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Revelation 12:7-17

20th Message

Bernard Bell

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WAR OF THE WORLDS

SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN

Our Scripture reading this morning began with the verses printed on the cover of the bulletin:

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. (1 Pet 4:12-13 NIV)

But we *are* surprised at the trials we suffer, and we *do* think something strange is happening to us. Scott Peck began the first chapter of his best-seller *The Road Less Traveled* with these memorable words:

Life is difficult.

This is a great truth, one of the greatest truths. It is a great truth because once we truly see this truth, we transcend it. Once we truly know that life is difficult—once we truly understand and accept it—then life is no longer difficult. Because once it is accepted, the fact that life is difficult no longer matters.

Most do not fully see this truth that life is difficult. Instead they moan more or less incessantly, noisily or subtly, about the enormity of their problems, their burdens, and their difficulties as if life were generally easy, as if life *should* be easy. They voice their belief, noisily or subtly, that their difficulties represent a unique kind of affliction that should not be and that has somehow been especially visited upon them, or else upon their families, their tribe, their class, their nation, their race or even their species, and not upon others. I know about this moaning because I have done my share.

Life is a series of problems. Do we want to moan about them or solve them?¹

We can identify with Scott Peck: we have all moaned about our problems. We easily buy into the mindset that “life *should* be easy.” It is easy to fall into a victim mentality. But few, if any, of our trials arise specifically because we follow Christ. This was not so when Peter wrote his first letter or when John wrote Revelation.

It was in the 60s, during the despotic reign of Nero, that Peter wrote from Rome to Christians “scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia” (1:1), provinces in Asia Minor, in what is today Turkey. Within a few years both Peter and Paul were dead, killed during Nero’s persecution of Christians in Rome. It is evident from Peter’s letter that the believers in these provinces were also facing active persecution.

Fifty years later, in A.D. 111, when Pliny the Younger was appointed governor of Bithynia, he found himself confronted with the problem of what to do about Christians brought before him for trial. He wrote to the Emperor Trajan, seeking approval for his actions:

I have never participated in trials of Christians. I therefore do not know what offenses it is the practice to punish or investigate... Meanwhile, in the case of those who were denounced to me as

Christians, I have observed the following procedure: I interrogated these as to whether they were Christians; those who confessed I interrogated a second and a third time, threatening them with punishment; those who persisted I ordered executed. For I had no doubt that, whatever the nature of their creed, stubbornness and inflexible obstinacy surely deserve to be punished. There were others possessed of the same folly; but because they were Roman citizens, I signed an order for them to be transferred to Rome.²

Trajan replied,

You observed proper procedure...they are to be punished, with this reservation, that whoever denies that he is a Christian and really proves it—that is, by worshiping our gods—even though he was under suspicion in the past, shall obtain pardon through repentance.³

This is the backdrop of Revelation, written just fifteen years before Pliny’s governorship of Bithynia. In Pergamum Antipas had been killed for his faithful witness to Jesus (2:13). The Christians in Smyrna were suffering for their faith, and Jesus warned that death was close at hand (2:9-10). But not all seven churches were suffering. Some of them had avoided persecution by softening their witness.

A major problem we have in trying to understand the book of Revelation is that we are not facing the sort of persecution faced by Christians in the first century. Following Christ is not a life and death issue in the West. But it is in some countries today: Indonesia, Pakistan, China, to name but a few. In these countries following Christ can be costly. Christians can be under intense pressure to forsake Christ and so save their skin. Why does God allow this to happen?

Last week we sought to reconcile the thorny problem of God and evil. We are not told where evil ultimately came from, but we are shown what God is doing about it. We are not told the origins of Satan, but we are shown that God is constantly thwarting his evil purposes, working them to his own good purposes. He did this supremely in the Lord Jesus Christ. Satan repeatedly tried to prevent the birth of the promised seed, but God ensured that the line would continue. God ensured that the seed was born, and there was nothing Satan could do about it. Satan inspired an unholy alliance of Jew and Gentile to join in putting Jesus to death. But God turned the tables, raising him to life and installing him in heaven at his right hand as King of kings and Lord of lords. Again, there was nothing Satan could do about it.

But if God has won the decisive victory at the cross, and has installed his King, why do God’s people still suffer? Hasn’t the battle been won? This week we’ll look at the more specific problem of the continuation of evil against Christians after the decisive victory of the cross. This is an equally thorny problem. In the Old Testament God delivered his people *from* their suffering in Egypt. He brought them into the Promised Land where they would enjoy rest and bless-

ing if they walked in his ways. Subsequent generations found that the reality did not match the promise, but they had only themselves to blame. Israel suffered only because she kept forsaking the Lord.

In the New Testament the rules seem to have changed. It seems that God has delivered his people not *from* suffering but *into* suffering. It is faithfulness to Christ which brings suffering, while forsaking Christ avoids suffering. Why? Not just why is there evil in the world? But why do God's faithful people suffer? This is the question we take up in the rest of Revelation 12.

This chapter divides into three sections, in which the dragon Satan makes four separate assaults upon God, his purposes and his people. In 12:1-6, which we looked at last week, Satan tried to overwhelm the Messiah. In 12:7-12 he wages war in heaven in an attempt to preserve his place there. In 12:13-17 he wages war on earth, first against the woman (13-16) and then against the rest of her offspring (17).

A. War in Heaven (12:7-12)

And there was war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven. 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. (Rev 12:7-9)

After the installation of Jesus at God's right hand as King of kings and Lord of lords, war broke out in heaven. On one side is the archangel Michael, described in Daniel as the angelic protector of God's people (Dan 10:13, 21; 12:1). Here he is depicted as the commander of God's heavenly armies, who leads the assault upon Satan and his armies. Satan fights back, desperate to maintain his place in heaven. But he is defeated and thrown out of heaven down to the earth. This does not depict some primeval fall of Satan—we never are told the origins of Satan or of evil. This is the ejection of Satan from God's court after the installation of Christ on God's throne.

The ejection of Satan from heaven elicits a heavenly song of praise:

Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say:

“Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God,

and the authority of his Christ.

For the accuser of our brothers,

**who accuses them before our God day and night,
has been hurled down.**

They overcame 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.**

Therefore rejoice, you heavens

and you who dwell in them!

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.” (12:10-12)

This song interprets the vision of Satan's ejection from heaven, giving us its meaning and significance.

Satan's name means “accuser.” In the Old Testament he had access to God's court, where he brought accusation against God and his

people. These accusations had merit, and God permitted them to be made. It was true that Job had led a charmed life (Job 1-2). It was true that Joshua the high priest was defiled (Zech 3). But the time for such accusations is over. The accuser has been thrown out of heaven. Why? Because at God's right hand he has now installed an advocate for us, even the Lord Jesus Christ. As we sang,

Before the throne of God above,

I have a strong, a perfect plea,

A great high priest whose name is Love,

Who ever lives and pleads for me.⁴

As Paul told the Romans,

there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus ... Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. (Rom 8:1, 33-34)

This is indeed cause for great rejoicing. Satan no longer has access to God's court, there to bring accusation against us. Even when we still sin he cannot bring any accusation against us. As John wrote, “if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 John 2:1-2).

The song next celebrates the victory of the saints. It is clear that the saints have been killed, yet they are considered victorious. Their victory over Satan has two causes: the blood of the Lamb, and their faithful witness even unto death. In the visible, earth-bound world, it seemed as though the dragon had defeated them by killing them. But in the unseen, heavenly world it is the faithful saints who emerge triumphant over the dragon. This is possible because death is not the end, or rather the first death is not the end.

The expulsion of the dragon from heaven, and the victory of the saints over the dragon, is cause for rejoicing by the residents of heaven. Those who dwell in heaven include not just the four cherubim, the 24 elders, the countless angels, but also the martyred saints. Throughout the book John consistently uses two different verbs for “live” or “dwell,” one for those who dwell on the earth, one for those who dwell in heaven. It is one of his ways of dividing humanity into two sets of people. The earth-dwellers (“the inhabitants of the earth” NIV) are opposed to God and his people. The saints, though they might now be present on earth, are bound for heaven where they will dwell and God will dwell with them. The saints are to be willing to die on earth, but their mindset is the antithesis of suicide bombers today. Both believe that martyrdom puts them on the fast track to heaven, but there the similarity ends. The Islamic suicide bomber wants to destroy as many infidels as possible; his weapons are violent; his eye is on the self-centered reward of 72 virgin brides. The Christian allows himself to be slain by the infidel rather than deny Christ; his only weapon is his faithful witness to “the word of God and the testimony of Jesus”; his eye is on the prospect of seeing God's face and of hearing these words, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God” (Rev 21:3).

The expulsion of the dragon from heaven to earth elicits rejoicing from heaven but the pronouncement of woe upon the earth. Since Satan no longer has access to heaven, he will wreak his destructive purposes on earth. His activity on earth is a sign not of his great

power but of his limited power. His great rage is due to his awareness that “his doom is sure.”

Three times in Revelation, Satan the dragon is hurled down: from heaven to earth (12:9), from earth to the Abyss (20:2), and from the Abyss into the lake of fire (20:10). Why doesn't God just hurl him straight into the lake of fire? That would have spared the earth a lot of trouble. In particular, it would have spared God's people on earth a lot of trouble. But God has chosen not to throw Satan directly into the lake of fire. He allows him to rampage across the earth, “like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour” (1 Pet 5:8).

B. War against the Church (12:13-16)

So far Satan is 0-2. He has not prevented God from installing the Messiah at his right hand, and he has been thrown out of heaven. But he does not give up. He launches a third attack, taking out his fury on the earth, specifically on God's people on the earth:

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 woman was given the two wings of a great eagle, so that she might fly to the place prepared for her in the desert, where she would be taken care of for a time, times and half a time, out of the serpent's reach. Then from his mouth the serpent spewed water like a river, to overtake the woman and sweep her away with the torrent. But the earth helped the woman by opening its mouth and swallowing the river that the dragon had spewed out of his mouth. (12:13-16)

Satan's next target is the woman, mother of the Messiah. Last week I argued that this woman is the community of God's people, the one people of God. Since this is after the exaltation of the woman's son, the woman must now be the Church. Unable to destroy Christ, Satan seeks to destroy the Church. But again he is thwarted: the woman is carried away on eagles' wings to the desert.

When God delivered his people from Egypt he carried them on eagles' wings into the desert and brought them to himself (Exod 19:4). For Israel the desert or wilderness was a place of both testing and provision. God provided her with food, water, guidance and victory in battle. But Israel was constantly tested. She had to trust God's provision, and she wasn't very good at doing this. Constantly she took her eyes off the Lord's promises of his presence, protection and provision. Looking at the world around her, she kept losing faith and wanting to go back to Egypt. Israel's pilgrimage in the wilderness lasted forty years.

The Church's pilgrimage through the desert lasts a symbolic “time, times and half a time” or 3½ years. For the Church, just as for Israel, this pilgrimage in the desert is a time of testing and provision as she makes her pilgrimage to the Promised Land of rest. Will the Church keep her eyes on Jesus, trusting God for provision? Or will she look around, respond in fear to the scary world she sees, and want to turn back?

Though Satan's pursuit of the woman is thwarted by her escape to the desert, still he persists in his efforts. He tries to overwhelm the woman with a torrent of water, the destructive waters of chaos. Yet again God frustrates Satan's efforts. There is nothing he can do to overwhelm the woman.

The message of these verses is that there is nothing that Satan can do to destroy the Church. The Church is inviolate for she is the bride of Christ. This is not at all the same as saying that individual churches

are secure. While God ensures that the Church of Christ continues, he makes no guarantees to individual congregations. One has only to travel through Europe and the Middle East to realize this truth. Throughout Europe vast cathedrals are now devoid of worshipers and serve only as tourist attractions. Throughout North Africa and the Middle East ruins testify to once-thriving Christian communities. In the past four years I have led two PBCC tours to Turkey. It is sobering to see so many abandoned churches in that Moslem land. All seven ecumenical church councils were held in what is today Turkey. Many of the Church Fathers lived here. Last year we visited Cappadocia where there are hundreds of churches carved into the solid rock. All are now long-abandoned. North America is not immune to church decay. Mainline denominations are in steep decline. Many churches are largely empty on Sunday mornings.

Nevertheless, while the Church diminishes in one part of the world, God is raising up new life in another. The Church is growing by leaps and bounds throughout Latin America, Africa and Asia. There is a deep irony here. For years the mainline Church in the West, in pursuing its liberal cause, has said we need to listen to the developing world. Now the Church in the developing world is speaking, accusing the Western Church of liberal theology, of loss of faith, of materialism. Witness the recent debate over homosexual ordination within the Anglican Church. The tables have been turned: the developing world is sending missionaries to the West. Faithful evangelical Anglicans, unable to find ordination under liberal bishops in the US and Canada, are seeking ordination from African bishops.

Let this be both a warning and an encouragement. The Church can never be destroyed, but individual congregations can and will fizzle out when they take their eyes off their Lord. Jesus had no qualms at all about warning some of the seven churches of impending judgment. He threatened even to remove the lampstand from Ephesus. It is sobering that of the seven cities, only Smyrna still has a Christian presence today. It is more sobering that the Smyrnan church, which was spiritually the healthiest church to which John wrote, was also the most persecuted.

C. War against the Saints (12:17)

With his attack on the woman thwarted, the dragon is now 0-3. Still he does not give up:

Then the dragon was enraged at the woman and went off to make war against the rest of her offspring—those who obey God's commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus. (12:17)

The dragon's final target is the rest of the woman's offspring, who are further defined as “those who obey God's commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus.” These are the saints, the Christians. Again we read that God thwarts the purposes of Satan. No! We don't read that.

Satan went after the child, the Messiah, but God snatched Christ up to his throne. Next Satan tried to retain his place in heaven so he could continue to bring accusation against God's people, but he was thrown out for God had installed an advocate on his throne. Next Satan tried to devour the Church, but God is protecting the Church of his dear Son. Lastly Satan goes after the individual believers. Does God prevent this attack? No! God allows Satan to proceed. In fact, God allows Satan to call up reinforcements. In the next verse John sees the dragon standing by the sea (13:1), which in the imagery of Revelation is the same as the Abyss, the home of all which is chaotic and destructive, of all which opposes God. The dragon summons

up two assistants, the beast from the sea thereafter known simply as the beast, and the beast from the land, thereafter known as the false prophet. God allows Satan to go after the believers and he allows him to use these two assistants. In the next two weeks we'll look at how these assistants operate: the beast with brute force and terror, the false prophet with deception. And we'll look at how believers are to respond.

Our question for today is the same as last week: Why? Why does God allow his saints to be fair game for Satan? Why have the rules changed? In the Old Testament, faithfulness brought blessing and unfaithfulness brought suffering. For the churches at the end of the first century, faithfulness brought suffering, even death, while unfaithfulness allowed one to save one's skin. Why?

None of this makes any sense without the double vision of God's throne room in chapters 4-5. Last week I said that Revelation reveals to us the deep structures of the cosmos. These are not the physical structures that explain the physical fabric of the cosmos. They are the structures which explain the spiritual and moral fabric of the universe. In chapter 4 John 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. Also on the throne is a Lamb "standing as though slain" who is announced as the conquering Lion. The first truth is that God is sovereign over all the affairs of the universe, bar none. He is sovereign even over Satan. The second truth is that the key to history lies in this mixed metaphor of the conquering Lion who is the slain Lamb. The path to victory lies through apparent defeat. Sadly, many readers don't pay enough attention to chapters 4-5, so eager are they to get on to the "good stuff" of the seven seals, seven trumpets and seven bowls. They don't pay enough attention to chapter 12, so eager are they to get on to the identity of the beast and the number 666 in chapter 13. Without the two visions of chapters 4-5, the two deep truths of the sovereign Lord and the conquering Lamb, none of the rest of the book makes sense, and none of the world makes sense. Without chapter 12, chapter 13 doesn't make sense.

Satan has been thrown out of heaven, but God allows him a free hand to go after the saints, even to the point of death. Why? There are two answers, the same two truths given to us in chapters 4-5. God allows Satan to go after the saints because he is sovereign and because the path to victory is through apparent defeat.

Firstly, God is sovereign. God works this way because it pleases him. I must be content in that. As we sang earlier in the words of William Cowper, "God moves in a mysterious way his wonders to perform."⁵ In a few minutes we'll sing, "Whate'er my God ordains is right."⁶ It's right because it's ordained by the one who sits upon the throne. As another of my favorite hymns puts it, "This is my Father's world: I rest me in the thought."⁷

Secondly, the slain Lamb has shown us the way. At the beginning of the book John describes Jesus Christ as "the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth" (1:5). These are the key roles of Jesus. The path to the throne lay through faithful witness, death, and resurrection to new life. The saints are called to follow him; "they follow the Lamb wherever he goes" (14:4). The saints are called to bear faithful witness to God, regardless of the cost. For many in the early church this meant death. In the visible world, the seen world, it seemed that the dragon had conquered the

saints. But in the unseen world, the saints were celebrated in heaven for conquering the dragon:

**They overcame 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. (12:11)**

Tens of thousands of Christians were killed in the first three centuries. The Church had no physical power in the face of Rome. Its only weapon was the gospel. Yet the more Christians Rome killed the more the Church grew.

Around A.D. 200, little over 100 years after Revelation was written, Tertullian wrote a defense of the faith addressed to the "Rulers of the Roman Empire." He said of the Church,

We are but of yesterday, and we have filled every place among you—cities, islands, fortresses, towns, market-places, the very camp, tribes, companies, palace, senate, forum,—we have left nothing to you but the temples of your gods... The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; the blood of Christians is seed.⁸

The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church. This is a hard message for the Western Church, especially for the American Church. This nation is constitutionally committed to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Yet God does not seem as committed to these values for his own people.

Why does God allow his people to suffer even to death? Because he is sovereign and chooses to work this way, and because the Lord Jesus Christ has set the pattern. He bore faithful witness to God, he died for that faithful witness, and he was raised to new life.

Our Lamb has conquered; let us follow him.

1. M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978), 15.

2. Pliny, *Letters* 10.96. Internet Medieval Sourcebook: <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/pliny1.html>.

3. Pliny, *Letters* 10.97.

4. Charitie L. S. Bancroft, *Before the Throne of God Above* (1863).

5. William Cowper, *God Moves in a Mysterious Way* (1774).

6. Samuel Rodigast, *Whate'er My God Ordains is Right* (1675; trans. from German by Catherine Winkworth, 1863).

7. Maltbie D. Babcock, *This Is My Father's World* (1901).

8. Tertullian, *Apologeticum*, chapters 37, 50, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994 [1885]), 3:45, 55.