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Revelation 12:1-6

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# ENTER THE DRAGON

*SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN*

We all know that Revelation tells us what is going to happen in the future. In the very first sentence we're told that this is "The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place" (1:1). Later in the first chapter, Jesus commissions John to write "what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later" (1:19). After seven messages addressed to seven churches in the province of Asia, the main sequence of visions begins in chapter 4 when John is summoned up to heaven: "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this" (4:1). At the end of the book John is assured, "These words are trustworthy and true. The Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, sent his angel to show his servants the things that must soon take place" (22:6).

At its most basic level, then, Revelation concerns the things which are now and the things which must happen. It addresses the tension between these two, the tension between the way things are and the way things ought to be, the tension between reality and the vision. The world is a certain way, but it will not always remain that way. Certain things must happen, which will transform it into the world which ought to be.

These are matters which are of great concern to us. We know that all is not right in the world, but why? Why are things the way they are? What is wrong? What will happen next? How will things turn out? How will it all end? These questions have been even more on our mind since 9/11. The London bombings of July 7th have reminded us afresh of the threat of terror. Can we ever be safe? Why do the terrorists hate us so much? What motivates the suicide bombers? One answer is that they are motivated by exactly this dissonance between reality and the vision, between the way they perceive the world to be currently and the way it ought to be. Furthermore, they have been persuaded that their death in holy war puts them on the fast track to paradise, where they will receive the martyr's reward of 72 virgin brides.

Since Revelation is about the things which must happen, many people assume that it gives us the information we need to prepare our timelines and charts. A multi-billion dollar industry of books and movies rides upon this perception. Those who have followed this series will know that I do not read Revelation this way. Indeed, I am concerned about the effect that this perception of the book has on people. It engenders two very different responses: fear and fascination. Neither of these is pastorally helpful. Fear engenders great anxiety and can lead to loss of faith and spiritual and psychological paralysis. Fascination diverts people into a preoccupation with timelines and can produce arrogance and a critical spirit toward those who develop different timelines. Revelation is a deeply pastoral book, intended to produce confidence and hope among God's people. It is a pastoral message from Jesus, the great Shepherd of the sheep, "to show his servants what must soon take place" (1:1) and addressing seven churches of which he is the Lord. It is a pastoral message from John to those seven churches for whom he cares deeply while he is in

exile in Patmos. He is their "brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus" (1:9).

Revelation does address both the present and the future. It does so by revealing to us the deep structures of the cosmos. I don't mean the macro- and micro-structures probed by cosmologists and particle physicists. The deep structures of the cosmos are not visible to the most powerful space telescope or particle accelerator. But Revelation reveals them, drawing back the veil to show us the world unseen to the human eye. This is why I have called this series "The Seen and the Unseen."

We see these deep structures at the beginning of John's vision when he is caught up into heaven to be shown "what must take place" (4:1). There in heaven he sees a throne and one seated upon it. Everything else is described in relation to this throne. The throne is surrounded by four cherubim who cry out "Holy, Holy, Holy" (4:8) and by 24 elders who fall down and say, "You are worthy" (4:11). Here is the first deep truth. There is a single throne at the center of the universe, and its occupant rightly receives worship because he is the creator of all things. The world is not out of control. The one who created it is still actively sovereign.

But there is a second truth. Also on the throne is a Lamb "standing as though slain" (5:6). This is the Lion of Judah who has conquered, and thereby has the key to God's plan of history. Here is the second deep structural truth: the key to history is this mixed metaphor of the conquering Lion who is the slain Lamb. He has conquered by being slain and raised to new life. At his feet the cherubim and the elders also fall down and say, "You are worthy" (5:9). They are joined by all the angels, "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain" (5:12).

The revelation of "what must take place" begins with this two-fold vision of the heavenly throne room. Without this, nothing else makes sense. Because God is actively exercising his rule and because the Lamb has conquered certain things must happen: God's enemies must be defeated. The subsequent visions of seven seals and seven trumpets show God's judgments upon those opposed to him.

These judgments build to a climax with the seventh trumpet when the great cry goes up in heaven, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever" (11:15). A climax has been reached and it seems that the end has come. There is a sense in which the book could end at this point, but we're only half-way. I have another five years to go!

The 24 elders continue the theme, falling down in worship:

**"We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty,  
the One who is and who was,  
because you have taken your great power  
and have begun to reign.**

**The time has come...**

**for destroying those who destroy the earth" (11:17-18 NIV)**

Though we have been shown certain key truths in chapters 4 and 5, there are many unanswered questions. If God's kingdom has come, why are things still out of order? Why is there still evil in the world? More specifically, why does evil befall God's people? Or, as Rabbi Kushner asks, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" Who are these destroyers and why are they bent on destruction? For John at the end of the first century, Why is Rome dominant? Why? Why? Why? How do we reconcile God and evil? For the past 300 years this question has gone under the title of theodicy, the justice of God. It's an age-old problem which continues to exercise the minds of philosophers and theologians today. Revelation 12 helps us address this very problem.

**A great and wondrous sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth. Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on his heads. His 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 he might devour her child the moment it was born. She gave birth to a son, a male child, who will rule all the nations with an iron scepter. And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne. The woman fled into the desert to a place prepared for her by God, where she might be taken care of for 1,260 days. (Rev 12:1-6)**

What strange vision is this? A pregnant woman, a child and a dragon. How does this help us understand the deep realities of the cosmos, especially the problem of evil? What is a dragon doing in the Bible? The dragon belongs on the Welsh flag (what is it doing there?) and in works of fantasy—*The Lord of the Rings*, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, and the Harry Potter novels. We recognize those as works of fiction, of make-believe, but the Bible is different. The Bible is true, so what's a dragon doing in it?

These images might seem very strange to us, but they would not have seemed so strange to a reader at the end of the first century, to a reader who knew both his Old Testament and the prevailing Greco-Roman culture.

Both the pregnant woman and the great red dragon are described as signs. This means that they are symbolic, that they represent something. What do they represent? Of the three figures, the child is the easiest to identify. His destiny to rule all the nations with an iron scepter (12:5)—a quote from Psalm 2:9—identifies him as the Messiah. The woman is his mother, but which mother? Catholics understand her to be Jesus' physical mother Mary. Clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head, she is the Queen of Heaven, whom Catholics address as *Regina*, Queen. But in verse 17 the woman has other offspring, so this cannot be Mary.

Many interpret the woman as Israel. The number twelve suggests that the figure has something to do with the people of God, and the sun, moon and stars are reminiscent of Joseph's vision (Gen 37:9). The Old Testament prophets portrayed Israel or Zion as a woman in labor, suffering the pain of God's judgment but about to birth a new age. Israel does indeed birth the Messiah, but the objection still stands that this woman has other offspring, "those who obey God's commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus" (12:17), which clearly means the followers of Jesus.

If the woman is not Mary and is not Israel, who is she? She is the community of God's people, which both births and is birthed by the Messiah. A few weeks ago I was asked what PBCC's position is on "replacement theology": the idea that the Church has replaced Israel as the people of God. As I see it, there is one people of God. In the Old Testament this was primarily national Israel, descended from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, into which a few Gentiles were incorporated. But it became increasingly clear that within ethnic Israel some had faith and some did not, that within God's people who were physical descendents of Abraham there was a subset of God's people who were the spiritual descendents of Abraham. In Christ, God has now opened wide the doors of this spiritual family to encompass both Jews and Gentiles who are justified by faith, as was Abraham. There is only one people of God. This one people both births the Messiah and is birthed by the Messiah. It is this one people that is represented by the woman.

What about the dragon? He is Leviathan (Greek *drakōn*), one of a collection of mythical beasts which populate the Old Testament. His companions include Nahash the serpent and Tannin the sea monster. These are creatures borrowed from the mythologies of Israel's neighbors. Myth is a term as slippery as Nahash the mythical serpent. Myths arise out of an attempt to explain the world: how and why was the world created? Why were humans created? Why is the world the way it is? How will it all end? These are questions which have exercised every generation. Twenty-first century Western society asks the same questions, though it no longer answers them using images of dragons and sea monsters.

Israel's neighbors had their creation stories, or cosmogonies, explaining the genesis of the cosmos. The most famous of these is the *Enuma Elish*, the Babylonian creation story. But the mythical animals of the Old Testament, including Leviathan, come from the Ugaritic and Canaanite stories. These creation stories of the Ancient Near East share certain features in common. The earth was created after a great primeval battle between good and bad gods, what scholars call the Combat Myth (in German, *Chaoskampf*, "chaos struggle"). Humans were created as an afterthought, after a squabble among the gods. These myths, which attempt to explain the world, reflect a profound unease over man's place in the cosmos. The world is a scary place, populated by capricious gods whom you cannot trust. That's why you have to try to placate and manipulate them with sacrifices. You can never really be sure that in the end good will prevail over evil, that the world will not sink into chaos. In this uncertain cosmos, humans are but tiny gods who matter little to the gods.

Does the presence of these same mythical beasts in the Bible mean that the Bible reflects the same understanding of the cosmos? If you took any religious studies classes in a secular college this might be what you were taught. But it is increasingly recognized that the Bible makes use of these myths in order to disarm them. For example, Genesis 1 is not simply a copy of Babylonian or Canaanite creation stories, but a powerful polemic against them.

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen 1:1). There is no hint of any struggle, of any primeval combat. God effortlessly calls the cosmos into being: he speaks and it happens. The sea monsters are not independent agents which he has to battle; he created them (1:21). The human is not an afterthought, but created according to God's express purpose, in his image, and for relationship with him (1:26). The whole creation is very good (1:31). What a different picture this gives us of the one God, of his creation, and of our place in it. Nevertheless, as we look around the world today,

there is much that seems out of our control. Chaotic forces seem poised to overwhelm order. But the Bible shows us repeatedly that nothing is outside of God's control. When God later questioned Job, he asked him,

**“Can you pull in Leviathan (Gk. *drakōn*) with a fishhook?...**

**Can you make a pet of him like a bird  
or put him on a leash for your girls?” (Job 41:1, 5)**

That which seems terrifying to Job, God has complete authority over. There is nothing so draconian that God is not sovereign over it.

Returning to Revelation, Leviathan the dragon is identified with Satan, the devil, the ancient serpent (12:9; 20:2). But who is Satan and where did he come from? The Bible tells us surprisingly little about him, though that has not prevented authoritative descriptions of his origin and downfall. We are not told the origins of the serpent in Genesis 3, other than that he was one of the creatures God had made. Nowhere are we told where Satan came from, though we can perhaps infer that he is an angel who rebelled against God. Satan is a Hebrew word, meaning accuser. He appears in only a few places in the Old Testament. In both Job 1-2 and Zechariah 3 the Satan, the Accuser, has access to God's heavenly court where he brings accusations against God's people. There is a certain merit to these accusations: it is true that Job has lived a charmed life; it is true that Joshua the high priest has been defiled by the exile in the pagan land of Babylon. God permits Satan to bring these accusations but rebuts him.

When it comes to thinking about Satan, there are two opposite dangers: belittling him and magnifying him. Many deny the existence of Satan, dismissing him as the product of superstitious pre-modern minds. But how then do you explain the presence of evil in the world? Evil must be blamed on the environment. It can therefore be educated or legislated or medicated or constructed or managed out of existence by enlightened people. But I do not know how people can continue to believe this after the last hundred years.

The other danger is to magnify Satan, to grant him more power than he really has. I fear that this is what can happen in evangelical communities that read too many books about Satan and demonic forces. We get dangerously close to the ancient mindset of fearing that chaos will overwhelm order, that there are two gods duking it out, one good and one bad. The success of God's purposes hangs in the balance, and we have to give him a helping hand by binding Satan and the demons. But the Bible is very clear that Satan has already been bound. I think that the reason the Bible tells us very little about Satan and very much about God is to avoid the risk of us focusing too much attention on Satan. We are shown over and over again that God is sovereign. Where does evil come from? Where does Satan come from? We're not told. These are matters hidden within the inscrutable purposes of God, and we must be content to leave them there.

There is a second danger facing the evangelical church, one which arises from faulty thinking about God, though it arises from this same attempt to reconcile God and evil. A theology known as Open Theism, which arose within liberal circles, has begun to infiltrate the evangelical church. God cannot be truly sovereign without denying human free will. Therefore God must be limited. Because he can't know the future, he has to take risks with people, waiting to see how humans act. Sometimes they make evil choices, which pains him for his goal is love, but he modifies his plans accordingly and moves on.

Somehow it all works out in the end. This is less than the God we see revealed in Scripture. God is sovereign, all-knowing and unchanging. He is sovereign over evil without being responsible for it. Satan is the architect of evil, but God is sovereign over Satan, and, as the hymn says, “God is working his purpose out.”

The dragon is blood-red, for he causes the death of many; he is the supreme destroyer. He has seven heads, ten horns and seven crowns. The heads represent authority, the horns power, and the crowns honor that he arrogates to himself. From an earthly perspective his power and authority seem total. He stood in front of the woman to devour the child as soon as it be born. Here an ancient drama nears its climax.

When God pronounced judgment on the man, woman, and serpent following the Fall, he began with the serpent,

**So the LORD God said to the serpent, “Because you have done this,**

**“Cursed are you above all the livestock  
and all the wild animals!**

**You will crawl on your belly  
and you will eat dust  
all the days of your life.**

**And 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.” (Gen 3:14-15)**

The serpent had persuaded the woman that he was her friend and God the enemy. But God was not content to let it remain that way. He would insert enmity between the serpent and the woman and between their seed. Though death had entered the world, God would ensure that life would continue through the birth of offspring. This text is often called the ProtoEvangelium, the First Gospel. Much of the rest of the Old Testament can be read as the outworking of this promise, of God ensuring the birth of the seed: narrowing the line down through Shem, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Judah, David; overcoming the barrenness of Sarah, of Rebekah, and of Rachel; the spiritual barrenness of Israel in the days of Ruth; the adultery and murder of David.

Since Satan knows that this seed will mortally crush him, it's in his best interest to try to prevent the birth of the seed. This he does repeatedly. But God has cursed him, meaning that everything that he does will be futile and frustrated. While God will restore blessing to his world, Satan will end up in a dead-end. Again and again we see God overturn the evil purposes of Satan, especially his attempts to destroy the seed. When Pharaoh ordered the Hebrew midwives to kill the baby boys, they feared God not Pharaoh and let the baby boys live (Exod 1:15-21). When he ordered his people to throw every baby boy into the Nile, Moses was found and rescued by his own daughter (Exod 1:22-2:10). When Athaliah, daughter of King Ahab of Israel and wife of King Jehoram of Judah, tried to kill all the royal line of Judah, her own daughter Jehoshaba hid Joash away (2 Kgs 11:1-3; 2 Chr 22:10-12). When Herod ordered the Massacre of the Innocents in Bethlehem, the Holy Family fled to Egypt, Joseph having been warned in a dream of Herod's evil intent (Matt 2:13-18). Behind all these human actions was Satan seeking to destroy the line. But every time, God thwarted the purposes of Satan.

In John's vision, the child was born and snatched up to heaven out of the dragon's reach. There was nothing the dragon could do



about it. The Messiah has been born and has successfully discharged his mission. He has been installed as King of kings and Lord of lords, for his destiny is to rule all nations, a quote from Psalm 2. That psalm begins,

Why do the nations conspire  
and the peoples plot in vain?  
The kings of the earth take their stand  
and the rulers gather together  
against the LORD  
and against his Anointed One.  
“Let us break their chains,” they say,  
“and throw off their fetters.”  
The One enthroned in heaven laughs;  
the Lord scoffs at them.  
Then he rebukes them in his anger  
and terrifies them in his wrath, saying,  
“I have installed my King  
on Zion, my holy hill.” (Ps 2:1-6)

In his sermons following Pentecost, Peter repeatedly drew the contrast between the evil, destructive, Satanic purposes of man and the overturning of those purposes by God: “God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ” (Acts 2:36); “You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead” (3:15); “Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead” (4:10); “The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead—whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior” (5:30-31). Since Satan’s efforts to prevent the birth of the Messiah were thwarted, and his attempts to divert Jesus from his mission by testing him in the wilderness were also thwarted, he moved Jews and Gentiles to join together in unholy alliance in slaying the Messiah. But that proved to be his final undoing: God turned the evil intent of his opponents to his own great purposes.

Finally, the woman fled into the desert. Since this is after the completion of Christ’s mission on earth, the woman is now the Church, though still the one people of God. The desert or wilderness is the land of pilgrimage, the in-between land which must be traversed on the journey from the land of bondage and death to the land of promise and rest. It is the land of testing and provision. Israel had to make that journey, and she didn’t like it. Frightened by the trials of pilgrimage, she kept wanting to go back to Egypt.

The duration of this sojourn in the wilderness is the symbolic period of 1260 days, or 42 months and 3½ years. During this symbolic time several things happen: the Church is taken care of by God (12:6, 14), God’s enemies trample his people (11:2), the believers bear their prophetic witness (11:3), and the dragon’s henchman, the beast, exercises blasphemous authority (13:5). This is the entire Church Age, from the day of Pentecost till Christ’s return. It is a time of testing: “battered on the east, and beaten to the west” but one day we will arrive “Safe in your Harbour.”

David experienced life in the wilderness. Many of his psalms record the testing and provision which he found there. In Psalm 34 he wrote, “Fear the Lord, you his saints, for those who fear him lack nothing” (Ps 34:9). In 1696 Nahum Tate and Nicholas Brady published a collection of metrical psalms for singing. Psalm 34 they turned into the hymn, “Through all the changing scenes of life.” Here’s how they rendered verse 9:

Fear him, ye saints, and you will then  
have nothing else to fear;  
make you his service your delight;  
your wants shall be his care.

If you do not fear God, if you have too large a view of Satan or too small a view of God, or if you deny their existence altogether, then the world is a very terrifying place. Fear God and you will have nothing else to fear. Don’t fear God, and you will have everything else to fear.

Revelation is a pastoral letter, written to seven churches during this time of pilgrimage, calling them to fear the Lord and not their circumstances. Some of these churches had taken their eyes off Jesus and were looking at the world around them. They saw a very scary world, and, out of fear, compromised their witness in the hopes of an easier life. But they were laying themselves open to the judgment of Jesus. Conversely, the churches that were the most faithful were the churches facing active persecution. They stared their dangers in the face and received Jesus’ assurance, “Do not be afraid” (2:10). It’s a message we need to heed today.

There is no denying that there is evil present in the world. Why does God allow it? I do not know. What I do know is that God is sovereign and is effortlessly thwarting the purposes of Satan. In the words of another hymn, “All my hope on God is founded; he doth still my trust renew.”

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