

Appearances Can Be Deceptive

Revelation 12:1-6

7/19/2015

The question we can ask ourselves to start off with in this passage is a simple one: which side looks like it is going to win? Any of us who know anything about giving birth knows that a woman is never more vulnerable than when she is giving birth. She cannot pay attention to anything except giving birth. Bombs going off outside would not distract her attention from her uterus, and the pain. So, we are to imagine a woman at the point of giving birth, being exceedingly vulnerable. She would not be able to defend herself against any kind of attack whatsoever. Now imagine that there is a huge, monstrous dragon that knows exactly when she is vulnerable. He is waiting just outside the delivery room. He looks powerful and very, very scary. He has wonderful wings, terrifying teeth, horrible heads, cast-iron crowns, slobbering saliva, cruel claws, and a very hungry belly. Imagine also that this dragon is incredibly intelligent. He is not some mindless monster who doesn't know one end of his body from the other. This dragon knows how to use every part of him to rip, tear, and shred his victims to pieces. As you imagine this scene in your mind, ask yourself this question: which side looks more likely to win? The woman giving birth, or the terrifying dragon? Ah, appearances can be deceptive, can't they? The woman appears to be vulnerable, weak, helpless. The dragon appears to be vicious, powerful, and triumphant. The truth is that the opposite is the case, because of God, and His actions and protection, and His annihilation of Satan's power. The main thing John wants us to see here is that, from an earthly perspective, things look very bleak, but from a heavenly perspective, the picture couldn't be brighter. Which perspective will we adopt? If we adopt an earthly perspective on what is happening, we will get depressed, angry, hopeless, and idle. As one commentator puts it, if we see evil as powerful and inevitable, we won't resist it. But if we see evil as defeated, and defeatable, we will resist it. So, you see, our actions will depend entirely on our perspective about the real situation. We need to see the earth with heavenly eyes. When we do that, there is hope, courage, determination, and worship of our God, Who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

The vision that John gives us in chapter 12 is the first part of a new cycle that describes all of human history this time, starting way back in Genesis, and ending all the way forward in the Second Coming of Christ. So, the events that John describes are continually happening. This is what the age-old battle looks like: the battle between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman. It is the battle that Augustine described with the idea of two cities: the city of man and the city of God.

When we first take a look at this great sign in heaven, our first question is this: who is this woman? She is described in glorious terms. She is clothed with

the sun. The moon is her footstool. She wears a crown of twelve stars. Wow! It reminds of George Gordon, Lord Byron: "She walks in beauty like the night of cloudless climes and starry skies, and all that's best of dark and bright meet in her aspect and in her eyes." This is one beautiful woman. So, who is she? Well, the imagery comes from Genesis, and the dream that Joseph had that he shared with his father, mother, and brothers. In his dream, the stars, the sun, and the moon all bow down to him. Jacob interpreted the dream to be referring to himself and the brothers, and Joseph's mother. He was angry about Joseph's dream. That dream made the brothers envious of him, and was one of the big reasons why they sold Joseph into slavery, ironically putting Joseph on the very path of having that dream fulfilled! In other words, the sun, the moon, and the stars are Israel, the people of Israel. There is no other metaphorical meaning attached to the sun, moon, and stars in the entire Bible. We also know a few other things about this woman. First of all, she gives birth to the Messiah, Jesus Christ. Israel certainly did that. In fact, as one commentator puts it, the entirety of the Old Testament sees Israel in labor, trying to give birth to the Messiah, the one promised in Genesis 3:15 as the One Who would crush the head of the seed of the serpent. We know, furthermore, that this woman is not just a single person. In verse 17, the dragon goes off to make war against the rest of her offspring. This happens after the birth of Christ, but it is the same woman. Therefore, the woman can be no one other than God's people: Israel before Christ, and the new Israel, the church, after Christ. The woman is the church of God.

Ah, but how many people see the church this way? She certainly doesn't look this pretty on earth, does she? The church is "with schisms rent asunder, with heresies distressed." There are false sons in her pale, otherwise known as hypocrites. She looks like a beggar in the wilderness, as verse 6 seems to say. So, how can John describe the church in such a glorious way as having the sun, moon, and stars for her ornaments? John describes the church in this way, because it is the heavenly way of looking at her. If we look at the church and find her ugly, it is because we are looking at her with earthly eyes. John is saying here that we need to put on a different pair of spectacles, and see her with the eyes of faith. We need to see the church as God sees the church: the redeemed people of God, bought with the blood of Jesus, purified through water and the word, in principle the heir of the new heavens and the new earth.

Where does this vision lead? It leads to Revelation 21, and the bride of Christ coming down out of heaven, perfectly dressed, without any spot or wrinkle remaining. Is this how we see the church? All too often, we see the church as the place where we go to be bored out of our skulls, to attend because if we didn't, the neighbors might say something to us. Or, we think of the church as an optional extra for the Christian faith. My friends, don't you see the problem with this way of thinking? We are not thinking about the church in the way that Christ thinks

about it. Jesus gave Himself up for her! He died for the church! We often won't even live for the church. Or, we'll throw a few scraps of our time and money at the church, as if the church was a dog that only gets the leftovers. What we need is for the divine ophthalmologist to get us a new pair of glasses, so that we can see the church as she really is, as she is the bride of Christ.

There are two other things that can prevent us from seeing the church as she really is. One of those things is an earthly view of Satan. From an earthly perspective, Satan looks like the victorious one, doesn't he? He looks fierce, terrible, and powerful. He sweeps a third of the stars out of the heavens. Many commentators agree that this is talking about Satan taking down a third of the angels with him in his original rebellion. This is possible. It is also possible that this the stars are people that Satan takes down with him to form his own kingdom. By the way, we shouldn't get too hung up on what the seven heads and ten horns mean. He's brainy and powerful, okay? The head is the source of intelligence, and he's got seven of those; and the horn is the source of power, and he has ten of those. So he's brainy and powerful. Our reaction is supposed to be (temporarily!!!), "Ooh what a fearsome monster!" But then we're supposed to notice something else. Despite his power, his brains, and his brawn, he can't kill a single infant child! He can't kill a woman at her most vulnerable, when she is giving birth! What kind of a wimpy dragon is that? Seen from a heavenly perspective, Satan has no claws, no teeth, no power. In fact, he is already beaten. Satan tried to kill Jesus. Remember Herod trying to kill all the boys born in Bethlehem? That didn't work! Herod tried sweet-talking the wise-men, but God took care of that attempt as well by warning the wise-men to go back to their own country another way. Satan tried to have Jesus killed several times before the cross, but each attempt failed. The fact of the matter is that when God has decreed that something will happen, there is nothing Satan can do to thwart that plan. This is spelled out very clearly in verse 5, where the child is "caught up" to God. That is a passive verb, meaning that the subject of the sentence receives the action. This particular passive verb is what we call a "divine passive," meaning that God is the one performing the action. So, this child is caught up to heaven by God! This is a very succinct way of describing Jesus' entire life, death, resurrection, ascension and session at the right hand of God the Father. You see, once we have a heavenly perspective on Satan, our perspective on the church will come into focus as well, because our view of Jesus will be front and center. The church is the one who will be triumphant. The gates of Hades will never triumph against the church. Satan winds up being a thing of sound and fury, signifying nothing.

The other problem that we have in seeing the church as she really is that we get the church confused with someone else. In Revelation, Satan is a counterfeiter. He has a counterfeit trinity, a counterfeit truth, a counterfeit sacrament, a counterfeit death and resurrection, and a counterfeit church. Satan wants us

confused about the true church. He doesn't want us to recognize the true church for what it is, because then we might join it and promote the kingdom of God, which is very detrimental to Satan's own kingdom. In chapter 17, you can read all about this counterfeit church of Satan's, called Babylon, the great prostitute. She is also dressed up to look beautiful. In an earthly way, she looks beautiful. But once we put on the heavenly spectacles, she turns very ugly indeed. She attacks the church, quite the cat-fight! She rolls in the blood of the saints, like a pig in its own vomit. She shows no love at all except a love of bloodthirsty persecution of the true church.

So, how do we tell these two women apart? How do we know where the true church is? The Reformers came up with a simple, easy answer to that question. There are three marks of the true church. The Word is preached in a pure fashion, the sacraments are faithfully administered, and church discipline is carried out. Word, sacrament, and discipline. We don't think of the church in these terms much today. Frankly, most of the time when we search for a church, we are asking other questions. They may not be bad questions, but they are not always the essential questions. What does this church have for the kids? How warm is the church? Does it have my kind of music? None of these are bad things. But if we allow them to get in the way of searching for a church that has Word, Sacrament, and discipline, then we might wind up at a false church, because our priorities were wrong.

These things are vital when we consider relocating to another area. Typically, what happens is that the job leads the way. We find a job, and then hope that we'll find a good church, because they are about as common as air molecules, right? Wrong! The American church is in serious decline, both in doctrine and practice. If you consider moving to another area, the right church should be your first priority, not your last. There may be a very tempting job that is way out in the boonies somewhere, but if there is no good church there, you should refuse the job offer. The job is not worth the spiritual damage that will happen to your family if you join up with a false church.

It's time to take the broadest view possible on the current situation. There is no denying that the dragon looks pretty fierce right now. He might even have sprouted a couple more heads when we weren't looking, and several more horns! It looks bad for the church. But appearances can be deceptive, and the outcome of the age-old battle is never in any doubt.