

The Great Wonder

Revelation chapter 12 describes something that the Bible calls a “great wonder”. What makes this so intriguing is that this is the only sign in all of Revelation (or, indeed, the entire Bible) that is described in those terms. It's true that Stephen did “great wonders” (Acts 6:8), and that one day the Antichrist will do great wonders to deceive people (Revelation 13:13), but there is only one sign that is called a “great wonder” and it is the one we find in Revelation 12.

So what does this sign mean? Why is it called great, and how do we interpret it? What can we learn from this fascinating passage? Let's take a few minutes to dive into the text and see what we can find out.

The first verse sets the scene. The great wonder is a woman:

Revelation 12:1: “And there appeared a great wonder in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars.”

If we read the rest of the passage we will discover that the text does not tell us who this woman is. Fortunately, it's not difficult to figure out. In Genesis 37:9 Joseph tells his family that he dreamed that the sun, moon, and eleven stars bowed down to him. His family was offended because they knew exactly what he meant – he was saying that one day he would rule over his parents and his eleven siblings. The woman is Israel, and the twelve stars represents the famous twelve tribes. All throughout the Old Testament the nation of Israel is compared to a woman.

The passage also tells us that the woman was pregnant and about to give birth:

Revelation 12:2: “And she being with child cried, travailing in birth, and pained to be delivered.”

This is more evidence that the woman represents Israel. It is highly unlikely that the woman represents the Church because the Church is called the *bride* of Christ – in other words, the Church is unmarried. Israel, though, was the *wife* of Jehovah (Jeremiah 3:14). The woman who is giving birth is not the unwed Church, but the nation of Israel.

But this birth is not unopposed. Someone is unhappy about what is going on:

Revelation 12:3: “And there appeared another wonder in heaven; and behold a great red dragon, having seven heads and ten horns, and seven crowns upon his heads.

4 And his tail drew the third part of the stars of heaven, and did cast them to the earth: and the dragon stood before the woman which was ready to be delivered, for to devour her child as soon as it was born.”

The Bible tells us that a great dragon was poised to devour the child of this woman the moment it was born. So who is this dragon? Well, if we skip down a few verses we will see that Revelation 12:9 tells us that the dragon is actually the devil. The woman is giving birth to a child that the devil hates, and the devil is determined to kill the child the moment it is born. The devil is not alone in this endeavor: he has managed to gain the support of a third of the angels (which are here referred to as the

“stars of heaven”). This is actually comforting, by the way: it means that God has twice as many angels on His side as the devil does. The devil is outnumbered.

So who is the child? Well, we are given an important clue in the next verse:

Revelation 12:5: “And she brought forth a man child, who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron: and her child was caught up unto God, and to his throne.”

The passage tells us that the child was going to rule over the nations with a rod of iron, and that it escaped the devil's wrath by being caught up to God. On the surface it looks like the child is the Lord. After all, Jesus will one day rule over the nations with a rod of iron (Psalm 2:9). Herod tried to kill Jesus once the king discovered that He had been born, and at the end of Jesus' ministry on Earth He ascended to God.

But I do not think this is the correct interpretation. When the devil tried to kill Jesus shortly after the Lord was born, Jesus did not escape by ascending into Heaven. Instead He went to Egypt, where He lived for some time. The ascension did not happen until after the crucifixion. When Jesus did ascend into Heaven no one was trying to kill Him, and the devil certainly had no ability at that point to threaten His life. The ascension was not sudden or abrupt; instead the Lord ascended into Heaven in an orderly, stately manner. Jesus was not remotely in any danger.

One detail that is easy to overlook is the fact that the phrase “caught up” in this verse is actually the Greek word *harpazo* (Strong's #726). According to Strong's it means to seize or catch away, and carries the idea of “force suddenly exercised”. It does not refer to a slow, steady ascension; it refers to grabbing something suddenly with great force and yanking it away. This word is *not* used in the book of Acts to refer to the ascension of the Lord, but it *is* used in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 when Paul is talking about the Rapture. When Paul says that we will be “caught up” to meet the Lord in the air, that was the word he used.

It is true the passage says this child will rule over the nations with a rod of iron. But we must remember that in Revelation 2 the Lord gave the Church this promise:

Revelation 2:26: “And he that overcometh, and keepeth my works unto the end, to him will I give power over the nations:
27 And he shall rule them with a rod of iron; as the vessels of a potter shall they be broken to shivers: even as I received of my Father.”

The Church is a much better fit for the identity of the child. The Church will one day rule over the nations with a rod of iron, and the Church will one day be raptured. The Church was also born out of the nation of Israel – the apostle Paul told us that we were a wild branch that was grafted into the family of God (Romans 11:17). It also makes sense from a timeline perspective. The book of Revelation is talking about things that will happen in the *future*. The ascension of Christ was in the past, but the Rapture is still to come.

Given that interpretation, the passage becomes very intriguing. Have you ever wondered why the Church will be raptured – that is, suddenly removed from the world in the twinkling of an eye? Now we know. At the moment the Church reaches maturity, the devil launches an all-out attack on us with his entire army of demons. At that same moment the Lord snatches us away from him and moves us all to Heaven, where we are out of his reach. The rapture is actually a *rescue*. It is quick and sudden because we are in tremendous danger.

Once we are removed from the world, the Lord puts Israel out of his reach as well:

Revelation 12:6: “And the woman fled into the wilderness, where she hath a place prepared of God, that they should feed her there a thousand two hundred and threescore days.”

1260 days is 72 months, or 3.5 years. That is half the length of the Tribulation. God has provided a place for her to hide from the wrath of the devil – a place where she will be safe (for a while, anyway). Incidentally, this is more evidence that the child can't possibly be Jesus. Did the nation of Israel flee into the wilderness for three and a half years immediately after Jesus was born, or after the ascension? I don't think so.

After the rapture the devil does something tremendously surprising. He launches an attack on Heaven:

Revelation 12:7: “And there was war in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon; and the dragon fought and his angels,”

It is important to realize that once the Rapture occurs and the Church is gone, verse 6 does not say that the devil tries to attack Israel, fails, and then does something else. Instead the passage tells us that immediately after the rapture the devil *follows the Church to Heaven and tries to invade*. The devil is so angry and so determined to wipe out the Church that he actually tries to conquer Heaven itself! If you ever wondered what happens after the rapture, now you know: war breaks out. (Keep in mind the passage does *not* say that the Church will do any fighting; the war is strictly between the angels. But it does look like we will be there when it takes place.)

The Bible does not tell us how long this war lasts, but it does say how it turns out:

Revelation 12:8: “And prevailed not; neither was their place found any more in heaven.

9 And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world: he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him.”

I'm sure it comes as no surprise to anyone that the devil is not able to conquer the habitation of God. His attempted invasion is a complete failure. The devil and his angels are cast out of Heaven forever and are forced down to the Earth. This leads to tremendous rejoicing among those in Heaven:

Revelation 12:10: “And I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, Now is come salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of his Christ: for the accuser of our brethren is cast down, which accused them before our God day and night.”

One important point we need to realize is that before this war happened, Satan actually had regular access to Heaven. We know this because the book of Job tells us exactly that:

Job 1:6: “Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan came also among them.

7 And the Lord said unto Satan, Whence comest thou? Then Satan answered the Lord, and said, From going to and fro in the earth, and from walking up and down in

it.”

Not only did Satan regularly appear before the Lord in Heaven, but he used those appearances to accuse the servants of God and try to get God to curse them (Job 1:9-11). Satan has spent thousands of years accusing believers of sin, but after this war he is cast out once and for all. The devil will no longer be able to accuse anyone, because his access rights to God have been revoked. This is good news for us, but it's bad news for the world:

Revelation 12:12: “Therefore rejoice, ye heavens, and ye that dwell in them. Woe to the inhabitants of the earth and of the sea! for the devil is come down unto you, having great wrath, because he knoweth that he hath but a short time.”

It is true that the devil can no longer cause any trouble *in Heaven*. The Church has escaped his wrath and there is nothing he can do about it. However, the devil is now trapped *on Earth* – and he is full of anger because he knows that he only has a short time. Specifically, he only has seven years – the length of the Tribulation. At the end of the Tribulation the Lord will return to Earth and cast him into the bottomless pit, where he will no longer be able to deceive the nations. His time is short and he is going to make the most of it to cause enormous destruction and death. The devil will use the Antichrist to make war with those who are saved during the Tribulation and put them to death. He will try to wipe out all of Israel, but he will fail – for the Lord will return from Heaven and put an end to his reign.

This passage offers a fascinating look at the events surrounding the rapture. We already knew from the rest of the Bible that the rapture would occur before the seven-year Tribulation, but now we know how it fits into the bigger picture of end-times events. We can also see *why* the rapture will occur, and what the devil will do in response.

I think people will be surprised at what will take place after we meet the Lord in the air. We will be taken to Heaven – but when we arrive we will discover that Heaven is a war zone. It's impossible to say how long this war will last, but we know the outcome. Once the war is over we will stand before God and be held accountable for the way we lived our lives (1 Corinthians 3:12-15). Those who lived well will be rewarded; those who lived poorly will still enter Heaven but will do so empty-handed. Once the judgment is over and we have received our crowns, the great scene of Revelation 4 will begin and the Tribulation will start. At that point the twenty-four crowned elders (which represent the Church) will be in place and all will be ready for the final chapter of this age.