

Discover Bible Studies

#25: Can I Find God's Church Today?

God has frequently given special messages to meet the needs of different generations: a message to help Adam and Eve after sin ruined their world, a message to the world before the cataclysm of the Flood, messages for Israel when Assyria or Babylon threatened. Jesus came with a special message for His generation, and God has sounded a special message for our day. Chapters 12 and 14 of Revelation summarize God's special message for us today. In this DISCOVER guide and the guide that follows, we will take a look at that message.

1. THE CHURCH ESTABLISHED BY JESUS

The life and teachings of Jesus established unity of belief and close fellowship in the apostolic church that He founded. The apostles formed an intimate relationship with the risen Christ. Paul pictured that close bond as a marriage relationship:

"I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him." -2 Corinthians 11:2. (Unless otherwise noted, all Scriptural texts in the DISCOVER guides are from the New International Version of the Bible [NIV].)

According to Paul, the Christian church is a pure woman, the bride of Christ, a fitting symbol of Christ's beloved church.

In the Old Testament the same metaphor is used to describe Israel, God's chosen people. God said to Israel: "as a bride you loved me" (Jeremiah 2:2); "I am your husband" (Jeremiah 3:14).

The book of Revelation also speaks of the church as a woman:

"A great and wondrous sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head." -Revelation 12:1.

(1) The woman is "clothed with the sun." This suggests a church shining like the sun, because of being clothed with Christ's glorious presence. Jesus, "the light of the world" (John 8:12), shines through the members of His church, and they in turn become "the light of the world" (Matthew 5:14).

(2) The woman has "the moon under her feet." The moon represents the reflected light of the gospel in the sacrifices and ceremonies of God's people in the Old Testament. The moon being "under her feet" suggests that the reflected light of the gospel has been superseded by Christ's ministry.

(3) The woman has "a crown of twelve stars on her head." Stars fittingly represent the twelve apostles, noble men whose testimony about Jesus shines brilliantly to this very day.

Clearly, the description of this woman indicates that John has in mind the transition from God's people, Israel, in the Old Testament to the Christian church of the New Testament that Jesus established. The sun, moon, and stars emphasize the light-giving ministry of the Christian church in sharing the Good News.

2. THE DRAMA OF SATAN'S DEFEAT

The entrance of the woman sets the stage for a great drama:

"She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth. Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on his heads. His tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth. The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that he might devour her child the moment it was born. She gave birth to a son, a male child, who will rule all the nations with an iron sceptre. And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne." -Revelation 12:2-5.

Three key figures participate in this drama:

- (1) The woman, already identified as the God's church.
- (2) The male child born to this woman "is snatched up to God and to his throne" and will someday "rule all nations." Jesus is the only child ever born in this world who has been taken up to God's throne and will someday rule all nations.
- (3) The dragon representing the Devil, or Satan.

"And there was war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven. THE GREAT DRAGON was hurled down-that ancient serpent, CALLED THE DEVIL, OR SATAN, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him." -Revelation 12:7-9.

The picture becomes clear once we understand the symbols. When the Devil and his angels "lost their place in heaven," they were "hurled to the earth." When Jesus was born in this world, the Devil tried to kill Jesus, the male child, as soon as He was born. He failed, and Jesus was "snatched up" to God's throne.

Satan then set out to annihilate the Christian church that Christ established. The apostle John, who wrote Revelation, saw glimpses of this great conflict between Christ and Satan raging on this earth. As the battle reaches a climax at Christ's crucifixion, John hears a voice shout from heaven:

"Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ. For the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down." -Revelation 12:10. (Compare John 12:31 and Luke 10:18.)

Jesus won a decisive victory over Satan at the cross. Then He confirmed the certainty of the plan of "salvation" and provided "power" for resisting the cunning of Satan. "The kingdom of God" was made secure, and the Saviour's "authority" to be our High Priest and King was confirmed.

"Now have come the salvation" declares that history's crowning event has arrived. The birth of Christ, the Saviour of the world, has taken place (verse 5). In spite of Satan's fierce temptations, Jesus has lived His sinless life, died and arose the victor over sin and death (verses 10). Satan has been forever defeated (verses 7-9). The Cross is magnified in its full power.

The announcement, "now has come the salvation," interests not only John, but the entire universe:

"Therefore rejoice, you heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to the earth and the sea, because the devil has gone down to you! He is filled with fury, because he knows that his time is short." -Revelation 12:12.

All heaven celebrated Jesus' victory. Christ destroyed any claim Satan may have once had to a place in heaven, and a defeated Satan lost forever his claim to our world.

3. THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH IN CONFLICT WITH SATAN

Before Jesus ascended to heaven He established the Christian church (symbolized by the woman). His death on the cross gave the Christian church the power to defeat Satan.

"They [the Christian church] overcame him [Satan] by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death." - Revelation 12:11.

Christ is now able to give His power, the fruit of His victory, to His church. Jesus decisively triumphed over Satan at the cross, and He now continues to triumph over Satan through His church. Three characteristics mark the triumphant church during the passing centuries of the Christian era:

(1) "They overcame him [Satan] by the blood of the Lamb." Jesus was caught up to God's throne so He could make His blood effective in the lives of his followers. He can clear the record of our sins, save us through His shed blood (1 John 1:7), and give us power to live a healthy Christian life day by day.

(2) "They did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death." "The blood of the Lamb" made them willing to die for Christ's cause; they did not "shrink from death." God had suffered greatly, so these Christian martyrs were also willing to suffer and die. Even children made the ultimate sacrifice. A story is told of a Christian mother who was thrown to the lions in a Roman arena because she gave her ultimate allegiance to Christ and not to the state. Her young daughter, instead of shrinking back in horror, felt a fervent devotion welling up inside. As the lions attacked her mother, she stood and cried, "I too am a Christian." Roman officials arrested her and hurled her to the hungry beasts.

(3) "They overcame him [Satan] . . . by the word of their testimony." Not the words, but the word of their testimony-the testimony of their lives, their living witness to the power of Jesus and His gospel. During the darkest hours of the Christian era an army of Christians-from the early church fathers to the Protestant reformers-overcame the worst the Devil could hurl at them, simply by the dynamic witness of their lives.

Revelation 12:11 pictures a victorious church filled with overcomers: apostles, martyrs, reformers, and other faithful Christians. Their kindness, faithfulness, courage, and triumph has thundered down the centuries and moved the world.

Since Satan failed to destroy Jesus when He lived on earth, he now seeks to destroy the Christ who lives in His church.

"When the dragon saw that he had been hurled to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child. The woman was given the two wings of a great eagle, so that she might fly to the place prepared for her in the desert, where she would be taken care of for a time, times and half a time, out of the serpent's reach. Then from his mouth the serpent spewed water like a river, to overtake the woman and sweep her away with the torrent. But the earth helped the woman by opening its mouth and swallowing the river that the dragon had spewed out of his mouth." Revelation 12:13-16.

Just as predicted, during the Dark Ages of the Christian era, Satan sent "a river" of persecution "to sweep" the church "away with the torrent." Satan wants to destroy Christ's influence by wiping out His church and uses every trick his evil genius can devise. The dragon represents Satan primarily. But remember that Satan uses human institutions in his role as dragon to attack God's people. He used the Roman king Herod in an attempt to murder the Christ child as soon as He was born. He worked through Christ's jealous religious rivals to stalk and harass the Saviour, and finally secure His execution on the cross. But Satan's apparent victory turned into Christ's greatest triumph.

Furious over his defeat at the Cross, Satan turned his wrath against the church that Jesus established. During the decades after Christ's crucifixion, thousands met their death in the Roman Coliseum, city squares, dungeons, and desert hideaways.

At first secular authorities initiated this persecution. But after the death of the apostles a gradual change crept into the church. During the second, third, and fourth centuries, many

in the church began to modify the truths Christ and His apostles had taught. Some apostate leaders even began to persecute those Christians who insisted on the purity of New Testament beliefs.

Scholars estimate that about 50 million of the faithful perished. In an effort to drown out the church and destroy it, the Devil sent "a river" of persecution "to sweep her [the church] away with the torrent." "But the earth helped the woman by . . . swallowing the river" of persecution and false doctrine.

During these medieval persecutions, the true church withdrew from the apostate leadership and took refuge in "the desert to a place prepared for her by God, where she might be taken care of for 1,260 days" (verse 6). This prediction was fulfilled during the 1260 years of persecution from A.D. 538 to 1798 (a day often stands for a year in symbolic Bible prophecy, see Ezekiel 4:6).

During these dark centuries, faithful Bible-believing Christians found refuge wherever they could; for example, in the Waldensian valleys of western Italy and eastern France, and in the Celtic church of the British Isles.

4. GOD'S CHURCH IN OUR DAY

This brings us to our day-to the true church of Christ since 1798. As might be expected, the Dragon is still angry with God's people. The great unseen war continues. In fact, Satan makes his greatest attack on the church just before Jesus comes.

"Then the dragon [the devil] was enraged at the woman [God's church] and went off to make war against the rest of her offspring-those who obey God's commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus." -Revelation 12:17.

This prophecy focuses on our day. Satan is enraged; he wages war on "the rest of" the woman's "offspring"-God's present-day people. Notice their identifying marks:

(1) These last-day believers "hold to the testimony of Jesus." Clinging faithfully to the pure doctrines of the Word of God, they testify for Jesus through dynamic Christian living.

(2) These last-day Christians are a people of prophecy. Receiving "the testimony of Jesus Christ" enabled John to write the book of Revelation (Revelation 1:1-3). The final group of believers receive a similar gift: direct testimonies from God through an earthly messenger. Their gift of prophecy focuses on God's revelation of their mission and their final destiny.

(3) These last-day Christians are also identified as "those who obey God's commandments." They not only defend the integrity of the Ten Commandments, they also obey them. God's love in their hearts produces joyful obedience (Romans 5:5; 13:8-10).

These last-day Christians follow the example of Christ and the early church in obeying the commandments of God. This greatly provokes the Dragon-the Devil. And he wages war

with "the rest of" the woman's "offspring" because they bear witness that love for God produces obedient disciples. As Jesus charged:

"If you love me, you will obey what I command." -John 14:15.

The lives of these last-day Christians show that it's possible to love God with all our hearts and our fellow human beings as ourselves. According to Jesus, these qualities, love for God and love for people, sum up God's Ten Commandments (Matthew 22:35-40).

The fourth of those commandments asks us to observe Saturday, the seventh day of the week, as the Sabbath. Since a love for Jesus has imbedded all ten of the commandments in their hearts, these last-day Christians are Sabbath-keepers.

The Sabbath is at the heart of God's final message to His people in Revelation, chapters 12, and 14:6-15. All the resources of heaven are arrayed behind the last-day Christians described in these chapters. A living Saviour is their constant companion, and the Holy Spirit works to "strengthen them with power in the inner man." The promise is sure. They will overcome Satan "by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony" (Revelation 12:11).

Do you wish to be one of these last-day Christians who "obey God's commandments" and "hold to the testimony of Jesus"? Why not make that decision just now?

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