

Covenant Pulpit



Opposition

The Man of Lawlessness Revealed

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History has branded him a madman. But it wasn't always that way. At one time he was the toast of the Roman Empire, a confidant of Emperors and architect of great dreams. In those days he was known as Herod the *Great*.

In 44 BC the Roman Senate proclaimed him King of the Jews. The decision was wildly unpopular in Palestine. The social elite despised him because his ancestors were mostly Arabs. Patriots hated him for being a puppet of Rome. The pious abhorred him for his hedonistic lifestyle.

Yet Herod spared no expense to build his subjects a new temple, one of the wonders of the ancient world. He constructed a magnificent seaport at Caesarea, one of the great engineering feats in history. He did the impossible by erecting a city on top of sheer cliffs at a place called Masada. He built grand highways and public buildings. Those prodigious feats earned him the title, *Philokaisar*—"The Emperor's Friend." Because of that, Israel gained favored nation status and unprecedented prosperity. But the more Herod tried to win their hearts, the more the Jews wanted him gone.

A man can only absorb so much rejection before his soul shrivels. In the face of ingratitude, Herod became resentful. In an atmosphere of political intrigue, he became suspicious and then paranoid. Survival became his obsession. He married ten wives to shore up his political base. He had his second wife executed on trumped up charges because he suspected her of plotting against him. He tortured his mother-in-law and forced her to testify against her own daughter. He later had her killed too, along with his brother-in-law. He executed three of his sons, causing Caesar Augustus to joke, "It would be safer to be that old Jew's pig than a member of his family."

In the end, Herod descended into madness. Holy men who had spoken against him were massacred in a monastery at Qumran, and he ordered two rabbis burned alive because he didn't like their sermons. His mind had been eaten away by syphilis and his body was infested with worms. His last days were spent in agonizing pain and suicidal depression. On his deathbed he ordered the arrest of the heads of 300 leading families, who were to be executed when he died so there would be weeping in Israel at his passing.

But no single deed has guaranteed Herod's place in history's hall of shame more than his act of terror recorded in Matthew's gospel. To make sure he eliminated a newborn king, he sent soldiers to the region around Bethlehem to kill all the babies under the age of two. In a season of bright lights and festive carols, it is the one jarring note—the horror that mars the happiness of the Christmas story.

But these are only the opening lines of a Christmas story that will not end until the baby returns as the awesome Lion King to destroy the last Antichrist with nothing more than “the breath of his mouth.” (2 Thess. 2:8). Like all great stories, this one will not end until the hero returns, the heroine is rescued, the oppressed are set free, evil is vanquished, villains are punished, and we all live happily ever after. And this is the best part of this continuing Christmas story for you and me:

**Just as God delivered Joseph and Mary,
He will deliver us from all our antichrists.**

These sermons on the *Second Coming* at Christmas have caused some to ask if it’s appropriate to talk about scary “end times” during this season of joy. Only a Grinch would steal Christmas with talk of antichrists. Someone asked me, “Pastor, aren’t you at least going to put a smiley face on the Antichrist? After all, this *is* the Sunday before Christmas!”

But the Christmas story can’t end without the *Second Coming*. The full joy of Christmas is in the last chapter when King Jesus returns to triumph over all antichrists like Herod. Here’s what we learn from the final chapters of the Christmas story:

1. The heart of a red dragon beats in every antichrist.

In the book of Revelation, St. John is given a vision more graphic and terrifying than any *Stephen King* novel: the final days of planet earth. John sees a one-world government that will enslave everyone, and the Antichrist who will rule with absolute power for 3½ years. But, before that, the heart of conflict is revealed in the 12th chapter of Revelation. This is the history of the world from God’s perspective. Remember, history is *His* Story. Revelation 12 is breathtakingly-perfect storytelling, with all the elements of every great story. More than that, it is the Christmas story fully told.

Revelation 12:1 opens with the appearance of a beautiful woman, “...clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head.” This woman is the bride of the King of the Universe. For that reason alone, she is drenched in dazzling sunlight and moon glow. She is crowned with twelve stars, symbolic of the twelve tribes of Israel. Indeed, this woman is Israel. God has chosen to love her, and give her the honor of bearing his name. Though she has been repeatedly unfaithful, he will never stop loving his beautiful Israel.

In verse two we read, "She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth." In her womb is the Crown Prince. Israel is about to give birth to a Messiah, the Savior of the world. This is the son that was promised to Abraham, the father of the woman Israel. Through this prince—the Son of God in the flesh—people from every tongue, tribe, and nation will be redeemed from the kingdom of darkness and its evil Lord Lucifer.

Verses 3&4 say, "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 earth." This is Lord Lucifer. He is ferocious in his appearance and power, a fire-breathing dragon drenched in the blood of his victims. He flings his tail and "a third of the stars of the sky" (1/3 of the angels of heaven) fall under his spell. Verses 7-9 tell of an ancient war in heaven between demonic angels and the armies of the archangel Michael who thwart Lucifer's attempt to seize the throne of heaven. Defeated, and cast down to earth with his demonic hoards, Lucifer roams the earth—a raging dragon who deceives the nations, builds dark kingdoms, enslaves mankind and drenches the earth in blood. His frenzy increases as his doomsday clock winds down to his sure defeat and doom.

Verses 4&5 tell us that the red 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." This is the drama of Matthew's Christmas story. Because the heart of the red dragon beats in his chest, Herod will stop at nothing to kill the baby Jesus. Later false religious leaders will engineer his crucifixion because the heart of the dragon has possessed them. And the Romans will crucify him because they too are possessed by the dragon. But the King of the Universe has a plan for his Son, the Crown Prince. Verse five says that this Son is destined to "rule all the nations with an iron scepter." We read that he was "...snatched up to God and to his throne." In a few words, Revelation 12 tells us that Jesus rises from the dead, ascends to heaven, sits at the right hand of his Father and will come again as King of kings to rule the nations.

Verses 6&13 tell us that the woman fled into the desert, pursued by the dragon. It seems that Israel has been pursued by the dragon since her birth. Babylon, Egypt, Assyria, Persia, Greece, Rome, Russia, Nazi Germany, and now the Muslim nations of the world have all tried to destroy Israel. From the god-kings of Egypt to Senecharib the Great, to Nebuchadnezzar, to the Roman Emperor Vespasian who ordered the annihilation of Israel in 70 AD, to Adolph Hitler, to Saddam Hussein, antichrists have been intent on pursuing the genocide of the Jews. No nation has been attacked more times with more viciousness than Israel. No city has been destroyed as often as

Jerusalem. No people have been more mistreated among the nations than the Jews. Only one thing can explain this universal hatred: verse 17 says, "...the dragon was *enraged* at the woman..." The dark lord Lucifer despises Israel because she is loved by his archenemy, the God of heaven. But verse 14 says that the one who passionately loves Israel put wings on her so she might fly to safety. No one has been able to destroy Israel. And after 2,000 years of desert wanderings, she has been resurrected as a nation again. But there will be one last power play of the red dragon when the final antichrist drives the last global empire to turn like a ravenous beast on Israel at the end of time.

Why should we Christians care about the fate of Israel? Verse 17 says that we who "obey God's commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus" are also her offspring. Israel is our mother. That makes us descendants of her father Abraham. It also makes us sons and daughters of the God who is her husband, and brothers and sisters of the Crown Prince she has born. Therefore, the red dragon will hate us too. No wonder verse 17 says that the dragon "went off to make war against the rest of her offspring." 160 million Christians have been martyred in the last century alone. We too will be hated by the last Antichrist and the final global government whose strings will be pulled by the red dragon. But for us there is a happy ending. At a place called Armageddon the nations of the world will gather to destroy Israel. But the baby prince that Herod couldn't kill will come again as the King of kings to rescue his family and destroy Lucifer and his armies of demons and nations. Then the Christmas story comes to its triumphant end.

2. The heart of every antichrist beats in Herod.

Herod understood an inviolate principle: there cannot be two kings in any kingdom. If one is to rule, the other must die. Surely, Herod would have to die in order to give his throne to Jesus: die to self, to pride, to power and position. He lied to the Magi when he said in Matthew 2:8, "As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him." The original word for *worship* here has the concept of falling down at the feet of one who is greater than you, and giving your life and possessions to him. That's exactly what the Magi did in Bethlehem. But Herod could never die like that. That's why he's an antichrist who foreshadows the final Antichrist.

Let me define the word *antichrist*. The Greek word *Christus* means "the anointed one." The Hebrew word *Mašía* or *Messiah* defines a king who has been anointed by God to save his people. There is only *one* Christ. But Jesus said in Matthew 24:4, "Many will come claiming 'I am the Christ.'" How many kings, political saviors, conquerors, religious demigods, and architects

of great social movements have come along with the claim that they would fix all the problems of the world—if only people would follow them? The world is full of preachers, philosophers, and politicians who have Messianic complexes. But anyone can be an antichrist. All it takes is the sense that you have been “anointed” to save yourself, or to save others from themselves, or rescue situations, or fix the problems of the world. In a very real sense, we all have a tendency to rush in and save the day, or exercise lordship over ourselves and others. By nature we are all grasping and controlling. At times we all suffer from a Messianic complex.

But there is only one true *Christ*. By definition, those who try to control or manipulate their world as if they are its savior, stand in opposition to the only one who is *the* King—and are, therefore, *anti*-Christs. That’s why Jesus said that the first prerequisite to following him is to die to self. Herod grasped the fact that either he must die, or Jesus must die. Two kings cannot occupy the same throne. That is why the red dragon and all his antichrists have been intent on killing the King of the Universe, Queen Israel, the Crown Prince who has become the King of kings, and all of us who are royal sons and daughters of the Kingdom of Heaven.

3. The antichrist drama is played out in Hanukkah.

In Matthew 24:15 Jesus speaks of the Antichrist when he says, “So when you see standing in the holy place the abomination that causes desolation spoken of through Daniel the prophet...” St. Paul repeats Daniel’s prophecy when he speaks of the Antichrist in 2 Thessalonians 2. Daniel looks centuries into the future and speaks of an antichrist who will be the greatest foreshadowing of the final Antichrist. He was a descendent of one of the four generals of Alexander the Great. His name was Antiochus IV and he ruled an empire that covered the territories of Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Iran, and Afghanistan. He was so arrogant that he deified himself as a god. He changed his name to Antiochus Epiphanes. The word *Epiphanes* in the Greek literally means “God made manifest.” Antiochus was declaring that when you saw him, you saw God. But wasn’t that the claim of Jesus Christ? You can’t get anymore *Antichrist* than Antiochus Epiphanes.

In 168 BC this Syrian antichrist launched an invasion of Egypt. Outside of Alexandria, Antiochus was met by a Roman ambassador named Gaius Popillus. The ambassador silently drew a circle in the sand around “God made manifest.” Looking straight at Antiochus he said, “If you step across this line any further into Egypt, Rome will crush you.” Humiliated and enraged, Antiochus Epiphanes turned like a red dragon back toward Syria. He took his wrath out on poor little Israel. After slaughtering 160,000 Jews,

he banned the Ten Commandments and the practice of the Jewish religion. He renamed the temple mount to *Jupiter Olympus* and installed statues of the Greek god Zeus in the Holy of holies. He had pigs boiled in cauldrons, and the pork-saturated water was sprinkled over every inch of the temple and all its instruments of worship. These acts were so profane that the Jews forever after referred to them as “the abomination of desolation.”

For 3½ years (note well that number) Antiochus Epiphanes put God’s people through great tribulation, martyring thousands in the most horrific ways. Finally a hero rose up to challenge this Syrian antichrist. His name was Judah. He came from a family of priests, and prophesied that God was about to destroy Antiochus. He took the name Maccabees from the Hebrew word for hammer. He is remembered in history as Judah the Hammer. This warrior king of the Jews sent Antiochus Epiphanes scurrying back to Syria in defeat, where he died an agonizing death from a horrific disease. The Jews celebrated by purifying their temple. But there was only enough consecrated oil to burn in the lamp stand for a day. Yet miraculously the flames burned for several days until enough new oil was purified. Since that time Jews (including Jesus himself) have annually celebrated the *Festival of Lights* or *Hanukkah* at the same time we celebrate Christmas. It is fitting, for if you understand the story of *Hanukkah* (the abomination of desolation, Antiochus Epiphanes, and Judah the Hammer) Jesus says that you will be able to spot the Antichrist and know how the Christmas story ends.

4. When the Antichrist is revealed, the end is at hand.

St. Paul warns mostly Jewish Christians about the *Second Coming* in 2 Thessalonians 2:3&4, “...that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction...he sets himself up in God’s temple, proclaiming to be God.” St. Paul reminds us about “the abomination of desolation” when Antiochus Epiphanes profaned the temple by setting himself up as God. The final Antichrist will be like that Syrian antichrist in every way. I believe that this fact, together with other biblical prophecies, might make us be on the lookout for someone from that part of the world: Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, or Iran. He may well have a Muslim name. The Shi’ites who dominate Iraq and Iran have long held to a prophecy of a Muslim Messiah they call the 12th Prophet or the Imam Mahdi. They believe that he will come to Jerusalem, set up his throne on the temple mount, purify Israel of the Jews, destroy Christianity, and rule the world under the banner of Allah. When one stands at Armageddon looking across at the mountains of Syria from whence came Antiochus Epiphanes, and then we realize that this valley runs straight up into Iraq and Iran, it all begins to make sense. The prophets spoke of a great bear that would come

down upon Israel from the north. We have often mistaken that bear for Russia. But Daniel saw the bear as Persia, the ancient kingdom that occupied modern Iran and Iraq. More than any other nations, the ancient kingdoms that once flourished in Iraq and Iran destroyed Israel again and again. The heart of the dragon still beats in their hatred for Israel today.

St. Paul tells us that we will know this antichrist by these signs: 1) **He will oppose God's law.** Verse three calls him "the man of lawlessness." Like Antiochus Epiphanes and the rebellious politicians in our day who legalize same sex marriages, abortions, and all manner of violation of the Laws of God, this antichrist will stand against God's law. 2) **He will demand worship.** Verse four says, "He will exalt himself over everything that is called God." Watch out for men who demand adoration because of their savior complexes. 3) **He will wow with signs and wonders.** Verses 9-11 speak of counterfeit miracles that will cause people to be deceived. Lucifer trades in the supernatural and can give great power to his puppets—whether they are false preachers or power hungry politicians. 4) **He will be under God's sovereign control.** Don't fear his coming. Verse six tells us that he will be "revealed at the proper time." God is orchestrating everything. Verse seven says that right now he "holds back" or restrains his coming. But the day will come when God writes the final lines of history as *His Story*. 5) **He will be supernaturally destroyed.** Verse 8 tells you that, in spite of his great wonders and power, he will be destroyed in an instant by Jesus with "the breath of his mouth and the splendor of his coming."

5. The heart of the Lamb trumps the heart of the dragon.

How do we live? I want to say one thing in keeping with this day: we live with joy. We will stand firm because Paul says in verse 13, "...God chose you to be saved." The Christmas story is one of triumph in spite of the terror of an antichrist like Herod. At a celebration of the Jewish *Festival of Lights* Jesus said that the Hanukkah was a story about him. Who defeated Antiochus Epiphanies? His name was Judah. Jesus comes from the tribe of Judah. He called himself the hammer. Jesus will come to rule the nations with a rod of iron. Judah the Hammer came from a family of priests, he was a prophet, and became a warrior king. Jesus comes as prophet, priest, and king to defeat all of his and our enemies. More than that, he is the miraculous light that never goes out in a dark world. So we wish our Jewish family a Happy Hanukkah with the hope that they will see the same triumph that we see in our Merry Christmas as we await our Warrior King.

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