

SHE GAVE BIRTH TO A SON

Text: Revelation 12:1-6

Readings: Psalm 2; Luke 2:1-7; Matt 2:1-18

Theme: Jesus was born from the woman, Israel, threatened by Satan, the dragon, but is now the ruler of the nations.

Purpose: To explain the Christmas story and the birth and reign of Christ from this dramatic telling of it in Revelation.

The movie trilogy, “The Lord of the Rings”, produced by Peter Jackson, has been enormously popular, and has certainly promoted our beautiful country of New Zealand!

Peter Jackson has followed those three movies with two more based on Tolkien’s book, “The Hobbit”, which was written as an introduction to “The Lord of the Rings”. The first movie was called “An Unexpected Journey” and the second one, is called “The Desolation of Smaug”.

Part of the popularity of these movies is that they deal with big themes that everyone can identify with, especially the conflict between good and evil. These books and movies portray the good wizard Gandalf fighting the evil wizard Saruman; the good hobbit Bilbo fighting against the depraved Gollum. These are stories of light versus darkness, the Riders of Rohan versus the Orc army, righteousness versus injustice.

Tolkien was a Christian and, like his friend C S Lewis, wrote out of a Christian world view from a biblical perspective.

The Bible describes a conflict between good and evil, between light and darkness, between God and Satan, between Christ and the Devil.

This last book of the Bible, the book of Revelation gives us an overview of this conflict, but it assures us that Christ and his church will be victorious over the Devil and his evil angels.

It was written to encourage Christians who were suffering persecution in the first century in the Roman Empire. They could take heart knowing that God was in control of the entire world and that Jesus Christ was king.

Revelation 12 gives us a bird’s eye view of this conflict, taking in the whole history of the world and of this struggle. It provides us with an overview of the people of Israel in the Old Testament, the birth of Jesus Christ into this world, and Satan’s attempts to destroy this new born child.

This chapter is a dramatic, powerful retelling of the birth of Jesus Christ.

Verses 1-6 describe the conflict between God and Satan.

Verses 7-12 focus on the spiritual battle, going on at the same time, between Satan and the archangel Michael.

Verses 13-17 describe the attack of Satan on the church in this present age.

Today we are only looking at verses 1-6 that describe this conflict between Satan and Christ. We are going to consider **the characters** involved and then **the conflict** they are engaged in.

1. There are **FOUR CHARACTERS** mentioned here.

a. The Woman is a picture of the people of Israel, the Old Testament people of God.

i. She is "clothed with the sun", a picture of the glory of Israel; she has “the moon under her feet”, a picture of her power and rule; “and a crown of 12 stars on her head”, a description of the 12 tribes of Israel.

People in the world often despise the church and look down on her; to them the church seems weak and feeble, irrelevant and insignificant.

Think of the line in the hymn, "Though with a scornful wonder men see her sore oppressed"; unbelievers often look at the church with scorn. Even Christians can get discouraged about the church, especially when there are problems and arguments, when Christians bicker amongst themselves and pick on each other, when members are ungrateful and ungodly.

But we need to see the church as God sees her. The church is the bride of Christ! She is beautiful and splendid, grand and glorious! "The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord; she is his new creation by water and the Word."

ii. The woman was pregnant.

Some of the women here could tell us stories about the joys and struggles of their pregnancies. The Old Testament is the account of the pregnancy of Israel as she prepared to give birth to the Messiah.

A woman's pregnancy usually lasts about nine months, give or take a few weeks. The pregnancy of Israel lasted 2000 years! It began when the LORD enabled Sarah to conceive in her old age. She gave birth to a son whom she named Isaac. The pregnancy of Israel continued from one generation to the next following the line of Isaac, Jacob and Judah all the way through to Joseph and Mary, who were from the tribe of Judah, from "the house and line of David" (Luke 2:4).

b. The woman was about to give birth, which introduces the second character in this drama, **the child**. The child is the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of God. The Prophets spoke about him as the Star of David, the Lion of Judah, the Righteous Branch, the Wonderful Counsellor, the Mighty God, the Prince of Peace!

He would be a Prophet like Moses, a Priest like Melchizedek, a King like David.

He would fulfil all the ceremonies, rituals and sacrifices that were carried out in the temple services.

He would complete all the feasts and festivals that Israel celebrated.

He would fulfil the law of Moses perfectly because he was the Son of God, able to keep the entire law down to its last detail!

The apostle John did not mention the birth of Jesus in his gospel but in this book of Revelation he gives us an account of Christ's birth in quite a different narrative than the gospels.

c. The third character in this drama is the **dragon**.

Dragons were described in the mythology of the ancient peoples. The Canaanites wrote about a leviathan and the Egyptians about a crocodile. For his description of Smaug Tolkien drew on these myths and on the Old English poem *Beowulf*, which had a dragon at the heart of the story.

One of the reviews of this Hobbit movie describes Smaug as one of the great dragons of world cinema; he is "a giant, flying, fire-breathing combination of serpent and crocodile."

But as terrifying as Smaug is, the enormous red dragon described in Revelation is even more terrible and horrible to look at.

He has seven heads, which is terrifying in itself, but may also suggest that he was hard to kill; if you cut off one head there are six others to go!

He has ten horns. A horn is a symbol of power and this dragon has ten of them, so he is very powerful.

And he has seven crowns on his heads. A crown is a symbol of political authority; the dragon has seven symbolizing his widespread rule over the nations.

This enormous red dragon represents Satan, who is described in more detail in verse 9; he is "that ancient serpent the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray."

The reference in verse 4 to "a third of the stars" probably looks back to the fall of Satan; how he became proud and rebelled against God and took a third of the angels with him.

This graphic description of his power warns us that we should never underestimate Satan. Take him seriously. Be on your guard because he goes around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour! Put on the full armour of God for your spiritual protection. Just as Bilbo had his short sword, Sting, made by the high elves of the west, so you need to take up the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God, written by the Holy Spirit (Eph 6:17).

d. Thinking about the power of Satan should not make us despair because we must also see the other person in this story who is **God himself**.

The whole Bible is about God from the opening verses of Genesis to the closing verses of Revelation. The entire book of Revelation is written to show us that God is almighty and powerful and in control of all that happens.

These are the four main characters described in this dramatic account: the woman Israel, the child who is Jesus, the dragon who is Satan and God himself.

2. Secondly, we turn to **THE CONFLICT** described here. Verse 4 describes the dragon standing "in front of the woman who was about to give birth so that he might devour her child the moment it was born."

a. **The Old Testament** is the record of God working out his plan of salvation, and the record of Satan seeking to thwart God's plans. This conflict was introduced in Genesis 3 when God spoke to that serpent, Satan, saying; "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers" (Gen 3:15).

All through the old covenant Satan tried to destroy the people of Israel and so destroy the Messiah. He sought to do that through Pharaoh in Egypt who commanded all the baby boys of Israel to be thrown into the Nile, through the wicked queen Athaliah in the time of Joash who tried to kill the entire royal family, through the Assyrians and the Babylonians, and through Haman in the days of Esther who tried to wipe out the Jews.

b. **The New Testament** describes the birth of the Messiah.

i. Eventually Israel "gave birth to a son, a male child." (v 5) When Jesus was born Satan tried to devour him through the mad cruelty and paranoia of King Herod and his murder of all the babies in Bethlehem. But God the Father protected him by warning Joseph and having him flee to Egypt with Mary and Jesus.

Satan attacked Jesus again at the beginning of his ministry with three temptations at the end of Jesus' forty days in the wilderness.

During the ministry of Jesus Satan tried to destroy Jesus through the malice and scheming of the Scribes and Pharisees who plotted to kill him. And eventually they did kill him, collaborating with Pilate and the Romans.

ii. But in this vision John does not mention the ministry of Jesus, nor even his death and resurrection. He only mentions the birth and ascension of Jesus. Verse 5: "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." This is Christ's ascension.

This chapter is concentrating on one point - that God is all powerful and that Christ is the victorious ruler. The focus is not on Christ's humanity but on his divinity and so on his kingship, power and

glory. He “will rule all the nations with an iron sceptre” (v 5). This is a quote from Psalm 2 which describes the powerful rule and reign of Jesus who is putting all his enemies under his feet.

iii. God not only rescued his Son but he also protected his New Testament people, the church of Christ, his body.

The woman “fled into the desert to a place prepared for her by God” (v 6).

When the people of Israel escaped out of Egypt they fled into the desert where they were safe. In the same way the church of Jesus in the New Testament is protected and kept safe; “God has placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body” (Eph 1:22).

The church is safe for 1,260 days, a period also described in Revelation as 42 months (11:2), and as "a time, times and half a time" (12:14), and as a 1000 years (Rev 20). This describes the period from Christ's first coming until just before his second coming, this entire New Testament age in which we are living.

Throughout this time Satan is waging war against the church. During the last 20 centuries millions of Christians have died as a result of persecution. Many are being persecuted today especially in Islamic countries.

But Satan cannot prevent the church from growing nor can he prevent the gospel from being preached! This will continue all through this gospel age. Jesus will go on extending his kingdom until he comes again. “Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power.”

This is the big picture of Revelation 12, of the conflict between good and evil, righteousness versus injustice, God triumphing over Satan, Christ victorious over the Devil!

This is the good news we can hear again in this advent season!

Amen