THEY TRIUMPHED OVER HIM

Revelation 12:1–17

Key Verse: 12:11

“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.”

The word “revelation” in Greek is “apocalypse” and it literally meant to “get naked, take your clothes off, or reveal.” The Book of Revelation is “revealing” or trying to help us see what we could never see with the naked eye—what’s going on in the spiritual world. To help us, the book uses all kinds of symbolism, which sometimes can seem obscure, cryptic, or even terrifying. But the symbolism isn’t meant to make live in fear, trying to figure out the exact times of the end of the world. Instead, it’s meant to inspire us. How? This book wants us to see not only the evil in the world, but also God—who he is, what he’s done in the past, what he’s still doing today, and what he’s going to do in the future. Revelation repeatedly says that God is sitting on his throne, ruling the universe, all of heaven is worshipping him, and we should, too. With this focus, Revelation seeks to strengthen believers. In this world we face many things trying to sever our relationship with Jesus: sometimes it might be violent persecution, sometimes, subtle heresy, and sometimes, most alluring of all, seductive pleasures. In the face of these temptations, we can seem so weak and vulnerable. But Revelation consistently proclaims, from beginning to end, that God wins the final victory, and that if only we remain faithful to Jesus, we will, too. Today’s passage is at the heart of the book’s message. It contains a vision, with an interpretation in the middle (10–12). It tells us that we believers are in the midst of a great war between God and Satan. Satan wants to accuse and destroy us, but God wants to take care of us, protect us and help us. How can we overcome Satan’s strong attacks and end up on the winning side? It’s by the blood of the Lamb and the word of our testimony. In this study we want to focus on what that means to us practically. May God open our hearts and speak to us through his living word.

Read verses 1,2. The image here is of a pregnant woman. Verse 1 says that this woman is “a great sign,” meaning she gives us a glimpse into what will happen in the end. The woman is pretty, but she cries out in great pain. It’s the pain of living in this fallen world under the curse. The sun, moon and twelve stars reminds us of the vision young Joseph in Genesis saw (Ge37:9). This woman is vulnerable, but endowed with glory. She doesn’t represent Jesus’ mother Mary, but rather the entire community of God’s people in history, waiting for God’s promised Messiah to come and save them.

Read verses 3,4. The image here is of a dragon. This is the first full depiction in Revelation of Satan. He’s got seven heads, meaning he’s so crafty and way smarter than any human being. He’s got ten horns, symbolizing his great power, which he intends to use to wound, kill and destroy. He’s got seven crowns, meaning he’s the ruler of this world, and a phony ruler trying to take over the rule of God. His flinging a third of the stars to the earth means he took a third of the angels of heaven with him to the earth to help him fight against God; these former heavenly beings have become the devil’s agents, or demons. Look at verse 4b again. This dragon is intent on destroying the woman’s child as soon as he is born. This reminds us of how Herod tried to have the boy Jesus who was born in Bethlehem murdered by killing all the baby boys two years old and under (Mt2:16). Satan really didn’t want God’s Messiah, our Savior King Jesus, to be born. He still really doesn’t like God’s salvation work to happen in this world. He is always waiting to destroy it as soon as it might happen.

Read verse 5. This part of the vision depicts the birth of Jesus and his ultimate ascension into heaven. There’s a quotation in verse 5 of the prophecy of Psalm 2:9: “You will break them like a rod of iron; you will dash them to pieces like pottery.” This male child would grow up to be God’s powerful Ruler on earth who would destroy all God’s enemies, no matter how powerful they are. Revelation tells us that Jesus is now the Lamb at the center of the throne, meaning he’s at a place where the devil can no longer harm him, where he’s sharing God’s rule. We need to believe that Jesus has power to crush God’s enemies, and that he’s at the right hand of God, interceding for us (Ro8:34).

Read verse 6. This is a new image of the woman who has fled to the wilderness. It represents God’s people who have to scatter in a spiritually barren world where it’s impossible to survive on our own without God’s help. The words here “taken care of” are literally “nourished.” It tells us that God doesn’t abandon us in this spiritually harsh world and leave us totally vulnerable to Satan; God is actually still there for us to care for us spiritually, so that we can survive and thrive. The 1,260 days, or three and a half years, represents the relatively short time God allows his people to suffer in this world. 1,260 days may seem at first like a long time, but it’s actually short and meant to comfort us.

Look at verse 7. The word “Then” here is literally “And.” This verse probably doesn’t follow chronologically after verses 1–6, but before. It goes back to the original fall of Satan, even before the Fall of man. Read verses 7–9. The image here is of the great spiritual battle between the archangel Michael and Lucifer. The devil, or Satan, is described here as cast out of heaven. It was because he became proud and conceited, so proud and conceited that he thought he could take the place of God. He plants this same pride in human beings, making us think we don’t need God and can be like God (Ge3:5; cf. 1Ti3:6). Such pride always leads to a humiliating fall (Pr16:18; cf. Isa2:11,12).

We also see in these verses that there was a war in heaven. Revelation tells us that this war is still going on. The devil isn’t just a symbol or cartoon character; he’s very real. Satan is still waging war, not directly against God, but against God’s people in this world (13:7; cf. 1Pe4:8). He especially likes to attack believers who are vulnerable in their faith, spiritually weak, or isolated from other believers. We can’t see the war he’s waging against us, but it’s nonetheless real. Ephesians 6:12 says, “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” We shouldn’t allow the deceptive things in this world to lull us into spiritual complacency. We need to open our spiritual eyes and wake up to see that we’re right in the middle of a bloody spiritual battlefield.

Finally, we see in these verses that Michael and his angels were stronger than Satan and his angels. It tells us that Satan is powerful, but he’s no match for God. God is wiser and more powerful than Satan. God’s power isn’t just for himself; it’s also for us. Ephesians 1:19–21 says, “…and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the age to come.” To fight spiritually, we need confidence not in our own power but in God’s power he exerted in Christ.

Read verse 10. Here the loud heavenly voice is celebrating the defeat of Satan the accuser. How was Satan defeated? It was through God’s Messiah, Jesus. Jesus defeated Satan through his death and resurrection. Jesus crushed his head, as the prophecy in Genesis predicted (Ge3:15; cf. Ro16:20). Jesus is God’s salvation. Jesus gives us his grace, which defeats all the devil’s accusations. Jesus gives us hope in God’s kingdom, which defeats all the devil’s despair. We need confidence that in Jesus, we have the ultimate spiritual victory. Sometimes, people can be foolishly optimistic. It can lead to total defeat. Other times, people can be heavily pessimistic. They’re like the character Glum in the cartoon Gulliver, who always said, “We’re doomed!” He’s like the modern-day “Debbie Downer,” who always sees the worst possibilities. Instead of being like that, we need real confidence in what God has done, is doing, and will do: “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.”

What is the secret of having such confident faith? Read verse 11. The word “triumphed” here is important. In Greek this word in some form is used many times in Revelation, especially early on, in the letters to the seven churches (2:7,11, 17,26; 3:5,12,21). In the NIV it’s most often translated as “victorious.” We notice three things in verse 11 that give us victory: the blood of the Lamb, the word of our testimony, and not loving our lives in this world so much that we shrink from death. Let’s think briefly about each one of these.

**First**, the blood of the Lamb. Revelation 7:14 tells us that there are people who will come out of the great tribulation in this world who “have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” They are those who have accepted the blood of Jesus for the forgiveness of their sins. The most precious thing in the world is that Jesus the Lamb shed his blood for each one of us, no matter who we are. His precious blood redeems us from the empty way of life handed down to us from our ancestors (1Pe1:18,19). His precious blood cleanses our guilty consciences so that we can serve the living God (Heb9:14). The blood of Jesus the Lamb is just like the lamb’s blood at Passover. People put the lamb’s blood on the doorposts of their houses, and the angel of death passed over them and couldn’t harm them. In the same way, the blood of Jesus protects us from Satan. Jesus made a new covenant with us in his blood (Lk22:20). It’s God’s promise to us to forgive us, cleanse us and save us through the blood of the Lamb. But we need faith in his blood (Ro3:25a). It’s not our wisdom or strength, but the blood of Jesus that gives us victory over the devil, and over the power of sin in our lives.

**Second**, the word of our testimony. What is this “testimony”? Verse 17 says that it is to “hold fast” their “testimony about Jesus.” It means we need a personal testimony of our faith in Jesus. How did I come to receive Christ personally? It may not have been dramatic, but it always involves realizing that I’m a sinner and the saving grace God has given me in Jesus. No matter what we’re going through in life or what we’re struggling with, we always need to come back to this personal testimony of our faith in Jesus. It becomes our spiritual weapon, our rock, our source of victory. I cannot save myself, but Jesus saves me. It also implies here that the world tries to silence our testimony about Jesus. When people hear the name of Jesus, they often get offended. Why? Because people know that he calls us all to repent, and they don’t want to do that; they want to remain in sin. But no matter how spiritually hostile the environment around us is, we need to hold fast our testimony about Jesus.

**Third**, “not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.” These words get at what may challenge our faith the most. It’s not from without, like persecution; it’s from within. It’s our love of life in this world. Our Lord Jesus himself warned us about it. He said in John 12:25, “Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life” (cf. Mt16:25; Mk8:35; Lk9:24; 17:33). When we love our life in this world too much, we can’t follow Jesus. We can’t hold fast our testimony about Jesus. We give up the spiritual struggle. To really win the spiritual victory, we need to die to our love of this world (1Jn2:15–17). When we love our lives, we’re ashamed of Jesus and his words. When we love our lives, we don’t want to deny ourselves or take up our cross daily. When we love our lives, we become self-centered instead of Christ-centered. When we put our priority on enjoying life in this world, avoiding the suffering involved in following Jesus, we lose the spiritual battle. It’s not about keeping rules; it’s about loving the wrong things. We all tend to love parents or children more than Jesus (Mt10:17). We need the grace to love our Lord Jesus Christ with an undying love (Eph6:24). May God help us with this inner battle.

Read verse 12. This tells us that the there is rejoicing in heaven, but also a time of woe on earth, because the devil is here. He’s a sore loser: he’s full of fury, knowing his time is short. He wants to make as much trouble as possible, before the bitter end.

Finally, the vision comes to a conclusion. Read verses 13–17. Here, the “two wings” of the great eagle represent God’s care for his church. The “time” again represents the shortness of time of God’s people’s suffering and of the power of evil over them. The “water like a river” probably refers to false teaching the devil uses to try to get God’s people to turn away from the gospel. God used the earth to swallow it up, meaning God still uses all kinds of things in all kinds of ways to protect his people from evil. Though the devil is waging war against us, we need to keep God’s commands and hold fast our testimony about Jesus.

Today we learned that we’re living in a spiritual battlefield, and that the devil is out to destroy us. Our only source of victory is the blood of the Lamb, our testimony about Jesus, and our willingness to lose our lives in this world for his sake. May God inspire us to fight spiritually through faith in Jesus, and give us the assurance of victory in him.