

Unwrapping God's enemy

Revelation 12 and 13

We're going to have a guessing competition! You know how every now and again you'll hear that a company has issued an urgent recall notice for a product? "For months we've been selling this heater but we've just discovered that it's likely to blow up and you'll probably be killed, so send it back!" You know the kind of notice I'm talking about?

Here's what I'd like you to guess. Over the past month, how many different models of motor car have been recalled? Of all the different models of car that were sold in Australia in June 2016, how many models have been urgently recalled by the manufacturer? The answer? 47. That's higher than what I would have guessed. The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission—otherwise known as the (ACCC) or "the consumer watchdog"—have a website where they list all the latest recall notices, and, over the month of June, they listed 47 different models of car that were found to pose a threat to public safety.

The list includes some well-known names. The Jeep Grand Cherokee 2014-15 is one. Here's a picture, it looks like a nice big safe car, but there is a hidden problem. The recall notice says that if the transmission is put in park while the engine is still running, then the park brake won't engage prior to the driver exiting the vehicle and "the vehicle may roll away striking and injuring the driver, passenger or bystanders." "I bought a jeep!", **splat**

Looking through the list, it's the European engineering that is most suspect. There are four Ferraris on the list, two Maseratis, four Jaguars, a Peugeot, a Citroen. And one Mercedes; a really nice one! The SLK model was recalled because "Incorrectly sized nuts may have been fitted to the tie rods on the rear axle. If these nuts come loose it may alter the steering characteristics of the vehicle", and, "changed steering characteristics may cause an accident hazard to the vehicle occupants and other road users."

So these notices are quite alarming. On the outside these cars look safe and they have a good reputation, but underneath the shiny exteriors lie some very real hidden dangers. We are now entering the second half of our six-week series in the book of Revelation, which is all about revealing the spiritual side of the universe. We've seen some wonderful things as Revelation exposes the world's spiritual side, but today's revelation is a little more sobering. Today's chapters have the same effect as one of those recall notices; they draw our attention to a dangerous reality that we need to address.

In Chapter 12 the focus is on an enemy of God who likes to hide. This is a chapter teaching us about Satan and his ways, a chapter warning us of his methods, and a chapter which also shows us how his power can be defeated; we get the warning and

the instructions as to what to do all in the one place. Remember, 1:3 said that we will be blessed if we take this book to heart. The blessing here is that we will see and respond to this danger ahead of time.

We pick things up in chapter 12.1 which opens with an incredibly vivid and intense scene: John sees a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. ² She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth. And in verse 5 She gave birth to a son, a male child, who “will rule all the nations with an iron scepter.” We already discovered that some images in the Book of Revelation are easy. Who is this male child? There’s only one figure who rules *all the nations*, and that’s the Lord Jesus himself. The scene we have here is the Christmas story, the birth of Jesus.

You would think that the woman is therefore Mary, the mother of Jesus. Well, not quite. Note that this woman is crowned with twelve stars on her head. In Apocalyptic writing the number 12 is representative of God’s people. This woman isn’t Mary but the community of God. Jesus was born to a Jewish family, he was born as a member of the tribe of Judah, a descendant of David; Jesus emerged from God own people, that’s what’s being communicated by this picture of a woman giving birth.

And as this woman is giving birth we see a startling figure standing next to her. Verse 3: Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on its heads. We learn a little later on in verse 9 that the dragon is the devil himself: Satan. And the picture of Satan that we have in front of us is a frightening one. This dragon is coloured red, which in this type of writing represents *violence*. He’s not a friendly dragon like the one in Shrek, he want to do some damage, verse 4: Its 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 it might devour her child the moment he was born. If you thought that the Christmas story was G rated affair then this passage ought to make you think again. The birth of Jesus elicited from Satan an unbelievably violent and murderous reaction.

Do you remember the story of the three wise men and King Herod? When Herod hears that these wise men have come to worship a king, he decides to do what? To murder all Jewish boys under the age of 2. When we remember the Christmas story we sing songs like *Silent Night*. There would have been nothing peaceful about the murder of so many babies. What we have here in Rev 12 is the same story from a different angle. Herod’s murderous rampage was prompted by the Devil; it was Satan’s attempt to kill Jesus before his ministry had begun. It didn’t matter that Jesus was only a baby, Satan wanted to devour him.

And Jesus isn’t the only object of Satan’s violence. The end of verse 5 fast-forwards to the very end of Jesus ministry, we’re told that the child was snatched up to God and to his throne—A reference to the ascension in Acts 1 were Jesus returns to his Father—but in the meantime the woman is taken to a place of protection in verse 6. Why is

she in need of protection? Skip with me to 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. The dragon wants to devour God's people as well as their King. Some scholars suggest this is reference to the persecution experienced by the first generation of Christians after Jesus. We know that the Roman emperor Nero unleashed a terrible persecution upon Christian people after the great fire in Rome. Revelation suggests that such violence is not only political but also spiritual; there is a real Satanic element at play in these instances of persecution. And the persecution continues on, affecting subsequent generations of believers. Have a look at verse 17: 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. Satan is waging war against *us*. If he could, he'd have us killed, and as far as God allows him to he will do his best to make us sick, to make us downcast, to frustrate the mission of our church, to lead us into disappointment, to ruin relationships, to make life miserable. This is the first truth that Revelation is teaching us today: we have an enemy.

So let's think about this some more. Why is he so intent on this mission of violence? Well, it's interesting to know a little bit about his background. From verse 7 we have a change of scene. No longer are we in Palestine at Christmas time, rather we are up in the heavens where God has his dwelling place. And there's a huge fight going on. Then war broke out in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. First thing we notice is that Satan and his angels have their origin in heaven. This means that they have a power that's greater than human strength. 2 Peter 2:11 describes angels as being stronger and more powerful than us. And in v7 we see a group of them attempting to assert this power in heaven. From other parts of the Bible it would seem that Satan and his angels were attempting mutiny against God. In the New Testament letter of Jude, v6 speaks about angels abandoning their proper dwelling. They were not happy with the position assigned to them and so they reacted; like lots of wars it's a fight based on pride and a hunger for power.

But in this fight there was a clear winner. Verse 8: But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven. ⁹ 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. It's a difficult exercise to try and work out when this expulsion took place, whether it was before the creation of the world or after or before Jesus death and resurrection or after. I think the important thing here is not so much the timing but the fact that Satan's rebellion was not successful, that as powerful as he might appear to be—and Satan is powerful—he is a force who has been defeated.

Satan's expulsion from heaven left a very bitter taste in his mouth. Have a listen to verse 12: Therefore rejoice, you heavens and you who dwell in them! Why can the Heavens rejoice? Because the Devil has been expelled! *Hooray! The pest has gone!* 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. This is why the Devil is on the attack; because he's a bitter loser! And as we'll see in a couple of weeks time, he knows that his expulsion was just the first stage in his punishment. Eternal destruction is what waiting for him in

the end—he knows that day is coming—so he wants to cause as much trouble as he can in the meantime.

And so as he seeks to cause havoc, what are the methods that he uses? What are the tricks and maneuvers that we ought to keep an eye out for? Well, as he did through Herod, Satan's not afraid to use violence. In our world today there are places where Satanic violence is happening. Through the so-called Islamic State in the Iraq and Syria. You may remember those 20 Christian men from Egypt, killed on a beach in Libya. Other Christians have been crucified in town squares. This is the Devil making war against the offspring of the woman. I think when the regime in North Korea finally falls, we will hear horrific stories about what our Christian brothers and sisters have endured there. Even in British history there are stories where violence has been unleashed upon Godly men and women. During the time of the Reformation in the 1500s, those who held fast to the testimony about Jesus were burned at the stake. Throughout history and in all different cultures we see this violence erupting.

But there are more subtle methods that Satan employs as well. In verse 9 Satan is described as that ancient serpent who leads the whole world astray. If he can't kill us, then he'll lie to us. This was Satan's first tactic in Garden of Eden: "You will not die!" he told Eve. Here's one lie up on the screen, you may have seen this in the news a few years back, it's a billboard that was put up in the UK: "There's probably no God, now stop worrying and enjoy your life". If you're going to lie you should be more confident: "There *is* no God" would be a better approach! There are other lies too: that God can be found aside from Jesus Christ; or that God doesn't really care about sin, or that he requires perfection from us rather than faith. He's the Father of lies.

Another tactic Satan will use is that he will aim to accuse us. Verse 10 he is described as the accuser of our brothers and sisters. Richard Dawkins, the British biologist and atheist who funded this billboard, in his book *The God Delusion* accuses Christians of child abuse. He says that to teach a child the basics of faith is a form of abuse. Now there's a terrible accusation to make. Often it's Christian people who get caught out accusing others of immorality, but more and more we may hear normal Christian beliefs being criticized: that our beliefs are bad for humanity, that our practices are unjust. The temptation will be to shrink back in the face of these accusations, but it's worth asking, where is this criticism coming from? If we suspect that it's actually Satan who is upset and who's on the attack then there might not be any reason to actually be ashamed.

So there are a number of methods Satan will employ, but his aim in all of them is clear. Peter says that the Devil is like a lion, looking for someone to devour.

So what can we do in the face of such a powerful and persistent enemy? Well, this chapter has some good news for us. God is in the business of protecting his church. You notice that the woman is carried away out of the dragon's reach. This is described in verses 6 and also 14-16. Yes, some people will be called to make the

ultimate sacrifice in this battle—the evil one will have some small victories— but God will continue to grow his church as he has promised, so we can pray for deliverance. I remember speaking with my old neighbor about the atrocious events in the Middle east with the so-called Islamic State, and She said in despair “What can we do? What can we do?” And I said “You grew up a Catholic, didn’t you? So you know the Lord’s prayer. How does he tell us to pray? Deliver us from evil.” If we pray about this we may find that God will in fact deliver us just as he gave wings to the woman in verse 14. God cares about this, pray for deliverance.

Second thing we can do is get on with the job of preaching the gospel and testifying about what Jesus has done for each of us. Listen carefully to verse 11. How do we in the church triumph over the devil? They triumphed over him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony.

The key weapon we have is the message of the Gospel. Satan can threaten us with death. But what does the Gospel teach us? Because of Jesus, we will be raised from the dead. The Devil will accuse us of wrongdoing, but what does the gospel teach us? Because of Jesus’ blood there is nothing left to accuse us of; in the heavenly law court, those accusations will fall on deaf ears! The gospel is our key weapon because it disarms all of Satan’s weapons. It frees us from death and sin, it frees us from following Satan into God’s judgment.

I remember some years ago I joined a friend who was involved in a church ministry where he would visit homes of people seeking to get their child baptized. Those seeking baptism would contact the church and the church would contact him and he would visit and conduct an interview, and if the family were confused about the Christian faith he would make some return visits and explain a bit more about the gospel. I accompanied him on one of these visits, and when we were in the car on the way over, he said to me “Every time I bring the conversation around to Jesus the phone rings. It’s as if Satan just doesn’t want them to hear it. Every. Time.” And I thought “Everytime? Are you sure? You’re imagining it!”

Anyway we arrive at the house and we sit down with a cup of tea, and we talk about the kids and the footy, and then my friend says “last time I was here I left you with a question about Jesus, and I was wondering whether you...” ,aAnd right then, I kid you not, the phone starts ringing. The father gets up, “sorry, sorry, need to answer this” My friend looks at me as if to say “See? I told you so!” It was remarkable. It was spiritual warfare. And the weapon we were using—the weapon Satan didn’t like— was the gospel. We need to keep believing it, keep defending it, keep speaking it.

I’ll lead us in prayer.