“The Agony of Advent”
Revelation 12:1–17
Introduction

When we think of Christmas we usually think of things like presents, trees, parties, decorations and such.

In addition to the traditional things that go along with this holiday, many of us are reminded of the birth of our savior.

We sing Christmas songs that remind us of joy to the world and the story of Christ’s birth. We read the passages of Scripture that foretold Christ’s birth long before it happened. Then we read the wonderful stories written for us of how Mary and Joseph made their journey to Bethlehem. How the angels appeared to the shepherds and subsequently made their way to a tiny stable where the new born child entered this world. And then later how the wisemen from the east made their way to Bethlehem guided by a star.

All the decorations, presents, songs, and the story of our savior’s birth are all a part of our celebration at this time of year, but this morning I want us to consider a different side of Christmas. This other side doesn’t overshadow the joy that came to this world when God himself took on human flesh, but it does reveal more to the story.
Context

In Revelation, John records multiple spectacular visions that God reveals to him. In chapter 12, John sees several visions that draw back the curtain of the physical and allows us to peer behind the scenes into what we don’t typically see.

These visions are centered around a woman who gives birth to a child. But unlike the stories we typically rehearse during Christmas, this vision includes a dragon who wants to destroy this child. Being unsuccessful in his attempt, the dragon proceeds to attack the rest of the children of the woman who gives birth to this child.

John’s visions reveal that, while Scripture teaches us that the birth of our savior brought joy to this world, it also brought great trials and tribulation as well.

The good news is from the very beginning of the story, we know the ultimate outcome . . . The dragon is woefully inadequate for the war he rages and is in fact a defeated foe awaiting his final and full condemnation.
Revelation 12:1–17

“And a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pains and the agony of giving birth. And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads seven diadems. His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and cast them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she bore her child he might devour it. She gave birth to a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron, but her child was caught up to God and to his throne, and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, in which she is to be nourished for 1,260 days. War arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon. And the dragon and his angels fought back, but he was defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him. And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, “Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death. Therefore, rejoice, O heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!” When the dragon saw that he had been thrown down to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child. But the woman was given the two wings of the great eagle so that she might fly from the serpent into the wilderness, to the place where she is to be nourished for a time, and times, and half a time. The serpent poured water like a river out of his mouth after the woman, to sweep her away with a flood. But the earth came to the help of the woman, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed the river that the dragon had poured from his mouth. Then the dragon became furious with the woman and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus.”
While the book of Revelation can be slightly difficult to understand, it isn’t impossible. When understood, we find that the visions that God unveils to us through John are extremely helpful for our lives today.

Our passage today is one such example. In this chapter, John gives us a guide to understanding the entire history of the world. In a few simple sentences, John gives understanding and meaning to all that we read in the Old and New Testament as well as our present experiences as believers living in the midst of a world in opposition to the God we serve.

This chapter can be broken down into three sections.

1. Verses 1–6 gives background to all of history leading up to the birth, death, and resurrection of Christ. We will call this “the agony of birth.”

2. Verses 7–12 then reveal the consequence of Christ’s victorious atoning work on the earth. We will call this “the agony of defeat.”

3. Verses 13–17 remind us of both the difficulty of life and the hope in this life that all who follow Christ can expect in this world. We will call this “the agony of pursuit.”
The Agony of Birth

In verses 1–6, John sees two visions. These first visions tell the story of God’s people throughout the Old Testament that led to the coming of Messiah.

Symbolism in apocalyptic writings can be difficult. But if we keep in mind the purpose of symbols and rather than trying to assign an exact meaning to each one, but instead try to see the bigger picture, we will find understanding John’s visions a little less difficult.

The woman represents the people of God throughout the ages leading up to the birth of Christ and the dragon represents Satan and all his human expressions throughout the Old Testament seeking to destroy the purpose and plan of God to redeem his people.

What this ultimately teaches us is that Christ’s coming into this world was the culmination of many years and a multitude of events and that God’s plan to come and redeem his people was set in motion long before it ever became a reality.

When writing to the Galatians Paul said,

“But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law;”

(Galatians 4:4–5 ESV)

The fullness of time implies that all of time previously was striving for this one great event.

This is the story of the Old Testament. While it might seem that the stories we find in Scripture are random, the purpose of the Old Testament is to point to the one great event that occurred in the “fullness of time.”

The story that John seeks to reveal through this symbolism begins in Genesis 3:15 when God said that the seed of the serpent would bruise the heel of the seed of the woman but the seed of the woman would crush the head of the serpent.

(Genesis 3:15 ESV)

“I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.”

From that point on, there was a war that began between these seeds. The serpent, who is representation of Satan himself (we see that later in Revelation 12 when he is called the “ancient serpent” in verse 9) and the woman, who is the representation of the Old Testament people of God. The stories we read throughout the Old Testament reveal this enmity that God decreed would take place.

Immediately after the fall Cain murdered Abel. It seems that this is the first in a long line of attempts by Satan to undo the grand plan of God to redeem his people.
Seth was born and we read of a lineage of godly men born to his line. But subsequently, sin and Satan make their attack and we find that wickedness grows rampant so God decrees that he will destroy all flesh. The dragon would have won except that God preserved the seed that would give birth to Messiah when he saved Noah and his family.

The woman’s seed continues in Abraham who was combated by the seed of the serpent in the person of Lot. Abraham’s son Isaac was combated by the serpent in the person of Ishmael. Jacob was combated in the person of Esau. Each of these being cloaked attempts of the serpent to bring God’s plan to a halt.

Through Jacob God established an entire family who by God’s elaborate design ended up in Egypt in order to be preserved from famine.

In Egypt a new Pharaoh arose who sought to obliterate the seed of the woman by demanding that all the male children be killed, but God preserved Moses who led God’s people out of Egypt. In the wilderness God preserved his people and the seed through great difficulty and trials. They were combated on every side through many attempts of the serpent, even from within their own ranks.

In time God’s people were established in the promised land and elected a king, the wrong king - Saul. God anointed David as king and he was combated by the serpent expressed in the person of Saul as Saul sought to murder David on several occasions.

Many years after David died a ruler by the name of Queen Athaliah came into rule. She attempted to stamp out the descendants of David by ordering that they all be put to death. And they were. All except one child who was hidden away, by the name of Joash.

(2 Kings 11:2 ESV)

“But Jehosheba, the daughter of King Joram, sister of Ahaziah, took Joash the son of Ahaziah and stole him away from among the king’s sons who were being put to death, and she put him and his nurse in a bedroom. Thus they hid him from Athaliah, so that he was not put to death.”

God continued to preserve the seed despite the attempts of the dragon, that is Satan, to stamp it out.

The story goes on . . . Through attack after attack, Satan continually attempted to wipe out the seed of the woman who would one day deal him a head crushing blow.
Even in exile, while God’s people were scattered and few were faithful, Satan attempted to wipe out the entirety of God’s people through a man named Haman. Haman convinced King Ahasuerus to pass a decree to kill all the Jews. Satan would have succeeded if it weren’t for God providentially working through a woman named Esther.

Probably the most notable attempt of Satan to rid the world of the woman’s seed was through a king named Herod who ordered all male children under 3 to be murdered in Bethlehem because he was told by the wisemen of the timing of the miraculous star that guided them there to find the one who was born king of the Jews. This serves as the most vivid example of the dragon standing before the woman waiting for her to give birth so that he might destroy the child.

The journey to the cradle was a difficult and agonizing journey for the people of God. They suffered great trials at the hands of the dragon. John expresses this in Revelation 12 by the dragon using his tail to sweep down a third of the stars and cast them down to the earth. This symbolic language is taken from Daniel 8 where Daniel writes about stars be cast down and trampled as a way to express God’s faithful being persecuted. But God preserved them so that in the fullness of time, at just the right moment, they would give birth to the seed that was promised in Genesis 3 who would decisively defeat the serpent.

John records the dragon’s failure by writing that the child was caught up to God’s throne. So in a few words, John incases the birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ.

But the story doesn’t end there . . .
The Agony of Defeat

John then goes on to record the decisive defeat of Satan and all its attending results both good and bad.

Satan’s defeat was sealed. Not in the birth of the seed, but in death. Christ’s death on the cross was the event that dealt the head crushing blow to that ancient serpent who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world.

The result is two-fold:

First, redemption was made possible for sinners like you and me. Satan could no longer keep the world in darkness. The gospel would go forth to every nation. This doesn’t mean that Satan can no longer operate in this world, in fact the Bible calls him the prince of this world, but he can no longer hold dominion over the entire world. While there will always be individuals who walk in darkness, deceived by this world and its ways, Satan can no longer deceive entire nations. Thus the reason God has ensured that there would be worshippers from among every nation under heaven worshipping before his throne.

The reason victory is a reality in this world, even today, is because God will always preserve his people. The evidence of this reality is that there are believers who overcome because of the blood of the lamb (that is trust in the atoning death of Christ), by the word of their testimonies (that is continued proclamation of the gospel), and because they loved not their lives even unto death (that is the faithful followers of God will persevere to the very end).

The second result of Satan’s defeat is the dragon will unleash his wrath upon the earth seeking to devour whomever he can.

Therefore, in the present age, we live in a world in which the dragon seeks to pursue all who will trust in Christ and persecute them.
The Agony of Pursuit

The moment Satan realized his defeat he sought to pursue the woman (that is the Israelite believers). We read about this pursuit in the early pages of Acts as great persecution broke out against of the Jews who were following Christ. This was the work of the dragon seeking revenge.

As has always been the testimony of scripture, God preserved his own. That doesn’t mean that none of them died. God both guaranteed that his own would not deny him even unto death and that there would always be followers of Christ around.

John says that the woman was given wings of the great eagle so that she might fly from the serpent into the wilderness. John is using imagery from the book of Exodus,

(Exodus 19:4 ESV)
“You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself.”

This symbolism seeks to remind us and to reveal the difficulty that God’s people faced in the wilderness that would continue to be true of the people of God after the birth of Messiah. It also is a reminder of the provision that God gives his people in order to preserve them just as he had done before through the miraculous provision of water from the rock and manna from heaven.

In short, though there is guaranteed difficulty for those who follow Christ, there will be grace to persevere in the midst of the trials.

The water like a river that the dragon pours out of his mouth represents the escalated attack with which he will seek to destroy the faithful. Throughout the Old Testament, the trials that God’s people faced was represented by flooding waters,

(Isaiah 43:2 ESV)
“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.”

(Psalms 69:1–2 ESV)
“Save me, O God! For the waters have come up to my neck. I sink in deep mire, where there is no foothold; I have come into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me.”

But through God’s faithfulness the earth opens up her mouth and swallows the flood much like it did when the flood of affliction came to Moses in the wilderness by way of Korah in his rebellion.
(Numbers 16:32 ESV)

“And the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, with their households and all the people who belonged to Korah and all their goods.”

The continued result in this age is that Satan pursues those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus.
Conclusion

The story of Christmas is much grander than the story of a baby in a manger as wonderful as that is. It is the story of all of history since the fall. John views the affects of Christmas through these visions from God encompassing creation to the cradle and the cross, and the cross to consumation.

The coming of Messiah made life difficult for God’s people prior to his coming. Satan was bent on destroying them to undo God’s plan.

The coming of Messiah made life difficult for those who walked the roads of Jerusalem with him. Satan was bent on deterring the mission of Christ.

The coming of Messiah still makes life difficult for all those who truly follow him. Satan is bent on destroying you and the testimony you bear.

Advent is amazing, but it is also agonizing. That isn’t meant to discourage anyone or to squelch the joy that is intrinsic in the reason we celebrate Christmas.

It is meant to serve merely as a reminder that Christmas is about much more than presents, trees, and decorations. It’s more than family and friends and great celebration.

The central figure of Christmas has been and still is the greatest cause of enmity. Enmity between nations, religious groups, and even families.

The coming of Christ marked out the proverbial line in the sand. Humans either bear out the mark of the promised seed who has crushed the head of the serpent or they serve as just another expression of the serpent in this world seeking to destroy God’s grand plan.

We are either for Christ or against Christ. The cost is great, but the loss is greater.

Make your Christmas about more than all the traditional trappings that we attach to it. Sure enjoy the traditions, but enjoy the promise of persevering grace in the midst of a world bent on destroying all that is Christ. Knowing that, if you truly seek to live for Christ in this life, you will face agonizing difficulty, but also remember what Christ said, “be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.”