

Introduction:

- A. Christmas has always had a dark side. I caught the opening moments of *Christmas in Rockefeller Center* the other night, aired live from New York City, only a couple hours after the murderous San Bernardino rampage. Al Roker was caught between acknowledging the horror and sorrow but then preparing viewers for the happy holiday entertainment. It was jarring. It's not the first time!
- B. The story of Jesus' birth is so wonderful; such a relief. A *light has dawned. The Morningstar as come. Glory to God in the highest. "All is well."* But pan back from that glorious scene and there is more than meets the eye. *[painting by Cody F. Miller]* The Christmas story is as fierce as an invasion. Bethlehem was a beachhead. The great conflict had been brooding and building since the serpent lured Adam and Eve to sin and death. In that darkest hour God vowed to the arrogant, lying, deadly serpent in **Gen 3:15**, "*I will put enmity [hatred] between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.*" It is the Bible's oldest prophecy.
- B. Eight days after Jesus' birth—after the angels were gone away and the shepherds were back with their flocks—Mary and Joseph took the little Jesus to the temple in Jerusalem. They were met there by **Simeon**, an old man who'd waited all his life for the Messiah, and who knew this child was he. First he praised God: "*My eyes have seen your salvation which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel.*" "*Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: 'This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.'*" [Lk 2:34-35] Foreboding! Like I said, **Christmas has always had a dark side.** It is a war story in camouflage.



C. Even as Simeon spoke the magi were traveling from far off to the east, alerted to the birth of the Jews' King by a star. *Illus.:* I read an interview with biblical scholar, Colin R. Nicholl, about his new book, *The Great Christ Comet*. In the interview he said, "*The magi saw a nativity drama unfolding in the heavens, in which the constellation figure "The Virgin" [Virgo] played the role of a pregnant mother giving birth to a baby, whose part was played by a great comet.*" These astronomers were familiar with the Old Testament prophets and knew of Isaiah's promise of a son born to a virgin and of a great light shining in the darkness. [CT, 12/15] When these magi arrived in Jerusalem they began asking the question they assumed anyone could answer, "*Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews. We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.*" When King Herod heard this he was **disturbed**, and all Jerusalem with him.

Disturbed, indeed. Herod the Great was the unwitting pawn of that ancient serpent who was bent on destroying the woman's most singular offspring. The serpent plotted the death of Jesus, whom Joseph was told to name Jesus, which means *the Lord saves*. **By killing Jesus Satan would've doom us all.** Warned by an angel, Joseph, Mary and the baby Jesus fled in the night to Egypt. And Herod, serpent-hearted, issued an order "*to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under.*" And the daughters of Rachel were heard, "*weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted.*" **Christmas has always had a dark side.** The battle was joined.

Rev. 12 gives us a picture of the Christmas story that you won't replicate in the crèche over your mantle! Turn to **Rev. 12**. In his vision, John tells us, "*A great sign appeared in heaven.*" This is a symbolic portrayal of the world's greatest story. These verses paint a picture of just how that ancient prophecy in **Gen 3:15** would be fulfilled; how the woman's offspring struck Satan's head—his pride and brilliance. **It actually tells us three ways Satan was defeated.** The first is this:

I. DESPITE HIS SCHEMING, SATAN COULD NOT DESTROY GOD'S MESSIAH (12:1-6)

- A. **Vv.1-2...** The woman who gives birth here is not Mary. This woman signifies the people of God—Israel—from whom the Messiah is born out of their great travail. The imagery of sun, moon stars first appeared in one of Joseph's dreams of his family's future in Gen. 37. Israel is portrayed as a great queen, the wife of the Lord, about to give birth to their Son.
- B. **Vv.3-4...** The dragon represents Satan. We're told that explicitly in **v.9**, "*that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray.*" His heads, horns and crowns are all familiar symbols of authority and power. I think the allusion to his tail sweeping a third of the stars out of the sky is a symbolic description of the way Satan led a great host of angels in rebellion against God (cf. Dan 8:10).
- C. **Vv.5-6....** The child is clearly picturing Jesus Christ. The phrase, "*will rule all the nations with an iron scepter,*" is from **Ps. 2:9**, which describes how the Lord and his Anointed will rule over the world. The picture of this son being "*snatched up to God and to his throne*" helps us see the drama behind the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus as a victory snatched from the jaws of defeat. It's almost as if all of Christ's life here is seen as a birth—or a double birth—born from the womb and then born *again* from the tomb. And then just as the mighty dragon's jaws were to snap down, God snatched Christ up and enthroned him in glory, conqueror of man's great enemies: sin, death, hell, and Satan himself, all in one mighty life. That was the first blow against Satan. Satan waited to swallow alive the hopes of Israel and he came *so* close!
- D. Meanwhile, the woman—the Lord's bride—"*fled into the wilderness*" under the protection of God till the time was right. I think that portrays events yet to come, and I'd love to explain it all to you but time doesn't allow. ☺

Illus.: A few years ago we had a Muslim family over one night during the Christmas season. As immigrants, I

thought they might like to see how an American home is decked out for Christmas. When I showed the teenaged girls our manger scene, one said, “*Oh we know that story. We believe that too.*” This week I read something by Kenneth E. Bailey that cleared up my confusion: “*The traditional line of reasoning among Muslims is as follows: God always gives victory to his prophets. Jesus is one of the great prophets. But Christian Scriptures tell a story of the cross in which Jesus is devastatingly defeated! This is impossible. Ergo, ‘the cross never took place.’ However, in the Gospels Jesus is given the greatest victory of all time. He conquers **death.***” [K.E. Bailey, *The Good Shepherd*, p.242, quoting Kenneth Cragg] And that’s not all. He also conquers Satan by depriving him of the throne over all creation.

Remember last week how Pastor Michael told us that a kingdom requires three things: a king, territory, and a people who serve the king. Those three are here in this passage, and Satan tried to make a play for all three. First, he was unable to kill God’s King. The next verses portray Satan’s unsuccessful effort to seize the Lord’s territory: **vv.7-9**... Here is another defeat.

II. DESPITE HIS GREAT POWER, SATAN IS NOT STRONG ENOUGH TO LAY CLAIM TO ANY OF THE LORD’S TERRITORY (12:7-9)

- A. Michael and Satan (AKA Lucifer) are two of God’s great archangels. These two mighty archangels along with their vast angelic armies battle in the heavenly realms because Satan wants to seize God’s territory for himself. I think that they were created as equally mighty archangels, but Michael is stronger because he is righteous and loyal to God while Lucifer is weakened by pride and rebellion.
- B. Satan loses this battle. The picture of Satan being hurled to earth is not new here. Both Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 38 paint vivid pictures of this same scene. There God says, “*So I threw you to earth and made a spectacle of you before kings.*” What a blow to the supremely arrogant Lucifer who thought he’d raise his throne above the stars of God!
- C. I don’t think this sweeping of Satan and his army from heaven has actually happened yet. I think the battle rages

now, even though the outcome is a foregone conclusion for those who know and serve God. Right now Satan is *“the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.”* **But he won’t conquer heaven and he can’t hold earth.** In the end Christ will see that Satan is *“thrown into the lake of burning sulfur... to be tormented day and night for ever and ever”* [Rev. 20:10]. **For all his power, Satan will fall farther and lose more than any other creature.** He will be left with nothing, tormented forever. He cannot unseat God’s King. He cannot conquer God’s territory in heaven or earth. And he cannot own God’s people.

Back in Rev. 12 we come to a great hymn to be sung when Satan is finally cast down but just before he is forever into hell. **The emphasis here is on the triumph of believers over him.**

III. DESPITE HIS ACCUSATIONS, SATAN CANNOT CONDEMN THE REDEEMED OF THE LORD (12:10-12)

- A. When Satan is cast out of heaven, once and for all, all that is wrong with the world is set right: v.10a...
- B. The key reason why these things are true is that, basically, Satan is thrown out of God’s courtroom. V.10b... Satan has attempted to block “the salvation, the power, and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Messiah” by accusing us of our sins before God the Judge. The real battleground has been *us!* Satan has been our ruthless prosecutor and he has used God’s good Law of righteousness against us, and against the Lord. *“You cannot let these people into your kingdom. They have broken your own laws. They have rebelled against you! Judge, as powerful as you may be, you do not have the power to let sinners go free. And you certainly cannot build a kingdom from such rebels. Not even the authority of the mighty Messiah can do that.”* That was Satan’s case, and it was airtight! And without a people, there would be no kingdom. Satan held us all by the power of his accusations. **He had us sinners dead to rights.** Till Christ died for us to pay for our sins, and rose from the dead to conquer death.

C. We aren't surprised when we read that Jesus triumphs over Satan, nor when Michael was stronger than him. But here is a truly astonishing thing—**V.11**, "*They [that is, the believers] have triumphed over him!*" How could Christians triumph over Satan? This hymn celebrates our **three defenses. These are your defenses day in and day out!**

1. Our first defense against Satan's accusations is the "blood of the Lamb" (v.11a). Paul tells us in **Col 2:13-15**, "*When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.*"
2. Our second defense against Satan's deceit is "the word of our testimony" (v.11b). Satan's most common tool is deceit. Jesus called him "*the father of lies.*" Our defense against every lie is "*the word of our testimony*"—which means the Christian faith we profess, all that the Bible teaches us, made clear and true to us through our relationship with Christ and by the inward illumination of the Holy Spirit. **To defeat Satan, know, trust, say, and do God's truth.** *Illus.:* I have a friend who came out of Satanism to faith in Christ. She told me about a time when demons were assailing her. She said, "*I had such a breakthrough when I realized that God is bigger than Satan. I prayed, I don't have to fight for something I already have, and I have you, Lord Jesus.*" And she was left alone. The power of the word of our testimony.
3. Our third defense against Satan's threats is our willingness to die. "*They did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.*" Death has always been Satan's most powerful weapon for people had no defense whatsoever against it. **But Christ has made**

dying powerful, not weak. In fact, he has made dying the secret of eternal life. *“If anyone would come after me, they must take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it”* [Mk 8:34-35].

Perhaps you’re especially feeling that dying right now. A great loss. A painful humbling. A terrible weakness. Don’t love your lives so much as to shrink from that death. Satan has no power against Christians who know what Christ can do with death.

Illus.: Henri Nouwen told of a Lutheran bishop who was imprisoned in a German concentration camp during WWII. An SS officer tried, through beating, to force a confession from him. Though the intensity of the torture increased, he could not break the bishop’s silence. Finally, the infuriated officer, pounding his victim with even harder blows, shrieked, *“But don’t you know that I can kill you?”* The bishop looked in the eyes of his torturer and said, *“Yes, I know. Do what you want. But I have already died.”* That has always been the secret of Christ’s martyrs, and all believers who endure loss for Jesus’ sake. *Do what you want, but I have already died.*

SUMMARY: Satan could not kill God’s King. He could not seize God’s territory either in heaven or earth. And he cannot kill God’s people. He is defeated three times over.

Conclusion

The birth of Christ was the beginning of the end of the world’s most epic battle. The Christmas story is a kind of prophecy—a promise. We do well to celebrate. **V.12** says, *“Therefore rejoice, you heavens and you who dwell in them.”* Rejoice!

[The story from Henri Nouwen is in Songs of Heaven by Robert Coleman]