

Have you ever asked God for a sign? In the Old Testament, Gideon asked God for a sign that he was truly the one to lead Israel to victory in battle. Gideon set out wool fleece on the ground and was bold enough to ask God to make the fleece wet with dew but the ground around it completely dry at the break of morning. If this happened, then Gideon would be assured that God would truly use him to rescue Israel.

What does it sound like when you ask God for a sign? Maybe it sounds like this, "God, let me know what path I should take in my career" or "God, let me know if this person is the right one for me." Perhaps, "God, let me know that you love me." Sometimes it's as simple and straightforward as that. Did you know that Gideon, even after God granted his request with the wool fleece by making it wet and the ground dry, Gideon set the fleece out again one more time and asked God to do exactly the opposite, to make the fleece dry and ground surrounding it wet? Guess he needed some more assurance. What's behind our wish for a sign? Well, we want to know. We want to see. We really want our insecurity to be quickly taken away. We want to be sure.

Just as important as the sign itself is being able to interpret the sign. Ask anyone who's travelled on an international level, especially in getting from one place to the next. "Well, I'm thrilled this sign is here, now if only I could read it!" When looking over a dinner menu and telling the waiter what you'll have is like throwing a dart at a map, then you're really taking your chances. It's not enough to receive a sign right, you need to be able to interpret it or have someone interpret it for you in terms you can understand.

Was God really speaking to you back when you decided what path to take in your career, or when you decided whether or not that particular person was the one you would stay with? How can you be sure it was the right decision? Fair questions to ask. The clearest answer is that you can be sure when God gives you his Word. His promises never fail and there are many promises in his Word. Today, God shows us a great sign found in his Word. A sign that's found in the book of Revelation. God has opened it up so that we can see and understand this great sign he has given.

Chapter 12 begins, "**A great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head.**" It's clear that this woman is expecting a child and that the child is coming very soon. The woman, clothed in brightness, the brightness of the sun, was about to give birth to light. This light is the light we have been looking forward to, the light that brings hope, peace, and joy. This light is Christ! The baby Jesus, born into the world!

Right on the heels of this amazing sign we find another, "**Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on its heads.**" A giant red dragon stands in the presence of the woman about to give birth with the wholly evil intention of devouring the child to come. Maybe you've figured it out by now that the red dragon stands for the devil. There's more information given about him here - seven heads... ten horns... seven crowns... kind of strange imagery isn't it? This isn't a pretty sight to imagine. It's a bit more than our cartoon version of the devil we've grown accustomed to: a figure about the same size as us or any other human being, two horns, a little tail with a point at the end. But then, like that, we don't have to take him too seriously.

That depiction of the devil doesn't cause us to blink twice. But what you read in Revelation is not what you'll find in TV shows or comic strips.

Has it become easy for you to not take the devil seriously? Have you let down your guard because you don't act on your anger, you only keep it to yourself in your own mind not letting yourself lash out like you really want to? Are you convinced that a bit of gossip here and there does no real harm? It's not like you're saying it to their face. Do you believe that if you only give the devil a foothold he won't bother to try and take the rest of you down? Let's be clear, the devil, the red dragon here wanted to snatch away the child of this woman. He wants to take away anyone that he can get his hands on.

And from what we hear in Revelation, the devil has a frightening and intimidating appearance! Seven heads, ten horns, seven crowns. What's going on there? Those numbers... 7 and 10 usually remind us of God, perfection, completion, good qualities, so what are they doing in this case? The Bible tells us that Satan himself "**masquerades as an angel of the light**" (2 Corinthians 11:14). He tries to disguise his evil intentions and the harsh reality that he is in reality nowhere near the glory and might of God. Even though he cannot match God or take his place, the devil still wants to claim divine honor and glory for himself. Revelation reminds us of the devil's rebellion when describing that red dragon - "**Its tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth.**" The devil rejected God's authority and convinced other angels to follow him instead of God. The result left them all cast down out of heaven and out of God's presence.

Ever since that rebellion the devil has been roaming around and looking for opportunities to destroy God and his people. One such opportunity became very clear, the Son of God was going to be brought into the world with the purpose of bringing salvation. So the devil was there waiting to snatch away that child, and the child *was snatched away*, but it was not the devil capitalizing on that opportunity, it was God who took up his Son to be where he is and to sit upon his throne.

Verse 5 tells us how the Son born of the woman "**will rule all the nations with an iron scepter**", he will shepherd the nations and bring them back to God. For all those times when we did not take the devil seriously and wallowed in our sin, God took the devil seriously and he took our sin seriously by sending a Savior. God made it clear who truly has authority and power by using his might to accomplish salvation through Jesus. Jesus died on the cross and dealt with our sins once and for all, his sacrifice stands up in the court of our Holy God and declares you to be righteous in his sight because of Jesus' blood. Thank God for Jesus being born for our sakes!

Now you might be wondering yet, who is the woman in the great sign that was given? Did you ask yourself that when the text was read? Many people's initial reaction is to think that the woman is Mary, after all who gave birth to Jesus? It was Mary. But looking deeper into the text we find more information about this woman. The very first verse says the woman is wearing a crown of twelve stars which makes us think about the twelve tribes of Israel, the chosen ones of God, believers, the Church. The woman stands for the church, all those who held to God's promises before Jesus was born and all those who hold to God's promises since that wondrous night.

The last verse, verse six, tells us even more. **"The woman fled into the wilderness to a place prepared for her by God, where she might be taken care of for 1,260 days."** There the woman flees, she escapes into the wilderness, a desert region, desolate and bleak, for many days. It sounds like rough conditions, not an easy place to be, a spot that lacks the comforts of home. Yet this is where we find the Church, the family of believers. What's God's plan in this? Because it sounds like a terrible place to be... on the run... in the wilderness... scared of the unknown.

Remember two things: First, the woman went to a place *prepared for her by God*. God was already aware of what was to come and he had already planned it out. Second, God was *going to take care of her*. The Greek word used goes deeper than that - it means to nourish, to care for as one cares for a child. This is the depth of God's preparation, this is the depth of God's care. He did not leave behind the church in favor of his Son which he took up into heaven. He left his own Son to hang on the cross carrying the shame and scorn of the entire world so that he could take you up into heaven. Even Jesus himself prayed for you and the entire church in John chapter 17, **"My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one."** Just as God lifted up his Son out of the devil's reach, so he will do the same for you. Remember that the sign of that promise has been given! God had Jesus born on earth who would save sinners and bring them to God.

If you're looking for God's direction, looking for a sign as was mentioned at the beginning, he has given you one. God helped the shepherds find the baby Jesus, **"This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger"** (Luke 2:12). God helps you find the baby Jesus this Christmas season and always by giving you his Word. The great sign that was given in Revelation chapter 12 was the woman giving birth to the one who would shepherd all the nations. The Son was taken up to be with God after his mission was complete and the woman fled into the desert. But God did not leave his church to suffer there alone, forever. He left his church here on earth for a little while with the promise to care for them deeply. God's sign points to Jesus, the Word made flesh. Trust him to bring you safely to your heavenly home. Amen.