

# The Church in the Wilderness

Valley Center Seventh-day Adventist Church

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*The notes (Presentation Page xx) are a reference to the Presentation version of this sermon.*

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(Presentation Page 1) Previously in Revelation 12 we've studied verses 7-9 and verses 1-5. Verses 7-9 describe the outbreak of war in heaven, at some unknown time in the past, with one of God's top angels, Lucifer, called the "dragon" and Satan, somehow coming to the idea that he was equal with God and deserved the honor and worship that alone belongs to the Creator. We discovered that Jesus, under the name "Michael" was the special object of Satan's hatred.

(Presentation Page 2-4) Verses 1-5 of Revelation 12 depict God's faithful church at the time of Jesus' nativity, within the symbol of a virtuous woman clothed with the sun (having the righteousness of God), standing on the moon (founded on the Old Testament system of sacrifices which "reflected" God's plan of salvation, and having twelve stars in her garland, representing the twelve tribes of Israel.

These verses go on to describe Satan's attack against Jesus at His birth, which history records as King Herod's order to put to death the infants two years and younger who lived in Bethlehem. By this time, warned by God, Mary, Joseph and Jesus were in Egypt. In sweeping language, just skimming the highlights, verse 5 covers the whole of Jesus' life on earth, from His birth to His ascension. "And she bore a male Child Who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron. And her Child was caught up ("raptured") to God and to His throne."

(Presentation Page 5) Last week we discussed how this picture, of the dragon or Satan standing ready to attack, represents Satan's destructive activity not only against Jesus as soon as He was born, but his malevolent designs against the world as soon as it was born, the covenant people of the Old Testament as soon as God called Abraham, the hindrances posed against the Seventh-day Adventist Church in its infancy and his attack against anyone as soon as they are reborn.

(Presentation Page 6) We might have also employed this depiction as representing Satan's attack against the New Testament Church "as soon as it was born," for that surely happened, and that thought leads us into our study today. Verse six continues, (Presentation Page 7) "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." Today we will follow the blood-stained trail of God's beleaguered and persecuted followers through the centuries, suffering mistreatment by pagan Rome in the early centuries of Christianity as well as by papal Rome in the middle ages.

What we share today is historical fact, affirmed by secular as well as religious historians, available in college textbooks and library volumes.

It is meant in no way to demean or judge the religious experience of any individual. But God wants us to have our eyes open. He wants us to see things as He sees them. That is the whole purpose of what is “revealed” within the pages of all Scripture and particularly the Book of Revelation. Jesus was put on a cross by those who professed church membership, but yet He looked on His executioners with pity and love and desired their forgiveness and salvation. We should learn from the testimony of Scripture and history and become more closely aligned with God’s program and way of thinking.

Very quickly the devil attempted to “devour” the newly born Christian Church following the return of Jesus to heaven. It did not take long for the establishment to discover that there was political gain in persecuting those following “The Way.” James was the first to feel the sword of decapitation and before too long all the disciples became martyrs for Jesus, the only exception being John, whom they attempted to kill by putting in boiling oil but God miraculously spared his life. He then was banished to the lonely Isle of Patmos. The Apostle Paul followed in the footsteps of the others and was martyred in Rome.

Being known as a Christian in those days put ones life in jeopardy. Followers learned to be discrete when meeting new acquaintances, for to reveal ones identity as a Christian might not only cost your life, but the lives of your family and friends as well. Often when a Christian met someone new he might take his walking stick and draw an arc in the dust of the street. If the other person were also a Christian, he or she would take their walking stick and make another arc, intersecting the one already there, and complete the tail of a fish.

(Presentation Page 8, 9) Christians early adopted the symbol of the fish because the word in the Greek language for fish is *ichthus* (as in *ichthyology*), the five letters of which are each the beginning letter for a term for Jesus. “I” is the first letter for the word *Iesous*, “Jesus;” “Ch” the first letter for the word *Christos*, “Christ;” “Th” the first letter for the word *Theos*, “God;” “U” the first letter for the word *Uios*, “Son;” and “S” the first letter for the word *Soter*, “Savior.” Maybe you’ve seen the “fish symbol” on the back of a car and wondered what it means. Back then the word Christian meant something. It was both highly appreciated by those who endeared it as well as hated by those who despised it.

Many were those who were thrown to the lions in the Coliseum or covered with wax and lit as human torches to line the streets of Rome. But it seemed that the more persecution the devil brought the more the church grew! The martyr’s blood became the seed of the Gospel. The story of Stephen, the first martyr, was repeated a thousand times. He was stoned for his faith, but at his death there was one who stood by and observed the peace and tranquility on Stephen’s face which shone “as an angel.” The one who guarded the coats of those who didn’t want to dampen them with perspiration as they hurled the rocks of death was none other than the one known later as Paul, the mighty missionary to the Gentiles.

There were some particularly bloody periods of persecution through which the church passed, notably at the hands of Nero, who blamed Christians for the fires that ravaged Rome and Emperor Diocletian, who unleashed a terrific span of ten years of assault, from 303-313 A.D. Yet the church survived and even thrived during these periods of hardship.

(Presentation Page 10) The devil then employed another strategy. He changed gears. Christianity became recognized as a legal religion, even with the new Emperor Constantine professing allegiance thereto. Now the church faced even greater peril. While the fires of persecution burned, the church retained to a large degree its purity and fidelity. But when it became easy and popular to be a Christian, the Church encountered the greater danger of laxity and carelessness.

The Church wore the robes of compromise and paganism crept into its doors. The teachings of Jesus were replaced by man's wisdom. The institutions put in place by the Lord were replaced by those of pagan origin. (Presentation Page 11) The freedom of conscience so highly prized by our gracious God was removed and it became a crime to believe and practice doctrines not endorsed by the recognized church. (Presentation Page 12) The word in Greek *hairesis* means "to choose," and is the root of the word "heresy." Imagine that! Those who dared to choose to follow the dictates of their own conscience and in conformity with the Word of God were labeled as "heretics," from the related word *hairesitikos*. Those who desired to remain faithful had to flee to the remote areas for safety. That is the prophetic picture drawn in verse six. "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."

But before we discuss the meaning and application of this verse, there is a question that needs to be addressed concerning the location of verses 7-9 in this sequence. One might ask, "If verses 7-9 describe the war in heaven which took place prior to the creation of this world, why are they positioned after the description of Jesus' birth?" That is a good question.

(Presentation Page 13) It is true that verses 7-9 have their primary application in Satan's fall from heaven prior to the events recorded in Genesis, but there is also a secondary application of these verses that pertains to the time of Christ's victory on the cross and what followed immediately thereafter. This is because, even though Satan was evicted from heaven and his traveling privileges were limited, he was still allowed access to heaven on certain occasions, as noted clearly in the book of Job. He appeared at these councils as being the representative (as forfeited by Adam) of Planet Earth.

However, when Jesus defeated the devil by obeying God even to the death; when He shouted His final words, "It is finished," Satan's doom was made certain. His kingdom was effectively finished. From that point on, Satan's ability to attend the council meetings in heaven was revoked and Jesus now stood as the Representative of humanity. In anticipation of this victory, Jesus responded to the news of the success of His seventy missionaries by saying, "I beheld Satan fall like lightning from heaven." Luke 10:18.

So it is true that verses 7-9 also describe Satan's complete expulsion from heaven which took place after the Cross. (Presentation Page 14) You might say that Satan's eviction from heaven was a two-phase process. He had unlimited access before his initial fall prior to the creation of our world, and then after Adam's sin, he had limited access as described in Job 1 and 2. Verses 7-9 can be viewed as pertaining to both the first phase and the second phase.

In fact, when you consider it this way, the next verses make a great deal of sense, from a chronological point of view. (Presentation Page 15) "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. (Presentation Page 16) 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. (Presentation Page 17) 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 12:10-12. It is also true that there is an emphasis in prophecy to begin with the "now" and proceed to the "future." (Presentation Page 18) John's assignment as given him by Jesus was to "write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after this." Revelation 1:19. The way prophecy is usually laid out is to begin with where the prophet is at that time, and since John lived in the first century and wrote shortly after Jesus' death, it is natural that point would be the place of origin.

(Presentation Page 19) Then we read, "Now when the dragon saw that he had been cast to the earth, he persecuted the woman who gave birth to the male Child. But the woman was given two wings of a great eagle, (Presentation Page 20) 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 12:13, 14. These verses, in symbolic form, tell the story of the persecutions which raged during the middle ages.

We've already discussed the identity of the dragon and the woman. The dragon is the devil, and the woman is the church; that is the true followers of God. Not always was the group which professed to be the followers of God the same as the church recognized by God as being His true followers. There were those who followed God during the middle ages at the peril of life and limb.

They are described as fleeing to the "wilderness." That word appears both in verse six and verse 14. (Presentation Page 21) In the Bible, water is used as a symbol of "people, multitudes, nations and tongues." Revelation 17:15. Thus the beasts which arose "from the sea" in Daniel's prophecy of chapter seven, as well as the beast which John saw "rising up out of the sea" (Revelation 13:1) we understand to be nations or powers which emerge from locations of heavy population. Conversely, when a prophetic entity is said to be in the "wilderness," a dry and arid place, it suggests localities with sparse populations. Thus the Huguenots, Waldensees and others found their asylum in the remote recesses of Europe during the reign of the papacy. Though hunted like

animals, they managed to survive through God's blessing and practice their religion according to their choosing.

(Presentation Page 22) It is most interesting to compare verses 6 and 14 of Revelation 12, because it is clear that these two verses are saying the same thing, although with slightly different words. "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." (Presentation Page 23) Verse 14 reads, "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." (Presentation Page 24) From this comparison we conclude that the 1260 days are equivalent to the "time, and times and half a time." While there might otherwise be some room for conjecture as to what a "time" is in this context, the direct comparison with the 1260 days leaves absolutely no doubt whatsoever. We can know that the definition of the word "time" in this context must mean a "year." It is 3 ½ years that compose 1260 days.

Also, it must mean that a prophetic month is equal to 30 days. While the Hebrews operated under a lunar calendar, which amounted to approximately 29 ½ days, the *prophetic* month was fixed at 30 days. Thus also, the 42 months of Revelation 11:2 must be equivalent to the 1260 days of Revelation 11:3.

(Presentation Page 25) Bible students have long recognized the application of a "day for a year" principle in symbolic prophecy. (Presentation Page 26) It makes sense from an organizational point of view: if a dragon is used to represent Satan; if a woman is used to depict a church; if a lion, a bear, a leopard and other animals are used to represent various kingdoms in Daniel's prophecies, why not express time in prophecy in a symbolic term? It is consistent with the "code" or "encrypted" format of prophecy.

(Presentation Page 27) We have been given explicit instruction regarding this. We have the "two or three witnesses" that we need to confirm our understanding. We have the testimony of when the Lord declared to ancient Israel the prophecy of their wanderings in the wilderness for a period of 40 years, each year represented by one of the days of the spies investigation of Canaan. "According to the number of the days in which you spied out the land forty days, for each day you shall bear your guilt one year, namely forty years." Numbers 14:34.

We have the testimony of the prophet Ezekiel's experience when he symbolized the apostasy of Israel and of Judah by laying on left side and then his right side for a period of time, each day representing a year of literal time. "I have laid on you a day for each year." Ezekiel 4:6.

(Presentation Page 28) Thirdly, we have the testimony of Daniel 9's seventy "weeks" or 490 "days," which predict the Messiah's coming. There can be no other option of interpretation than to employ a "day for a year" slide rule, since the prophecy is to begin with the command and restore Jerusalem (centuries before Christ) and reach the coming of the Messiah. This period must encompass centuries, and cannot be understood in any other way than by a "day for a year" technique. This is the way it has been understood. So obvious and necessary is this conclusion

that some bibles even insert the words “of years” in the phrase by saying “seventy ‘weeks of years’” in the text of Daniel 9.

(Presentation Page 29) So the 1260 “days” are actually 1260 literal years, which began in the year 538 A.D. and concluded in the year 1798 A.D. (Presentation Page 30) The year 538 is established because by that time the papacy was able, by the removal of all her enemies, to implement her agenda without hindrance. The last obstacle was the defeat of the Ostrogoths who were driven from Rome and gave up any attempts to recapture it, being overcome by the armies of Belisarius the general of Emperor Justinian. From that time forward, the papacy began to wield authority in an increasing and daring fashion. (Presentation Page 31) At the close of the middle ages, following the inroads of the Protestant Reformation, Napoleon’s general Berthier drove Pope Pius VI from Rome in the year 1798, who died in exile, inflicting a serious setback on the Church, a wound from which many felt she would never recover.

(Presentation Page 32) We must touch on one more aspect of this most interesting time period. And that is the experience of the church during the middle ages to the life of the ancient prophet Elijah. Actually, the middle ages is only one of three applications of Elijah’s ministry! You remember that he was a prophet to Israel who lived about 850 B.C. The nation had fallen into apostasy and idolatry, and he was given the commission to call them back to true worship and a closer walk with God. To gain the attention of the nation, he told King Ahab that there would be “neither dew nor rain” until he said so. Then Elijah walked out of the palace and disappeared. A showdown on Mt. Carmel would take place years later at which time it was clearly shown that “The LORD, He is God.” The Old Testament closes with the promise that God would “send Elijah” before the “great and terrible day of the Lord.”

The first fulfillment of that promise was in the ministry of John the Baptist, who called the wayward nation of Judah to repentance and announced “the time is fulfilled,” referring to the coming of the Messiah. Jesus said, “If you are willing to receive it, he (John the Baptist) is Elijah who is to come.” Matthew 11:14.

The church in the middle ages also closely reflects the life of Elijah. When the ancient prophet told Ahab there would be no more rain, Elijah fled to the wilderness, where he was miraculously sustained for a period of 3 ½ years. James 5:17. Revelation makes use of his experience, in chapter 11:2, 6 and in 12<sup>th</sup> chapter that we are now studying, to illustrate what would happen in the “3 ½ years” or “1260 days” (literal years) when the church had to find safety in the shelter of the remote places, but was sustained by God’s hand as was Elijah.

Of course, there still is to come the final fulfillment of the prophecy of Elijah, a call to return to the commandments of God and the worship of the Creator, a call which will swell to a loud cry giving the world its last warning message.

(Presentation Page 33) Jesus never promised that it would be easy. The battle against sin would involve pain and travail from the start, and not diminish at its end. God’s faithful would find themselves walking the thorny path of trial, in the footsteps of Jesus. We often wonder “Why?”

and the answer to that question may not come easy. But we can be assured that whatever we encounter in our lives, others have walked this road before us, even to greater sacrifice than we'll be asked to bear. It can only be an estimate, because the true account of the number who suffered martyrdom is known only by Heaven, but between 50 and 100 million gave their lives for the sake of Jesus during these years.

Many sang hymns as the flames consumed them. Some marched to the stake or the gallows in their finest clothes, even their wedding garments, for they looked on their sacrifice as a privilege and honor. Would that we had the faith and passion of these heroes! We needn't worry. If it is to the road of trial that God calls us, He will provide the faith when the time comes. If it is to an ordeal of martyrdom that His providence leads us, He will sustain and comfort us when the time comes.