

The Christmas Dragon

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- [0 : 0 0] So, the Christmas story is probably the best-known story in the Bible, and we've probably all heard it several times by now over the past few weeks.
- We know all the characters, Mary, Joseph, Jesus, the shepherds, the wise men, even the donkey gets a song. One character you might be forgiven for forgetting, though, is the dragon.
- He's certainly there in the gospel accounts of the first Christmas, but very much working in the shadows, behind the scenes. What the book of Revelation does for us is it shows us what's going on behind the scenes.
- It helps us to see the dragon in the Christmas story. And the reason this is helpful, to see the dragon in the Christmas story, is because he is the story's primary antagonist.
- You might remember Waitrose's Christmas ad from last year, which featured Edgar the Excitable Dragon. He was a rather friendly sort of Christmas dragon, admittedly rather accident-prone.
- [0 : 5 8] But in the real story, the Christmas dragon is darkness and evil. He is the devil. And why it's really good for us to be able to recognize the dragon in the Christmas story is because he's also the enemy of God's people, and more broadly, the world.
- Whether you follow Jesus or you don't, the enemy is the same. The dragon. The difference that following Jesus makes, as we're going to see, is being on the winning side.
- The Revelation was given to John, one of Jesus' disciples, in order to dispel the fears, doubts, and failings of a group of seven churches in what's now modern-day Turkey, and to help them to keep following Jesus with confidence.
- And we often think of Revelation as that difficult, slightly wacky book at the end of the Bible that tells us about the future. But actually, it tells us not just about the future, but about what it looks like to follow Jesus in the present until he comes a second time.
- Basically, it's a book designed to help Christians to follow him and to understand the times in which they live. It's not a secret code with hidden clues about the future.
- [2 : 1 6] It's definitely not that. But why all the weirdness? Well, basically, it comes down to genre. It's written in a style that's called apocalyptic. A lot of words now come to be associated with the end of the world.
- But in fact, it's an ancient genre that basically means revealed. It's a peek behind the curtain. It's a look behind the scenes. And for the first recipients of the letter, for it is indeed a letter, well, they needed encouragement.
- And they needed to know why following Jesus didn't feel like they were following the one who defeated sin, death, and the devil. They were being persecuted and killed.
- Their churches were struggling. They were facing seemingly insurmountable challenges from the culture they were in. And the world looked to them, as it surely can often to us, would look more powerful than Christ's church.

And they must have asked, why? Why, if Jesus has won, what's he doing? And just as we might have the same question, whether we know Jesus or not, if Jesus really has won the victory over sin, death, and the devil, why does it not always look like it?

[3 : 26] And so this look behind the scenes was to encourage them that they were the victors, even though it didn't look like it. And Christmas is all about victory in the war against the dragon.

We've got three points, the dragon and the cradle, the dragon and the cross, the dragon and the church. So our first point, the dragon and the cradle. The first six verses here are all about the dragon and the cradle.

The dragon and the baby son of God. This wild picture begins with two signs that John sees in heaven. The first sign is called a great sign. This great sign is a woman, clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and a crown of 12 stars on her head.

The woman represents God's people. If you're familiar with the story of Joseph, either from Genesis or from that musical about the Technicolor dream coat, you might remember that one of his dreams used a similar image.

In his dream, the sun, the moon, and stars represented God's people. And so it is here. So Revelations is just picking up on that image. But John also sees that the woman was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth.

[4 : 42] Before her baby is born, however, a second sign appears. This sign is not described as great. And that's because this sign represents the enemy.

An enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on its heads. This is a picture of a monstrous enemy who wants power, symbolized by the ten horns, and kingship, symbolized by the seven crowns.

And the dragon's powerful tail sweeps across the night sky and sends a third of the stars shooting towards the earth. Stars in the sky can symbolize either God's people or, more often, angels.

But either way, the point is that the dragon is destructive and brutal, causing the fall of God's created beings. But the destructive dragon's primary target is the baby about to be born.

The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that it might devour her child the moment he was born. Now, all this might seem rather weird and confusing.

[5 : 51] Revelation, you see, uses images and symbols drawn mostly from the Old Testament to help explain why things look the way they do and why the devil and the world often appear more powerful than Jesus.

To make sense of the woman, the dragon, and the child, we need to understand a key bit of Old Testament background. So in Genesis, the very first book of the Bible, everything went wrong in God's good creation the moment that Adam and Eve listened to the lies of the serpent.

They disobeyed God and plunged the world and humanity into sin. And God said this to the serpent when that happened. 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. That was a promise, a promise that had implications for all of human history.

And it's the first promise that Jesus would come at Christmas. He is the offspring that would crush the serpent's head. And what we see in Revelation 12, really, it's an exploration of that promise and the war between the serpent and the woman.

- [7 : 04] So this is why the dragon is poised, waiting for this baby to be born. The baby spells his defeat. So when the baby is born, his plan is to devour it.
- What a dark and terrible image. The dragon licking his lips in hatred, ready to bloody them with this new newborn child. Verse 5 continues the image.
- She gave birth to a son, a male child, who will rule all the nations with an iron scepter. That's a quote from Psalm 2, which is a psalm that speaks of the promised king who would rule or shepherd the world with a rod of iron.
- That king is Jesus. Obviously, in the gospel account, it's Mary who gives birth to Jesus. But Mary is, in a way, representative of God's people and the first woman, Eve.
- And from her came the promised offspring, the king to crush the dragon's head. In the accounts of Jesus' life that we have in our Bibles, the Gospels, we do actually see a lot of times where the dragon, the devil, tries to devour the promised king.
- [8 : 13] It's the dragon who was behind Herod, who massacred all the infants in Bethlehem in the hope of killing the promised king. The dragon himself came to tempt Jesus in the wilderness once he had grown into a man.
- The plan was to stop Jesus in his work. But Jesus refused to turn aside from his mission. And it was the dragon who put in the heart of Judas the idea to betray Jesus.
- And the result of that betrayal was the crucifixion of the king. And so as Jesus breathed his last breath, it really did look like the enemy had won.
- The dragon seemingly had devoured his prey and the promised king was dead. The rest of verse 5 tells us what happened next. And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne.
- And verse 6 goes on and says that the woman fled into the wilderness to a place prepared for her by God, where she might be taken care of for 1,260 days. So the boy king there being snatched up to God's throne, that's a picture of Jesus' resurrection and ascension into heaven again.
- [9 : 24] The victory snatched from the jaws of defeat. The jaws of the dragon came down upon Jesus when he died. But Jesus burst those jaws by defeating death.
- Something the dragon didn't expect. And the woman, God's people, they flee into the wilderness where God has prepared a place for them. It's a picture of God's people from Jesus' ascension until he returns.
- And it's a picture of our lives now, walking in the wilderness of the world, but also being taken care of by God. The picture comes from the Old Testament where God's people were saved from slavery in Egypt.
- They wandered in the wilderness where God himself dwelt with them and then came to the promised land. And so similarly for Christians today, we have been saved from sin and from the dragon.
- We are wandering through the world whilst God dwells with us in his Holy Spirit. And then when we die or when Christ returns, we will enter his promised land, God's new creation.
- [10 : 28] So there's a lot of pictures here, and hopefully we're starting to see how they fit together. It's like a collage of different images. And they look randomly thrown together, but actually on closer inspection, they're telling a poetic story and making one unified point.
- And the unified point here is that Christmas is a story about conflict. It's a war story. And Christmas was a key move in God's grand plan to slay the dragon.
- The victory of that false dragon king is a pyrrhic victory. He did finally kill Jesus, but Jesus' death on the cross was actually the moment of the dragon's defeat.

And that's what the next section of this chapter reflects on, because Christmas and the cross are inseparable. The cross is the reason the boy king was born. So in exploring the consequences of the cross, John records for us two more pictures in verses 7 to 12.

Picture 1 is of war in heaven. Picture 2 is of a song in heaven. Some suggest that the war in heaven that we see here is a recounting of an actual historical event.

[11 : 44] I suspect that given the rest of the section is clearly dealing with symbols, I think it makes much more sense to understand the war as a symbol here as well. What this symbol, this image of war does, is it helps Christians to see the cross as the decisive moment in the great cosmic conflict that was initiated by the devil at the moment where humanity fell into sin and death.

The picture begins with war breaking out. On one side we've got the dragon. As we've said, he represents the devil. On the other side we've got the angel Michael.

In the Old Testament, Michael's the angel who looks after God's people. So here he's representative of God's people. It's quite interesting, because that means that the war is not just between God and the devil.

The war is also between God's people and the devil. So therefore the cross is a moment of victory for God's people. The moment of that victory in the war is represented by verse 9.

We read, The great dragon was hurled down. That ancient snake called the devil or Satan who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth and his angels with him.

[13 : 02] At the cross the dragon thought he had dealt the death blow to Christ. But the true king returned from the grave and that was the killing blow to the devil. The poet John Donne memorably wrote, Death be not proud, though some have called thee mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so.

It's really great. Death was the result of the dragon's work in the Garden of Eden, the result of sin. So when Jesus, the innocent king, died to pay the price for sin, well, he also released all who trust in him from the curse of death.

The end of John Donne's poem is superb. And death shall be no more. Death, thou shalt die. When death was dealt the death blow, at the resurrection, the dragon was defeated.

In Revelation language, hurled down. Over the last five weeks, we've been looking at the songs of Christmas in Luke's gospel. Here, after that picture of war, well, we've got the Christmas song from Revelation.

It begins with these wonderfully triumphant words. Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Messiah.

[14 : 18] This is a victory song. Through the cross and the resurrection, God's kingdom has been established under the authority of his anointed one, Jesus the Messiah.

This song repeats the defeat of the dragon. It calls him the accuser and repeats again that he's been hurled down. The dragon can no longer accuse us of our sin before God.

His accusations of our failure, although they might be true, are covered by Jesus who paid the price for sin. His victory is our victory.

Which is why verse 11 can say, They triumphed over 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.

The blood of the lamb is Jesus' blood. It's a picture of Jesus as the sacrificial lamb who died in our place. It's one of those common images in Revelation for Jesus. That's because his death is so central to our victory.

[15 : 24] The triumph of God's people is also reliant on the word of our testimony. Jesus died for us. But we also need to testify that he is Lord.

As he died for us, believers have to be prepared to die for him. That's the cost of discipleship and the price of victory. But a small price to pay because Jesus paid a much, much bigger one.

This isn't just academic either. Many of those to whom this letter was first written would go on to be executed simply for following Jesus and holding to the truth of the gospel.

To the church in Smyrna, we read this in chapter 2 of Revelation. Jesus says, Perhaps that's a bit shocking.

We don't usually want to associate death with Christmas. And yet, Revelation, what it's doing is it's bringing us into the story and shows us that to experience the victory of Christmas and the cross, actually we need to be prepared to die for Jesus.

[16 : 45] Because the devil is still out there. He has been defeated, but he is still dangerous. In the song, the heavens rejoice because the dragon has been thrown down to earth.

But the earth responds and responds in grief because the devil's now been loosed upon the world. The last line of the song doesn't exactly read like a confidence booster.

He is filled with fury because he knows that his time is short. And in his fury, he will use what little time he has to wreak havoc, chaos, and destruction amongst God's people.

The hatred of the dragon is against you and I if we follow Jesus. Just as the dragon tried to devour Jesus, so he wants to devour us, to see us fall away from Christ, or failing that, to see us suffer and die.

So this takes us into our final point, the dragon and the church. There's a line in the very first episode of Sherlock, if you've seen it, where John Watson says to Sherlock Holmes, people don't have arch enemies.

[17 : 58] There are no arch enemies in real life. And that's actually not true for Christians. We actually do have an enemy, an arch enemy. The dragon's hatred of Christ leads to a burning, fiery hatred of Christ's people.

But what's really comforting, given the dragon's hatred, is that we have a protector. That's the point that verses 13 to 16 are making as this collage continues.

The dragon realizes that he has been hurled from heaven, which suggests a violently sudden defeat. In the blink of an eye, Christ defeated death, and at that moment, the devil had lost.

And at his sudden fall, he looks around for the woman who represents God's people, the church. He wants his revenge. But the woman is given the wings of a great eagle, and she flies to the place in the wilderness from earlier in the chapter, that place where God is with his people.

It's a picture of sanctuary. The image of wings, that's one that's used quite often in the Bible to describe the care and the protection that God gives to his people.

[19 : 10] In Exodus, for example, God says, Revelation basically takes that image and applies it to the church today.

The image is of a woman carried to the place prepared for her in the desert for a time, times, and half a time. And that's just a very common apocalyptic phrase that indicates a very long time.

In this case, the time from Christ's ascension until his return. The place prepared for the woman refers to God's constant presence with his people.

The world is the wilderness that we walk through. But God dwells in us through his Holy Spirit, who helps us to bear the fruit of godliness, helps us keep on following Jesus, even when it's really tough, and protects us from the burning rage of the devil.

Christ's church is like a city in the desert, a stronghold against the rage of the dragon. And it's just enormously encouraging, isn't it? Even when the dragon spews out a flood from his mouth, the earth swallows it up.

- [20 : 24] Again, that's Exodus imagery. The dragon tried to kill God's people at the Exodus through Pharaoh and the Egyptians, but they were drowned in the sea as they pursued the Israelites. And the victory song that the Israelites sang on that day, they said, you, God, stretch out your right hand, and the earth swallows your enemies.

So it's just the very same image of protection and victory that we have here in Revelation. And the last verse summarizes pretty much where the church is now.

Then the dragon was enraged at the woman and went off to wage war against the rest of her offspring, those who keep God's commands and hold fast their testimony about Jesus.

In Genesis, God said that he would put enmity between the serpent and the woman, his offspring and hers. Jesus was the promised offspring, as we've discussed.

But if we trust in Jesus, well, we are united to him. God's people, therefore, are also the offspring of the woman. That is, those who keep God's commands and hold fast their testimony about Jesus.

- [21 : 33] Jesus. The war is still ongoing, even though the serpent has been dealt a mortal wound. Snakes are quite interesting animals. Even when decapitated, it takes a while, apparently, for their nerves to shut down.

And so a severed snake head can still kill you. Just look up the story of Chinese chef Peng Fan. He killed a snake. She was preparing to cook.

Wouldn't be my choice of dinner, admittedly, but each to their own. And the severed head then decided to take its revenge and bit him. 20 minutes later, he was dead. And it's pretty similar to what we have here, actually.

The head of the great serpent has been crushed. His defeat has already happened. But he will bite and burn whatever he can until the true king returns, just like that severed snake head.

That's why the world is the way it is. That's why the church often looks weak. The false dragon king is throwing all he's got at God's people and the world because he knows his time is short.

- [22 : 42] Because he knows he's lost. And so as we finish, we can take comfort that the time is getting shorter. We don't know when Jesus will return, but every minute of every day brings us closer to his second advent.

And whether you know him or you don't, this concerns you. Because there are two sides. Jesus and the dragon. There's no neutral territory.

There is no middle ground. The conflict at the heart of Christmas requires us to take a side. The Bible makes no false promises about how hard it is to follow Jesus.

It could be really hard. But it also makes no false promises about why following Jesus is worth it. And Jesus is victory and the promise of eternal life in his renewed creation.

Every evil wiped away. Every tear wiped clean. No more tears. No more anxieties. But the alternative, and this sounds stark, it is stark, is to be a slave in the dragon's army.

- [23 : 52] A pawn in his infantry. And make no mistake, he has no love for humanity. It was him who led humanity into its current cycle of pain and death right at the very beginning.

Ultimately, the alternative to Jesus is defeat and judgment. Jesus is the winner. In him is victory. And that will either be a wonderful encouragement for you today, or it might be something that just gets you thinking about what side you're on.

For all of us, the dragon will keep biting and striking out in anger until Christ returns. His hatred for humanity, and in particular for Christ's church, really does know no bounds.

And his chief tactic as he rails against his defeat is the one that he used in the garden. Lies and deception. His talents are embedded deeply in our culture.

He will lure everyone he can away from God, just as he did in the garden. He used very much orchestrated culture in such a way that our eyes are always bombarded by things which he tells us will bring us comfort, will bring us money, will bring us authenticity, will bring us respect, will bring us identity, will bring us pleasure, sexual or otherwise.

[25 : 17] The idols of our age, in short, idols which, we might add, could very easily and very often do infiltrate the church. We are in a conflict. And so we can't just rest on the laurels of Christ's victory, certain though it is.

We need vigilance, because the dragon will try to tempt us away from the winning side. Victory is secure, but it also requires us to keep God's commands and keep believing in Jesus.

An American bishop was writing in The Guardian just a few days ago, and he suggested that this Christmas should be a time of mourning because of the year that we've had. He completely misunderstood Christmas.

Every year since sin entered the world has been a year of mourning, not just 2020. We wish one another a Merry Christmas because Jesus came to defeat the dragon.

And if we're following him, we have won. What we do now is we keep pushing forward into 2021 and beyond in hope and holiness until he returns.

[26 : 26] When he does, I hope that we'll all be wearing crowns of victory and singing songs of joy. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, I thank you that in Christ is the victory.

I thank you that we have an absolutely certain hope in Jesus, because on the cross, he defeated our enemy, the devil. And Lord, although it's hard living lives whilst the devil is constantly trying to attack us, assail us and lead us away from you, and he constantly wants us to suffer and fail and fall.

I thank you that we have your Holy Spirit with us who helps us to live for you and to keep our eyes fixed on Christ until he returns. We pray that you would help us to keep trusting in him and to keep rejoicing in him for coming at Christmas and for dying on the cross and for rising from the dead, defeating the dragon.

Amen.