

Spiritual Battles

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[0 : 00] So, we're going to read now from a chapter in the book of Revelation. Revelation is the last book in the Bible, and it's a book that's full of allegory and symbol.

It's known as apocalyptic revelation, so it's a sort of revealing of what God is doing in this world. And as you read along, you're going to be slightly mystified by some of the language and some of the symbolism.

So, just to clue you in at the start then, Joe is going to read for us in just a second. It talks about a woman, and this woman is the church of Jesus Christ.

And then it talks about a dragon who's opposed to the woman, and that's Satan, the enemy of the church of Jesus Christ. And it talks about a son who will be born to the woman, and that is Jesus Christ himself.

So, you've got the woman who's the church, you've got the dragon who is Satan or the serpent, and you've got the son who is Jesus Christ. So, bear that in mind as Joe reads to us now.

[1 : 09] Revelation 12, starting at verse 1. A great sign appeared in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and a crown of twelve stars on her head.

She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth. Then another sign appeared in heaven, an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on its head. Its tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth. The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that it might devour her child the moment he was born.

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. The woman fled into the wilderness to a place prepared for her by God, where she might be taken care of for one thousand two hundred and sixty days.

Then war broke out 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.

[2 : 17] The great dragon was hurled down, an ancient snake called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him.

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 Messiah.

For the accuser of our brothers and sisters, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down. They triumphed over 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. 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 wilderness, where she would be taken care of for a time, times and half a time, out of the snake's reach.

[3 : 28] I'm going to take a little minute now, or more than a minute, to be honest, just to think about this amazing chapter that we read in the book of Revelation, try and make clear what its messages.

We had VED on Friday. So you might have seen some of the celebrations. You might have listened to the Queen's address or to Winston Churchill's speech, which was broadcast again for the declaration of victory in Europe.

And what an amazing occasion that was, after years of battle and struggle. And in chapter 12 of the book of Revelation, well, there's a really big battle, isn't there?

There's this huge conflict going on. And it's a spiritual battle. And all of us, in different ways, will probably feel like we are battling with things personally right now.

Every day, we're struggling away with our emotions, with anger or fear or addictive behaviors. And into all of that, Jesus is saying he comes as a good king to bring his peace and his victory into our lives.

[4 : 53] So if you're not a Christian, I would say that this is a really good time to become a Christian. If you don't follow Jesus, I'd say this is a great time to start following Jesus.

If you don't know Jesus as your king, this is a great time to say to Jesus, I want you as my king. It'd be a shame to let this season of disruption and struggle pass without finding new spiritual life in the midst of it.

Our struggle with anger has us sitting in a chair like this, and it becomes the critic's chair, doesn't it? It becomes the chair where we're looking at the people around us, maybe the people we're sharing our home with, or we're looking at the government and the politicians and the decisions that have been made at a big level or at a household level.

And we're just finding fault all the time. We're the critic. We're angry. We're always pointing out the faults and the feelings and the problems caused by other people.

Others of us, perhaps we're not so angry right now, but we're fearful. We're anxious. We're tense. We're kind of curled up in our chair, sort of trying to protect ourselves from the world, not wanting to be exposed to any of the dangers that surround us.

[6 : 12] We're fearful. And then for others of us, maybe it's our addictions coming back to haunt us, our temptations, our illicit pleasures.

We thought we'd left them behind, but in this crisis, they're back. Troubling us, disturbing us, calling to us. Troubling us, so it's such a topsy-turvy time.

We've got this slugfest that we're mired in. And we may think, well, that's all because of the coronavirus and the lockdown and everything that's going around about us.

But I think chapter 12 of the book of Revelation is saying the real battle isn't about coronavirus. It's not about politics.

It's not about the economy. The real battle is spiritual. The real battle is spiritual. So the key thing that chapter 12 tells us is that we're in a battle, a spiritual battle.

[7 : 17] And for those of us who are Christians, we're mired in this battle, not because we're under attack from the dark Lord and his forces of evil.

We're mired in this battle as Christians because we are on the attack, because we are going out bringing the good news of God's kingdom. Christians are on the offensive.

We're bringing others to live under the good reign of King Jesus. The battles we face come from the fact that Satan pushes back against us. He wants to reoccupy our hearts, distract us from sharing the message of Jesus, and take us out of the action.

So Satan comes at his heart. He wants to kind of test our loyalty. And he's asking us, he's pushing against us, saying, how much do you really want this? Would you even die for it? As we see in the passage in Revelation chapter 5 or Revelation chapter 12.

So this question is at the heart of it is, verse 11, they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death. So that's why the battle is waged against the people of God.

[8 : 32] I like to give my Thursday thought the phrase that stays something to hold on to when you wake up later in the week and think, what was church about on Sunday? And what I want you to understand is this.

Spiritual battle is God's kingdom coming through God's people speaking God's truth. Why is there such a battle? Because God's kingdom is coming through God's people speaking God's truth. So we're talking about the spiritual battle today. That's the theme. And that spiritual battle is, first of all, tied to the mission of the church.

Verse 10 in chapter 12 is actually a verse that kind of unlocks much of the book of Revelation. And verse 10 of Revelation 12 says, Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ.

So do you hear what that's saying? This is about the coming of the kingdom of our God. It's the answer to that line in the Lord's Prayer that says, Your kingdom come.

[9 : 43] Well, God says, My kingdom is coming. And the book of Revelation is about the coming of that kingdom and the disruption and the opposition that it faces.

So chapter 12 and this idea of the coming of the kingdom is key to understanding the whole book of Revelation. And that's the mission of the church, isn't it?

To bring the kingdom of God. A few weeks ago, I was watching a TV program and the presenter was abseiling down a hundred meter tall tower in Southampton.

And of course, he's got a harness and he's strapped to a rope and a guideline and he's guided safely down the side of the tower. He's guided down by this rope all the way to the ground.

And really, this idea of the coming of the kingdom is the guide rope that will get us through the book of Revelation.

[10 : 42] If we follow the theme of mission and the coming of the kingdom, that's what will get us safely to the end of the book of Revelation. It's about the mission of the church to bring the people of the nations into the kingdom of Jesus and the pushback that we receive because of this.

We read about a desert in this chapter 12. In verse 6, the woman fled into the desert to a place prepared for her by God. And that's mentioned again in verse 14.

The woman's given wings of a great eagle so she can fly to the place prepared for her in the desert. And that's an echo back to the Old Testament and to the exodus of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt.

And they wandered in the wilderness for 40 years waiting to get into the promised land. And so for the Christian church, there's a second exodus. We've been set free from the slavery of sin.

And now we're waiting in the wilderness, so to speak, for the new creation. And God cares for us in that wilderness. But at the same time, we face the pushback of Satan against us as we bring God's kingdom.

[12 : 03] So God's kingdom is coming through the witness of God's people. God wants to bring so many people. He wants to bring you, whoever you are, into his kingdom because he says, I'm a better king.

And my rule is a rule of goodness and light, not of darkness and evil. So verse 5 makes it really clear that the Son of God is on the throne.

The child who is born is snatched up to God and to his throne. Jesus is the one who reigns. And if you are a Christian, I want to say you've got a really important role to play in Jesus' mission in this world.

Throughout the book of Revelation, there's a high level of chatter about the testimony or the witness of the church. That's because we are talking about Jesus. His ways and his word and his work.

Telling people there is good news, there is a good king. That's our offensive against the darkness that's in the world. We want to bring the light, the goodness of Jesus to everyone.

[13 : 08] So that they have his hope, his life, his love. And we find that brings trouble to us. That was certainly the experience of the churches that Revelation was originally written for at the end of the first century.

These were real churches facing real persecution. In chapter two and three, we see how they respond in different ways. Some become apathetic.

Some become indifferent. Some go into sexual hedonism and pleasure-seeking and escapism.

Some just go all quiet. And, you know, they zip the lip. They're intimidated. It's hard to be a witness for Jesus in the face of intimidation and opposition sometimes.

And why is it so hard? Because the powers of darkness want to take us away from Jesus and destroy us. They want us to take us away from the mission of the church.

[14 : 15] But the message of Revelation is this, that there is grace for all of us. There is grace from God to help us to stay faithful, even to the point of risking our lives, as verse 10 tells us.

And God uses this witness. That's what we see through the book of Revelation, like in chapter 7 last week. God uses that witness to bring the nations to him.

So there's this amazing promise that God will bring his kingdom through his people as they share his truth. That's spiritual warfare and our mission as a church.

I also want to mention spiritual warfare and this battle in heaven that's depicted in verses 7 to 9. So as I said earlier in the service, the chapter is about the church, which is symbolized by a woman, and Satan, who's symbolized by the dragon, who is also the serpent or the evil one.

And so there's a reference back here in this chapter to the book of Revelation. Sorry, my bad. There's a reference here back to Genesis, the book of Genesis, first book of the Bible, chapter 3. [15:36] And in verse 15, as Adam and Eve choose to follow the serpent, to follow Satan, to disobey God, and to live life without God and his good rule, God promises that he won't forget them, that he'll come in grace and salvation.

And he promises Adam and Eve that the seed of the woman will crush the head of the serpent. So that's picked up on that image here, that truth in Revelation chapter 12. There is a spiritual battle, but God promised from Genesis onwards, there's only one outcome. God will win the victory over Satan through his son, the Savior, on the cross.

That tells us this. It tells us some really important stuff. It tells us Satan is real. There is real fierce opposition to the church and its mission. There's opposition to Christians and their witness. And that opposition is orchestrated behind the scenes by our enemy, the dark lord, Satan. And he uses all kinds of things, lies, deception, events, our own fears and circumstances, what others say, what our hearts desire.

[16:50] He uses all of those things to wage that battle against us. Now, lots of us have de-supernaturalized the world, so we just dismiss this idea of Satan.

We ignore this whole side to life. But don't make that mistake because you'll suffer for it. And then there are others, of course, who exaggerate the whole idea of this Satan and make it really scary and they see a demon behind every problem.

And that's not helpful either. But there is a reality here. Satan exists, but Satan is defeated. Verse 12 tells us that our enemy rages against us, but that he cannot reign over us.

So look at verses 7 to 9. Imagine the drama in heaven. Michael and his angels are fighting a war against the dragon.

And the dragon and his angels are fighting back. But guess what? Satan isn't strong enough. And he loses his place in heaven.

[17:57] The great dragon, the great dragon, we're told, was hurled down. The ancient serpent called the devil or Satan who leads the whole world astray.

He is hurled to earth and his angels with him. He is defeated. And that defeat in heaven is rooted in the realities of this world.

Satan tries to kill Jesus. We read that in this passage. And that's what happens in the life of Jesus. His enemies are motivated by Satan to conspire against him and put him to death.

But guess what? It's by that very death that Jesus overcomes Satan and all the powers of darkness. So verse 11 tells us that Satan is overcome by the blood of the Lamb.

By his blood, Jesus has conquered the dark Lord. So, yes, our enemy rages against us, but he can't reign over us.

[19:04] We're told in the New Testament, if we resist the devil, he will flee from us. Because he doesn't have any victory or any power or any claim over us. For all of us, it's just an important reminder.

Christianity is ultimately about the cross. At the cross, Jesus shed his blood, gave up his life to death so that you and I can be received into his kingdom.

You might be wondering, how do I become a Christian? How can I find the good reign of Jesus in my life? How can I find his peace? Well, you go to the cross and you thank Jesus that he died to save us and give us a victory over sin and death.

Repent of the way that you've been living. Turn away from that old way of living and receive Jesus Christ. Believe in him. So, we've got spiritual warfare and how it's connected to the mission of the church to bring good news.

Bringing God's kingdom through God's word. We've got spiritual warfare and the battle in heaven, which is won by Jesus. Finally, to talk about spiritual warfare and life on the ground.

[20:20] What's it like for us living in this world in the midst of spiritual battle? I watched a few weeks ago a couple of movies, *Flags of Our Fathers* and *Letters from Iwo Jima*.

And it's about taking the island of Iwo Jima in the Pacific at the end of World War II. It's a battle between U.S. forces and Japanese forces. It was the first bit of Japanese territory seized by the American army.

And it was an absolutely ferocious battle that lasted far longer than anybody expected. The Japanese were loath to give up this ground.

And they dug tunnels and caves and hideouts. And they laid traps and they deceived their enemy. And they lured the Americans in and they attacked them.

And often it would have seemed to the Americans that they weren't actually winning the battle for Iwo Jima. But even before they landed on the island, their victory was assured because their numbers and firepower was so overwhelming.

[21 : 27] But, you know, in the fog of war, as the enemy faints and dodges and surprises, it's hard. And that's what life's like on the ground for many of us.

We're lost in the fog of war. We're confused by what's going on in our own heart, by the feelings we've got, the questions we ask, the doubts we struggle with. We feel confused by our circumstances or by our relational difficulties or by what's happening in the world at large. And it just doesn't feel as if Jesus is in control. And so it's important to remember, and Revelation is about remembering that in the midst of the battle, Jesus is on the throne.

It was so important for first century Christians to be reassured about this. Because to them, Caesar was on the throne. He seemed so powerful, the Roman emperor. Could anybody stand against the power of the Roman emperor?

And Caesar was actively promoting the persecution of Christians in a really fierce way. Some Christians were being crucified.

[22 : 39] Some Christians had holes drilled into their head while they were still alive. And then hot lead was poured into their brains to kill them.

Other Christians were just being thrown to the wild beasts in the amphitheaters. There was a reign of terror against the church. And so how important it was for Christians in the first century to hear, Jesus is on the throne.

Despite the battle. Despite the cost. Jesus is on the throne. When we stop believing at a heart level that Jesus rules and that his rule is good.

And that he doesn't make mistakes. When we stop believing that, we will become fearful, angry, tempted, apathetic. If in our heart we think the coronavirus is in control or any other malign person, event or force, anxiety, fear, anger, temptation will start to really, really pull us down.

But when we know in our hearts that Jesus is on the throne, then our hearts are at peace. And part of our struggle as Christians is this.

[23 : 57] That often we know in our heads, you know, we have a theological conviction. Yes, Jesus has risen, ascended, and he's on the throne. But the way we feel says something different. And so this is a truth that needs to make its way to your heart and be embedded there.

So that not only do you know it's true, but you feel it's truth. You feel it's peace. So how can that be? How do you move this great truth of Jesus and the throne from head to heart?

Well, several things that I want to say in closing. Several things to say in closing. First of all, be aware that you are in a battle.

That Satan will use your own heart and the deceptions of your own heart to confuse you. He'll use the distortions of the culture and the world around you to mislead you.

He will use accusation, as we read in verse 10, to intimidate you and condemn you. But none of these things can stand. Let your heart be at peace.

[25 : 05] Your accuser has been hurled down. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Be aware of the battle and then be attentive to God and what he's saying.

It's his voice that you need to hear day after day. It's his voice that matters most. It's gospel truth that you need to let be spoken into your life.

So be attentive to God, to his word. Be attentive especially to the cross, to the blood of Jesus and the sacrifice of your king, that he laid down his life for you.

The king died for you. Let that be your peace. So be aware. Be attentive. Be prayerful. Because prayer is us telling God we won't make it on our own.

We can't do it on our own. We need you, Lord. We need you for this battle. We need you for these struggles in our mind and in our heart, our confusion, our despair, our fears, our depression, our anxiety, our temptations.

[26 : 09] And so we pray for grace. Lord, let my heart be moved by the cross. Move to worship you and thank you.

Bring me peace from knowing that by the cross you reign over all things and be joyful. Verse 12 tells us there is joy in heaven because Jesus reigns.

And so we sing the songs of the future here in the world today. Songs of peace and joy and comfort and celebration. So there is a spiritual battle and it's real.

It's a battle against the mission of the church. In the mission of the church, God's people may know God's truth. And that's a pushback against that.

That battle is fought out in heaven and the victory is Jesus's. And then we experience that battle in the fog of our own lives. But in the midst of the battle, we can know peace because of Jesus.

[27 : 13] Because of the cross. So back to where we started then. It's apathy keeping you in the couch. I was talking to somebody recently who said they can barely get themselves off the couch to the desk to do any work.

Apathy is reigning in their lives at this point. Or maybe immorality is reigning in your life right now. Guiding what you watch and fantasize about.

Or maybe fear and anxiety are devouring your days. Or maybe anger has got you seated in your chair like it's a throne. It's not God in the throne.

It's you in the throne. Judging everyone and everything. So let me ask you. Whose story and words are you listening to? What voices have weight in your life?

Who is your shepherd? Who fathers you? And who disciples you? Where is the cross impacting on your daily life? Is it preaching good news to your own heart?

[28 : 15] Is it humbling you? That God would love you enough to send his son to die for you? Is it inspiring you to trust Jesus? Is it compelling you to witness for him that he truly is the good king?

So finally, I just want to say take Jesus as your king today. Trust him with your whole life. Whoever you are, if you've never done that, let me just ask you. Why not do it today?

Take Jesus as your king. Receive him. Yield your life to him. So I'm going to ask Fergus now to just lead us in a couple of songs.

But first of all, before we hand to Fergus, just let me pray briefly. Lord, we want to respond to what we've heard from your word. May we respond with thanks and with humility.

That in all the battles of life, you are on our side. You are for us. That you offer us peace, salvation, hope.

[29 : 13] And so may we know that hope and peace in our lives today. In Jesus' name, amen.
Amen.