

Christmas Remixed

DAVE BAST

Where would you turn in the Bible if you wanted to find the Christmas story? If you said, Luke 1 and 2, you win a prize for scripture knowledge. If you added Matthew 1 and 2, or John Chapter 1, you get a bonus prize; but there is another place in the Bible where the Christmas story is told; a place where you might not think of looking. It is in the book of Revelation. It doesn't just explain Christmas to us, it explains a lot about the Christian life as well. Interested in hearing the story? Well, keep listening.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast, and this brings us, Scott, to the end of a four-part series, appropriately enough, for the four weeks of Advent, where we have been looking at the Advent message—the coming of God into our world, in person, in Jesus Christ; his promised coming again to finish his great work of recreation—of renewal and salvation; but we have been looking at other parts of the Bible, not those familiar Gospel Christmas story parts.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; we started in the very beginning, in Genesis. We went to the book of Psalms. In the last program, we kind of looked at the whole Bible, Old Testament and New, to trace a major theme of the Bible that came together in Jesus, the theme of the covenant; and now, we are going to the very end of the Bible, to the book of Revelation; a book that scares a lot of people, daunts a lot of people. It is sort of interesting. John Calvin, I think, wrote commentaries on every book of the Bible *except* for Revelation. A lot of people have not known what to make of this book across the centuries, because it is full of symbolism. It is really, finally, a dream...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And you know how dreams go. They can have a lot of funky stuff in them.

DAVE BAST

Very much so; I mean, John starts out by saying: I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, by which he means sort of like, I think, he was perhaps in a trance-like state...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

He was having visions; and like visions or dreams, you know, you can get some weird symbols and things don't behave the way they do in real life. A lot of that is happening in Revelation; and the result is, I think, for some people they make too much out of the book. They try to figure out every last thing. They develop

big systems of interpretation, and they think they can pinpoint everything that has happened in history. For others, though, it kind of makes them shy away, and they make too little out of the book of Revelation. They don't listen for the powerful message that this book is intended to convey to us; and it is intended to do so in a way that appeals to our imagination. It is sort of right-brained.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I once heard the historian and theologian, Martin Marty say that there are some parts of the Bible that we are supposed to take literally, but some more liberal scholars kind of treat it like a dream; whereas, Revelation is a dream, and yet, some more conservative people want to interpret it literally.

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is like, you know, you don't usually do that with dreams. I mean, you might have a dream one night where your brother-in-law is dressed up like Julia Child or something, but I wouldn't make too much of that. It might stand for something, but don't spend too much time getting hung up on the imagery. It is not a code that is meant to be cracked, it is ultimately a message of hope that is to be embraced; as we see all through Revelation, things are going to keep happening in history, but that we are told again and again, this is not the end of it all. In fact, we begin the book with good news. Jesus is the victor; that is the first thing John sees. Jesus is the victor over hell and Satan and death, and nothing can change that.

DAVE BAST

In fact, Jesus appears to John in this glorified form, so glorious in fact, John says: When I saw him, I fell at his feet as if I were dead...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

And Jesus says to him: Don't worry; I've got this. I am holding in my hand the keys of death and Hades. He did not just overthrow death and hell and sin and evil; he knocked them down and took the keys with him when he left—when he left the grave. So, Jesus is the victor, that is the message overall.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that is good news, because as John knew...and of course, the very, very first part of the letter after John sees that initial vision, there are also letters to seven churches that were in existence at the time; and some of them were being persecuted. The early Church, of course, was persecuted; and a lot of people needed to know who is in charge: Is Jesus really Lord, because on the ground it does not always look like it. In the day-to-day, hard-knock world we live in, where the Roman Empire was formally persecuting the Church and killing the apostles, and killing other people, can we believe that Jesus is Lord or can't we? John sees this vision to say: Yes, you can; and then he also...Jesus and the Spirit of God kind of pull back history's curtain for John...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And in Revelation 4 and 5, we see those majestic scenes in the throne room of God...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The Lamb, who is also the Lion. We did a series on that on *Groundwork* recently, how Jesus is both Lion and Lamb. He is on the throne, and the songs of: Worthy is the Lamb, and Holy, Holy, Holy, are being sung by all the angels and all the creatures, and even the martyrs of the Church are singing this song; and what is important to remember about Revelation 4 and 5, is that was not a vision of what *will* be...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is what is going on right now.

DAVE BAST

It is a vision of what is, yes. John says: I saw a door opened in heaven. There is a great contemporary British New Testament scholar named Richard Balcom, who points out in a little book on Revelation: Heaven does not mean the place you go when you die...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

Heaven, for Revelation, means ultimate reality. This is the reality behind the reality we see in this world. So, John is given a glimpse behind the scenes. It is sort of like you are at a theater and you are watching a stage production, and suddenly the back curtain is pulled aside and you see the director back there, who is directing everything that happens, and all the people and all the characters; and that is exactly what Revelation 4 and 5 is. God is the director...God is on the throne...he is triune: The Father, the Son, and the Spirit—they are all there; and as the ending of history, or the ongoing tide of history rolls along, often with natural disasters, often with death and destruction, nevertheless, God is still in control. That is the message.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, which is ironic, because I don't know about you, Dave, but I know that when I was a kid growing up, sometimes the book of Revelation scared me; or I went to some church services where the preachers used it to scare you; and talked about the mark of the beast and horrible things, and I found this book to be frightening, but that is exactly the opposite of what it is supposed to do...

DAVE BAST

Totally, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is supposed to comfort you.

DAVE BAST

Yes, it is; and so, we have one central truth that the whole book proclaims: God is in control. And one central exhortation that comes again and again throughout the book: Be faithful...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Hang in there; stay with it; don't deny; don't give up the ship, you know...

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, it is deeply, deeply comforting...*but*, what has it got to do with Christmas? What has it got to do with Advent? Well, it turns out that a central scene in the book of Revelation is *all* about Christmas, and it is one of the main reasons Jesus is the victor; and we are going to look at that in just a moment.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are talking today in this last Advent program about the book of Revelation, and the Christmas story that it contains, which might surprise you, but it is from Revelation Chapter 12, and here is that passage:

A great portent (or sign) appeared in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet; and on her head a crown of twelve stars. ²She was pregnant, and was crying out in birth pangs in the agony of giving birth. ³Then another portent appeared in heaven, a great red dragon with seven heads and tens horns, and seven crowns on his heads. ^{4a}His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven, and threw them to the earth.

SCOTT HOEZEE

^{4b}Then the dragon stood before the woman, who was about to bear a child, so that he might devour her child as soon as it was born. ⁵And she gave birth to a son, a male child, who was to rule all the nations with a rod of iron, but her child was snatched away, and taken to God and to his throne; ⁶and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, so that there she can be nourished for one thousand two hundred and sixty days.

DAVE BAST

There it is...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Merry Christmas!

DAVE BAST

That is the Christmas story from John's visionary, sort of fantastic, depiction of it in Revelation 12.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The ultimate message of Revelation—the book of Revelation—is comfort, and do not be afraid; but, this is kind of a terrifying scene. Here is this dragon with seven heads...it's got all of its mouths open...right in front of the woman, and as soon as she gives birth he is going to eat the baby! It kind of reminds you of the terrible scenes in Exodus when, you know, the babies of the Israelites are being snatched away and drowned in the Nile River. The idea that a newborn would be devoured at the moment of birth is horrifying; but spiritually speaking, John is saying, that was what was going on behind the scenes in Bethlehem and in that stall. You know, we often picture that as, oh, you know, *O' Holy Night*, *Silent Night*—holy night, it is so serene, and they are in a little barn and the cattle are lowing and mooing—the cows are mooing; but, peel back that curtain again, John is saying, and this is what you see: A horrible dragon representing Satan, ready to derail God's plan of salvation by destroying Mary's child.

DAVE BAST

Right; so, we do sometimes have to ask when we read Revelation: Who is who here? What is he trying to tell us with these fantastic figures; and he tells us outright a little bit later in this chapter, in verse 9 of Chapter 12...we didn't read that part yet...but he says: Well, the dragon is Satan. That is the devil. He is the enemy. He is the powerful one in terms of this world. He seems so mighty...that is what the horns are about. They are a symbol of power. He seems so glorious. He seems immortal. You cannot kill him, he has too many heads; and there he is, trying to destroy the child; and the woman who is to bear the child...well, clearly—I

think pretty clearly, if you know something of the Bible background—she is the people of Israel, at least in one sense; she is in heaven with the sun and the moon and twelve stars—that kind of brings to mind the dream that Joseph had of himself and his brothers; so, she is the people of Israel. She is the daughter of Eve. We saw in our first program...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

That Eve's promise was that a descendent one day would be born. She is Mary in human terms, because Mary is pregnant, as the Christmas story begins; and her baby will be in jeopardy because of the power of evil that wants to destroy him, and the child himself, that is pretty clear, too. He is the Messiah, he is the one who is going to rule; and he is protected. He is taken up into heaven; again, John just gives us the beginning and the end of the story; we can fill in the details from the Gospel, because we know, but Jesus is born, and he triumphs and ascends.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But, there is also more than a hint here of sort of an in-between time. So, the child is saved at birth; the dragon doesn't get to eat him; but the woman is sent away into a wilderness for 1,260 days, and there is a hint here that there is going to be some ongoing conflict. So, the child was saved, but the dragon isn't killed right off; in fact, here is the end of Revelation Chapter 12:

¹³So when the dragon saw that he had been thrown down to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child; ¹⁴but the woman was given two wings of the great eagle so that she could fly from the serpent into the wilderness to her place, where she is nourished for a time and times and a half-time. ¹⁵Then from his mouth, the serpent poured water like a river after the woman to sweep her away with the flood; ¹⁶but the earth came to the help of the woman. It opened its mouth and swallowed the river that the dragon had poured from his mouth. ¹⁷And then the dragon was angry with the woman, and went off to make war on the rest of her children, those who keep the commandments of God and hold the special testimony of Jesus.

DAVE BAST

Okay, so that is pretty wild...

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is very, very wild.

DAVE BAST

Again, we ask what is going on here? Well, what is going on, pretty clearly, because the dragon is stymied in his effort to destroy the child, he is unable to prevent the Messiah from coming and from living, dying, and rising again, and then ascending into heaven to accomplish the work of salvation, he turns his attention to what John calls the other children of the woman. So, now again, we have to think of the woman as the people of God—as the Church, in this case—the new Israel.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; yes, you just said earlier, Dave, that she is kind of...yes, okay, so she is Mary in the actual story. She is a daughter of Eve, but as you also said, Dave, she stands for Israel, and her children are Israel; but now, in this case, as in the last program...the third program in this series...we thought about the covenant and how God made a *new* covenant. So, God had made a covenant with Israel of old, and then in Jesus' blood he made a new covenant with the new Israel, which is the Church now, but they are going to be persecuted; and of course, John's readers got that very, very well, because John wrote this book to people in the early Church who were enduring a time of persecution, and who were wondering to themselves: Is this ever going to end? Can we really be sure that Jesus has won the final victory, because many days we feel defeated.

DAVE BAST

But the message John sees in this wilderness setting is that somehow the dragon is also prevented from destroying the woman and her children. So, just as he was not able to devour the boy child—the man child, John said; literally in that first part of Chapter 12, he is a boy baby and he is powerful, and he escapes. So, the woman and her other children will be protected, even though the floods may burst out against them, kind of like a rain-swollen wadi after a storm comes in the desert, she will nevertheless be spared—she will be delivered. What this has to say to us is what we want to explore in just a bit, as we wrap up this program.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And Dave, we are wrapping up this program, but also this four-part Advent series, looking at the Christmas story from other parts of the Bible, and in this program, from a very strange part of the Bible, the book of Revelation; and we have just seen that Revelation Chapter 12 tells us the same story we read in Luke 2, but from a heavenly, cosmic perspective, which is a little frightening, a little off-putting, a little scary even, but ultimately it is good news because it shows that despite the dragon—the serpent—the devil and his many attempts to stop God's plan of salvation that is climaxing in Jesus Christ, he could not prevent the Christ from being born. So, next he will try to rough up the Church, and he is going to be able to do that for a while, but he has a hedge around him. It is not license to kill—it is not a free rein...

DAVE BAST

Yes, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

This dragon is on a leash.

DAVE BAST

Right, exactly; so, what is the message for us here? I can think of several things that are both comforting and encouraging, and maybe challenging, as well for us as followers of Jesus; and the first thing certainly is we should recognize where we are. We are living in the wilderness; we are walking through the wilderness. Again, that is a theme that has rich resonance in the Bible. You think of the whole story of the Exodus; that is also the story of the Church. We are the children of the woman. We are being pursued; and the question is, how long? You raised that issue, Scott. How long is this going to go on? How long must we endure this? When is Jesus going to come back again, which is our hope? And John actually gives us a sort of clue here in his numbers, the numbers that he offers, which again are one of the real mysteries of Revelation; but they are symbolic. So, he mentions here 1,260 days, and a time, two times and a half-time; in other words, three and one-half, if we think of that as years, those two numbers are equivalent. Three and one-half years is about 1,260 days. Well, that is half of seven, and we know throughout Revelation the number seven stands for completeness or fullness...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

So, if you ask: How long do we have to be in the wilderness? The answer is: Not forever.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Not forever—a while, but not forever; and I think, Dave, in terms of our listening to this now, right on the cusp of Christmas in this series, you know, one of the things we try to do sometimes at Christmas is to shut out the wilderness—to shut out the bad news of the world. We want everything to be twinkly and sparkly and pretty, and we light the candles; and you know, we’ve got all of these cozy songs about gathering by the hearth and the holly and the ivy, and all of that; but really, we cannot and shouldn’t try to shut out the roaring of our fallen world or the persecution of the Church at Christmas, because Christmas is what gives us the hope the other 364 days a year. Christmas is part of what gives us the hope that, indeed, we are in the wilderness, but not forever; and that is something to rejoice at at Christmas as well.

DAVE BAST

Absolutely; and here is another truth, I think, that John would have us recognize and hang onto: Yes, we are being attacked, we are being pursued, but our enemy—our great enemy—has actually already been defeated...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

So, we didn’t read the middle part of Chapter 12—of Revelation 12—but if we go back to those verses, John describes this scene where there is a war in heaven between Michael and his angels and the dragon and his angels, and the dragon is thrown down and cast down to earth; and then John writes:

¹⁰I heard a loud voice in heaven proclaiming, “Now have the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Messiah, they have come; for the accuser of our comrades has been thrown down, who accuses them night and day before our God; ¹¹but they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; for they did not cling to life, even in the face of death. ¹²Rejoice, then, you heavens, and those who dwell in them; but woe to the earth and the sea, for the devil has come down to you with great wrath because he knows his time is short.

The victory has been won already.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is our Gospel hope. If it seems eerie or spooky or scary to reframe the Luke 2 story of Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem’s stall by overlaying it with this horrible scene of a woman and a dragon, and the dragon is going to eat the baby, that is not so odd or spooky, because this is our real hope. In fact, there is a sense in which you could sort of see the story Luke 2 tells about, you know, Mary and Joseph and the stable and the shepherds coming eventually—that is sort of the eye of the hurricane. All around them is this larger cosmic battle involving the archangel Michael and the devil and the dragon. All of that is going on, but all of it is depicted by John as a done deed. Things are tough, and the people to whom John wrote knew that acutely, because they were being persecuted. We often know it acutely. Christmas can often be a painful time for a lot of people. You know, maybe most weeks during the year you can sort of ignore the fact that you and your son and daughter are not getting along, but when Christmas comes and they don’t come home...

DAVE BAST

It hits you right in the face.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It hits you; or this is your first Christmas or your twentieth Christmas since your spouse died, and it is a time of the year when you miss him or you miss her a lot more than the average Thursday, let’s say. So, what good news it is to know that although we live in this wilderness of suffering, and even sometimes of active persecution, God’s got this thing. The Lamb has got this thing.

DAVE BAST

Right; and then there is this call that John issues through the voice that he hears in heaven, for us to be faithful, for us to conquer, to share that victory, which has been won, John says, through the blood of the Lamb; and we remember how the story proceeds, and where it leads, and how Jesus did defeat the enemy—he did overthrow Satan and break his power, but he did it by dying—he did it by accepting all the worst that the dragon could inflict on him, and he turned it into the power of God for salvation. So, we too will conquer; not by killing in the name of the Lord, but by willing to die, if need be, in the name of the Lord, and in that way we, too, will further the advance and hasten the coming again of the One for whom we long—the One that we look for.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We often say, or we *should* say...maybe we don't sometimes in the Church...but we often say at Advent that we are really between two advents. We are remembering the Advent—the arrival—advent means arrival—we remember the arrival, the coming of Jesus the first time, but we are also anticipating his second advent—his second arrival—his second coming, when he really will come to make all things right; and when it will be revealed to all that, indeed... You know, we often hear Handel's oratorio, *The Messiah*...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

At Christmastime, even though half of it is actually about Easter...

DAVE BAST

Right; but that is appropriate, too.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, but we tend to hear it at Christmas; and of course, the great *Hallelujah Chorus*: For the Lord God omnipotent reigneth; King of Kings, Lord of lords; and he shall reign forever and ever. That is the message of the book of Revelation when it tells the Christmas story, and that is our great hope.

DAVE BAST

Thanks be to God. Well, thank you, too, for listening and digging deeply into scripture with us on *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Dave Bast with Scott Hoezee, and we hope you will join us again next time as we continue to dig deeply into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives.

Connect with us at groundworkonline.com to share what *Groundwork* means to you, or tell us what you would like to hear on *Groundwork*.

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