The Woman in the Wilderness

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On the Wilderness Temptation, the 1,260 Days, and the Dove That Will Not Stop Hovering Until Chaos Becomes Order

The First Act of Grace

In the day that you eat of it, you shall surely die. That was the warning God gave Adam and Eve about the tree in the middle of the garden (Genesis 2:17). And then they ate of the tree. And they did not die. Not on the day. Not in the immediate sense the warning seemed to promise. And to me, that is the first act of grace God showed the human couple. Instead of executing the sentence, he covered them. He did something on their behalf. He acted for them, in the very moment of their shame, by clothing them with garments he made himself (Genesis 3:21). Grace was operating in the garden before the gate was even closed behind them.

And then God spoke directly to the woman about what was coming:

"To the woman He said: 'I will greatly multiply your sorrow and your conception; in pain you shall bring forth children; your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you'" (Genesis 3:16).

And to the serpent he spoke an even more important word:

"And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel" (Genesis 3:15).

He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel. Yes, you are going to go through pain, God was telling the woman. You are going to deliver a child in agony. But out of that agony, out of that suffering, comes the One who is going to crush the head of the serpent who started all of this. The very voice that whispered the lie in the garden is going to be silenced by the seed who comes through your line.

That is, to me, the rest of the story right there in Genesis 3. Yes, there will be suffering. Yes, the heel will be bruised across generations. But the head will be crushed in the end. There is good news embedded in the curse itself. Bittersweet, but I will take bittersweet over hopeless any day.

The Heel of Israel

And her seed was indeed continually bruised. Across the long generations of the Old Testament, we see Israel (the seed of the woman, carrying the promise forward toward the eventual Crusher) getting wounded on the heel over and over again. The serpent biting at Israel's heel. Israel suffering. Israel forgetting the trust in God. Israel finding herself in the wilderness over and over because she could not quite hold the trust steady against the serpent's continuous bite.

And then God acts on Israel's behalf in Egypt. After four hundred years of slavery, after the serpent's bite had taken away most of Israel's national strength, God delivers them with a mighty hand. The gods of the Egyptians are exposed as frauds, one by one, across the ten plagues. The God of Israel is shown to be the One who actually holds all the power. And they leave Egypt, following the cloud by day and the fire by night, the visible presence of God leading them out of the great Egyptian cities and out into the wilderness.

They go down into the Red Sea. Their captors decide they cannot let them go, too much economic value being lost, and pursue them into the sea. Moses stands at the shore with his staff, which represents the word of God that he had used across the plagues to do all the miracles. It is the word of God that has power over the waters. And here Moses raises the word over the Red Sea, and the sea parts. The children of Israel go down on dry land and come up safely on the other side. But the captors think they have power over the water too. They go down into the water, and the water covers them up. And here is what Ezekiel will later say about Pharaoh:

> Speak, and say, 'Thus says the Lord God: Behold, I am against you, O Pharaoh king of Egypt, O great monster who lies in the midst of his rivers, who has said, 'My River is my own; I have made it for myself.' (Ezekiel 29:3)

Pharaoh is a great sea-monster. That is Ezekiel's language. And sea-monsters belong in the sea. Oppressors who will not repent will find themselves back under the power of the waters they thought they could control. Pharaoh discovers the wrong end of the chaos-monster typology. The waters reclaim him for the deep he had been impersonating.

And Miriam, on the far shore, grabs her tambourine and begins to sing:

"I will sing to the Lord, for He has triumphed gloriously! The horse and its rider He has thrown into the sea!" (Exodus 15:1).

The horse and the rider are thrown into the sea. Everything that wants to bring us into slavery is delivered into the hands of the children of God. That is the great song of deliverance, sung on the far side of the waters, when the people see firsthand what the word of God can do over the chaos that had been their oppressor.

Bread From Heaven, Water From the Rock

And in Exodus 16, just one chapter after the great song of deliverance, the children of Israel are hungry, and they begin to murmur and complain. They accuse God of bringing them into the wilderness to kill them and their children.

For years I read this and thought, if I had seen what they had seen, I would have remained faithful. I would have held my trust. Surely. Only to live a few more days myself after I had said that, and discover that you do not have to live very long after you make those strident commitments to God before the serpent finds his way back to your ear. Half the time, the serpent finds me again right after I am done preaching here. I get in my truck. I drive home. I look at what the rest of my week looks like on my calendar. And the serpent shows up: come and bow down to me, and I will give you all the kingdoms of the earth (cf. Matthew 4:9). Mondays after a Sunday like this morning are dangerous mornings. I have learned to be watchful on them.

And so we should not be too quick to judge Israel. We are Israel, in our own measure. The same forgetting. The same grumbling. The same susceptibility to the serpent's voice when the immediate appetites assert themselves.

And what does God do? He rains down bread from heaven. Manna. Every day. Enough for that day. And on the sixth day, enough for two days, so that they would not have to gather on the seventh. Do you have an appetite for the manna from God? Do you have an appetite today for something from God that would actually be filling, an all-you-can-eat buffet of grace? That is the manna from heaven. And it is still being rained down on whoever has the appetite to gather it.

And in Exodus 17, they are thirsty, and they grumble again. And God brings water from the rock. And here is the diagnostic Paul gives us about that rock:

"All . . . drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ" (1 Corinthians 10:3–4).

That Rock was Christ. The Rock that gave water in the wilderness was Christ, in typological pre-figuration. The provision that sustained Israel across forty wilderness years was the same provision that would later sustain Israel-the-One, Jesus, across his own forty wilderness days, and would later still sustain Israel-the-Church across her own wilderness journey to the present moment. Same Rock. Same water. Same provision. Different historical moments of the same divine sustaining-action.

The Eagle's Wings

And at Sinai, God tells Israel what the deliverance had actually been about:

> You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine. And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. (Exodus 19:4–6)

I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself. The deliverance was not principally about geographic relocation from Egypt to Canaan. It was about Israel being borne to the Father himself. The wilderness was the place of the encounter, not the obstacle between Egypt and the destination. And the vocation was clear: a kingdom of priests, a holy nation, a special treasure to him above all the peoples.

And then Numbers 14 records how Israel responded to the spies' report about Canaan: They did not believe, and so they wandered another forty years in the wilderness. Forty years. Until the unbelieving generation died off and a new generation could carry the trust forward into the land. Moses himself, who at one point had also gotten sideways with the people and

apparently with his own trust in God, was not permitted to enter the promised land. He stood at the top of Mount Nebo and could see all the promises God had made spread out before him, but he could not enter in. And on the day the children of Israel finally crossed into the promised land, the manna stopped falling, the water from the rock stopped flowing, and they began to eat of the produce of the land they had inherited (Joshua 5:11–12). The provision shifted from wilderness-mode to inheritance-mode. Different season. Same Father.

That is, in roughly a few hundred words, the first five books of Moses. You're welcome; you do not have to read the begats. Well, you do. Go back through and finish them up. But for the chapter ahead, that is the substance you need to have in your mind.

Why Jesus?

And now we come to Matthew, the New Testament's careful re-presentation of all that history into the person of one Man. Look at how Matthew opens his Gospel. He gives us a genealogy. Forty-two generations from Abraham to Jesus, organized into three sets of fourteen. And the genealogy is not a parade of moral exemplars. It includes Tamar, who slept with her father-in-law Judah. It includes Rahab the prostitute. It includes Ruth the Moabite. It includes Bathsheba, identified only as the wife of Uriah whom David murdered. It includes Manasseh, the worst king of Judah, whose reign produced the Babylonian exile. That is the family tree of Jesus. Failures, scandals, foreign-blood, blood-stained kings. Why would anybody choose Jesus to be the King of Israel and the King of the universe? Look at his ancestry. Look at the failures and the lack of faith stretching back across centuries. Pick somebody else.

But the reality is that Jesus is representative of all of us. He represents Adam, the failed first man. He represents Israel, the failed chosen nation. He represents the seed of the woman, carrying the long-promised crushing-of-the-serpent into his own body. He carries the whole

failed human story inside him as he steps forward to do what no previous representative of humanity had been able to do: trust the Father all the way to the end, without grasping for an inappropriate use of power, even unto death.

And Matthew 1 names him precisely:

"And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21).

He will save His people from their sins. Not from Egypt. Not from Babylon. Not from Rome. God does not principally care about the civil conditions we find ourselves under. He cares about the power that actually has its grip on us, the power Paul names in Romans 7:

> I find then a law, that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good. For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? I thank God, through Jesus Christ our Lord! (Romans 7:21–25)

Who will deliver me from this body of death? Jesus, the saving One whose name itself means "the Lord saves." That is the deliverance Matthew 1:21 is announcing. Not from the political occupation. From the deeper occupation that no political revolution could ever address.

The Serpent Tries to Crush the Seed

And immediately after the announcement of Jesus's birth, the serpent makes his move. Herod, the puppet-king of Judea under Roman authority, hears about the birth and reaches out with henchmen to destroy the child. The serpent is there to crush the seed of the woman as soon as it is born. When your faith begins to rise up, you had better expect that there is going to be a counter-move, the seed of the serpent attempting to crush the seed of the woman before the seed

of the woman can grow into anything that threatens the serpent's territory. But the promise of Genesis 3:15 is that the seed of the woman will eventually crush the serpent's head, and that promise holds even in the immediate threat of Herod's reach.

And the angel ministers to Joseph and instructs him to flee with Mary and the infant Jesus into Egypt. And so Joseph carries the Son of Judah down into Egypt, just like the original Joseph in Genesis 37–50, who had carried the family of Judah and all the brothers down into Egypt to save them from famine. The pattern is being repeated. A different Joseph. A different Son. The same protective journey south into Egypt at a moment of mortal threat.

And when Herod dies, *Joseph brings the family back into the land*, settling in Galilee, and Matthew comments:

"And [He] came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, 'He shall be called a Nazarene'" (Matthew 2:23).

And Matthew 2 has already cited Hosea 11:1, out of Egypt I called My Son, applying to Jesus what Hosea had originally said of Israel coming out of Egypt under Moses. Jesus, in Matthew's careful presentation, is now the single individual who embodies the entire history of Israel. Out of Egypt have I called My Son. He is Israel-reduced-to-One. And the One is now going to walk through every step that Israel walked through, doing successfully what Israel did unsuccessfully.

The Baptism of the New Adam

And then John the Baptist appears in the wilderness. Crowds come out from Jerusalem and all Judea to be baptized of him. And John warns the Pharisees and Sadducees who come out:

> Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance . . . And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore

every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. (Matthew 3:7–8, 10)

Brood of vipers. Snakes. John identifies the religious establishment of Israel as bearing the family resemblance of the original serpent in the garden. Oppressors who do not want to give up their oppression will always be liable to this judgment. Do not ever think the wrath of God falls on innocent people who just did not always get it right. The wrath of God falls on confirmed oppressors who will not repent, who will not bring forth fruit of repentance, but who only want to control. The ax is being laid to the root, which echoes back to Isaiah 5, where Israel's leadership had been judged for failing to commit themselves to the true ways of God and instead beginning to oppress the very people they were supposed to be shepherding (Isaiah 5:1–7). The pattern of judgment is consistent across centuries. Leadership that turns oppressive eventually meets the ax that John was about to announce was being laid to the root of the tree.

And then Jesus comes to John for baptism. John resists. You are coming to me? I have need to be baptized of You. And Jesus says:

"Permit it to be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness" (Matthew 3:15).

To fulfill all righteousness. Jesus is now, in this single act, completing the typological journey of Israel through the waters. Israel went down into the Red Sea. Now Israel-the-One goes down into the Jordan. Israel came up on the other side to face the wilderness. Now Israel-the-One comes up to face the wilderness too. Israel was identified at Sinai as God's son (Exodus 4:22: "Israel is My son, My firstborn"). Now Jesus is identified at his baptism as the same Father's Son:

“And suddenly a voice came from heaven, saying, ‘This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased’” (Matthew 3:17).

This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. The Father is declaring at the baptism what had been true from before the foundation of the world: that this is the Son, the new Adam, the new Israel, the new humanity in concentrated form. Everything on this side of the baptismal waters is old creation. Everything that emerges from the waters belongs to the new. And Paul will later make exactly this connection in Romans 6:

“Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:4).

New creatures. New life. That is what comes up out of the baptismal waters, both for Jesus, in the original moment, and for every one of us who has shared in the same baptismal pattern.

Led up to Be Tempted

And immediately after the baptism, Jesus is led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil (Matthew 4:1). The phrase led up itself echoes the Exodus account: God led Israel up out of Egypt and into the wilderness, in language Exodus 13:18 uses. Same verb. Same direction. Same pattern. And do not ever think that when you are being tested, it is because you have done something wrong. The Spirit will lead us up. Testing is part of the structure of life as a child of God in this present age. It is not the sign of God’s displeasure. It is, more often, the sign of God’s commissioning. The Spirit leads us up into the place where the testing happens, exactly as the Spirit led Jesus.

And for forty days Jesus fasted. Just as Israel was tested for forty years in the wilderness. And just as Moses fasted forty days on the mountain before receiving the law. Forty is the number Matthew is invoking. The number of the wilderness journey. The number of the testing-and-formation period before the inheritance.

And after forty days, the tempter comes. And the first temptation:

"Now when the tempter came to Him, he said, 'If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread'" (Matthew 4:3).

If You are the Son of God. Notice the if. Jesus had just heard, audibly, from the Father at his baptism; this is My beloved Son. And just a few days later, the serpent's voice is asking him to doubt what the Father had said. Did God really say . . . Same question the serpent asked Eve in the garden (Genesis 3:1). Same strategy. Same destabilization-tactic. Do not be surprised if you have doubts about the great miracles God has done in your life, just a few days after they happen. The serpent specializes in producing those doubts. He has been at this work for a long time.

And the specific temptation is to use power to satisfy immediate hunger. Command that these stones become bread. Moses turned a rock into water: what about You, big guy? And the serpent's voice always sounds plausible. The devil will always have something that might be right but is not quite. He will know exactly how to play on your passions and on mine. On my hungers and desires. On yours. And Jesus's response is to quote Deuteronomy 8, Moses's farewell address to Israel about why God had taken them through the wilderness for forty years:

"But He answered and said, 'It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.'" (Matthew 4:4, quoting Deuteronomy 8:3).

Man shall not live by bread alone. There is something more real than our immediate appetites. There is something more real than our suffering, our hungers, our urgent desires. And here is the part of Deuteronomy 8 that Jesus is invoking by implication:

> And you shall remember that the Lord your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, to humble you and test you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. So He humbled you, allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord. (Deuteronomy 8:2–3)

To test you, to know what was in your heart. Sometimes we think God already knows everything that is going to happen. Maybe he does. He might have an abacus and know what decisions you and I will make. But it is striking that Moses says God puts us in the wilderness to know what is in our hearts, whether we will serve him or not. There is something God wants to discover in our trials and our temptations and our hungers. Will we trust him, or will we grab at the immediacy of our own power and strength? That is the question the testing exists to answer. And the answering of the question is itself part of the formation that the wilderness was designed to produce.

The Pinnacle of the Temple

And the second temptation moves the scene:

> Then the devil took Him up into the holy city, set Him on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to Him, “If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down. For it is written: ‘He shall give His angels charge over you,’ and, ‘In their hands they shall bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone.’” (Matthew 4:5–6)

The devil quotes Scripture too. He probably knows Scripture better than you and I do. Be careful with the assumption that everyone who quotes a verse is operating from the Spirit. The verse the devil is quoting is Psalm 91, a beautiful Psalm about God's protection of the faithful through every danger. And the angel-bearing imagery of Psalm 91 actually echoes Exodus 19:4, "I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself." The promise was that God would carry Israel through the wilderness without letting them be destroyed, until the destination was reached. The psalmist had picked up that promise and applied it to the king who walked with God through every threat.

The devil's distortion is not in the content of the verse. It is in the application. He is asking Jesus to manufacture a danger and then test whether God will deliver him from it. To throw himself off the temple pinnacle as a spectacular self-display, and force the Father to send the angels to catch him in front of the watching crowd. That is the test of God, manufacturing a situation that requires divine intervention as proof that the divine intervention will actually come.

And Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 6:

"Jesus said to him, 'It is written again, 'You shall not tempt the Lord your God.'"" (Matthew 4:7, quoting Deuteronomy 6:16).

You shall not tempt the Lord your God. God is not a genie at our disposal. That is the god of the surrounding pagan religions. You rub the lamp and you get what you want. That is not the God we serve. He operates from his own plan. He is working that plan for the good of the universe. We do not rub his lamp and force him to do what we want. We cannot pull a Scripture out of context and declare "this is the one I am standing on," expecting an automatic miracle on demand.

And let me make this pastorally specific to a problem I see in Western Christianity, particularly in our showmanship-driven version of it. A musician we have all heard has a song with a title roughly along the lines of Instead of a Show, pointing exactly at this temptation in our context. The Western Christian world particularly has to get away from showmanship. We have got to make sure that anything we are doing is not principally a promotion, a marketing plan, a twelve-step program for church success. It is supposed to be driven by the passions of individuals within the church that have been moved by the Holy Spirit to do specific kingdom-work. When we operate like that, we can hold onto the promise that we will not dash our foot against the stone, that the angels will be sent to bear us up. But the protection is for the people who are operating in God's actual movement, not for the people who have manufactured a situation in order to display a divine rescue. The first is faith. The second is presumption. And Jesus's quotation rules out the second emphatically.

The High Mountain

> And the third temptation moves the scene one more time:
>
> Again, the devil took Him up on an exceedingly high mountain, and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to Him, "All these things I will give You if You will fall down and worship me." (Matthew 4:8–9)

The kingdoms of the world and their glory. Notice, kingdoms, plural. There is glory out there. There is glory in the kingdoms. There is a way for us to take on the image and the glory of the kingdoms we think are so impressive. But the kingdoms of men, plural, are not to be compared to the kingdom of heaven, singular, which John the Baptist had announced at the opening of Matthew 3, and which Jesus will declare at the end of Matthew 4 has now drawn near

(Matthew 4:17). Singular kingdom. The kingdoms of this earth, in their multiplicity and their competing glories, cannot compare to the singular kingdom of God. Their glory cannot compare.

And the temptation is the kingdoms-of-this-world shortcut. If you will fall down and worship me, all of these will be yours. The devil is offering Jesus exactly what was promised to him anyway: Psalm 2 had said the nations would be his inheritance, the ends of the earth his possession. The Servant Songs of Isaiah had said the kings of the earth would come and bow down. The Messianic promise included the eventual gathering of all the kingdoms under the rule of the rightful King. But the devil was offering the destination through a shortcut. Take it through worship of me. Take it by the imperial-violence method that has produced every other surviving kingdom in history. Take it by the sword. Take it by the political maneuver. Take it by the Caesar-and-Alexander method that the surrounding world already understands.

And Jesus quotes again, from Deuteronomy 6:

"Then Jesus said to him, 'Away with you, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only you shall serve.'" (Matthew 4:10, quoting Deuteronomy 6:13).

You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only you shall serve. Notice the word "only." In Deuteronomy 6:13's original Hebrew, the word "only" is not in the source text: Jesus is adding it, sharpening the original command into an even more pointed exclusivity. There are no other substitutes to the worship of God. God alone. Period. No additional masters tolerated. No mammon-and-God arrangement. No flag-and-cross fusion. No Caesar-and-Christ split-loyalty. God only.

And the devil leaves:

"Then the devil left Him, and behold, angels came and ministered to Him" (Matthew 4:11).

The angels came and ministered to him. The promise that the angels would come was kept, but not in the manufactured-spectacle form the devil had been pressing for. The angels came naturally, in the wake of the faithful trust, after the testing had been completed. Like Elijah after the wilderness journey of forty days, who was fed by angels at the cave (1 Kings 19:5–8). Like Israel across the forty years in the wilderness, who were sustained by angelic provision under the cloud and the fire. Faithful trust through the testing produces the angelic ministry on the far side. Presumption tries to force the ministry up front, and forfeits both the test and the ministry.

The Power of the Tempter Broken

And this is where Matthew's narrative ties Jesus's wilderness experience to ours. In this one faithful One, Jesus, the power of Satan to dominate the minds and hearts of humanity has been broken. We sing about it: when Jesus comes, the tempter's power is broken. When Jesus comes, my fears are wiped away. He is the faithful One. He has broken the power of the tempter in our lives.

But, and the writer of Hebrews makes this honest in a way every realistic Christian needs to hold onto, we do not yet see all things put under our feet:

> "You have put all things in subjection under his feet." For in that He put all in subjection under him, He left nothing that is not put under him. But now we do not yet see all things put under him. But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, for the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor . . . (Hebrews 2:8–9)

We do not yet see all things put under his feet. But we see Jesus, crowned with glory and honor. He suffered. He broke the power. He crushed the serpent's head, even as the serpent bruised his heel at the cross. And he said to every one of us, now take up your cross and follow

Me (cf. Matthew 16:24). The breaking of the serpent's power in his life becomes the pattern for the breaking of the serpent's power in ours, day by day, as we walk out the testing we have been led into and refuse the same shortcuts he refused.

The Woman Clothed With the Sun

And the apocalyptic vision of all this comes in Revelation 12. Watch how the whole biblical story gets gathered up into a single cosmic image:

> Now a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a garland of twelve stars. Then being with child, she cried out in labor and in pain to give birth. (Revelation 12:1–2)

A woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a garland of twelve stars. There has been long debate about who this woman is: Israel, the church, Mary specifically, the faithful people of God across all generations. I think this is all the faithful, both Israel that produced the Messiah and the church that carries his life forward. The sun, moon, and twelve stars echo Joseph's dream in Genesis 37:9–10, where the same imagery represented the patriarchal family of Israel. And the labor pains are the long agony of bringing forth the Messianic seed across the whole sweep of redemptive history.

And how long is a normal human pregnancy? Nine months. But how many weeks? Forty. And the number forty is exactly the number the Bible has been using across the whole wilderness-testing tradition. Forty years for Israel. Forty days for Moses on Sinai. Forty days for Elijah at Horeb. Forty days for Jesus in the wilderness. Forty weeks for the woman bringing forth the seed. The number is not accidental. The wilderness journey, the testing period, the time of bringing forth, all of them operate on the same divine arithmetic. Forty is the formation-number.

And then the dragon enters the scene:

> And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great, fiery red dragon having seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems on his heads. His tail drew a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was ready to give birth, to devour her Child as soon as it was born. She bore a male Child who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron. And her Child was caught up to God and His throne. (Revelation 12:3–5)

The dragon stood before the woman to devour her Child as soon as it was born. That is Genesis 3:15 in apocalyptic form. The serpent-now-grown-into-a-dragon, attempting to crush the seed of the woman before the seed could grow into the head-crusher. And the image gathers up the whole biblical pattern: Pharaoh trying to kill the Hebrew boys at the Nile. Herod trying to kill the boys of Bethlehem. Every historical attempt by the dragon's vessels to destroy the Messianic line before it could produce the Messiah. Same pattern. Different historical agents. Same dragon underneath.

And the male Child, Jesus, was caught up to God and to his throne. The ascension, in compressed apocalyptic form. The seed of the woman, having crushed the serpent's head at the cross and been vindicated in the resurrection, takes his seat at the Father's right hand. That part is settled. The dragon could not prevent it.

The 1,260 Days

But the woman is not yet at the destination. Listen to what happens next:

"Then the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, that they should feed her there one thousand two hundred and sixty days" (Revelation 12:6).

One thousand two hundred and sixty days. Hold on to that number. Three and a half years, by the apocalyptic calendar of 360-day years. Forty-two months, in the parallel reckoning

later in Revelation. A time, times, and half a time, in Daniel's prophetic vocabulary that Revelation is invoking. This is the period of the church's wilderness journey, from the ascension of the Child to the consummation of all things.

And the math works out exactly. Take a time: 360 days, the apocalyptic year. Add times: two more, totaling 720. Add half a time: 180. Total: 1,260 days. Same number, expressed in different vocabularies, across multiple passages in Daniel and Revelation. And the consistency is not accidental. It is the same period, the period between the ascension and the consummation. The period the church lives in. The wilderness period during which we, like Israel before us, are tested as to whether we will trust the Father or grasp at the serpent's shortcuts.

And the woman is being fed during this period. Manna in the wilderness. Same provision that sustained Israel under Moses. Same Rock that gave water to Israel and is now Christ for us. The Father has prepared the place. The Father provides the sustenance. The Father carries the woman through the wilderness on eagles' wings. Revelation 12 makes the connection explicit:

> But the woman was given two wings of a great eagle, that she might fly into the wilderness to her place, where she is nourished for a time and times and half a time, from the presence of the serpent. (Revelation 12:14)

Two wings of a great eagle, that she might fly into the wilderness to her place, where she is nourished. That is Exodus 19:4 in apocalyptic form. "I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself." The Father's deliverance of Israel into the wilderness for formation is the same Father's deliverance of the church into the wilderness for the same formation. Different historical era. Same pattern. And we are still living inside the 1,260-day period. Still being fed by the Father in the wilderness. Still being formed for the inheritance that has been promised but not yet fully received.

War in Heaven

And between the description of the woman's flight and the description of her wilderness sustenance, Revelation 12 inserts a parallel image of cosmic conflict:

> And war broke out in heaven: Michael and his angels fought with the dragon; and the dragon and his angels fought, but they did not prevail, nor was a place found for them in heaven any longer. So the great dragon was cast out, that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; he was cast to the earth, and his angels were cast out with him. Then I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, "Now salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of His Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren, who accused them before our God day and night, has been cast down. And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives to the death." (Revelation 12:7–11)

They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives to the death. That is the kingdom-pattern in apocalyptic concentration. The dragon is overcome by the same three-fold instrument: the blood of the Lamb (which is Jesus's cross-shaped self-giving), the word of the saints' testimony (which is the same cross-shaped speech the apostles were sent out to proclaim), and the willingness of the saints not to love their own lives more than the kingdom-pattern itself. Same pattern. Same self-giving. Same cruciform shape. And the dragon (who had operated by accusation, by violence, by the imperial-power-shortcut) is overcome by what looks, in human terms, like the opposite of all three.

And the dragon is now thrown down to the earth. Cast out of heaven. His access to the heavenly courts as the accuser revoked. But, and this is honest, he is not yet eliminated from the

earth. He has been cast down here. And he knows his time is short. And his rage on earth, against the woman and her offspring, intensifies precisely because his cosmic position has been broken.

> Therefore rejoice, O heavens, and you who dwell in them! Woe to the inhabitants of the earth and the sea! For the devil has come down to you, having great wrath, because he knows that he has a short time. (Revelation 12:12)

He has come down to you, having great wrath, because he knows that he has a short time. That is the diagnostic for the present age in which we live. The cosmic battle has been decided. The dragon's accusation has been silenced in the heavenly courts. But the on-the-ground rage continues, and intensifies precisely because the cosmic decision has been made against him. The wilderness journey of the church takes place inside the time-frame of an enemy whose defeat has been decreed but whose final removal has not yet been executed. That is the honest description of our present pastoral moment.

The Voice of the Dragon

And Revelation 13, which I will not preach today but which is implied in the trajectory of Revelation 12, describes the dragon's continued on-the-ground operation through the beasts. The first beast rises from the sea with the dragon's authority. The second beast performs signs to deceive the inhabitants of the earth. And the dragon speaks great words through these vessels, trying to convince the people of God to turn aside from the One they have been entrusted to.

They might even quote verses. They might even quote 2 Corinthians. They might even try to convince us they are Jesus-people. We are going into an election year. Do not think the dragon's voice is what needs to be your principal authority for how to live as a kingdom-citizen. I am not anti-political: we live in a great country, we get to vote, civic engagement matters. But do not think electoral outcomes are going to change your life one bit when it comes to the

essential things, the hungers of your soul that no political program has ever been designed to feed. The dragon's vessels may have programs to feed the hunger in the belly. They will never have programs to feed the hunger in the soul. They will never give you all that you can gather up in a day: manna-style, sufficient for the day's needs, with nothing left over for the one who gathered much and no lack for the one who gathered little (cf. Exodus 16:18; 2 Corinthians 8:15). That arrangement belongs to a different kingdom.

Do you want all that you actually need? Do not put your dependence on any other thing than the One who is able. The kingdom, singular, not the kingdoms: plural. The dragon will speak that he has the answers, but what really comes out of his mouth is a flood, the same chaotic waters from which all the trouble began. And that Leviathan (the crooked serpent who lies in the midst of the waters, dealing with the waters as his element) he is not tamed by war, not by the sword, not by the gods-killing-monsters method the ancient Near East assumed was necessary. He is tamed by the dove. The same dove that hovered over the chaotic waters at the beginning of creation. The same dove that descended on Jesus at his baptism. The same dove-Spirit that hovers over us as we walk through the testing of this present age. The dove was incessant. It just would not go away. It hovered over the waters until order came out of chaos. And the dove is still hovering. Still patient. Still doing the slow ordering-work that violence could never have done.

Stand on the Sand

And here is the closing image of Revelation 12, or, depending on how the translators break the chapters, the opening image of Revelation 13:

> Then the dragon was enraged with the woman, and he went to make war with the rest of her offspring, who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus

Christ. And he stood on the sand of the sea. (Revelation 12:17; some translations read "And I stood on the sand of the sea")

And he stood on the sand of the sea. Some translations have I, John, stood on the sand of the sea. Either way, the image is significant. Like Moses standing at the shore of the Red Sea watching the chariots of Pharaoh be swallowed by the waters. Like John standing at the threshold of the apocalyptic vision, watching the dragon's vessels rise from the same chaotic deep that has produced every imperial oppressor across human history. And the next verse describes what John saw:

"Then I stood on the sand of the sea. And I saw a beast rising up out of the sea, having seven heads and ten horns, and on his horns ten crowns, and on his heads a blasphemous name" (Revelation 13:1).

A beast rising up out of the sea. It is like a bad horror sequel. Just when you think the antagonist has been finally defeated: he comes back, in a new form, with new vessels. You thought the serpent had been crushed in Genesis 3:15. You thought the seed of the woman had won. You thought Pharaoh had been drowned in the Red Sea. You thought Babylon had been overthrown. You thought Rome would be the last imperial expression of the dragon-pattern. And then the beast rises up out of the sea. And we discover that the dragon has more vessels in reserve than we had anticipated. The chaotic waters keep producing new imperial expressions of the same underlying spirit.

And the people of God just have to be faithful, like Jesus was faithful in the wilderness. Through the testing. Through the wilderness journey. Trusting the Lord. Trusting his words. And at the end of this thing, the oppressor will cease, and all that will be left will be the faithful of

God. And I want to say something pastorally encouraging here: that the faithful, at the end, are going to be more than you think. God wins.

And the great vision of Revelation 7 makes this explicit:

> After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, with palm branches in their hands . . . (Revelation 7:9)

A great multitude which no one could number. John had heard 144,000 from the twelve tribes of Israel. But when he turned to see what the voice had announced, he saw an innumerable company, from every nation and tribe and people and tongue. The accounting from the Father's perspective is more generous than the human ear can register. God wins. He is going to win. He is going to win in your life and in the lives of those you love. From cradle to grave, the Father is going to make sure every man, woman, and child has an opportunity to hear his great word and to choose between the kingdoms of this world and the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ (cf. Revelation 11:15).

Where Are You in Your 1,260 Days?

Where are you in your forty-two-month journey? Your 1,260-day suffering? Your forty-day wilderness hunger fast? God means to minister to you through angels, in the season when the testing is at its sharpest. I do not know when your answer is coming. But the answer is coming. Deliverance will come. And if it does not come fully in this life, there is a God who keeps a ledger, who knows those who are his, who is, in Malachi's vocabulary, making up his jewels (Malachi 3:17).

Let us stand and be the kings the Father commissioned us to be. Let us be the priests and serve. Let us be the prophets and speak. Now, that might mean death. Our boldness does not

mean meanness. It means that we speak with the authority God has given us into one another's lives, that God is able to provide sustenance in the wilderness for whoever will trust him.

And let the dove keep hovering. Let the patient Spirit keep doing the slow ordering-work over the chaotic waters of our present moment. Let the manna keep falling: fresh every morning, sufficient for the day, generous for whoever gathers. Let the eagles' wings keep carrying us further into the wilderness, toward the Father who has been bringing his people to himself across every generation of the long redemptive arc. And let us be faithful, in our forty days, as the One we follow was faithful in his: refusing the shortcuts, trusting the Father, walking through the testing, and waiting for the angels to come and minister at the appointed time. He keeps the appointment. He always has. He always will. Amen.