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March 8, 2015

**ISIS and the Dragon's War against the Woman and her Children
Revelation 12:1-13:1**

Let me be perfectly clear right from the start what this message is **not** about. It is not about whether ISIS is representative of Islam as a whole or is a deviant aberration of that religion. It is not about what the military strategy of the United States and our allies should be in response to the threat posed by ISIS and other similar groups. It is not about whether what we are witnessing with ISIS is a sign of the impending close of history and the return of Jesus Christ.

My aim this morning is to put what is happening globally in perspective from a biblical and divine point of view. In other words, ***I want to get behind and beneath the terrorist tactics of ISIS and try to account for why this movement has emerged and what the ultimate aim is of the person who is responsible for it.***

Two other introductory comments are essential. **First**, it is important to remember that the vast majority of Muslim men and women around the globe are as horrified by the atrocities inflicted by ISIS as you and I are. Never forget that far more Muslims are being slaughtered by ISIS than are Christians. **Second**, our aim is to love our Muslim neighbors and to serve them and sacrifice for them and pray fervently for them in order that they might come to know the saving grace of Jesus Christ. If there should be a Muslim present today, or any who later listen to this sermon podcast, please know that we are passionately committed to your eternal welfare. We want you to experience the same saving kindness of Jesus Christ that he has so mercifully granted to us.

With that in mind, I have three basic theses or truths that I believe are biblical and must be understood by Christians everywhere.

(1) The assault by ISIS on Christians, as well as that against the Church by any and all terrorist and political organizations, is not fundamentally a battle between human beings over earthly power, property, or possessions, but is a spiritual conflict between God's people and the principalities and powers of this present darkness.

“Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Eph. 6:10-12).

By “flesh and blood” Paul means humanity (Mt. 16:17; Gal. 1:16; Heb. 2:14). Behind and beneath the daily, earthly struggles with people and institutions and ideologies and terrorist organizations is an ***unseen spiritual battle***. This is not to suggest that Paul intends to deny that we have earthly and human antagonists. The point is that even when we do fight them, Satan lurks behind their efforts (see Matt. 16:23).

The language Paul uses here (“rulers” and “authorities” and “cosmic powers” and “spiritual forces”) is standard terminology to describe Satan and his demonic hosts (see Eph. 1:21; 3:10; Col. 1:16; 2:10; Rom. 8:38). What we must never forget is that these are defeated and subjugated powers (see Eph. 1:19ff.).

(2) The ultimate and decisive victory in this war was achieved by Jesus Christ when he suffered for sins and was raised from the dead and was exalted and enthroned in authority over all earthly and demonic powers. Simply put, the war has already been won.

[Paul prays that we might know] “what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but

also in the one to come. And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all” (Eph. 1:19-23).

“But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved – and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 2:4-6).

Whatever victory Christ has achieved is also ours because we have been united to/with him by God the Father. Whatever exaltation and enthronement Christ has experienced is also ours as we have been “raised up with him” and God has “seated us with him in the heavenly places.” His authority has become ours as well.

(3) The loss of physical life, no matter how gruesome or barbaric it may be, together with the loss of possessions and property, no matter how valuable they are, is not a defeat for the people of God but a triumph, as the name of Jesus Christ is exalted and prized and treasured above all worldly gain.

“And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, ‘Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death’” (Rev. 12:10-11).

Don’t ever think that, by beheading 21 Coptic Christians, Satan has won. ***His “apparent” victory is in fact his defeat. The Christian’s apparent “defeat” is in fact his/her victory!*** Observe the connection between v. 10 and v. 11. It is precisely in giving up their physical, earthly life out of devotion to and love for Christ that the “salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ” are put on display.

When you witness a Christian man or woman being beheaded or burned alive or crucified or in some other gruesome fashion losing his/her earthly life, shout aloud:

“Christ has won! Christ has won! Behold the **salvation** that God has wrought, such that redeemed sinners prize their eternal forgiveness above and beyond the perpetuation of their earthly existence! Behold the **power** of God in sustaining his children in faith in the face of unimaginable suffering! Behold the sovereign **reign** of God on display as Christians happily enter the heavenly kingdom! Behold the **authority** of Christ in handing over to the enemy his people who gladly embrace their martyrdom rather than submit to the allure of health and wealth on this earth!”

What is ISIS and what do they want?

First, the primary aim of ISIS is to restore the Islamic **caliphate**. A caliphate is a **theocracy** in the most literal sense of that term. A theocracy is a geo-political entity that is governed strictly by divine law. This divine law, in the case of ISIS, is derived from the Koran and from the Hadith (a collection of sayings and traditions purportedly from Muhammad; it is second only to the Koran in terms of authority for Muslims), and is called Sharia.

Second, a caliphate cannot exist without the presence of a duly acknowledged **caliph**, or leader, who is believed to be in the line of succession to Muhammad. In the case of ISIS, the caliph is **Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi**. There will be only 12 legitimate caliphs and Baghdadi is supposedly the 8th.

Third, once Baghdadi was declared to be the caliph and the caliphate, or Muslim state, was established, ***all true Muslims must pledge their allegiance to him and try to immigrate to the territory where the caliph is imposing Sharia law.*** One of the primary reasons why so many are immigrating to Syria and Iraq is that Sharia law requires that once a caliphate, or Islamic state, is established, all faithful Muslims are required to live there and under its authority.

Fourth, unlike Al-Qaeda, in order for the caliph to rule and the caliphate to exist there must be a **geographic territory** within which they establish their authority. **ISIS is not Al-Qaeda**. Jihadism is not monolithic. Although those in ISIS still honor Osama bin Laden, Islamic terrorism has significantly evolved over the last ten years. Whereas bin Laden's organization was flexible and operated underground as a geographically diffuse network of autonomous cells, ISIS requires a territory for its legitimacy. If it loses its grip on territory in Syria and Iraq it ceases to be a caliphate and loses its authority. Take away its territory and all oaths of allegiance to it are no longer binding.

ISIS recognizes no nation/state other than itself and honors no geo-political boundaries. All territory must eventually come under rule of the caliph and become part of the caliphate. Even the Taliban is regarded by ISIS as apostate because they engaged in negotiations with the west and exchanged ambassadors with Saudi Arabia and Pakistan.

Fifth, ISIS is **extremely Islamic**, with emphasis on the word "extremely". While it has undoubtedly attracted to itself a variety of psychopaths, sadists, and misfits who are simply looking for a cause to make their lives feel meaningful, make no mistake: ISIS, at its core, is a religious movement. That the vast majority of Muslims worldwide reject ISIS must not be overlooked. But that doesn't mean ISIS isn't itself an Islamic movement.

Sixth, one of the principal aims of ISIS is to remake civilization today into a seventh-century legal society governed by the words of Muhammad. To make this happen, ISIS is committed to **a strictly literal imposition of the Koran and the Hadith on all people**. To deny the holiness of the Koran or the prophecies of Mohammed is considered to be apostasy, an offense punishable by death. The doctrine of *takfir*, or excommunication, is designed to distinguish between true Muslims and those who have become infidels. Muslims who wear Western clothes, shave their beards, use or sell alcohol, or vote in an election are apostate and are marked for death.

The result is that there are mass executions of Muslims on a regular basis that are rarely reported by the media. In other words, so-called Muslim "apostates" are the primary victims of ISIS.

Seventh, something needs to be said about the **barbaric** way that ISIS disposes of its enemies: often by mutilation or amputation of certain limbs, crucifixion, and beheadings. Those who are permitted to live are forced into slavery. There is nothing new in this. Throughout the medieval period, generally from the 7th century until the 16th, enemies of the faith were typically disposed of in these ways. Medieval tactics of warfare invariably included mass murders and mass rapes of a subjugated people.

Bernard Haykel, Princeton professor and the leading expert on the theology of ISIS, writes:

"Slavery, crucifixion, and beheadings are not something that freakish [jihadists] are cherry-picking from the medieval tradition." Islamic State fighters "are smack in the middle of the medieval tradition and are bringing it wholesale into the present day" (as cited by Graeme Wood in "What ISIS Really Wants," *The Atlantic*, March 201583).

The primary reason Al-Qaeda didn't impose slavery was its fear of public disdain and reaction. They wanted to retain as much public support as possible. Not ISIS. Thus, lapsed Muslims are to be executed and pagans are to be brought into slavery, the women being taken as concubines for the ISIS men.

What we are witnessing in the behavior of ISIS has lain dormant for hundreds of years but is now being awakened and applied with literal fervency. Every word of Muhammad is strictly interpreted and applied without qualification. Beheadings and crucifixions are regarded as sacred requirements.

Eighth, ISIS is driven by its belief about the **apocalypse**, or the end of the world. They are anxiously looking forward to the appearance of the **Mahdi**, a messianic-type figure who will lead Muslims to victory over all its enemies before the end of the world.

The most significant battle will occur in the Syrian city of Dabiq. ISIS has named its official magazine *Dabiq*. When ISIS conquered Dabiq there was wild celebration. ISIS now awaits the arrival of an enemy army there whose defeat will initiate the countdown to the apocalypse. An anti-Messiah, their version of the Antichrist, known as *Dajjal*, will come from eastern Iran and slaughter a great number of the caliphate's fighters. Only around 5,000 ISIS soldiers will survive and will eventually be cornered in Jerusalem. ISIS believes that just when the armies of the caliphate are on the verge of defeat, ***Jesus will return***, thrusting a spear into the Dajjal, and then lead the Muslims to victory!

ISIS and the Dragon's War against the Woman and her Children

What we are witnessing in our world today is far more than a political squabble between East and West. ***It is first and foremost a cosmic war between the goodness and greatness of God and his redemptive purpose in human history, on the one side, and the forces of evil and of the Devil, on the other.***

It would be impossible in the short time we have to provide an explanation of everything in Revelation 12, so let me give you a brief summation of the primary characters and events involved in this story. Look at this chapter as if it were a ***Three-Act Play. The story line spans the entire church age in which we live, from the time of Christ's birth until the time of his return at the close of history.***

Act One is found in vv. 1-6 where we read of the attempt by Satan, figuratively portrayed as "a great red dragon," to kill the Christ child immediately upon his birth.

Act Two is found in vv. 7-12 where the dragon, or Satan, together with his demonic hosts, are defeated by the archangel Michael and the holy angels. The authority and power of Michael is derived from the triumph of Jesus in his death and resurrection. This triumph is repeated in the martyrdom of Christians who conquer Satan by holding firmly to their testimony concerning Christ's saving grace, all the way to death.

Finally, ***Act Three*** is found in vv. 13-17 (or actually through 13:1) where Satan's war against the Church is described, a war that has continued for 2,000 years and is raging with even greater intensity in our own day.

The Woman and the Dragon (Rev. 12:1-6)

Act One . . . I'm convinced that the woman symbolizes what we might call *the believing messianic community*: both OT Israel and NT Church. In other words, ***the woman is both the community of faith that produced the Messiah (Israel) and the community of faith that subsequently follows and obeys him (the Church).*** John clearly envisioned an organic and spiritual continuity between OT Israel and the Church. ***They are one body of believers.***

The woman is pregnant and suffering ***birth pangs***. This represents the longing, expectation, and anticipation of the Messiah's birth on the part of those in the OT community of faith (cf. Luke 2:25-38), as well as the persecution of God's people during the period of the OT leading up to Christ's coming (the word translated "in pain" is *basanizo*, always a reference to suffering and persecution in the NT: Matthew 8:6,29; 14:24; Mark 5:7; 6:48; Luke 8:28; 2 Peter 2:8).

We then read in v. 3 of yet another "sign" in heaven: a ***great red dragon*** with seven heads, seven diadems, and ten horns. In the book of Revelation the "dragon" is typically a symbol for Satan, the one who both represents and energizes all individual and corporate opposition to the kingdom and persecution of the people of God (see 12:9; 20:2,10).

What is most important for our purposes is the second half of v. 4 where we read of Satan's determination to kill Jesus upon his birth. Surely this has in view the barbaric and heartless command from King Herod that all the male infants in Bethlehem, two years and younger, be killed (Matt. 2:16-18).

Vv. 5-6 briefly summarize the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and the loving protection by God of the believing community, the Church, throughout the course of this present age in which we live.

War in Heaven and Victory on Earth (Rev. 12:7-12)

Act Two . . . Vv. 7-12 are introduced by John to explain why the Woman had to flee into the wilderness (vv. 1-6). The reason why Satan's fury is now unleashed against the church of Jesus Christ *on earth* is that he has lost his place and position *in heaven*; his power has been curtailed.

When did (or when will) this expulsion of Satan and his demons from heaven occur? Some believe it will occur in the future, during the so-called "tribulation" period. Other say it is timeless: no specific moment in history is in view. It is simply a highly symbolic description of Satan's downfall.

I believe it is because of the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus that this defeat of the Devil occurs, indeed, *has already occurred*. Michael and his angels are given the task of expelling Satan consequent to the victory of Jesus ***at the time of his first coming*** (Luke 10:18). Christians carry on this victory over Satan (v. 11) as they stand on the achievements of the cross and boldly proclaim the authority of Jesus' name.

Satan's accusations no longer have any legal or moral force against God's people following his defeat at the cross. This is the meaning of his being "thrown down" and there no longer being "any place for them in heaven." Prior to the cross the accusations and slander of Satan had legal force, for the sin of those against whom he spoke had not been fully expiated. But now, subsequent to the cross, "there is no condemnation for those that are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1). Whatever ongoing work of accusation Satan may attempt is countered by the intercessory ministry of Jesus (Rom. 8:33-34; Heb. 7:25; 1 John 2:1-2).

The fact that Satan has been defeated, that the atoning death and resurrection of Jesus have stripped him of his legal right to accuse the brethren is evidence that the "kingdom" of God and the "authority" of Christ have been inaugurated. Thus ***12:10 does not merely anticipate the final and consummate coming of God's kingdom but celebrates the presence of the kingdom now.***

The point of v. 11 is to reassure the people of God, then and now, that suffering and even martyrdom at the hands of the devil is ***not defeat for them, but for him!*** It is an ironic victory, but a victory nonetheless.

What does it mean to say that Christians "conquer" or "overcome" the Devil?

- It does not mean we destroy him (not until Rev. 20). In fact, note well that the victory of these believers only serves to intensify the wrath of Satan directed against the earth (v. 12).
- It does not mean we put a permanent end to his attacks against us (cf. 1 Peter 5:8-9).
- It does not mean Satan can't kill you (through persecution; cf. Rev. 2:10; 6:9-11).

To "conquer" or "overcome" the Devil means you stand firmly in your faith in Christ and thereby find the strength to say No to sin. It means you stand victoriously in the triumph of Christ over sin and death. It means you rejoice and rest in the forgiveness of all sin, notwithstanding the Devil's efforts to accuse and shame you. Satan's goal is to induce you to deny Jesus, fall into despair, and yield to temptation. To affirm and adore Jesus and resist temptation is to triumph over him.

And how is this accomplished? In three ways:

(1) ***"by the blood of the Lamb"*** – This is simply a way of referring to Jesus in his capacity as Lord and Savior who triumphed over sin and death by the shedding of his blood on the cross. We conquer the enemy when we respond to his accusations by pointing to Christ at the right hand of the Father, who answers every charge by an appeal to his blood shed for sinners. This is simply another way of saying what Paul wrote in Romans 8:33-34 – ***"Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died – more than that, who was raised – who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us."***

(2) ***“by the word of their testimony”*** – We conquer Satan and put demons to flight when we boldly proclaim in our words and our lives that Jesus is more precious than all; when we live in such a way that he is displayed as a treasure and prize of infinite value, surpassing anything that the world, the flesh, or the devil might offer us.

The “word” of our “testimony” is also expressed in ***corporate praise and worship***. When we gather and passionately proclaim his triumph and the sufficiency of his life, death, and resurrection, Satan has no ground on which to stand.

People often ask: “Is there a particular style of worship, a unique kind of song, a certain decibel level that particularly puts the devil to flight?” No. The devil pays no attention to sound or sweat or physical gestures. But he is compelled to submit to the proclamation of truth and the presence of the Spirit and the authenticity and intensity of heart devotion to Jesus. Intimacy in worship (God’s love and ours), adoration, declaration of God’s power, grace, kindness, justice, etc., affirmation of our commitment, etc. do more to repel the enemy than anything. That is warfare worship. Nothing will do more to drive away demons than the intensity of intimacy with Jesus!

(3) ***“for they loved not their lives even unto death”*** – That is to say, there is something more precious to them than life itself. ***They didn’t love or cherish their earthly lives so much that they denied Jesus to preserve it.*** There is something of infinitely greater value to their souls than the preservation of their physical existence on this earth. That something is a someone: Jesus Christ! Satan is conquered and overcome and routed when Christian men and women love Jesus more than their earthly welfare, more than earthly pleasures, more than earthly convenience, more than peace, prosperity, comfort, etc.

So how might Satan win? He wins when we love our lives more than we love God. When we allow our hearts to be captured by earthly comfort and success and find that we would do anything and everything to preserve it, even if it means relegating Jesus to second place in our souls. Too many of us love our lives illegitimately. There is a good and legal love of life in which we celebrate it as God’s gift and are grateful. But here John is talking about an over-protective concern for personal comfort and convenience and peace and prosperity and the resultant energy and life-style designed to perpetuate it. ***Satan wins whenever we treasure anything more than Jesus.***

So, how does this perspective on life overcome the enemy? When you prioritize your life so that nothing means more to you than Christ, you deprive Satan of any legal right to your heart or mind; you undermine and short circuit his power to influence your soul. If Christ is your life, what can Satan possibly latch hold of? What is there in your life to which he can affix himself? To what can he appeal in your soul that would give him a power base from which to operate?

Satan’s War on the Church (Rev. 12:13-13:1)

Act Three . . . Failing to destroy the “child” (Jesus), Satan turns his destructive attention to the “woman”, i.e., the people of God = the church.

The point of the imagery is simply to remind us that no matter how devastating may be the loss of earthly life, no matter how grim may be the prospects of future prosperity and growth, the persecution of the church by Satan will never ultimately prevail. Revelation 12:13-17 is John’s way of echoing the words of Jesus: ***“I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it”*** (Matt. 16:18b).

Here in ***Revelation 12:17*** we find the most precise and riveting explanation for virtually everything we see in our world today: ISIS, militant atheism, rampant sexual immorality, imprisonment, oppressive laws that seek to restrict what Christians can say and do: “Then the dragon became furious with the woman and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus.”

But above all else, do not overlook *the crucial relationship between Revelation 12:17b and 13:1*. We read that Satan “stood on the sand of the sea” (17b). What an odd way to conclude a chapter! Odd indeed, until you realize what happens in Revelation 13:1 . . .

Satan stands on the shore that he might beckon forth from the sea the “beast” with “ten horns and seven heads, with ten diadems on its horns and blasphemous names on its heads” (Rev. 13:1).

Who or what is this “beast” and what relevance does it have for us today? What relationship, if any, does it sustain to ISIS? Many mistakenly think that the “beast” is *only* the end-time Anti-Christ. He is surely that. But he is more. When you read the description of the beast in v. 2 and following you discover that John has taken the four world kingdoms described in Daniel 7 and combined them in one composite figure: the beast from the sea.

In Daniel 7 we read about four beasts who rise up out of the sea. On the significance of the “sea” as symbolic of evil, chaos, and anti-kingdom powers with whom Yahweh must contend, see Isaiah 17:12,13; 51:9-10; 27:1; 57:20; Rev. 17:8; 21:1; Jer. 46:7ff.; Job 26:7-13. We should also note that the image of an evil sea monster always symbolizes *kingdoms* that oppose and oppress God’s people (especially Egypt and Pharaoh; see especially Pss. 74:13-14; 89:10; Isa. 30:7; 51:9; Ezek. 29:3; 32:2-3; Hab. 3:8-15).

What we can conclude is that *whereas the four beasts of Daniel 7 represent four historically successive world empires, the sea-beast of Revelation 13 is John’s creative composite of them all. All the evil characteristics of those four kingdoms are now embodied in the one sea-beast who becomes Satan’s principal agent in persecuting the people of God.* The point would seem to be that the “beast” of Revelation 13 is both **corporate** in nature, as well as **personal**.

That is to say, the beast is a symbol for the system of Satanically inspired evil, and thus opposition to the kingdom of God, that throughout history has manifested itself in a variety of forms, whether political, economic, military, social, philosophical, or religious. Anything and anyone that seeks to oppress, persecute, or destroy the Church is the beast!

What I’m saying, then, is that the beast is a trans-cultural, trans-temporal symbol for all individual and collective, Satanically-inspired, opposition to Jesus and his people. It is anything and everything (whether a principle, a person, or a power) utilized by the enemy to deceive and destroy the influence and advance of the kingdom of God.

Thus, the beast is, at one time, the Roman Empire; at another, the Arian heresy (4th century). The beast is, at one time, the emperor Decius (3rd century persecutor of the church); at another, evolutionary Darwinism. The beast is the medieval Roman Catholic papacy, modern Protestant liberalism, Marxism, the radical feminist movement, the Pelagian heresy of the 5th century, communism, Joseph Stalin, the gay rights movement, the 17th century Enlightenment, 18th century deism, Roe v. Wade, the state persecution of Christians in China, militant atheism in the 21st century and . . . ISIS!

Each of these is, individually and on its own, the Beast. All of these are, collectively and in unity, the Beast. Will there also be a **person** at the end of the age who embodies in consummate form all the characteristics of the many previous historical manifestations of the Beast? If so, should we call this person the Antichrist? Probably.

Conclusion

Our response to the global spread of terrorism or to any other expression of opposition to the kingdom of Christ is faith, confidence, and joy in the ultimate triumph of our Lord and Savior:

“Now [today, and every day until Christ returns] the salvation and power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come!” (Rev. 12:10).