

Revelation 12 — They Overcame Him

Introduction

We have reached what I think is one of the center points of the whole book of Revelation. Chapters 12, 13 and 14 belong together because John is going to pull back the curtain and show us what is behind the conflict we have been watching. We have seen persecution, judgment, suffering and death. We have watched witnesses apparently defeated and then standing again. We have heard the seventh trumpet announce that “the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Messiah.” Now John gives us another way of seeing the same struggle, and that is important because I don't think Revelation is a simple timeline: A happens, then B, then C, followed eventually by D.

I compare this or imagine John being like a gopher popping his head up on a golf course. He looks around from one place and sees something happening over there. Then he pops up somewhere else and sees another part of the same landscape. Revelation gives us different views of the same great conflict rather than a calendar into which we must force every vision. Chapter 12 gives us a woman, a child and a dragon. It gives us war in heaven and persecution on earth. It shows us Satan cast down while still very active. And right in the middle of all of that comes one of the most important statements in Revelation: “They overcame him because of the blood of the Lamb and because of the word of their testimony, and they did not love their life even when faced with death” (12:11).

That sounds almost contradictory. How can people who are persecuted and sometimes killed be described as overcoming? That is precisely the point of the chapter—and perhaps of the entire Book. What looks like we are oppressed and beaten down, what looks like we are losing, isn't even close to true.

1. The Woman and the Child — Revelation 12:1-6

“A great sign appeared in heaven.” The word “sign” should immediately get our attention. John does not say merely that he saw a woman; he saw a sign. That tells us that we are dealing with symbolic imagery and should read it accordingly. The woman is “clothed with the sun,” the moon is under her feet, and on her head is a crown of twelve stars. She is pregnant and crying out in the pain of childbirth. Who is she? It is tempting to say Miriam, the mother of Yeshua. After all, the woman gives birth to a male child who is clearly Yeshua. But Miriam alone cannot carry the weight of John's picture. The imagery is much larger.

The twelve stars naturally take us toward Israel and the twelve tribes, and we have seen a remarkably similar picture before. In Joseph's dream in Genesis 37, the sun, moon and eleven stars bow before him; Joseph himself completes the twelve. As is common

throughout Revelation, John is speaking in the language of Israel. Isaiah gives us another important background. In Isaiah 66, Zion is pictured as a woman in labor who gives birth: “Before she travailed, she brought forth; before her pain came, she gave birth to a boy” (66:7). The prophet goes on to speak about a nation being born and calls those who love Jerusalem to rejoice with her.

So I don't think the woman is simply Miriam, although Miriam certainly participates personally in what Israel does corporately. The woman is Israel, the Jewish people, from whom Messiah comes. Paul says much the same thing in Romans when he speaks of his Jewish people: “from whom is the Messiah according to the flesh” (9:5). Yeshua did not suddenly arrive disconnected from everything God had been doing. He came through Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, through Judah, through David, through the covenants and promises, through the Jewish people. Miriam becomes the particular Jewish woman through whom the promised Jewish Messiah enters the world.

The child is easier to identify. He is the one “who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron,” language that comes directly from Psalm 2. There God speaks of His King installed on Zion and says to Him, “You are My Son.” The nations are given to Him as an inheritance, and He will rule them with a rod of iron. This is Yeshua. Then John does something extraordinary: he moves almost immediately from birth to enthronement—“her child was caught up to God and to His throne.” (12:5) What happened to Bethlehem, Galilee, the disciples, the miracles, Jerusalem, the cross and the resurrection? John knows all about those things; he wrote an entire Gospel about Yeshua. Here he is not giving us another biography. He compresses the earthly life of Yeshua into the points necessary for this vision. The Messiah comes from Israel, the enemy attempts to destroy Him, and the Son is caught up to God's throne. The apparent victory of evil has failed.

The woman then flees into the wilderness, where God has prepared a place for her and where she is nourished for 1,260 days. Again we meet that limited period—three and a half years, forty-two months, 1,260 days, “a time and times and half a time.” I don't think John's primary purpose is to give us reason to find a nearby calculator. The point is that the time is limited. The wilderness may be difficult, but God has prepared a place there. The woman is pursued, but she is also nourished.

2. The Dragon — Revelation 12:3-6

Before the child is born, another sign appears in heaven: “a great red dragon having seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads were seven diadems.” If the woman is a sign, so is the dragon. We don't have to guess what he represents because John will identify him explicitly a few verses later as “the serpent of old who is called the devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world.” (12:9) The language reaches all the way back to Genesis. The

serpent who opposed God and deceived the woman in the garden is still opposing God's purposes. Revelation is connecting the end of the biblical story with its beginning.

When that linkage happens, we who stand somewhere in the middle should pause and reflect. What we are experiencing as far as suffering is not new, and it's not news. Our pressurized life situations are 'within' the scope of humanity's history. That 'within' is to be a great comfort. It's not new, like Ecclesiastes records, "There is nothing new under the sun."

The dragon stands before the woman waiting to devour her child. We can certainly see that hostility appearing in human history. Herod tried to destroy the infant Yeshua, and later political and religious authorities opposed Him. Rome eventually crucified Him. But Revelation asks us to look past the human actors. Our ultimate struggle is larger than Herod, larger than Rome and larger than any individual ruler. Paul writes in Ephesians that our struggle is "not against flesh and blood, but against rulers, powers and spiritual forces of wickedness" (Ephesians 6:12). That does not mean human beings bear no responsibility for evil. Babylon was punished for how they mistreated Judah. Herod was responsible for what Herod did, Pilate for what Pilate did, and the Roman emperors for what they did. But John wants us to understand that there is something behind the hostility. Satan opposes the purposes of God.

That is also why we have to be careful about making other human beings the ultimate enemy. Someone may mock you at work, ridicule your faith at the tennis club, oppose you when you speak about Yeshua, or make life difficult precisely because you are a believer. Yeshua did not tell us to hate those people; He told us to pray for those who persecute us. John's vision helps us identify the real culprit and the real conflict. The dragon is the enemy, and human beings themselves are among those who need to be rescued from his deception.

The dragon's tail sweeps away a third of the stars of heaven and throws them to the earth. Then he waits for the child. Yet for all the terror of the picture, he fails at the very thing he intends to do. The child is born and is caught up to God and His throne. The woman is given a place prepared by God. The dragon is terrifying, but he is not sovereign. That distinction will become increasingly important as the chapter continues.

3. War in Heaven — Revelation 12:7-10

Then John sees war in heaven. Michael and his angels fight against the dragon and his angels. Michael is familiar to us from the book of Daniel, where he appears as a great prince associated and perhaps even assigned a role particularly with Israel, and Jude calls him the archangel. It is a spectacular scene, and we can let our imaginations run wild with it. Think of all the superheroes we could put together in one great battle scene, but

whatever Hollywood might do with it would probably look tame compared with John's vision. Yet the special effects are not the point. John wants us to know the outcome: the dragon loses. "There was no longer a place found for them in heaven." (12:8)

John then identifies the enemy fully: "the great dragon was thrown down, the serpent of old who is called the devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world." Serpent, devil, Satan, dragon, deceiver—the descriptions pile up so that there can be no misunderstanding. This is the source of the opposition we have been watching throughout the book. John's readers could see Rome. They knew the emperor and the local authorities who could make life difficult for them. John tells them to look deeper. What was happening on earth had a spiritual dimension as well.

And yet we must hold together one of Revelation's great tensions. Satan is defeated and Satan is active. Theologians use the term "Now and Not yet." He has been thrown down and yet he continues to persecute. His authority has been broken, but his hostility remains. That is not as strange as it first sounds. A defeated enemy can still be dangerous, particularly when he knows that the end is coming. John is not telling believers that Satan is imaginary or powerless; he is telling them that Satan is not ultimate.

Then comes the loud announcement from heaven: "Now the salvation, and the power, and the kingdom of our God and the authority of His Messiah have come." When did that happen? The victory of Yeshua is not waiting for some distant future before it begins. His death, resurrection and ascension are the decisive events. In John's Gospel, as Yeshua approaches the cross, He says, "Now judgment is upon this world; now the ruler of this world will be cast out. And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to Myself" (John 12:31–32). ['Lifted up' here means 'put up for all to see on a cross.' It is not referring to songs of exaltation and loud praises in a church service.] The cross looks like defeat, but Revelation says it is victory. And that is exactly what we need to understand before we meet the believers in the next verse.

4. They Overcame Him — Revelation 12:11

"And they overcame him." I love those words. Who overcame whom? The believers overcame the dragon. That sounds almost absurd when you consider the difference in power. Satan is portrayed as an enormous dragon, while the believers are people who can be mocked, imprisoned, exiled and killed. Yet John says they overcame him and then tells us how: by "the blood of the Lamb and because of the word of their testimony, and they did not love their life even when faced with death." Those three things belong together.

First, they overcame by the blood of the Lamb. Their victory does not begin with their own strength. They do not overcome Satan because they are spiritually tougher than everybody else. Chapter 5 has already shown us the Lion of the tribe of Judah who conquered as the

Lamb who was slain. The victory belongs to Yeshua before it belongs to us. The blood of the Lamb speaks of His sacrificial death, His forgiveness, His redemption and the price paid to make us God's people. The accuser can accuse, but the blood of the Lamb answers the accusation. We overcome because He overcame. (Ephesians 1:6-7; 1 Peter 1:19)

Second, they overcome because of “the word of their testimony.” We have just spent Chapter 11 talking about witnesses, and here they are again. Testimony is not merely, “I used to be unhappy and now I'm happy,” or, “My life used to be difficult and now everything works.” Those things may be part of our story, but they are not the heart of our testimony. The testimony is the Gospel. I once was lost; now I'm found. I was a sinner. God has saved me by His grace. The Lamb's blood has provided forgiveness, and what God has done for me is available to others through Yeshua. We testify to what God has done. That means witness is not an optional activity for a few unusually outgoing believers. Revelation puts testimony right at the center of the conflict between the Lamb and the dragon. The dragon deceives; the people of God testify.

Third, “they did not love their life even when faced with death.” That's the part we would probably rather leave out. We like the blood of the Lamb, and we can celebrate testimony, but John goes further. These believers have placed loyalty to Yeshua above the preservation of their own lives. That doesn't mean we go looking for our own martyrdom, nor does it mean life is unimportant. Life is God's gift. But there comes a point at which faithfulness asks the question: Which matters more to me—preserving myself at any cost, or remaining faithful to Yeshua? The earliest believers knew that question personally, and some of our brothers and sisters around the world still know it personally.

Most of us will face that same principle in less dramatic ways. Paul says, “I die daily.” There is a laying down of ourselves that belongs to discipleship. My will does not always get the final vote. My comfort is not the highest good, and my reputation does not have to be protected at every cost. The blood of the Lamb, the word of their testimony, and lives surrendered even in the face of death—that is how Revelation describes overcoming. It is not the world's definition of victory, but then Revelation has been teaching us from the beginning to see things differently, from heaven's point of view.

5. Power and Authority — Revelation 12:10-12

John's announcement brings together two ideas that we sometimes confuse: power and authority. I remember watching the results of enormous rainfall and flooding in Sydney. Imagine a large truck travelling toward a flooded roadway. The truck has power. An 80-kilogram policeman standing in front of it does not possess enough physical strength to stop an eighteen-wheeler travelling at speed. But the policeman raises his hand, perhaps holding a stop sign, and the truck stops. Why? Authority. The truck has greater physical power, but the officer has authority that the driver recognizes.

That distinction helps me with Revelation 12. Satan still demonstrates power. He deceives, accuses, persecutes and destroys, and we would be foolish to pretend otherwise. But he does not possess ultimate authority. The authority belongs to God's Messiah. That is why the loud voice can announce the authority of Messiah even while believers are still being persecuted. The presence of suffering does not mean Yeshua has somehow lost His throne. We have seen that throne repeatedly throughout Revelation, and there is still one throne. The One who sits there is still there. Today.

This is also why the dragon is furious. Verse 12 says he has “great wrath, knowing that he has only a short time.” There it is again: limitation. We have seen limited judgments, limited months and limited days. Now even Satan knows that his time is short. For the people suffering, it may not feel short. Three and a half years can feel like forever when you're in pain, and three days can feel like forever when you're grieving. But forever it is not. The rage of the dragon is actually evidence that his future is limited.

So endurance is possible not because the suffering is unreal but because the suffering is not the end of the story. That distinction is important. Revelation never asks us to pretend that evil doesn't hurt. John himself is exiled. Other believers have been imprisoned, and some have been killed. The book does not offer them a glib answer to suffering; it gives them a larger story in which to understand it. The dragon has power, but Messiah has authority, and the dragon's time is short.

6. The Woman in the Wilderness — Revelation 12:13–16

When the dragon realizes that he has been thrown down, he persecutes the woman who gave birth to the male child. Again, this confirms for me that the woman is larger than Miriam. John is portraying Israel, the people through whom Messiah came and against whom hostility continues. The woman is given “the two wings of the great eagle” so that she can fly into the wilderness, where she is nourished away from the presence of the serpent. That language has deep roots in the Tanakh. When God brought Israel out of Egypt, He said, “I carried you on eagles' wings, and brought you to Myself” (Exodus 19:4). In Deuteronomy 32, God is compared to an eagle hovering over its young, spreading its wings and carrying them.

The wilderness therefore is not merely a place of danger; it is also a place where God sustains His people. Israel learned that during the Exodus. There was no supermarket in the wilderness, no field waiting to be harvested and no obvious means of supporting an entire nation. If Israel survived, it was because God provided. Revelation uses that same language of dependence and preservation. The woman is not promised that there will be no wilderness. She is promised nourishment and God's presence in the wilderness.

Then the serpent pours water from his mouth “like a river” in an attempt to sweep the woman away. The image is wonderfully dramatic: dragon, woman, wilderness, wings, river and earth. But the earth helps the woman. It opens its mouth and swallows the river. The dragon does not get what he wants. He could not devour the child, he could not win the war in heaven, and now he cannot sweep away the woman. John keeps showing us a frightening enemy who repeatedly fails to accomplish his ultimate purpose. The enemy is active, but he is not sovereign. And eventual defeat is his only option.

That matters when we think about the long history of hostility against the Jewish people. I don't want to force every episode of Jewish suffering into one verse of Revelation, but John's picture certainly recognizes that the people from whom Messiah came would experience hostility. Antisemitism rears its ugly head throughout time, long before John on Patmos wrote, and even into our time. The lie of ‘Jews being the evil one’ that prevents the [state | nation | club | protagonist] from getting its way only benefits the liar. And whether it's the blood libel of the Middle Ages or the false book “Protocols of the Elders of Zion” or any of the current chants of protest, the hostility to the woman as Israel is unabated. Yet the woman remains. The dragon rages, but God preserves. Once again the emphasis is not that God's people avoid every experience of suffering; it is that suffering does not cancel God's purposes.

7. The Rest of Her Children — Revelation 12:17

The chapter ends with the dragon enraged against the woman. Unable to destroy her, he goes away “to make war with the rest of her children,” and John immediately tells us who they are: those “who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Yeshua.” Here the picture widens. The woman is Israel, Messiah comes from Israel, but the testimony of Yeshua goes out into the nations and others become part of the community that belongs to God. I sometimes jokingly call this the “Gentiles for Jesus” movement.

The Jewish Messiah came through the Jewish people, Jewish believers first carried His message, and some Gentiles also came to faith in Israel's Messiah. The family grew. That is not replacement; it is enlargement. The woman does not disappear simply because she has other children. John has just spent the entire chapter identifying her and describing God's preservation of her. The nations coming to Yeshua do not require Israel to stop being Israel.

Notice also how John describes these other children. They keep God's commandments and hold to the testimony of Yeshua. Obedience and testimony belong together: life and words, faithfulness to God and witness concerning Yeshua. The dragon hates both. That explains something about the opposition believers experience. Revelation does not promise that faithfulness will remove conflict. Sometimes faithfulness creates conflict precisely because

the dragon opposes the testimony of Yeshua. But conflict is not evidence that the dragon is winning. Chapter 12 has already told us who wins.

What Are We Supposed to Do?

First, understand where the conflict comes from. People are not our ultimate enemy, and that matters enormously. If we forget it, we can become as hostile as the people opposing us. We can start imagining that defeating them is the same thing as advancing God's kingdom. It isn't. We pray for our enemies, bless those who persecute us, and continue to testify about Yeshua. The dragon deceives people; our calling is not to hate the deceived but to bear witness to the One who can set them free.

Second, don't interpret suffering as evidence that God has abandoned you. That is one of the most difficult lessons in this chapter because believers overcome while suffering, and some overcome while dying. God never promised that His people would avoid every painful experience. What He promises is His presence and the certainty that suffering does not have the final word. The wilderness can still be God's place of provision. A believer may be under enormous pressure and still be exactly where God is sustaining him or her.

Third, testify. The dragon is called the deceiver, so our response to deception is truth. We tell people what God has done through Yeshua. We don't need to exaggerate our stories or turn every testimony into "I was miserable and now everything is wonderful." Sometimes everything isn't wonderful. The testimony remains true: the Lamb was slain, the Lamb conquered, His blood redeems, and Yeshua is Lord. Revelation 12 tells us that speaking that testimony is itself part of overcoming the enemy.

Finally, remember that the dragon's time is short. We don't know how long "short" feels from where we stand, and Revelation is not inviting us to calculate the date. It is asking us to see our suffering in light of eternity. The enemy has power, but Yeshua has authority. What looks like we are oppressed and beaten down, what looks like we are losing, isn't even close to true.

Takeaways

God will use the Jewish people even at the end of time to depict and declare His purposes.

We shall overcome. And the mechanics are available to us.

The ending will come, in God's timing. The enemy's time is limited.

Memory Verse

"And they overcame him because of the blood of the Lamb and because of the word of their testimony, and they did not love their life even when faced with death."

What's Next?

Chapter 12 ends with an angry dragon determined to make war against those who hold to the testimony of Yeshua. Then, in Chapter 13, something rises from the sea: a beast with horns, heads and crowns, to whom the dragon gives his power, his throne and great authority. Another beast will rise from the earth. John is going to show us what happens when the spiritual hostility of the dragon takes visible form in human systems of political power, false worship and economic pressure.

The imagery will take us back to Daniel and into the world of Rome and emperor worship. Eventually we will arrive at perhaps the most famous—and most misunderstood—number in Revelation: 666. But John's purpose is not to turn believers into detectives searching for the beast in every new politician, computer chip or financial system. His original teaching keeps returning us to the larger question: who receives our allegiance?

The dragon wants worship, and the beasts will demand it. John keeps pointing us somewhere else—to the throne, to the Lamb, and to the God whose kingdom outlasts them all.