts of the Bible, doesn't let us off that easily. And I think Beck also rightly diagnoses this situation.

[15:33] The secular age, he says, is characterized by two cross pressures. On the one hand is the downward pressure of skepticism and disenchantment, where the enchanted world is emptied out and all that is left is the flat, horizontal drama of human action and interaction.

But here and there in this secular age, we also experience updrafts of transcendence. A pull toward the heavens. We're interrupted by wonder and awe.

We're surprised by joy. We experience a deep-seated ache and a yearning, a feeling of restlessness, a longing for whom. In this secular age, faith and doubt will always go hand in hand. But it's hard work to position yourself at the center of these countervailing currents. Everything about faith is a struggle. Here's one common technique to stay afloat.

Believe as little as possible. Believe only what is absolutely necessary. And yet, you probably have already realized that revelation fragrantly confronts that kind of faith.

[17:01] It boldly proclaims that the world contains real malevolence and cannot be scooby-doo-ified.

It presents evil as complex. And to beat it, we have to be careful not to reduce it to these categories that are easiest for our rational minds to hold.

It asks us to believe a story about good and evil, about God and the dragon that pulls us out past the language and lifestyle of respectability.

You know as well as I do that talking too much about the devil might get most of us in trouble with our friend groups. But not talking about the devil risks misunderstanding something that is critical to the faith of Jesus and to faith in Jesus.

And that then brings you back to something else from old scratch that I want to share. It's probably one of the best understandings of the devil that I've encountered.

[18:19] See, Richard Beck, he always writes out of his experience teaching Bible study at a local prison. And he talks about that as the basically the catalyst of his conversion to taking the devil more seriously.

And when teaching prisoners about the Beatitudes, he says basically that he's met with this resignation. But basically they say, you can't do that stuff in here.

You'll get hurt. You'll get hurt.

You'll get hurt.

You'll get hurt.

[20:21] You'll get hurt. come from, or if it'll come, in a world where to proclaim that we will not give allegiance to any earthly king is considered un-American, we can feel that force pressing down on us.

When I, with Anthony, had to write that financial update to the church, saying that we are out of cash reserves, I could feel that force pressing down on me, telling me to give up in a world in which churches that proclaim this more beautiful gospel, a gospel that is non-coercive and cross-shaped, they frequently don't have the resources they need.

I could feel that force whispering to me, if you just, if it shaped your message, if we just shaped our message to a demographic that is more financially well-off, or stopped talking about the sins of white supremacy and the exploitation of capitalism, then we wouldn't be in this position.

We can feel that force pressing down on us in so many ways. But y'all, here is the good news of Revelation 12, of the entire book of Revelation, of the whole sweep of the biblical story, that Satan, that force pressing and squeezing us, will be thrown down.

That even though the dragon may stalk the earth for a little longer, just as Jesus was snatched to heaven in the resurrection and the ascension, that we too shall be saved.

[22:23] The dragon of chaos and deception and accusation may roam, but will not prevail.

Y'all are quiet. I could use an amen. I'm not going to lie. I get an amen. See, in verses 1 through 9 of this passage, John sees this vision in heaven of a great conflict between good and evil, in which the dragon is defeated.

And then in verses 13 through 17, John sees a vision on earth of the dragon, attempting to win battles wherever he can, even though the war has already been determined.

And between those two scenes, there is a song that John hears ringing out in heaven. It's a spiritual of sorts that tunes our hearts to resistance to the dragon in whatever form he takes.

It's a song that explicitly asks us two questions that we desperately need to consider in this political and economic and spiritual moment.

[23:35] First, can you believe the wild proclamation of verse 10? Now have 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 has been thrown down. Can you step outside of the lie that things will always be this way, maybe have to be this way, and instead accept the reality of heaven, that Jesus, the resurrected one, who was tempted as we are, has already overthrown evil in every permanent sense?

Now, I know that it is tempting to believe as little as possible, to believe only what is absolutely necessary.

But God is inviting us to the full story. Can you believe it? And then, not only that, the face of such wild proclamation in the face of it.

Can we live inside of God's tactics for the overthrow of evil? The blood of the lamb that is living this cross-shaped life where we willingly empty of power instead of trying to seize it.

[25:14] The word of our testimony that is being willing to give a verbal account of what we know of God's love and God's justice, even though that account will cost us something.

Not clinging to our lives, even in the face of death, because as strange as it may seem, we know that death is not the worst thing that can happen to us. Giving into that pressure, that whisper, being squeezed into the dehumanizing shape of conformity to this world is.

Reverend King, Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., compellingly summarized the tactics we are invited to. came up with this term that is gorgeous called transformed nonconformity.

Honesty impels me to admit, he said, that transformed nonconformity, which is always costly and never altogether comfortable, may mean walking through the valley of the shadow of suffering, losing a job or having your six-year-old daughter ask, Daddy, why do you have to go to jail so much?

In some ways, Revelation 12 is a scandal to our modern mind, not only because of his imagery, but also because of the invitation that lies underneath those implicit questions, an invitation to simply endure, to be nourished by God in the wilderness, to wait to be given the eagle's wings that we may run and not be weary, that we may walk and not be faint.

[27:12] In a world which tells us that we should, we must, we deserve to live lives of security and stability and luxury.

Revelation asks us to practice the vocation of enduring until the end, even as we lose jobs and go to jail and feel ourselves passing through the valley of the shadow.

it's a little bit like the realization that Sam shares with Frodo about the great stories of darkness and danger.

He says, but I think, Mr. Frodo, I do understand. I know now. Folk in those stories had lots of chances of turning back.

Only they didn't. They kept going because they were holding on to something. For us, that something is resurrection.

[28:24] The resurrection of Jesus, the transformation of evil, the raising to life of all our dreams for flourishing and for a flourishing world under a good creator.

may we believe. May we practice the tactics of Jesus and may we endure.

Amen.