

“Behind the Scenes”

Revelation 12

2/8/98

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You have heard it said, “Timing is everything?” I say unto you “Perspective is everything.”

Several times I’ve had the experience of being in a store and have seen a mother lose sight of her child.

I’ve seen women literally running from aisle to aisle in a clothing store looking frantically for their child.

Because of their concern and because I identify with their fear, I have found myself also searching for the child.

A couple of times I have seen the lost child before the parent did and my relief is instant and thorough.

Stop the scene right there for a minute.

I see the child and am relieved, the mother does not yet see the child and is in panic.

What’s the difference? Perspective - I can see them both and though they are both still in tears, I know they are both OK and will be reunited.

I have conducted many funeral services.

Sometimes the relatives of the deceased are panic-stricken - their hopelessness is palpable.

Last Thursday night we held the memorial service for Georgie Ann Moore.

Her husband Wally grieves deeply over the loss of his wife of over 40 years but he does not grieve as those who have no hope. Why?

Perspective! He sees something in the future that he knows will mitigate his present circumstances.

Perspective - it’s everything.

I remember when, a couple of years ago, Public Service Corporation was going through what a lot of companies, large and small, go through - a reorganization.

I had several friends who were in the middle of that and had weeks on the job when they didn't know whether they would still have a job the next week or the next month.

When you have kids in college, house payments to make and other financial responsibilities - that can be a very anxious time.

Oh what you would give to be able to see into the future and know how it would all turn out.

The hardest part seemed to be not knowing.

In fact there were times when these friends couldn't even tell what forces were at work manipulating the outcome.

They would have had some relief from the anxiety if they could have known the rules the game was being played by even if they couldn't see the outcome.

Being totally in the dark about the process and the outcome was agonizing.

Imagine if what we were discussing here was not someone's financial security but his or her very life.

Waking each morning **not knowing** if it would be your last.

Not knowing if this day your spouse or your child would be carted off by the government never to be seen again.

And nearly as bad would be your ignorance about even who the enemy was - who you could trust and who you couldn't.

Not knowing for certain what choices would elicit what responses.

Oh, what you would give to be able to see into the future and know how it would all turn out - Perspective.

One of the hardest things about facing difficult times in life is not knowing what is going on, why this is happening, and how it will turn out.

The Apostle John wrote the book of Revelation as a letter to the people of the churches of Asia Minor - in the area of the world that we now call Turkey.

As I have mentioned before these were people whose jobs, homes and even lives were at stake.

In the 11th chapter, which we looked at last week, John gave his readers and us a look into the future.

He wrote, there is coming a day when the kingdom of the world will become the kingdom of our Lord and he will reign forever and ever.

A day was coming when those who have opposed God and his people will be judged and those who have remained faithful will be rewarded with the presence of God forever.

I can imagine those Christ-followers in Turkey, being greatly encouraged by those words.

I can imagine them, like us, singing songs that express that expectation.

I can imagine them being uplifted, strengthened and expectant - kind of “pumped up” ready to face the world.

They have been told by God, that the evil that exists in this world and that seems to be so powerful will be overthrown.

That’s great.

And they walk out of church on Sunday thinking about the coming “kingdom of our Lord” and walk right into Monday hit full in the face by the present “kingdom of the world”.

In other words, it’s one thing to think about what will be.

But when “what is” keeps knocking you down you can easily wonder what’s going on.

How does what is and what will be fit together?

How do we explain the apparent incoherent, chaotic, even evil world in which we live.

It too often looks like most of life is just flat out “out of control” and the best we can hope for is that some day Jesus will come and put an end to it all.

How do you fit the “dog eat dog” world in which we live into the greater scheme of things? How do we make any sense out of the life that so often comes at us?

Perspective!

John has repeatedly told what the outcome of history will be but **what he will do now is describe the process** -

He will give them God’s perspective on what is happening on the earth and what will happen during the tribulation.

When life as we would like it to be is falling apart and when in the future the people of God face persecution during the tribulation - John wants us to know what is going on.

He wants us to understand the forces at work making life so miserable at times.

My thesis, taken I believe from this passage, is that knowing the outcome and knowing what is going on during the difficulties of life make it much easier to “hang in there” - to remain faithful, to persevere.

Once we are convinced life is out of control we will turn to anything and anyone to bring order back into our lives even if it means we must make a pact with the devil.

Fear will cause people to do many things.

God wants us to have his perspective so we will not be afraid, so we will know what is going on in the difficult times of life and we will by his grace persevere.

God has pulled back the curtain on the stage of life to allow us to see behind the scenes, to see another dimension of history, so we can see the forces that shape what we experience each day.

The major point that God is going to make to his followers through John, in this text, is that their lives are not being driven by the fickle winds of fate.

It is not the capricious whims of chance that make life difficult for God's people.

It is not some unknowing, unseeing force that confronts Christ-followers.

Behind the evil of this world is a person - John pictures him as a dragon.

The vision John sees in Chapter 12 is this:

A magnificent woman appears and she is pregnant.

Even as she appears so also appears a powerful dragon.

So powerful is he that a third of the stars are swept out of the sky by a swish of his tail.

The next scene in the drama is that of the dragon standing in front of the woman waiting for her child to be born so he can devour it.

But as soon as the very special child is born it is protected by God and taken to heaven.

At that same time the woman goes to the desert where she is protected by God for 1260 days.

At that point the scene switches from earth to heaven and we see the high-ranked angel, Michael, and others of God's angels doing battle with the dragon and his angels - and the dragon loses - being hurled from heaven.

And then the inhabitants of heaven celebrate.

They sing of their delight in the fact that the dragon has been overcome.

But the drama is not over - when the dragon realizes he has been defeated in his desire to kill the child, he turns his attack on the woman.

But again God protects her.

So infuriated is the dragon at being foiled again that he now turns his attack on the other children of the woman.

And in chapter 13 we see two other creatures joining forces with the dragon to wage their war against the children of the woman.

The first creature is a beast out of the sea with great power and hideous appearance.

An amazing thing happens - It seems that the beast had a fatal wound to his head but is healed - it looks like he comes back from the dead.

So awed and fearful are the people of the world that all but those who have belong to God, begin to worship the beast and the dragon.

And with outrageous blasphemies against God and unstoppable power he wages war against those people who belong to God.

And beginning at 13:13 John sees another creature, a beast out of the earth, join the first beast and the dragon.

And he, too, spoke with great authority but he looked like a lamb.

And this lamb did great miracles - miracles that looked very much like the miracles done by God's prophets in the past.

And because of his appearance and power he deceived people all over the earth.

He even set up an image of the first beast and made it appear to have life and speak.

He commanded that the image be worshipped and anyone who didn't would be killed.

Along with that he made it difficult if not impossible for anyone to hold a job, get income or even purchase things unless they had the mark of the beast on them.

When we think about the vision just described we see six principle characters:

Three of the characters are clearly evil: the dragon and the two beasts.

Three of the characters are good: the woman, the child and the other children.

I want you to see who John says these characters represent and I want you to see that this story covers a great deal of time.

The child that is born, John clearly indicates, **is Jesus**.

In 12:5 he is referred to in OT Messiah language as the one who would rule the nations with an iron scepter.

The child being snatched up to God speaks of the ascension of Jesus following his life, death and resurrection here on earth.

Well if the child represents Jesus, then **the mother** must represent **the Israelite people of God** as a whole of which Mary was a part.

God had promised that out of his people Israel would come the Messiah.

The rest of **the woman's offspring** clearly represent **the church**.

12:13 speaks specifically of those who obey God and hold to the testimony of Jesus.

So far we have the woman who represents the Israelite people of God throughout the OT up to and including Mary from whom comes **the child** - the Messiah, Jesus.

We also have **the other offspring** of the woman - the Church, the NT continuation of the people of God - including us.

But **allied against the Lord and his people of all ages are three others:**

The dragon who John calls (12:9) "the ancient serpent, the devil, **Satan**."

Now from our perspective, what John has described thus far is past and present history - he is not yet talking about the future.

Satan the ancient adversary of Israel was very present when the Messiah was born and tried his best to destroy Jesus' life and ministry.

When he was foiled in his plans to defeat Jesus he turned his attention on the people of God - specifically the church.

I Peter 5:8 says, "Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour."

Now I know that I **haven't interpreted yet** who the two beasts are but I want to pause here for minute and allow you **to soak up** what John was saying to his first readers and subsequently to us, in what he has described thus far:

From the Garden of Eden, right down to the time of Jesus, and right up to this very day, February 8, 1998, who does God say is behind the attacks on his people? - Satan.

The Christians in Turkey could know their circumstances weren't the result of blind chance over which no one had any control.

The persecution they were facing was not just the result of evil capricious governments.

The evil behind the evil they were experiencing was none other than Satan himself.

Now John is **not** suggesting that everything bad that ever happens to you is directly from Satan.

In fact when we are introduced to the beasts, in the next section, you will see how Satan works through others.

But even the tragedies that some call "acts of God" - an earthquake in Afghanistan, El Nino in Florida and other disasters can be traced back to an earth that is under the influence of the evil one.

The Apostle Paul said that even the natural order is waiting for its redemption from the power of evil.

And even the evil that people foist on one another can trace its source back to Satan.

Now you might say that knowing that someone as powerful as Satan is behind the evil that I and others experience **is not comforting** but even more frightening.

That might be true except for two very important things:

God says not only do you know the ultimate source of your opposition - Satan - but you also know:

1. His days are numbered and
2. His power over you is limited.

Remember in John's vision he saw the dragon defeated by Michael the angel and he saw the dragon thrown out of heaven?

When that happened, John said he heard a celebration in heaven.

There were at least two things they were celebrating:

1. That **Satan's days were limited** - In fact Satan knows his days are limited that's why his attacks in the tribulation are so severe.

And in Chapter 20 we will see that this dragon, Satan himself, will be thrown into the lake of fire and be tormented forever and ever.

Even if his attack is violent we know his days are numbered.

Just knowing that Satan's attacks on God's people can't go on very long, is comfort in itself. There is an end in sight.

2. We also know that **his power over Christians is limited.**

He has the power to kill them but he doesn't have the power to destroy them.

In 12:10 it says that God's people actually overcame Satan "by the blood of the Lamb and the testimony of their witness; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death."

Satan's desire from the beginning has been to take God's people away from God.

To cause them to fail, to cause them to follow Satan instead of God.

Christians defeat Satan by their very faithfulness (empowered by the grace of God).
Satan is overcome not when he is kept from killing them in this life, but when he is unable to take their souls with him to hell.

Christians know that Satan's power is limited because while he can kill their bodies **he can never kill their souls** which belong to God.

Some of us will be tempted to say **that is not much comfort**.

And I would say I understand that sentiment: if we were God we would probably make it all turn out so we had nothing but wealth and comfort all of this life and forever.

But for reasons I don't know, and would probably not understand if I did know, God has allowed Satan a limited amount of authority to create havoc on this earth for a time.

But what I do know is that even that authority is limited and his doom is sure.

And what God has in mind for those who love him will make the difficulties of this life worth it - So my God promises.

And so John says a Christ-follower's faithfulness extends even to his or her willingness to die because they know love of life on this earth is not to be compared with the life God gives.

And God promises that even our physical bodies which Satan has the power to kill will be resurrected to live forever.

I want to wait until next week to talk about the other two evil characters introduced to us in this vision.

They are the two beasts.

The first beast is probably the one we commonly refer to as the **Antichrist** - though he is never called that in Revelation.

The **second beast** is called the "**false prophet**"

And though the power of these two characters is seen even in our own day and age, as John says, we will see that their influence will be even greater during the tribulation.

What will it be like to live in that time?

How will God's people persevere in the midst of that turmoil?

Are these two characters, these beasts, actual individuals or are they political or religious movements?

What does it mean that they have authority for 42 months?

What is this mark of the beast that is said to be the number 666?

But let's go back to John's major point in chapter 12:

Christian, your life is not out of control.

You are not caught in the vortex of chance.

You can know that you have an enemy - he is Satan.

He is the one who is behind the evil that happens.

God is in control of him - we are not left to fate.

Knowing who is the source of the evil that comes into your life you can also know two things about him:

He is doomed - he cannot forever assault you,

and his power is limited even now - he cannot defeat you.

Even if he takes your physical life or the lives of those you love, he cannot take you - you belong to God and God has marked your soul.

So persevere Christian - your very perseverance is your defeat of Satan.

I know you know the song well but I want you to look at Martin Luther's great hymn - A mighty fortress is our God - page 26 - and follow along as I read words that capture the truth of this passage so well.

READ p 26 all four verses.