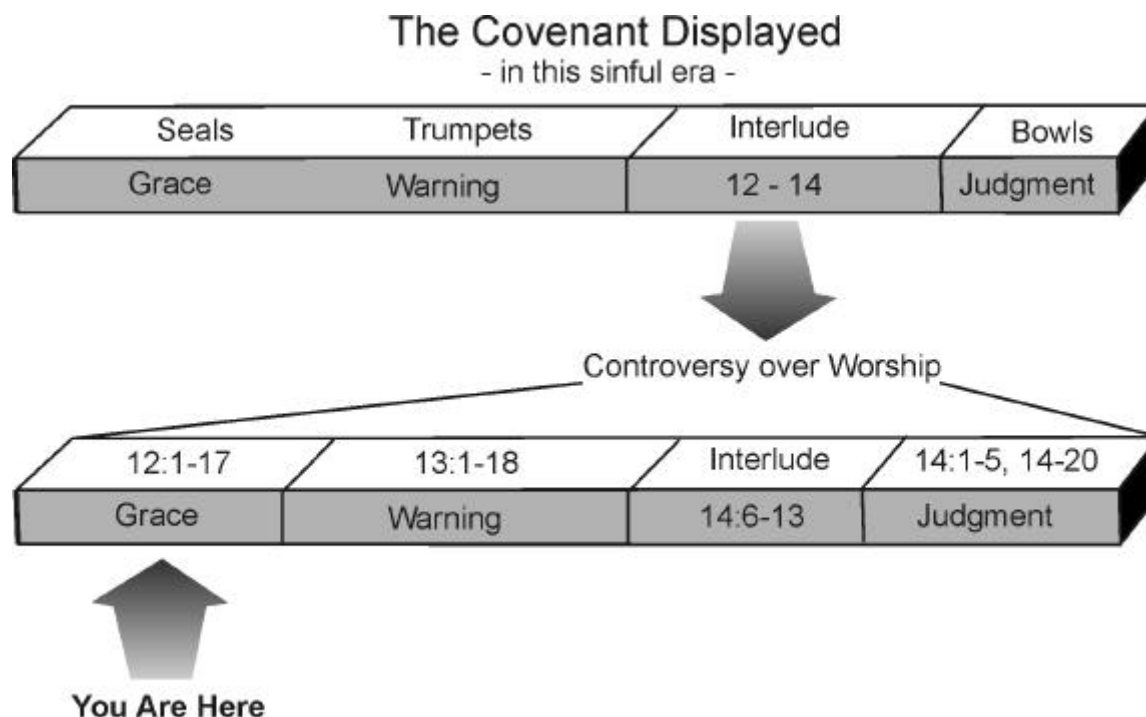


The Controversy Over Worship: Part I The Sun of Grace

A great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars (12:1)

With this **great symbol**, God comes back to the story of grace. “**Great**” means that God really wants us to see that it’s important. That means we need to spend enough time to nail down just what it means.



The **woman** is pretty easy. After all, she’s part of a pattern. In chapter 17, we’ll see a **harlot**. Since harlotry is one of the most common symbols in the Old Testament, we can be confident that the **harlot** represents idolatry. The opposite of this is faithfulness. This means the **woman** represents God’s saints. Right now, some of you who are familiar with this passage will be shouting, “Wait a minute! It’s Mary.” And in a sense you’re right. Let’s look.

In verse 2, **the woman is pregnant and in labor**. Then in verse 5 her **male child is caught up to heaven**. If we take this literal¹, the woman is Mary and the child is Jesus. And in a minute we’ll see that the child really is Jesus. But the woman *isn’t* Mary. In verse 6, *after* Jesus’ ascension, the **woman flees into the wilderness**. We have no record that Mary did this. And God doesn’t ask us to draw conclusions without evidence.¹

¹ Some of you will think about the time Jesus spent in Egypt as a baby. But scripture only tells us that he was there until Herod died. We don’t have hard dates for his birth, so there is no way for us to verify this as 1,260 days in the

The **woman** spends **one thousand two hundred and sixty days in the wilderness**. This is exactly the same length of time, expressed with exactly the same Greek words as the length of the church's **sackcloth and ashes ministry** in 11:3. That is the same period called **forty-two months** in 11:2 and 13:5, again in identical Greek. Finally, it is the period called **a time, times, and half a time** in 12:14, quoting the exact Greek of Daniel 12:7. None of these periods has anything to do with Mary, but all of them are intimately involved with the period the church preaches the gospel under persecution. Since these passages all use identical substantive language,² the woman has to represent the church.

But the New Testament church *didn't* give birth to Jesus. He was born over thirty years before the "church" got started at Pentecost, and His mother was a faithful servant of God in the Old Testament tradition. That means that the woman represents God's faithful in all ages.³ At the same time, since Mary was faithful, she's part of the imagery.

The church is **clothed with the sun** (12:1). This brings us to Malachi 4:2, where Jesus is called the "Sun of Righteousness" and Galatians 3:27 where the saints are said to have "clothed (themselves) with Christ." But we can't stop there. Malachi tells us that Jesus comes "with healing" for the saints, and this happens when they are changed (1 Cor 15:51-55) and the Day of the Lord burns up the wicked, leaving "neither root nor branch" (Mal 4:1). This is typical Old Testament language of God's promise to His covenant-keeping remnant. So with the first bit of symbolism, God introduces grace.

Interpreters differ on what the **moon under her feet** means. But when we combine this with her **crown of twelve stars**, we are drawn to Joseph's dream in Genesis 37. He saw the sun, moon, and stars bowing down to him. These represented his father, mother, and brothers. His brothers didn't like Joseph telling about the dream, and sold him into slavery. After a long and involved story, Joseph ended up saving Egypt and his family from a seven-year famine. Joseph's comment at the end of this story is instructive. "God sent me before you to preserve life" (Gen 45:5).

This is the message of grace. Again. God wants to rescue every life He can. All we have to do is to come to Him. We will be preserved in spiritual Egypt (11:8) until the last person responds. Then He will rescue us "by great judgments" (Exod 6:6, 7:4).⁴

Joseph was a type of Christ.⁵ He was the savior of his family, just as Christ is the savior of His family. The stars/brothers that bowed down to him became the tribes of Israel, and now become the stars in the chaste woman's crown. Once again, through a vision from John's Hebrew heritage, God shows that His people are the same through history. Ancient Israel continues on in the church of the apostles.

wilderness, so we can't use it. Of course, Egypt wasn't a wilderness, since it had a thriving civilization. We have to remember that this is *symbolic*, not literalistic.

² I hate using technical language here, but it's important. Some passages will use the same words as others, but since the words or forms don't carry any particular importance, they aren't useful as interpretive keys. But these phrases have "substantive" importance. It's also important that they aren't found anywhere else in scripture. That makes it a lead-pipe cinch that they're talking about the same thing.

³ Once again, we see the saints of the Old Testament alongside the saints of the New Testament. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile in God's plan.

⁴ It's possible to misunderstand my last comment to mean that no one who trusts in God will die. I'm reminded of the story of Lazarus where Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me shall live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die" (John 11:25-26). His point is that even though saints die like everyone else, after the resurrection, they will live forever with God.

⁵ Remember, a type is an acted-out prophecy.

And another sign appeared in heaven: and behold, a great red dragon having seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads were seven diadems. (12:3)

Behold! tells us we're looking at another important part of the vision. Here God combines the four beasts in Daniel 7 to create the **dragon (Satan – 12:9)**. They are a lion, bear, four-headed leopard, and a terrifying beast with ten horns. That makes **seven heads and ten horns. On his heads were seven diadems** – king's crowns. These *aren't* the victors' crowns the saints wear. The beast is all about power, not victory over sin.

Daniel's vision covered all of human history from the time of Babylon until Christ's return. When God imports these Old Testament symbols, the combined beast must represent all of human government over that time. But in 12:9 the dragon is identified as Satan, not human government. The emphasis here is on Satan's influence on human governments.

With his **tail, the dragon swept away a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth** (12:4). The name **Devil** (12:9) literally means "Slanderer." We know from Ezekiel 28 that Satan started out as the highest angel, but that he slandered God.⁶ He used his lies to convince a third of the angels – **stars of heaven** – to join his rebellion.⁷

The one thing Satan couldn't allow was a Savior for mankind. As long as everyone sinned, there'd be nobody who could pay the penalty for our sin. So when Mary was about to deliver Jesus, Satan got ready **to devour her child**. Through his power with man's governments, he enticed Herod to try to kill Jesus as soon as He was born (Matt 2:16-18). Jesus survived Satan's attempts on His life until the moment He surrendered it on the Cross for us. **He was caught up to God and to His throne, and will rule the nations with a rod of iron** (12:5, c.f. Psa 2:9, Rev 2:27).

After Jesus **ascended**, He sent the Holy Spirit to guide the church (Acts 2). Three thousand were saved on that first day of ministry (Acts 2:41), the first public display of grace in the apostolic era.

And the woman fled into the wilderness where she had a place prepared by God, so that there she might be nourished for one thousand two hundred and sixty days. (12:6)

Persecution started almost as soon as the apostles started preaching. It began in Jerusalem (Acts 4:5-22). Shortly it spread to other parts of the Roman Empire. For about three centuries Christians suffered from time to time as madmen like Nero tried to wipe them out. Each persecution brought more people to Christ, and then after a while the persecutors would lose interest.

Judaism was *religio licita*,⁸ but Christianity wasn't until Constantine (313AD) issued the Edict of Milan. With a stroke of his pen, he ended the persecution of Christians. In 325 he convened the Council of Nicaea to try to unify Christianity under a single set of key beliefs. He also made it a favored religion within the Empire, and within a century the majority of citizens claimed to be Christian.

The partnership of church and state fell apart in 476 when barbarians conquered Rome. But they couldn't hold onto power, and by 538, Rome was back on top. But this time the church was the

⁶ See chapter 1 of this book.

⁷ We note that the stars are angels for a couple reasons. First, they are "of heaven," and Revelation contrasts saints/holy ones/heaven dwellers with the wicked/earth dwellers. Next, Daniel 12:3 says that those who lead people to righteousness will "shine brightly like the stars forever and ever."

⁸ A term describing a religion recognized by the government as legitimate.

primary authority, not the civil government. For over a thousand years after this, all the crowned heads of Europe looked to Pope for their legitimacy. This ended for good in 1798 when one of Napoleon's generals deposed the Pope.⁹

During this **1,260 days** (years),¹⁰ the organized church was the home to every form of depravity and corruption. It was so bad that in 1510 Martin Luther said, "If there be a Hell, Rome is built on it!" The official church refused to allow any differences of opinion, and killed any "heretics" it could catch. Satan's minions worked hard to stamp out the true followers of Christ. The armies of Rome **poured after** the true church (12:15). But the **earth helped the church** (12:16) by being too big to let Rome catch everyone.

I have to spend a moment here on this delicious language. The **serpent sent water like a river after the woman** trying to kill her. It was a River of Death. This murderous **flood came out of the serpent's mouth**. But Satan's poisonous **river** dries up when **the earth opens its mouth to swallow it up**. In the end, Satan's intentions will come back to haunt him, since he and his people will be killed by **the sword from Jesus' mouth** (19:15-21). The law of *lex talionis* will give them back what they gave.

On the other hand, God provides a River of Life for his bride in the New Jerusalem (22:1-2). Men are to live by the words out of God's mouth (Matt 4:4, c.f. Deut 8:3). God's word is true food (John 6:63). The saints are **nourished** by the word of God's mouth in the **wilderness**. And the contrast doesn't end here.

The words from God's mouth do not return without doing what He intends for them to accomplish (Isa 55:11). But Satan's own people screw up his attempts to destroy God's people, not God! He's the ruler of this world (Jn 12:31, 14:30), but his rebellious spirit fills the wicked so much that they won't even follow *his* wishes. His troops are in such disarray that his wrathful attempts on God's people simply disappear into the ground.

This simple word picture reminds us of Paul's statement of God's promises.

We know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to *His* purpose. (Rom 8:28)

God won't allow Satan to win the war. His saints are **nourished** (12:6, 14) as they continue to spread the message of grace. They are a "voice crying **in the wilderness**" like John the Baptist. They prepare the way for the Reformation (c.f. Isa 40:3, Matt 3:3).

There was war in heaven (12:7). Because John's view moves around, it's not immediately obvious when this war happened. It looks like it could be after the **1,260 days** of verse 6. But when we look back at chapters 4 and 5, all of heaven is rejoicing when Jesus was crowned king after his ascension (5:7ff, 12:5). So by then, Satan has already been **thrown down to the earth** (12:9, 12).

Before the cross, Satan had access to heaven (Job 1:6). After all, until Jesus died, there was always the possibility that He would fail to live a sinless life. Christ could have flunked one of the tests after His forty days in the wilderness (Matt 4:1-11). That would mean that Satan's charges were true, and he would have had the right to go anywhere he wanted. When Jesus died, that last small hope of Satan's was snuffed out.

⁹ Pope Pius VI wasn't the only Pope deposed. He was just the last straw in a whole series of events that destroyed papal authority over civil government. The Peace of Augsburg (1555) and the Treaty of Westphalia (1648) were other key stops on that road.

¹⁰ Remember the year/day principle we discussed in chapter 11? Check Appendix B for details...

With Christ's victory on the cross, **the accuser of the brethren** (12:10) was locked out of heaven. He was stuck on earth, fighting a losing war. He was **full of wrath**, and brought **woe to those who live on the earth** (12:12).

We have to back up a step and be careful about language. If we think like modern people, we would say that Satan is bringing **woe** to us, since we "live on the earth." But this isn't what John is saying. Remember, one of the patterns in the book is that the saints are pictured **living in heaven** (12:12), while the wicked **dwelt on the earth** (6:10, 8:13, etc.). So Satan's **wrath** gets taken out *on his own people*. God won't let him loose on the saints. Now this doesn't mean that they won't have troubles. As God's people, we'll always be the target of Satan's **war** (12:17). Jesus promised us persecution. But it does mean there are limits. God will always give us strength to get through (1 Cor 10:13). We'll always be able to **keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus** (12:17).

Satan **deceives the whole world** (12:9). All of us used to belong to Satan's side, but we've tasted God's grace (Psa 34:8). We're part of the heavenly community. Satan used to deceive us, but he doesn't anymore. The only people he can deceive are the wicked. And they get it in spades.

Right now, you may be asking, "Why is he spending so much time on this?" I'll give you a peek ahead. In chapter 20 God reveals the millennium in its greatest detail. There are several competing views of what this time period is all about. The key lies in verse 3, where Satan is **unable to deceive the nations**. Lots of theologians get completely lost in that phrase because they haven't bothered to see the patterns in the book. We've set up the first part of that pattern here. We'll finish it there.

God's people, those **who dwell in heaven**, have **overcome Satan because of the blood of the Lamb and because of the word of their testimony, and they did not love their life even to death** (12:11). Jesus gave the saints the victory. Grace wins the war, not anything we can do. His people praise Him even in death, and they receive eternal life. It is truly cause for **rejoicing** (12:12).

