

**WAR OF THE WORLDS**  
**Rev 12:1-16:21 (21 April 2002)**  
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From the *War of the Worlds* (1898) by H. G. Wells to the blockbuster movie *Independence Day* (1996), we are familiar with stories in which the earth fights for survival against an enemy from another world. These cosmic conflicts are cast in clear-cut categories: there are only two sides—there is no neutral ground. Furthermore, it is not hard to distinguish the bad guys from the good guys. And, early in the story you are fairly certain of who is going to win, even if you do not know how it will happen. The original ending of *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) was changed: it was felt that the audience would not approve of a story where the bad guys win.

The Apostle John in the Book of Revelation tells the tale of a war of the worlds: a war that breaks out in heaven only to be fought finally on earth. There are only two sides: God versus Satan. God is good, Satan is bad, and that is not hard to see. Even before we hear this story, we are fairly certain of who is going to win. Without further ado, let's begin reading with the first verse of the twelfth chapter of John's Apocalypse.

<sup>Rev 12:1</sup> A great portent [sign or omen] appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. <sup>2</sup>She was pregnant and was crying out in birthpangs, in the agony of giving birth. <sup>3</sup>Then another portent [sign or omen] appeared in heaven: a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems on his heads. <sup>4</sup>His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth. Then the dragon stood before the woman who was about to bear a child, so that he might devour her child as soon as it was born. <sup>5</sup>And she gave birth to a son, a male child, who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron. But her child was snatched away and taken to God and to his throne; <sup>6</sup>and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, so that there she can be nourished for one thousand two hundred sixty days.

<sup>7</sup>And war broke out in heaven; Michael and his angels fought against the dragon. The dragon and his angels fought back, <sup>8</sup>but they were defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. <sup>9</sup>The great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.

<sup>10</sup>Then I heard a loud voice in heaven, proclaiming,  
“Now have come the salvation and the power  
and the kingdom of our God  
and the authority of his Messiah,  
for the accuser of our comrades has been thrown down,  
who accuses them day and night before our God.  
<sup>11</sup>But they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb  
and by the word of their testimony,

for they did not cling to life even in the face of death.

<sup>12</sup>Rejoice then, you heavens  
and those who dwell in them!

But woe to the earth and the sea,  
for the devil has come down to you  
with great wrath,

because he knows that his time is short!”

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

<sup>18</sup>Then the dragon took his stand on the sand of the seashore. <sup>13:1</sup>And I saw a beast rising out of the sea having ten horns and seven heads; and on its horns were ten diadems, and on its heads were blasphemous names. <sup>2</sup>And the beast that I saw was like a leopard, its feet were like a bear’s, and its mouth was like a lion’s mouth. And the dragon gave it his power and his throne and great authority.

<sup>3</sup>One of its heads seemed to have received a death-blow, but its mortal wound had been healed. In amazement the whole earth followed the beast. <sup>4</sup>They worshiped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast, and they worshiped the beast, saying, “Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?”

<sup>5</sup>The beast was given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words, and it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months. <sup>6</sup>It opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling, that is, those who dwell in heaven. <sup>7</sup>Also it was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them. It was given authority over every tribe and people and language and nation, <sup>8</sup>and all the inhabitants of the earth will worship it, everyone whose name has not been written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb that was slaughtered.

<sup>9</sup>Let anyone who has an ear listen:

<sup>10</sup>If you are to be taken captive,  
into captivity you go;  
if you kill with the sword,  
with the sword you must be killed.

Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints.

<sup>11</sup>Then I saw another beast that rose out of the earth; it had two horns like a lamb and it spoke like a dragon. <sup>12</sup>It exercises all the authority of the first beast on its behalf, and it makes the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose mortal wound had been healed. <sup>13</sup>It performs great signs, even making fire come down from heaven to earth in the sight of all; <sup>14</sup>and by the signs that it is allowed to perform on behalf of the beast, it deceives the inhabitants of earth, telling them

to make an image for the beast that had been wounded by the sword and yet lived;<sup>15</sup> and it was allowed to give breath to the image of the beast so that the image of the beast could even speak and cause those who would not worship the image of the beast to be killed.<sup>16</sup> Also it causes all, both small and great, both rich and poor, both free and slave, to be marked on the right hand or the forehead,<sup>17</sup> so that no one can buy or sell who does not have the mark, that is, the name of the beast or the number of its name.<sup>18</sup> This calls for wisdom: let anyone with understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a person. Its number is six hundred sixty-six.

<sup>14:1</sup>Then I looked, and there was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion! And with him were one hundred forty-four thousand who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads.<sup>2</sup> And I heard a voice from heaven like the sound of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder; the voice I heard was like the sound of harpists playing on their harps,<sup>3</sup> and they sing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and before the elders. No one could learn that song except the one hundred forty-four thousand who have been redeemed from the earth.<sup>4</sup> It is these who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins; these follow the Lamb wherever he goes. They have been redeemed from humankind as first fruits for God and the Lamb,<sup>5</sup> and in their mouth no lie was found; they are blameless.

<sup>6</sup>Then I saw another angel flying in midheaven, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth—to every nation and tribe and language and people.<sup>7</sup> He said in a loud voice, "Fear God and give him glory, for the hour of his judgment has come; and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water."

<sup>8</sup>Then another angel, a second, followed, saying, "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! She has made all nations drink of the wine of the wrath of her fornication."

<sup>9</sup>Then another angel, a third, followed them, crying with a loud voice, "Those who worship the beast and its image, and receive a mark on their foreheads or on their hands,<sup>10</sup> they will also drink the wine of God's wrath, poured unmixed into the cup of his anger, and they will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb.<sup>11</sup> And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever. There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and its image and for anyone who receives the mark of its name."

<sup>12</sup>Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and hold fast to the faith of Jesus.

<sup>13</sup>And I heard a voice from heaven saying, "Write this: Blessed are the dead who from now on die in the Lord." "Yes," says the Spirit, "they will rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them."

<sup>14</sup>Then I looked, and there was a white cloud, and seated on the cloud was one like the Son of Man, with a golden crown on his head, and a sharp sickle in his hand!<sup>15</sup> Another angel came out of the temple, calling with a loud voice to the one who sat on the cloud, "Use your sickle and reap, for the hour to reap has come, because the harvest of the earth is fully ripe."<sup>16</sup> So the one who sat on the cloud swung his sickle over the earth, and the earth was reaped.

<sup>17</sup>Then another angel came out of the temple in heaven, and he too had a sharp sickle. <sup>18</sup>Then another angel came out from the altar, the angel who has authority over fire, and he called with a loud voice to him who had the sharp sickle, “Use your sharp sickle and gather the clusters of the vine of the earth, for its grapes are ripe.” <sup>19</sup>So the angel swung his sickle over the earth and gathered the vintage of the earth, and he threw it into the great wine press of the wrath of God. <sup>20</sup>And the wine press was trodden outside the city, and blood flowed from the wine press, as high as a horse’s bridle, for a distance of about two hundred miles.

<sup>15:1</sup>Then I saw another portent [sign or omen] in heaven, great and amazing: seven angels with seven plagues, which are the last, for with them the wrath of God is ended.

<sup>2</sup>And I saw what appeared to be a sea of glass mixed with fire, and those who had conquered the beast and its image and the number of its name, standing beside the sea of glass with harps of God in their hands. <sup>3</sup>And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb:

“Great and amazing are your deeds,

Lord God the Almighty!

Just and true are your ways,

King of the nations!

<sup>4</sup>Lord, who will not fear

and glorify your name?

For you alone are holy.

All nations will come

and worship before you,

for your judgments have been revealed.”

<sup>5</sup>After this I looked, and the temple of the tent of witness in heaven was opened, <sup>6</sup>and out of the temple came the seven angels with the seven plagues, robed in pure bright linen, with golden sashes across their chests. <sup>7</sup>Then one of the four living creatures gave the seven angels seven golden bowls full of the wrath of God, who lives forever and ever; <sup>8</sup>and the temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power, and no one could enter the temple until the seven plagues of the seven angels were ended.

<sup>16:1</sup>Then I heard a loud voice from the temple telling the seven angels, “Go and pour out on the earth the seven bowls of the wrath of God. . . .” (NRSV).

The call of Revelation to all who read or hear it is *to conquer*. The book demands our active participation in the divine war against evil. Everything else that is said in the seven messages to the churches has this purpose, expressed in the promise to the conquerors that concludes each message (2:7, 11, 17, 28; 3:5, 12, 21). These promises find their climatic fulfillment in 21:7—“Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be My children.” It is only by conquering that the members of the churches may enter the New Jerusalem (cf. 22:14). The visions that intervene between the seven messages to the churches and the final vision of the New Jerusalem are to enable the readers to move from one to the other, to understand what conquering involves.

We, those of us who claim to be Christians, are soldiers in the army of the Lamb. We were not drafted; we enlisted by our own free choice. And now, we are marching to the

New Jerusalem. But there are enemies that stand in our way. If we are to reach our destination, we must do so by conquering.

In chapters 12 and 13, John introduces the principal enemies of God. They are the satanic trinity: the dragon or serpent (the ancient, supernatural source of all opposition to God), the beast or sea-monster (the imperial power of Rome), and the second beast or earth-monster (the imperial cult that provides the religious propaganda for the imperial power). The initial confrontation between the dragon and the woman who bears the child who will defeat him in the end takes the story back to the Garden of Eden (cf. Gen 3:15), and also takes in the history of Israel. The woman is not only Eve but also Zion, from whom the Messiah is born (cf. Isa 66:7-9). *The good news is, the followers of the Lamb have conquered the dragon!* “But they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they did not cling to life even in the face of death” (12:11). *The bad news is, the defeated dragon has mustered his forces on earth in the form of the Roman imperial power, and now the Christians must defeat the beast.* And this is exactly what the faithful Christians do: “And I saw what appeared to be a sea of glass mixed with fire, and those who had conquered the beast and its image and the number of its name, standing beside the sea of glass with harps of God in their hands. And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb . . .” (15:2-3a).

But conquering is not so simple. The beast “was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them” (13:7; anticipated in 11:7). The point is not that the beast and the Christians each win some victories; rather the same event—the martyrdom of Christians—is described both as the beast’s victory over them and as their victory over the beast. In this way John poses the question: *Who are the real victors?* The answer depends on whether we see things from the earthly perspective of those who worship the beast or from the heavenly perspective which John’s visions open up for us. To the followers of the beast, it is obvious that the beast has defeated the martyrs (13:8). Even Christians must have been tempted to see it that way. They were a tiny minority of powerless people up against the overwhelming might of the state and the overwhelming pressure of pagan society. What was the point of resisting the beast when he was proving irresistible? But John’s message is that from the heavenly perspective things look quite different. The martyrs are the real victors. *To be faithful in witness to the true God even to the point of death is not to become a victim of the beast, but it is to take the field against the beast and win.* But only in a vision of heaven (7:9-14; 15:2-3) or a voice from heaven (11:12; 14:2) can the martyrs be *recognized* as victors. The perspective of heaven must break into the earth-bound delusion of the beast’s propaganda to enable a different assessment of the same empirical fact: *the beast’s apparent victory is the martyr’s—and therefore God’s—real victory.*

The heavenly perspective has the power of truth. When the martyrs testify to the true God against the false divine claims of the beast and refuse to admit the lies of the beast even when they could escape death by doing so, they win the victory of truth over deceit. The beast’s lies cannot deceive them or even win their lip-service by force. The beast can kill them, but it cannot suppress their witness to the truth. Their death does not disprove their witness, because even in their death the power of truth to convince overcomes the power of brute strength to suppress it. *Perhaps the most important contrast between the forces of evil and the army of the Lamb is the contrast between*

*deceit and truth.* The dragon is the one who deceives the whole world (12:9; cf. 20:2-3, 7-8), the second beast deceives the inhabitants of the earth with its propaganda for the divinity of the first beast (13:14; cf. 19:21), Babylon deceives all nations with her sorceries (18:23), but the followers of the Lamb, like the Lamb Himself, are entirely without deceit (14:5; cf. 3:14). There can be no compromise between the truth of God and the idolatrous lie of the beast.

But this is not all that John wants us to see. He wants us to see not only the victory of the martyrs, but also the effect of the witness of the martyrs. *The conflict between the beast and the Christian martyrs confronts the nations with the choice: heed the witness of the martyrs and repent of idolatry (14:7) or face the judgment of God on all who worship the beast (14:9-11).* This brings us to the “song of Moses . . . and the Lamb”:

Great and amazing are Your deeds,  
Lord God the Almighty!  
Just and true are Your ways,  
King of the nations!  
Lord, who will not fear  
and glorify Your name?  
For You alone are holy.  
All nations will come  
and worship before You,  
for Your judgments have been revealed (15:3b-4).

The Christian martyrs celebrate the victory God has won through their death and vindication, not by praising Him for their own deliverance, but by celebrating its effect on the nations, in bringing them to worship God. The redemption of a special people from all the peoples is not an end in itself, but has a further purpose: to bring all the peoples to acknowledge and worship God.

I realize that there are many details that I have not discussed. What I hope is that I have helped you to see the big picture. Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, is “the faithful and true witness” (3:14; cf. 1:5). He said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). Do you believe Him?

*We all have a choice to make: to live our lives by the truth of God or by the lies of this world.* Make no mistake, the lies of this world are powerful, persuasive, and pleasing. But they are still lies. What we need is a vision and a voice from outside of this world so that we may see and hear the truth about this world. And the truth is, if what we are living for is not worth dying for, then we are living a lie. Death is not the end of life but it is the end of all the lies. Death is the appointment we all must keep, and it is an appointment with the truth.

Perhaps you have already made the decision to follow Jesus. For all of us who have made this decision, we must realize that God has redeemed us to reveal through us the riches of His grace. We are to be His lampstands in this world. We have been saved to shine.

Are you saved? Is your light shining?

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