

My brothers and sisters in Christ our Savior, let's listen once again to the beautiful story of that first Christmas.

A great and wondrous sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth. Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on his heads. His tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth. The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that he might devour her child the moment it was born. She gave birth to a son, a male child, who will rule all the nations with an iron scepter. And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne. The woman fled into the desert to a place prepared for her by God, where she might be taken care of for 1,260 days.

Wasn't that just beautiful?! Wasn't that a beautiful retelling of the first Christmas?! What, you never heard that Christmas story before? You've read those words but never thought of them as the Christmas story? You don't venture into the book of Revelation much because it's kind of confusing? For any of those reasons and more, I would not be surprised if many of us are not overly-familiar with this HEAVENLY VISION OF CHRISTMAS. This doesn't show up much in Christmas pageants and plays or Children's Christmas Eve services. And people would probably be a little freaked out if the picture on the front of the worship folder was the picture on the front of the Christmas cards you send out this year!

But this bit of Scripture gives us something amazing to see. Well we get to imagine what the Apostle John got to see. Our Savior Jesus Christ actually spoke to John and allowed him to see this HEAVENLY VISION OF CHRISTMAS! This is Christmas from God's point of view, a behind-the-scenes look at what went on in the spiritual realm as our Savior was coming into this world. This vision pictures the love of God in sending our Savior and his care for his people until he comes again, so it is a perfect Advent message to think about today.

As we consider the vision that Jesus himself gave to John and to us, it is important to clarify what the things seen in the vision mean. It is a little tricky, but certainly not impossible—because of what we know from the rest of Scripture and from the book of Revelation itself. In these six vision verses, we find 4 scenes:

Scene 1: A Pregnant Woman
Scene 2: A Red Dragon

Scene 3: A Son
Scene 4: A Desert Flight.

Scene 1: A Pregnant Woman (v.1-2)

A great and wondrous sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth.

If this is a vision of Christmas, the woman who is pregnant and about to give birth is obviously Mary, right? Wrong. It says here that this woman spent 1,260 days in the desert. Earlier in Revelation it becomes clear that in this vision, God uses the term 1,260 days to represent the New Testament era, the time from the birth of Christ until his return. Jesus' mother, Mary, lived and died like every other sinful human being, so this woman cannot be Mary.

Later in verse 17 of this chapter, the offspring of this woman are described as “**those who obey God’s commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus.**” It’s not terribly difficult then to identify this woman as the Church of God. The Church’s offspring obey God and hold to Jesus’ teaching while in this world. She is described as shining like the sun—a reminder that you and I, God’s people, share the glory of Christ. The moon under the Church’s feet may represent the truth that we reign with Christ.

Although the crown of 12 stars may seem hard to understand, that seals the deal on identifying this woman as the Church of believers because it uses three obvious symbols from the rest of this book of Revelation. The number 12 (and its multiples) always represents the Church (think of the 12 tribes of Israel in the Old Testament and the 12 Apostles in the New Testament). The crown is the crown of victory given to believers in Jesus. And the stars represent the spiritual leaders of the Church.

So this **great and wondrous sign appeared in heaven:** a woman representing the Church, was pregnant and about to give birth to a son.

Scene 2: A Red Dragon (v.3-4)

Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on his heads. His tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth. The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that he might devour her child the moment it was born.

We are used to red as the most popular Christmas color—Santa hats, candy canes, holly berries, wrapping paper, ribbons & bows, Rudolph’s nose—all sorts of things are red. But this second scene, or second vision inside the bigger vision, includes something red that is foreign to our typical Christmas images: a red dragon—an *enormous* red dragon with 7 heads and 10 horns and 7 crowns on his heads. That’s what he looked like as John viewed this scene. Red has already been associated with bloodshed and death in Revelation, so this does not look good at all!

And it’s a dragon. A 7-headed dragon. Just after our text, the dragon is explained to be Satan himself. The number 7 usually refers to God’s activity for his people, but certainly not here! Satan is a pretender, but not without power—that is the significance of the 10 horns. The crowns he wears are not the laurel wreath type victory crowns mentioned in regard to the Church. No, this is a different word for crown, the kind worn by earthly rulers who claimed to be gods themselves—fitting for Satan who tried to rebel against God and take his place!

So we see a huge, powerful red dragon with 7 heads, 10 horns and 7 kingly crowns. And we’re told that he did two things. **His tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth.** God uses stars to represent leaders. This description calls to mind the brief, but sad scriptural account of Satan’s rebellion when he was an angel in heaven. He and other angels rebelled and they were all cast out of heaven by the almighty God. That’s the first notable thing he did. And then there is this: **The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that he might devour her child the moment it was born.**

From the church of God, the band of believers in this world, would come a child, a son, who be the world's Savior. It had been promised for many centuries and when the time had fully come, the baby would be born...and waiting for him was the dragon, Satan. *He* knew the promises of God as well.

If you can imagine the spiritual realm—the place of God and angels—you might imagine the eager anticipation and the growing excitement as the Savior's birth came closer by the year...then by the month...then by the day...then by the hour...and as the minutes ticked off and Mary was in labor, those holy messengers of God had powerful wings ready to take flight so that the announcing angel could share the news with the shepherds out in the fields and a whole host of them could sing praises to God while the Lord's glory shone over the Bethlehem hills and the promised Messiah lay in a manger bed.

But we find out here that it was not only the angels in heaven who knew this moment, the moment of the Savior's birth, was coming. Satan and his cohorts in the spiritual realm knew it too. And Satan was ready—as he always is—to destroy the blessings of God. And so the dragon, with mouth agape and fangs bared waited for the baby!

My goodness! Did you know that this unseen activity was going on while Mary and Joseph worried about where to spend the night and how close together the contractions were getting?! My Christmas card just shows two pious parents and the little baby Jesus in a manger with a donkey and a cow nearby! But Jesus shows John what was going on in the background where you and I can't see—Satan was ready to ruin any chance at salvation for the world from the moment the Christ child was born! The advent of our King was filled with danger from the very start!

As we celebrate the birth of our Savior, we'll hear about how King Herod served as Satan's tool as he wanted to know where the King of the Jews had been born so that he could kill him. As we read about Jesus' life, we hear how Satan tempted him in the desert wilderness right after Christ's baptism and right before he began his earthly ministry on the way to the cross. We hear how the religious leaders were set against Jesus and wanted to kill him long before our Savior willingly went to the cross. All those things and more might be represented by the dragon who looked to devour the One to be born as the world's Savior. How fiercely Satan fought to devour God's grace in Christ!

Scene 3: A Son (v.5)

She gave birth to a son, a male child, who will rule all the nations with an iron scepter. And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne.

But you and I are preparing right now to celebrate Christmas in a few days. The Savior was born! And that's what this HEAVENLY VISION OF CHRISTMAS showed to John. Through the church, God brought forth his Son, the Savior who would rule all nations and just as he foretold through King David, he would rule with absolute power—with an iron scepter.

Power and love are found in perfect combination in Jesus. With power he conquered his enemies of sin, death and hell, along with all who oppose him. With love he secured the world's salvation and brings his people to heaven. His perfect life came to an end and his blood stained the wooden beams of the cross and your sin was paid for, then the disciples found the garden tomb empty. After that, he ***was snatched up to God and to his throne***; he ascended into heaven. And now you and I await his glorious return!

Scene 4: A Desert Flight (v.6)

The woman fled into the desert to a place prepared for her by God, where she might be taken care of for 1,260 days.

When we think of the Christmas story and the gospel accounts which tell us of Jesus' life as a baby, we might naturally think that when the apostle sees this in his vision: ***The woman fled into the desert to a place prepared for her by God, where she might be taken care of for 1,260 days***, it must represent the flight of Joseph, Mary and Jesus into Egypt for a time as Herod tried to kill the child. But remember, God has already in Revelation used 1,260 days to represent the New Testament era—from Christ's birth to his return on the Last Day. And recall that the woman is clearly not Mary, but the Church, the collection of believers from which Jesus was born.

So this, then, is the Church living in the desert of this world while she waits for this time to come to an end. But all the while, while God's people wait for him to come to them again at the End, God prepares their place and he takes care of them. You and I are among the believers spoken of here. We live in this world while we wait for Jesus to come again. Our place here has been prepared by God and he takes care of us.

So there's your HEAVENLY VISION OF CHRISTMAS, your beautiful Christmas story with Advent overtones. A Pregnant Woman, a Red Dragon, A Son and a Desert Flight—all meant to convey these beautiful truths:

- God had a plan to send a Savior to take away your sins.
- Satan battled against our God and Savior but did not prevail—our Savior came as promised.
- Jesus completed the work of salvation and now rules as the ascended Savior.
- Though we live in the sinful desert of this world, it will only last for a certain amount of time and God cares for us all the while. We are not alone.

Just as God's Son came when the time had fully come, so it will be with his return. When the time is exactly right, the Savior will return and we will need no written accounts or pictures of dragons and deserts to tell the story of God's love because the HEAVENLY VISION OF CHRISTMAS will be seen with our own eyes for all eternity. Just as we look forward to celebrating Christmas, we look forward to that Day! Amen.