

## COSMIC COMBAT AT CHRISTMAS

It was July 21, 1861. A Sunday afternoon. The war between the States had just erupted. A lot of people from Washington D.C. had heard that a battle was brewing by a little stream in Virginia called Bull Run. They decided that a neat way to enjoy their Sunday afternoon after church would be to hop in their carriages, go to a hillside, spread out a big blanket, enjoy a nice picnic lunch, and watch the battle unfold. Decked out in their Sunday best, they had one of the most unusual picnics in American history. While down below the boys dressed in blue and grey battled it out and the blood ran red, the folks on the hills munched on sandwiches and took in the spectacle. They had heard that the union army would make short work of the confederate army (just the reverse happened). So this would be a fun way to spend a Sunday afternoon. Here's the irony of it all. The armies of God and Satan are slugging it out in the trenches. But some folks are on the hilltop munching on Fritos. Clearly we face a clear and present danger. We are in an international state of emergency. This is no time for hilltop picnics. Think first with me about the enemy we face.

**I. THE DRAGON'S IDENTITY.** I Peter 5:8 tells us that *"our enemy the Devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour."* The book of Revelation calls him a wicked dragon loose and at large in the universe. Satan has a counterfeit power. Revelation 12:3-4 paints a verbal picture of this enemy of humankind. *"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."* Don't miss the details.

**He's fiery red** because *"he was a murderer from the beginning"* [John 8:44]. He's a vampire dragon. His whole being is stained with blood. Think of Hitler as well as the abortion holocaust. Stalin's & Pol Pot's killing fields.

**He's a seven-headed serpent**, as a sign of his power's global reach. He gets around. I John 5:19 says, *"the whole world is under the control of the evil one."* And Revelation 12:9 tells us he *"leads the whole world astray."*

**Ten horns thrust out from his head.** They point to great political power. He's cruel, savage, viscous, and monstrous. So immense in size is this dragon, so enormous, that his mammoth tail furiously lashing across the sky sweeps away one-third of the stars in heaven and flings them down upon the earth! [12:4]

Don't file this away as fictional fluff. Satan is no figment of our imagination. You may ask if the Devil looks like this scary creature. The Bible tells us that he can metamorphosize into an Angel of light [2 Corinthians 11:14], but underneath he's a monster. Author Kurt Vonnegut wrote of a kingdom whose subjects came up to their king and said, *"There's a horrible stench in the land...it reeks around here."* The king solved the problem quickly and simply. He cut off their noses. The Bible says Satan appears as an angel of light, one great cosmic nice guy [2 Cor. 11:14]. I don't know, but when I see him wreck marriages, tear up psyches, destroy ministries, thrash the moral life out of a nation, I smell a monster. I smell hell. And you do too. Unless, you've already submitted to an extraterrestrial nose job. Satan just doesn't want us to sniff him out.

**II. THE DRAGON DRAMA.** History is compressed here in Revelation 12. In Genesis 3:15 God lays a curse on the demon-possessed Serpent. A great champion, a dragon slayer will arise on the stage of history, one of Eve's offspring. There will be a fight to the finish. The champion's heel would be wounded, but the serpent's skull would be busted. That was the promise. But OT

promise led to NT fulfillment. Who is this cosmic pregnant woman *"clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head"* [12:1]. Is she **Eve**? Is this **OT Israel**? Is this **Mary**? Or perhaps it is all three? Most probably this is the Messianic Community about to give birth to the Messiah. Embodied in Mary is a genetic and theological heritage that extends through Israel all the way back to Eve and the curse on the serpent. We want Christmas to be nice, warm, chestnuts roasting on an open fire and a cuddly baby Jesus lying in a nice manger. But Revelation here paints a strange almost macabre nativity scene before our eyes. OT Israel like a pregnant mother is about to give birth to the champion Christ. To the picturesque manger scene of Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds you've got to see the dragon. Look at vs. 4b: *"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."* His mouth is stretched open as wide as possible. He's ready to gobble up the Christ child the moment he was born.

The image of the blood thirsty dragon ready to gobble up the Christ triggers our memory. We think of Pharaoh's slaughter of the innocent at the birth of Moses. We remember Haman's aborted attempt to slaughter the Jews in the days of Esther. We recoil from Herod's violent assault on the Bethlehem boys two years old and under at the birth of Christ [Matthew 2:16]. Matthew 2:16 reads: *"When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under."* The dragon is a murderer, a cannibal with blood lust. So when King Herod, hit man for the dragon, snuffs out all those boy babies in Bethlehem, Jesus' life is in jeopardy too. But the Champion was snatched away to Egypt. His life spared for a future contest. Revelation 12:5b reads: *"And her child was snatched up to God and His throne."* The moment of victory is compressed into a single sentence. Here is the triumph of Christ's ascension and enthronement. Revelation 20 tells us that Satan is bound. And he's bound in this sense, that he cannot hinder the advance of the Gospel. He cannot deceive the nations. Jesus' enthronement is not the end of violence. It's the beginning of the end. If the Lord reigns, Satan can't!

Now the rest of the NT spells out more fully Christ's victory and Satan's demise. It speaks chiefly of the cross. On that Roman torture rack, the cross, Satan's brood strutted, hissed and laughed. Somehow Satan had forgotten God's curse. The Champion, the Dragon Slayer will bust your skull! There on the cross, Jesus broke the Devil's back. We read in Colossians 2:15 *"And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross."* It's a triumphal procession! The enemy has been stripped naked. His weapons disarmed. On the cross, God hit the delete button on His cosmic computer. He wiped out the full debt of our sin. Risen from the dead, Christ removed the sting of death which is sin. God's verdict toward the new humanity has been reversed. *"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus"* [Romans 8:1]. In God's sight, we are not guilty. And now ascended to heaven, enthroned at the right hand of the Father, Satan is dethroned. When Christ stepped into the control room of the universe, heaven, that's when Satan had to step out. Jesus' entrance into heaven precipitated a war in heaven. Michael and his angels overthrew the dragon and his angels [12:7]. And *"Satan fell like lightning from heaven"* [Luke 10:18]. *"The great dragon was hurled down"* [12:9]. With Christ enthroned, Satan could not be but dethroned. Christ's ascension victory spelled Satan's defeat.

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Satan is the “accuser of our brothers...he accuses them before our God day and night” [12:10]. Satan, loves to throw open the doors of our memory and show us and God the skeletons in our closet. He loves to stick our noses in the stench of our past. Rejoice Christian! Your closet is empty! You want to show me my failures, you want to rub my nose in the slime, check it out. The closet is empty! Jesus cleaned it out by the cross. I love the T-shirt that says, “When Satan reminds you of your past, remind him of his future.”

Satan loves to mess with our minds, expose our weaknesses, our failures, our sin and shove his bony finger in our chests. Revelation 12:11 says so powerfully: “They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb.” C.S. Lewis’ friend Tolkien in The Lord of the Rings trilogy paints a powerful picture. It is so gripping that it bears repetition. The Fellowship of the Ring are being chased by Balrog, this cosmic Devil. They cross a huge crevasse; the others go on ahead and Gandalf the Christ figure faces the beast alone [movie]. He alone can stand in the gap. He looks the beast in the eye. He drives his staff in the ground and cries, “You shall not pass!” Gandalf is snookered by the Balrog’s whip. Gandalf dies. He descends into hell. But the next installment opens with the same scene. While hurtling down the throat of the abyss, Gandalf seizes his sword in mid-air and smites the beast into ultimate oblivion. Gandalf himself rises again more powerful than ever. This is how we overcome the Dragon. We point to that unspeakable turning point of the Cross, where Jesus gave His life for us. Where Jesus’ voice thundered: It is finished! That is, “You shall not pass!”

**III. THE DRAGON’S DOOM.** Satan’s days are numbered. We read in 12:12b “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.” [The reference is to Satan’s little season, “a limited period of unrestrained wickedness”]. This is how Revelation speaks of the final battle. The armies will gather for the final conflict at Armageddon. [This is Hebrew for “Mount of Megiddo,” scene of numerous decisive battles in the Middle East cf. Christianity Today, October 25, 1999, p. 38]. But here is the good news. Theologian J. Nelson Kraybill writes: “In John’s vision, the cataclysmic final battle never happens: as nations array themselves for battle, an angel” pours forth the seventh bowl of God’s wrath, history’s worst earthquake erupts, and a voice from the heavenly temple thunders: “Done!” [Revelation 16:17] [Ibid]. One Word from God is all it takes. “Done!” Then there will be no more death. No more violence. No more tears. The dragon will be hurled into the lake of fire [Rev 20:8-10]. Death will be swallowed up in victory and then there will be peace on earth.

**A TRIUMPHANT COMFORT.** Until that great day, Revelation 12 leaves us with a triumphant comfort and an incredible challenge. Here’s the comfort: **the dragon has lost his bite.** He now has much more bark than bite. Look at vv. 13-16. Every single attempt to exterminate the woman i.e., the NT people of God is foiled. When you’re beat up, shell shocked and battle weary, the Lord will provide the two wings of an eagle and sweep you away to the safety of a desert refuge. A river spewed from the serpent’s mouth threatens to drown the church in a flood of evil, but the earth swallows the torrent.

The Devil’s battle strategy is an exercise in absolute insanity. No wonder Dorothy Sayers calls Satan the Cosmic idiot. His efforts may make temporary gains but they will always be foiled. Always futile. God always safeguards His people. This is eternal security, the perseverance of the saints. The Father has a hold on you and He will never let you go--come hell or high water!

Jesus said: “My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father...is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand” [John 10:27-28].

**SERIOUS CHALLENGE.** And now here’s the challenge. We must fight, until no more breath comes out of our nostrils! The champions of the Kingdom [12:11], “They overcame him [the dragon] by the blood of the lamb [something we already referred to] and by the word of their testimony [and then there’s this shocking comment that cuts me to the quick] “They did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.” Paul calls us to this challenge in 2 Corinthians 10:4-5. We don’t fight with words of hate. We don’t scream the message of Christ in America’s intellectual marketplaces. No. We don’t fight with the weapons of the world. But with a skilled, well-reasoned, passionate, articulate defense of the Christian world-view, we shape a potent apologetic of the hope that is within us. We pull down Satanic ideological strongholds, “and we take captive **every thought** to make it obedient to Christ” [10:5]. In the citadel of darkness, the marketplace of ideas we are on the attack. That’s why we are passionate about Christian education from Kindergarten through graduate school. That’s why we care about youth church education and adult education. Because around the water cooler, in the locker room, over coffee, around the dinner table we are constantly barraged with questions. And we need, Peter writes, to “Always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you...” [NKJV, 1 Peter 3:15].

Dr. John Townsend said it: “The Kingdom of God is no Tupperware party.” As overcomers, as militant champions, we’re called to holy warfare. Sometimes we think that this is Christianity at its best when we enjoy our SS picnic on the mountaintop, enjoying the drama unfold below us as the professionals battle it out. We think our finest hour is when we’re celebrating on the mountaintop. Hardly.

It was May & June 1940, the House of Commons. Prime Minister, Winston Churchill had to steel his people against the Nazi onslaught. He said, “I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat.” He spoke with passion, “Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties, and so bear ourselves that, if the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say: “This was our finest hour.” Did you catch that? Not on the mountaintop, it’s when we’re slugging it out in the trenches with the world, the flesh, and the Devil, that’s our finest hour. I want to paraphrase for this message what may be Churchill’s most memorable speech and his shortest [1]. The portly Prime Minister walked up to the podium, looked out at the students and audience and then exploded. Never give in—never, never, never, never, in nothing great or small, large or petty....Never yield to force; never yield to the...might of the demonic hordes.” Never give up. Never give out. Never give in. Never. Never. Never.

[1] “Never give in—never, never, never, never, in nothing great or small, large or petty, never give in except to convictions of honor and good sense. Never yield to force; never yield to the apparently overwhelming might of the enemy.” [Harrow School of Boys, October 29, 1941]