



Sometimes I find I appreciate a movie much more after watching the extra features at the end. The really interesting parts are when they show you what goes on behind the scenes when they are doing a real stunt. Someone is actually jumping off a plane or from a train or climbing a building. When you watch those short behind the scenes clips it really helps you to appreciate the movie. Have you ever wished you could do that with real biblical events and miracles? What would you find? Today we read from the book of Revelation and we get a behind the scenes glimpse of a real event in history. It is a behind the scenes view of the first Christmas. And as we turn to Revelation 12 and pull back the curtain, we see how there's more to the manger scene than we sometimes might appreciate. The manger scene reveals amazing love.

There was a lot going on behind the scenes at the first Christmas. Now I'm sure that if you were to interview Mary and Joseph, they'd tell you the first Christmas wasn't at all like we sing in the hymn *Away in A Manger*. I'm sure you wouldn't have described it as a *Silent Night*. It would have been dirty. Does God give any more details about what took place that night? That's just what we read about in chapter 12 of Revelation. There we find the details of what God the Father saw and what was really taking place in the spiritual realm that night. We end up seeing much more than the animals that might have been near the feeding trough. The behind the scenes information reveals that there was a baby-eating monster ready to devour the baby who was about to be born.

Before we go any further, we need to review the type of literature we have in Revelation. The book is filled with vivid pictures, some numbers, and extraordinary events. It is not something John intended for us to interpret literally. It is recorded as a symbolic vision. Just like when we read parts of Ezekiel and Daniel, we have to understand this is a vision. Just as there are different styles of painting, there are different styles of writing in the Bible. Visual art has realism, and Biblical literature has historical accounts. There's poetry in the Bible, which would be comparable to a mix between realism and figurative art. But there's also apocalyptic writings in the Bible which use imagery to convey its message. These types of writings would be more like abstract art or surrealism. If you were to go to a museum to see artwork by Salvador Dali or Pablo Picasso, you'd immediately recognize their paintings don't always convey literal scenes. Yet their paintings still have powerful significance. They use color and icons to convey meaning. That's how it is with books like Revelation, it is a real vision meant to convey powerful messages through the scenes, numbers, and the symbols.

One of the most frightening scenes appears in chapter 12. John sees a woman who is about to give birth. It is vision of what took place on Christmas Eve. At first glance one might think that if she is a woman giving birth to Jesus, she must be Mary. But just as other woman depicted in Revelation represent a bigger picture so does this woman. She has some measure of authority and is crowned with twelve stars. Crowns symbolize power and royalty. The number twelve, such as the twelve tribes of Israel and twelve apostles, represents God's people, his Church. She has more offspring which are described as believers. And she lasts from the time of Christ's birth until his return. It becomes clear as you read along that she actually more fully represents Israel, or God's church. Mary is included, but so are all believers. Through faith we are royal members of God's family and wear his radiant righteous robe.

But what probably catches your attention is not the pregnant woman. She is not alone. What comes to the scene is not merely some animal that feeds from the manger. It is a dragon that seeks to feed on the new-born baby boy. John describes a fiery red dragon coming right before the woman, ready to devour the baby when it is born. This he later identifies for us as the devil, or Satan. He has seven heads and crowns because he tries to imitate God (seven is the number of God's working). The word for crown here describes a crown used to claim divine authority, often used illegitimately by pagan rulers. The ten horns on the dragon call to mind Daniel's visions in which horns symbolize those who are in positions of power and persecute God's people. The horrible picture brings full light to what was happening on Christmas Eve. The real scene of the manger is very bleak -much bleaker than we could imagine. The manger looks dirty on the surface, yet we don't see it as dangerous. But the devil was! The animals present weren't trying to eat the newborn baby. But the devil was!

This dangerous attack plays out in the life of Jesus. The horns on the dragon could be said to convey a picture of someone like Herod, who tried to kill the baby Jesus with his murderous scheming. And every single temptation against Jesus in the wilderness, every cry of a demon that opposed him, even the temptations from his own disciples to turn aside from his work, all this was the working of Satan to stop Jesus. Ultimately the devil moved Judas to betray him and motivated the powers and authorities that crucified him.

Satan "a great sign" is a powerful adversary bent on destroying God's work. He "swept a third of the stars out of the sky." John reveals later in this chapter it means the devil dragged many angels with him in rebellion against God. And the dragon knows why Jesus is born. The prophecy of Psalm 2 said that a son of David would be king and is going to rule over all nations with an iron scepter. Jesus, as God's Son in human flesh was born destined to rule over all nations. That's why we see the horrific picture of the devil seeking to devour him at his birth.

Is this what we see when we look at the manger scene? When you contemplate God love do you see him as a little generous, or do you see such an amazing love that he came in the flesh to face the dragon for us? What Father would give his Son so that those born his enemies might be saved? Our Father in heaven! Who would be willing to be born into such horrific darkness and danger? Jesus who became our brother! And he endured far more horror than the onslaught of the devil's attacks. He endured everything that was necessary to silence the devil's roars and render his temptations powerless. When the devil got the first man and woman to sin, he ruined creation. Jesus needed to do more than fight the devil, he needed to restore mankind from its state of ruin because of sin. Jesus took that sin on himself. He endured the entire weight of the curse of sin. He was born so that his shoulders could bear the most horrific battle in our place. On the cross he suffered the curse of God on every sin. That is his measure of love. God gave his Son. His Son gave his life.

And Satan could not stop him. And we know he defeated the devil because he descended into hell in victory and preached victory over Satan and all the demons in hell. He defeated our enemy as he rose back to life and ascended bodily into heaven. We know he now sits in glory and holds all authority. The prophecy that he will rule all nations will come true when he returns in glory. Then the devil will be forever defeated and locked in hell. As the vision described Jesus was taken up into heaven. He sits at the Father's right hand, he holds all authority. The devil can't touch him.

So what does the devil do? He doesn't give up. Since he can't reach the Christ, he goes after his people, the Church. And this same attack has been directed against you and me. Our enemy the devil is a dragon who wants to enslave and rule over all mankind. That is why the woman in the vision had to flee. "When the dragon saw that he had been thrown down to the earth, he persecuted the woman who had given birth to the male child." (Rev 12:13) The devil and all his evil angels are on the attack. That same baby-eating monster that tried to destroy Jesus is now set against God's church. He wants to destroy you, God's new creation through faith in Jesus. He desires to mock God and make us suffer and hate God. Jesus once used another type of biblical imagery, a parable, to describe the devil's work. He likened the devil to a bird that when it sees the seed of the gospel ready to grow it comes and snatches it up and devours it. Jesus once revealed to Peter this horrible threat, "Satan wants to sift you like wheat." He wants to destroy your faith, separate you from God, and make you his slave and a slave to sin. He wants you to be cursed with him to hell. No wonder it says that the woman, God's people, fled from him to the wilderness! She isn't in heaven yet. She isn't living the good life yet.

But just as God provided for his people Israel in the wilderness, so he provides for his Church as it sojourns. The time span with the number 1260 is also represented elsewhere as 42 months, or half of seven years. Sometimes described as times, time, and half a time. It is half of seven years because seven represents the complete time of God working for his people. It is the time of waiting. It is a time of persecution and wandering in the wilderness. You may feel that weight at times while we sojourn here. The devil will try to discourage you. He will try to drag you down. He wants you to see the manger scene as nothing more than a sentimental decoration so that he can devour your soul. How can we stand against him?

It doesn't say the church defeated the dragon. It was that baby who triumphs and takes his position of power over all nations. The devil can't win when we've seen the reality of God's great love. It was first revealed in the scene of a baby born to a woman, laid in a manger. It reveals the love of God who faced our greatest enemy and the danger and curse we deserved. He loves you. When you see the manger remember that!

So why aren't were there yet? It says, "the woman fled to the wilderness to a place God prepared for her to nourish her." While you sojourn and face the devil's schemes, you are blessed by God. He feeds you and protects you. He brought you to this place prepared for you. He made you his own through faith. He feeds you with his good news! He considers you his own child. And he went through the greatest length to keep you as his own and will keep you safe from sin, death, and the devil.

Your life may not always feel comfortable. That's because you are in the wilderness. You are on the target of a baby-eating-monster who we know as the devil. He wants you to despair, to suffer, and to forget about God. He wants to rule over you and take over God's people. But you are right where God wants you to be. He rules in heaven with a place prepared for you. And he prepared your place for you while you sojourn on this earth. He brought you to know him through his holy Word. He now nourishes you and takes care of you through that same powerful word. After the 1260 days are over, namely, when this world ends, you will then witness what the manger scene all meant. It meant God would stop at nothing to provide for your needs. It meant that God would face the devil and the forces of evil to be your Savior. It meant that you have one who now rules at God's right hand, Jesus, your brother.

Tomorrow evening is when we celebrate Christmas and sing once more of the manger scene. But don't forget to appreciate what we really celebrate. You've had a behind the scenes extra look at it all. Picture that reality. See the fiery dragon ready to devour the child. See the love of Jesus who came to this world to fight our battle for us. See him facing our greatest fears and greatest enemy. And see him accomplishing his mission and returning to heaven in victory. See him at the throne of God ruling over all things. That's what we celebrate at the scene of the Christmas manger. The manger scene reveals amazing love.