

Enemies

By David Feddes

This part of Revelation begins with a woman about to become a mother, and it shows that our greatest enemy was scared of the birth of a child. When you begin reading in Revelation 12, the apostle John is given a vision of a woman crowned with twelve stars, with the moon under her feet, and a great dragon with seven heads waiting to devour her child the moment that child is born.

Dragon: Satan

In that picture we have an overview of much of Old Testament history. After the fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, God said to the serpent that he would put enmity or hatred or opposition between the woman and the serpent, and between their offspring, and that the offspring of the woman would crush the offspring of the serpent (Genesis 3:15). Throughout history you see this dragon trying to devour.

When Eve gives birth to Abel and he's a godly man, it seems that Satan wants to destroy him, and Cain murders Abel. Yet Eve then gives birth to another son, Seth, and the line of promise continues. When God has chosen Abraham and his offspring, the pharaoh of Egypt tries to wipe out all of the baby boys and merge Israel into Egypt as far as the women go, erasing God's chosen people and the promised seed from history. But again, God gives godly midwives, and baby Moses is saved, and the nation of Israel is rescued from the clutches of Egypt.

As you read these various stories, you need to realize that there's more going on than just the story. That's what's fascinating about the book of Revelation. I mentioned in a previous message that there's almost nothing in Revelation that's not told to us elsewhere in the Bible, often in a rather different form. But you don't say, "Therefore Revelation is useless." The Bible tells us about Satan, it tells us these Old Testament stories, and Revelation shows us this vision of the dragon and the woman that puts it all together.

You realize that Cain killing Abel is the dragon trying to kill the seed. Pharaoh trying to wipe out all of the babies is the dragon trying to devour the promised offspring. You realize that when Athaliah, the wicked queen, tries to wipe out the entire line of David—possibly including her own grandchildren—there's more than just a crabby old lady involved. There is a very wicked dragon involved, trying to wipe out the promised seed. When Haman tries to destroy the Jewish people and Queen Esther saves the people, you again have an attempt of the dragon. When Herod tries to kill the baby Jesus when at last that promised baby is born, then an angel warns Mary and Joseph, and they rescue the baby so that he can grow up and carry out his work. Finally, when Jesus dies, it's actually not a victory of the dragon.

Revelation 12 summarizes it all and says Satan wants to devour the child of the woman, but the child is caught up to God and his throne. There it summarizes all of Jesus' birth, his ministry, his death, his resurrection. He's caught up to the throne, and the dragon has been defeated. So when we read about all of that, it should make us think really hard about what God has done in the past, what Satan's been up to in the past, and even the events of our own time.

It's Mother's Day. It's also a day of worship. So what are some people doing on Mother's Day, the day of worship? They are protesting at houses of worship against motherhood. That's what's happening. They caught a whiff of a rumor that the Supreme Court might overturn the nationwide approval of abortion, and so they're going to go to houses of worship on Mother's Day and protest the protection of babies being born. You should smell a little bit of dragon breath when that sort of thing is going on.

The devil has feared and hated that promise of the seed ever since the promise was first given. He hates Christ even more now that he's been defeated by Christ. In this vision the child is born, he's caught up to God and to his throne, and then the dragon can't get at the child anymore, so he goes after the mother.

Now, who's the mother? The mother is God's people—the holy people of God, the Jerusalem that is from above, which is our mother (Galatians 4:26). God's people have given birth to the promised Savior, and he is enthroned. What happens next? The Bible says in Revelation 12 there's war in heaven, and Michael, the mighty archangel of God's people, and his angels fight against the dragon and his angels. They fight back, and they lose, and so the dragon and his cohorts are thrown out of the spiritual realms and cast down to earth.

The Bible says, "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... 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" (Revelation 12:10-12).

The casting down of Satan is brought about by the victory of the child, the Lord Jesus Christ. So he's hurled down. Does that mean all goes well from here on out? No. A fatally wounded dragon is a very, very dangerous creature. The Bible uses that image of Satan as a dragon, or as a roaring lion going around looking for someone to devour (1 Peter 5:8), or as a strong man, a bully. Satan is pictured in fearsome terms in the Bible, and we need to take him very seriously.

But at the same time, we need to realize that he's filled with fury. Why? Because he's winning? No, because his time is short. He's a very frustrated and doomed dragon. He has lost, and he still has his fury. Now what does he do with his fury? He can't take it out on Christ anymore, so in Revelation 12 the next thing he does is pursue the woman, the people of God—the church—and try to destroy it. But he fails. Then he goes after the rest of the offspring of the woman, others who are believers.

That's where Revelation 12 ends. He's as mad as mad can be. He's been defeated, he's terribly wounded, and now he wants to go after God's people. He stands on the shore of the sea, and from there on for a while the dragon is not seen in the visions of Revelation. Near the end you'll see him back again—mainly for his destruction. But Revelation 13 shifts away from the dragon to those who are working for him.

Satan's Servants

^{13:1} And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, with ten horns and seven heads, with ten diadems on its horns and blasphemous names on its heads. ² And the beast that I saw was like a leopard; its feet were like a bear's, and its mouth was like a lion's mouth. And to it the dragon gave his power and his throne and great authority. ³ One of its heads seemed to have a mortal wound, but its mortal wound was healed, and the whole earth marveled as they followed the beast. ⁴ And they worshiped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast, and they worshiped the beast, saying, "Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?"

⁵ And the beast was given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words, and it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months. ⁶ It opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling, that is, those who dwell in heaven. ⁷ Also it was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them. And authority was given it over every tribe and people and language and nation, ⁸ and all who dwell on earth will worship it, everyone whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who was slain. ⁹ If anyone has an ear, let him hear: ¹⁰ If anyone is to be taken captive, to captivity he goes; if anyone is to be slain with the sword, with the sword must he be slain. Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints.

This passage in Revelation describes another of John's visions: a strange creature with multiple heads and animal parts, representing the power of **statist oppression**—government domination, persecution, and cruelty. This beast seems to have been dead and then comes alive again, doing much damage for a limited time. That's the beast out of the sea.

Then Revelation goes on to speak of another beast:

¹¹ Then I saw another beast rising out of the earth. It had two horns like a lamb and it spoke like a dragon. ¹² It exercises all the authority of the first beast in its presence, and makes the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose mortal wound was healed. ¹³ It performs great signs, even making fire come down from heaven to earth in front of people, ¹⁴ and by the signs that it is allowed to work in the presence of the beast it deceives those who dwell on earth, telling them to make an image for the beast that was wounded by the sword and yet lived. ¹⁵ And it was allowed to give breath to the image of the beast, so that the image of the beast might even speak and might cause those who would not worship the image of the beast to be slain. ¹⁶ Also it causes all, both small and great, both rich and poor, both free and slave, to be marked on the right hand or the forehead, ¹⁷ so that no one can buy or sell unless he has the mark, that is, the name of the beast or the number of its name. ¹⁸ This calls for wisdom: let the one who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man, and his number is 666. (Revelation 13:11-18).

The second beast looks like a lamb but talks like a dragon. Later in Revelation, he's referred to as the false prophet—the one exercising the powers of religion and miracles, pretending to speak truth about God but actually serving the first beast. He uses **religious deception** to support the power of statist oppression.

So, you have two beasts, and then a third evil force appears—Babylon, or the great prostitute, representing **cultural seduction**.

^{17:1} “Come, I will show you the judgment of the great prostitute who is seated on many waters, ² with whom the kings of the earth have committed sexual immorality, and with the wine of whose sexual immorality the dwellers on earth have become drunk.” I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was full of blasphemous names, and it had seven heads and ten horns. ⁴ The woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her sexual immorality. ⁵ And on her forehead was written a name of mystery: “Babylon the great, mother of prostitutes and of earth’s abominations.” ⁶ And I saw the woman, drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of the martyrs of Jesus... ¹⁸ And the woman that you saw is the great city that has dominion over the kings of the earth.

^{18:3} The kings of the earth committed adultery with her, and the merchants of the earth grew rich from her excessive luxuries... ¹² cargoes of gold, silver, precious stones and pearls... ¹³ wine and olive oil, fine flour and wheat; cattle and sheep; horses and carriages; and bodies and souls of men. (Revelation 17:1-6, 18; 18:11-13).

Everything is for sale in Babylon, including human bodies and souls. Babylon is seated on the beast, holding a golden cup that looks fabulous on the outside but is filled with abominations and immoralities on the inside. Everyone who is not saved mourns when Babylon falls, because Babylon made everyone rich.

These are the great enemies John sees in his vision: the dragon, the beast out of the sea, the beast out of the earth who looks like a lamb and is a false prophet, and the prostitute Babylon. In looking at these enemies, you see the kinds of forces that oppose God’s people—Satan, statist government oppression, religious deception, and cultural seduction.

Roman Empire

As we think about this, we need to realize at least two things. One is that this speaks of the future. The other is that it also addresses the churches to whom it was written. Revelation was not just some strange code that had nothing to do with them. The original readers understood what was being talked about. They understood what the visions were communicating. They didn’t receive chapter after chapter of indecipherable code that meant nothing to them. They knew who was being described: the empire.

The mighty Roman Empire had all sorts of propaganda about its greatness, but John’s visions tell a very different story. The propaganda said the *Pax Romana*—the Roman peace—had brought peace and prosperity to the whole world. Rome was a mighty city of marble, splendid and glorious, even represented as a goddess, the goddess Roma. The Caesars were worshiped. The goddess Roma was worshiped. They celebrated the supposed divine blessing that came through the empire, with statues, magnificent buildings (some ruins still visible today), and festivals honoring the gods and the emperors. They even engineered fake miracles in the temples, with

deceiving priests performing wonders for the glory of Rome. It all seemed to bring peace, order, stability, wealth, and pleasure.

What could be better than the blessing of Roman rule? A lot.

When God gave John this vision, he showed him a city on seven hills and revealed that this imperial power of Caesar was not a divine blessing but a terrible beast. This beast demanded worship, killed Christians, and crushed liberty.

The Bible sometimes calls him “the beast.” Elsewhere, the apostle Paul speaks of “the man of sin” or “the antichrist,” and the people who first heard John’s vision even understood that the name *Nero* can be represented by the number 666. That’s what the letters add up to when you use the ancient method of assigning numerical values to letters—a practice common in John’s time.

There was also a terrible thought circulating that Nero might come back again. Nero had been a savage butcher—he killed Christians, burned much of Rome, and then blamed the Christians for it. He had them burned alive and fed to wild beasts. But things turned against him. During the “Year of the Four Emperors,” he ended up committing suicide with a sword. The beast was dead—hallelujah! The power of the Caesars was finished.

But then it wasn’t. The Caesars returned, resurrected in power, more terrible than ever. By the time John wrote Revelation, probably during the reign of Domitian, the persecutions were worse than ever, and the beastly power was back again.

Along with all this political power came the religious deception—going on not only in Rome itself but throughout the provincial cities. There were temples reenacting the supposed “miracles” of Rome. Local colonies, loyal to the empire, were working on behalf of the beast. They had images of the divine Caesar and led people in worshiping him. Often these city officials—the “kings of the earth,” as Revelation calls them—were eager to make everyone worship Caesar because it paid well and brought them local power.

So there was religious deception everywhere throughout the empire: pagan worship, false gods, the denial of Christ as Lord. Even within the church there were lambs talking like dragons—Satan coming as an angel of light, preachers appearing as lambs but actually wolves in sheep’s clothing. That’s the terrible power of religious deception.

Along with all that was the power of cultural seduction. Rome said, “Rome is a beautiful goddess! She brings blessing to all.” But the vision from heaven says, “Rome is a witch. She will curse you. She will sell anything. She is a hideous creature who drinks the blood of the saints and drinks abominations out of her glittering gold cup.”

So who are you going to believe—the Roman propaganda or the vision from heaven?

Multiple Fulfillments

The churches who first heard this vision would clearly understand some of what was being talked about. But that doesn't mean this vision is confined to the past. If only it were so—if only Satan were out of business, if only he had unleashed his last blast in the first century, if only there were no more statism, religious deception, or cultural seduction. But in this vision, God not only helped the church of that time understand the powers that were already unleashed in the world; he also showed what would continue throughout these last days until it culminates in the terrible powers near the end of time.

I don't believe Revelation is only about the earliest times or the Caesars and Rome. Throughout Revelation, you find different names for that civilization. Sometimes it's called Babylon, sometimes Sodom, sometimes it hints at Jerusalem. Revelation gathers together all the Old Testament prophecies against the great cities and civilizations and pronounces judgment on them all.

When we look at these events in Revelation, we need to understand that there are multiple fulfillments. God wants us to understand what's going on behind the scenes—from heaven's point of view—right now. And he also wants us to have some sense of what's coming. It's not only about the future; it helps us understand the present as well. Prophecy always does that: it helps us see what's happening now from heaven's point of view. Some prophecies predict future events, but many are given so that we can discern the spiritual realities behind current events.

Near future?

You can't read Revelation without asking some obvious questions. How near is the end? When you hear certain prophecies, you might think, "I could see that unfolding in very short order." When you think of one terrible power ruling the world, is it really hard to envision in this age of globalization—when everything is increasingly interconnected in commerce, communication, and politics?

"But never in the United States," we might think, "would anyone limit freedom. Never would a minor crisis be used to change systems of governance. Surely not in 'the land of the free and the home of the brave.'" And yet, when Covid came, a disease that killed less than one percent of the population, the whole world changed course almost overnight. It's not hard to imagine global powers acting in lockstep again, following the same line of action.

Imagine if there were a few major nuclear attacks or a massive financial crash—how would the world respond then? We saw how quickly global groupthink took over during a comparatively minor event.

Is it really hard to imagine religious deceivers doing more damage than ever? Imagine someone performing apparent miracles on live television—though with modern CGI, they wouldn't even need real miracles to convince people. With global media, supposed "signs and wonders" can be broadcast worldwide in real time.

It's also no longer hard to imagine the ability to control buying and selling. We've already seen it: "Do what we say or you lose your job. Do what we say or you can't travel. Do what we say or you can't buy or sell." Pets already have implanted chips to track them—once you belong to someone, you'll get one too. It's not far-fetched anymore.

You don't need to be a wild conspiracy theorist—just have open eyes.

And as for Babylon the prostitute—can you imagine any civilization more sex-crazed than ours? More drug-infested and drunken? More money-hungry? More obsessed with selling everything and making everything for sale?

So, yes, when you speculate whether the end might be near and wonder what kind of strange world could make Revelation's scenarios possible, it doesn't take much imagination to see how the world's final chapter could be near. You just need to read the news.

Enemies now

In thinking about how near the end might be, however, we don't want to get lost in wild speculations—thinking we've figured out God's timetable or identified the main villain. We need to understand that God shows us the forces of the future so that we can see how they're already at work in our world right now. The main concern isn't about computer chips in pets—you may or may not care about that—the main concern is what's happening now that reflects these same forces.

Let's take a few examples. You can see the blending of government power, religious deception, and economic control in several systems. In a Muslim country, you can see the melding of religious authority with state power and economic advantage or disadvantage depending on your standing.

In a communist country, the state officially denies God, displays huge portraits of its "dear leader," and demands a kind of worship. The economy is completely controlled, and whether you prosper or suffer depends on your loyalty to the regime and your stance toward God.

In capitalist societies, we're not strangers to government mandates either. We've seen church lockdowns and government orders about when and how you can worship. And just look at what's happening in our own time. When the possible overturn of *Roe v. Wade* was rumored, President Biden said we must not undermine the right to "choose to abort a child." That, sadly, was no slip of the tongue—he accidentally told the truth. None of the euphemisms—"fetus," "terminated pregnancy"—just the plain, chilling words: "abort a child." Now, President Biden is not the final Antichrist, but when leaders say people should have the right to kill children, we're right back with Molech and human sacrifice. Amazon, for example, will pay thousands of dollars for employees to travel somewhere to abort a child—but not necessarily help them if they have the child. That's a "thoughtful, "nice" kind of wickedness.

But it's not just Islam, communism, or "woke capitalism." The church itself is deeply implicated. In Revelation, five of the seven churches Jesus addresses are in serious trouble. Only two escape

without stern warnings. The rest are called out for compromising with the beast. The churches found ways to get along with Rome's sexual immorality and to offer a little incense to Caesar here while still worshipping Jesus a little there.

The same danger exists today. Throughout history the church has been tempted to blend political power with religious deception. Think of the medieval church and the period before the Reformation, when religious and political powers united to suppress those who truly believed the gospel. Or think of churches in the United States during the 1800s—many defended slavery and the trade in “bodies and souls of men.” The church can easily compromise with the beast, the false prophet, and the prostitute.

In our time, the same patterns continue: the killing of children, the sexual revolution, and a civil religion that confuses patriotism with faith.

Sometimes American churches have a hard time distinguishing between the cross and the flag. The flag of the United States is not the last hope of humanity. If that were our hope, we'd already be doomed. Our hope is in the cross of Christ and the triumph of the Lamb—not in union with any political movement or nation. We can pray for our country and love it as we love our fellow people, but we must not pretend it is somehow immune to becoming another Babylon.

These are things to reflect on when we think about the enemies described in Revelation. When the book was first written, it gave courage to God's people by helping them recognize their enemies rather than remain blind to them. And throughout the ages it has done the same—not to inspire speculation about the last few years of earth's history, but to help believers live faithfully now, in the time God has placed us in.

Of course, if we do happen to be living at the very end of history, we can be ready for that too. Because when that time comes, the powers will be turned up to their highest level. The fury of Satan, the pressure of government oppression, the lure of religious deception, and the pull of cultural seduction will all be at their maximum. If those powers are going to be turned up to the maximum at the end of history, what does that mean for us right now?

Main truth about enemies

Let's backtrack and ask one question: What, in your mind, is the main thing about these enemies described in the book of Revelation? What's the absolute core truth, the most important thing to know about them?

They lose!

People read the book of Revelation and think, “Oh, how scary!” But the key truth is this—they lose. They end up in the lake of fire. The beast is in the lake of fire at the end of the book. The false prophet is in the lake of fire. The dragon is in the lake of fire. Don't fear the beast, the false prophet, or the dragon—they all get the lake of fire. And those who jump on their bandwagon end up there too.

So, in the time that we have left, we need to realize the main thing about these enemies is that they lose. Revelation portrays that in several ways.

At the end of chapter 14 and into chapter 15, Christ is pictured as one who bears a sickle and comes for the great harvest of the earth. He harvests those who are faithful to him, but he also harvests the wicked, and there's a great trampling of the grapes of wrath.

In chapter 19, there's another vision—Christ is portrayed as the rider on a white horse, whose name is Faithful and True, who has written on him “King of kings and Lord of lords.” He comes with all his hosts to judge his enemies and rescue his people (Revelation 19:11-16).

That's what we need to understand about the enemies in Revelation: they lose, Christ wins. Even when the enemies are turned up to maximum strength—as they were close to maximum in the days of the Roman Empire under Nero and Domitian—Christ carried his church through all of that. If, at the end of history, those enemies reach full power again, Christ will still win. If Christ can win when they're at maximum strength, he can certainly handle them when they're not.

In our time, Satan is still at least partly restrained and bound; the forces of the future are not yet fully unleashed. So when we face challenges—oppression, deception, or a culture that tries to lure us in with its messages and propaganda—we must not cave in or be pushovers.

All of those powers lose. Even at maximum force, they lose. In the meantime, they will not prevail over those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life (Revelation 13:8).

In Revelation, there's a vision of the throne—of God the Father seated on it, of the Lamb of God who takes the scroll of history and opens it, and of the Holy Spirit symbolized by the seven flames of fire before the throne, or the seven eyes of the Lamb (Revelation 4–5). You have this vision of God—the Trinity.

Satan, by contrast, forms his unholy trinity: the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet. But the unholy trinity is no match for the real Trinity. The one who only looks like a lamb is no match for the true Lamb.

So, in our own time, we need discernment—to recognize the forces of falsehood and identify the real enemies. And we must know who we are and to whom we belong. When we belong to Jesus Christ, we need to hear again the voice of the Spirit to the churches: no compromise, no collapse.

“We follow the Lamb wherever he goes” (Revelation 14:4). We are the bride of Christ, and we renounce the witch—we will not join her.

Yet even as we resist evil, we look forward to that final vision of Revelation, where “the kings of the earth bring their splendor into” the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21:24). Salvation will reach many among the nations. So we don't live with a smug “us versus them” mentality. Revelation does sharpen our minds with that distinction, but it also calls us to be light.

Jesus is the light of the world, and he says, “You are the light of the world” (John 8:12; Matthew 5:14). We are the lampstands. May God give each of us grace to face our enemies and not be overcome by them, to love our personal enemies when we meet them, and to win them to the blessed gospel of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God.

Prayer

Father, help us through these visions to understand our own time and be ready for the future—to be ready for a future of ever-increasing glory with you, and to take seriously the terrible judgments that come upon your enemies. We pray that in our own time we will be faithful to you, and faithful to our calling—to follow you with first love, with great zeal, without lukewarmness, and with a desire to be a light to the nations as you have called your church to be. Strengthen us, Lord. Clarify our minds, encourage our hearts, and help us to live for you in this wicked and perverse generation. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

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