

their prayers call an army of heavenly angels to their side, a living Saviour is their constant companion, and the Holy Spirit works to "strengthen them with power in the inner man." The promise is sure. They will overcome Satan "by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony" (Revelation 12:11).

Do you wish to be one of these last-day Christians who "obey God's commandments" and "hold to the testimony of Jesus"? Why not make that decision just now.

Dear Father: How thankful I am for the clear testimony Scripture gives us about how we can be part of God's last-day people who overcome. Help me to surrender my life to the everlasting gospel, to keep the commandments and the faith of Jesus. Keep me close to Christ as I live a life of absolute submission, trusting in everlasting grace. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

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DISCOVER

CAN I FIND GOD'S CHURCH TODAY?

For generations Roman Catholics and Protestants have been waging a violent war on each other in Northern Ireland, even though both swear allegiance to the Bible. Since the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, Orthodox Christians, Catholic Christians, and Moslems have been slaughtering each other, often in the name of their religious beliefs. For centuries the tension in the explosive Middle East has been fueled by Jewish and Moslem beliefs, both of which have their origins in the Old Testament Scriptures.

It's no wonder people these days are gun-shy of anyone shouting for one truth, one faith, and calling for absolute allegiance. But at the same time, we're aching for a place to stand, a truth to believe in completely.

Some today keep urging us to "find your own individual truth," and they assure us that "god" is in some inner recess of the heart. But it's not very comforting to just make up the truth as you go along. When you come right down to it, it would be frightening to believe that there's no truth on the horizon bigger than our individual selves.

That's our dilemma today. We ache for a meaningful place to make a stand in the world—and we are afraid of finding it inhabited by fanatics.

Fortunately God has prepared a special message for us in these times. God has frequently given special messages to meet the needs of different generations: a message to help Adam and Eve after sin ruined their world, a message to the world before the cataclysm of the flood, messages for Israel when Assyria or Babylon threatened.

Jesus came with a special message for His generation, and He has a special message for our day that gives us a place to stand. We find it in the Bible in the prophetic books of Daniel and Revelation. Chapters 12 and 14 of Revelation summarize God's special message for us today. In this DISCOVER guide and the guide that follows, we will take a look at that message.

1. THE CHURCH ESTABLISHED BY JESUS

The life and teachings of Jesus established unity of belief and close fellowship in the apostolic church that He founded. Apostolic Christians knew

God, and these last-day Christians take the same stand: following the example of Christ and the early church in obeying the commandments of God. This greatly provokes our enemy, the dragon. The devil wages war with "the rest of" the woman's "offspring" because they bear witness to a great truth: genuine love for God produces obedient disciples. As Jesus charged:

***"If you love me, you will obey what I command."*—John 14:15.**

Have you discovered this in your own life? The lives of these last-day Christians show that, in Christ, it's possible to love God with all our hearts and our fellow human beings as ourselves. These qualities, love for God and love for people, sum up God's Ten Commandments (Matthew 22:35-40).

The fourth of those commandments asks us to observe Saturday, the seventh day of the week, as the Sabbath. Since a love for Jesus has imbedded all ten of the commandments in their hearts, these last-day Christians are Sabbath-keepers. The devil has tried in various ways to chip the fourth of the Ten Commandments out of the tables of stone on which God wrote them, but he hasn't been able to remove them from the hearts of faithful believers.

God does have a last-day movement that leads men and women back to obedience to His commandments—one that calls His people back to allegiance to Him. The Sabbath is the symbol that God is both Creator and Lord of this world and of each of our lives. And the Sabbath is at the heart of God's final appeal to His people in Revelation, chapters 12 to 14.

All the resources of heaven are arrayed behind the last-day Christians described in these chapters. They may seem to be rather isolated in the world, but

This prophecy focuses on our day. Satan is enraged; he wages war on “the rest of” the woman’s “offspring”—God’s contemporary people. Notice that the final Christian church has certain identifying marks: they “obey God’s commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus.”

1. These last-day believers “hold to the testimony of Jesus.” Clinging faithfully to the pure doctrines of the Word of God, they testify for Jesus through dynamic Christian living. They have discovered that the great truths of the Bible awaken love and devotion to Christ. A caring people, they want to share with others the joys of living “in Christ.”

2. These last-day Christians are a people of prophecy. Receiving “the testimony of Jesus Christ” enabled John to write the book of Revelation (Revelation 1:1-3). The final group of believers receive a similar gift: direct testimonies from God through an earthly messenger. John defines “the testimony of Jesus” as “the spirit of prophecy” (Revelation 19:10). Their gift of prophecy focuses their eyes on God’s revelation of their mission and their final destiny.

3. These last-day Christians are also identified as “those who obey God’s commandments.” They not only defend the integrity of the Ten Commandments, they also obey them. “God has poured out His love into [their] hearts by the Holy Spirit” (Romans 5:5). God’s love produces joyful obedience (Romans 13:8-10). The apostolic church demonstrated a loyalty to the commandments of



who they were and lived out their faith confidently. They formed an intimate relationship with the risen Christ. Paul pictured that close bond as a marriage relationship:

“I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him.”—2 Corinthians 11:2. (Unless otherwise noted, all Scriptural texts in the DISCOVER guides are from the New International Version of the Bible [NIV].)

According to Paul, the church is a pure woman, the bride of Christ. A woman in her freshness and purity as a bride is a fitting symbol of Christ’s beloved church.

In the Old Testament the same metaphor is used to describe Israel, God’s chosen people. God said to Israel: “as a bride you loved me” (Jeremiah 2:2), and “I am your husband” (Jeremiah 3:14). Though the term “church” is not used in the Old Testament of your Bible, the New Testament speaks of Israel as “the church in the wilderness” (Acts 7:38, KJV).

In the book of Revelation, John also speaks of the church as a woman:

“A great and wondrous 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.”—Revelation 12:1.

The description of this woman indicates that John has in



mind the transition from God's people, Israel, in the Old Testament to His church in the New Testament.

1. The woman is "clothed with the sun." This suggests a church shining like the noonday sun, because of being clothed with Christ's glorious presence.

Jesus, "the light of the world" (John 8:12), shines through the members of His church, and they

brackets in the original). This prediction was fulfilled during the 1260 years of persecution from A.D. 538 to 1798 (remember that a day often stands for a year in symbolic Bible prophecy, see Ezekiel 4:6).

During these dark centuries, faithful Bible-believing Christians found refuge wherever they could; for example, in the Waldensian valleys of western Italy and eastern France, and in the Celtic church of the British Isles. Men such as Patrick of Ireland, Columba of Iona, and Aidan of Lindisfarne preached the divine Word of God in secret centers of learning where they trained young men to share the pure gospel in a time of ignorance, superstition and intolerance. (For full details about the wilderness church and its 1260 years of trouble and controversy, be sure to enroll in the *God Cares Daniel* and the *God Cares Revelation* courses when you complete the DISCOVER series.)

Passing over century after century of church history, as outlined accurately in Revelation, we come right down to our own day—to the true church of Christ since 1798.

4. GOD'S CHURCH IN OUR DAY

As might be expected, the dragon is still angry with God's people. The great unseen war continues. In fact, Satan makes his greatest attack on the church just before Jesus comes. Note the last act in the drama at the conclusion of the prophecy:

***"Then the dragon [the devil] was enraged at the woman [God's church] and went off to make war against the rest of her offspring—those who obey God's commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus."*—Revelation 12:17.**

The dragon represents Satan primarily. But remember that Satan uses human institutions in his role as dragon to attack God's people. He used the Roman king Herod in an attempt to murder the Christ child as soon as He was born. He worked through Christ's jealous religious rivals to stalk and harass the Saviour, and finally secure His execution on the cross. But Satan's apparent victory turned into Christ's greatest triumph. Furious over his defeat at the cross, Satan turned his wrath against the church that Jesus established.

During the decades after Christ's crucifixion, thousands met their death in the Roman Colosseum, in arenas, city squares, dungeons, and desert hideaways. At first secular authorities initiated this persecution.

But after the death of the apostles a gradual change crept into the church. During the second, third, and fourth centuries, many in the church began to modify, and sometimes even reject, the truths Christ and His apostles had taught. Some apostate leaders even began to persecute those Christians who insisted on the purity of New Testament beliefs.

Scholars estimate that about 50 million of the faithful perished. In an unsuccessful attempt to drown out the church and completely destroy it, the devil sent "a river" of persecution and false doctrine "to sweep her [the church] away with the torrent." "But the earth helped the woman by . . . swallowing the river" of persecution and false doctrine.

During these medieval persecutions, the true church withdrew from the apostate leadership and took refuge in "the place prepared for her in the desert." Fortunately God's faithful people had "a retreat prepared [for her] by God, in which she is to be fed and kept safe for one thousand two hundred and sixty days" (Revelation 12:6, Amplified New Testament,

in turn become "the light of the world" (Matthew 5:14).

2. The woman has "the moon under her feet." The moon represents the reflected light of the gospel in the sacrifices and ceremonies of God's people in the Old Testament. The moon being "under her feet" suggests that the reflected light of the Gospel of the Old Testament has been superseded by the reality of Christ's life, ministry, death, and resurrection.

3. The woman has "a crown of twelve stars on her head." Stars fittingly represent the twelve apostles, men of noble character whose testimony about Jesus shines brilliantly to this very day.

Clearly, John is describing the transition from God's Old Testament

people to the Christian church of the New Testament that Jesus established.

The sun, moon, and stars—used to describe the characteristics of this woman—emphasize the light-giving ministry of the Christian church, and its primary role of sharing the Good News.

2. THE DRAMA OF SATAN'S DEFEAT

The appearance of the woman sets the stage for a great drama:

“She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth. 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 the earth. The 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. She gave birth to a son, a male child, who will rule all the nations with an iron scepter. And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne. The woman fled into the desert to a place prepared for her by God, where she might be taken care of for 1,260 days.”—Revelation 12:2-6.



a whole army of Christians—from the early church fathers to the Protestant reformers—overcame the worst the devil could hurl at them, simply by the dynamic witness of their lives.

Revelation 12:11 pictures the victorious Christian church. It depicts a church filled with overcomers: apostles, martyrs, reformers, and other faithful Christians. The testimony of their kindness, courage, faithfulness, and triumph has thundered down the centuries and moved the world.

Since Satan failed to destroy the Son of God when He lived on earth in the flesh, he now seeks to destroy Christ's church. The church receives both encouragement and warning:

“When the dragon saw that he had been hurled to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child. The woman was given the two wings of a great eagle, so that she might fly to the place prepared for her in the desert, where she would be taken care of for a time, times and half a time, out of the serpent's reach. Then from his mouth the serpent spewed water like a river, to overtake the woman and sweep her away with the torrent. But the earth helped the woman by opening its mouth and swallowing the river that the dragon had spewed out of his mouth.”—Revelation 12:13-16.

Just as predicted, during the Dark Ages of the Christian era, Satan sent “a river” of persecution “to sweep” the church “away with the torrent.” This is spiritual warfare. It's deadly serious. Satan wants to destroy Christ's influence by wiping out His church and He uses every trick his evil genius can devise.

enabled the martyrs to retain a sense of mission in the face of adversity. God had suffered greatly so they were willing to suffer.

Even children made the ultimate sacrifice. A story is told of a Christian mother who was thrown to the lions in a Roman arena because she gave her ultimate allegiance to Christ and not the state. Her young daughter had to look on the cruel scene.

But instead of shrinking back in horror, she felt a fervent devotion welling up inside. As the lions attacked her mother, she stood up and cried, "I too am a Christian." Roman officials arrested her on the spot and hurled her to the hungry beasts.

Tertullian, a church leader in the second century, said of Christians: "The working of such love puts a brand upon us, for 'See,' say the heathen, 'how they love one another, and are ready to lay down their lives for each other.'"

Christians who kept biblical truth in the face of death are an inspiring example. Here's an account of the ordeal of believers who insisted on practicing baptism by immersion as taught in Scripture:

"In 1160 a company of Paulicians (Baptists) entered Oxford. Henry II ordered them to be branded on the forehead with hot irons, publicly whipped them through the streets of the city, cut their garments short at the girdles, and turned them into open country. The villages were not to afford them any shelter or food and they perished a lingering death from cold and hunger."—Moore, *Earlier and Later Nonconformity in Oxford*, page 12.

3. "They overcame him [Satan] . . . by the word of their testimony." Not just the words, but the word of their testimony—the testimony of their lives, their living witness to the power of Jesus and His gospel. During the darkest hours of the Christian era



Three key figures participate in this drama:

1. The woman, already identified as God's church.

2. The male child born to this woman "is snatched up to God and to his throne" and will someday "rule all nations." Jesus Christ is the only child ever born in this world who has been taken up to God's throne and will someday rule all nations.

3. The dragon representing the devil, or Satan.

"And there was war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven. THE GREAT DRAGON was hurled down—that ancient serpent, CALLED THE DEVIL, OR SATAN, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him."—Revelation 12:7-9.

The picture becomes clear once we understand the symbols. When the devil and his angels "lost their place in heaven," they were "hurled to the earth." When Jesus was born in this world nearly two thousand-years ago, the devil tried to kill Jesus, the male child, as soon as He was born. He failed, and Jesus was "snatched up" to God's throne. Satan then set out to annihilate the Christian church that Christ established. But Satan has failed to destroy either Christ or His church.

John saw glimpses of this great conflict between Christ and Satan raging on this earth. As the battle reaches a climax at Christ's crucifixion, John hears a voice shout from heaven:

"Now have come the salvation and

the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ. For the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down.—Revelation 12:10; (compare John 12:31, KJV).

Jesus won a deciding victory over Satan at the cross. At the cross Jesus confirmed the certainty of the plan of salvation. God provided “power” for resisting the cunning of Satan, “the kingdom of God” was made secure, and the Saviour’s “authority” to be our High Priest and King was confirmed.

“Now have come the salvation” declares that history’s crowning event has arrived. The birth of Christ, the Saviour of the world, has taken place (verse 5). In spite of Satan’s fierce temptations, Jesus has lived His sinless life. Jesus has died and emerged from the grave a victor over sin and death (verse 10). Satan has been forever defeated (verses 7-9). The cross is magnified in its full power (verse 10-11).

The announcement, “now has come the salvation,” interests not only John, but the entire universe:

“Therefore rejoice, you heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to the earth and the sea, because the devil has gone down to you! He is filled with fury, because he knows that his time is short.”—Revelation 12:12.

All heaven celebrated Jesus’ victory. Christ destroyed any claim Satan may have once had to a place in heaven, and a defeated Satan lost forever his claim to our world. In lock step with Christ the Christian church marched forward in triumph.

3. THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH IN CONFLICT WITH SATAN

Before Jesus ascended to heaven He established the Christian church (symbolized by the woman). He poured His life into it and sacrificed His life for it. Christ’s death on the cross gave the Christian church the power to defeat Satan.

“They [the Christian church] overcame him [Satan] by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.”—Revelation 12:11.

Christ is now able to give His power, the fruit of His victory, to His church. We can conquer territory formerly belonging to Satan because of the power of the cross. Just as Jesus decisively triumphed over Satan at the cross, He now continues to triumph over Satan through His church.

Three characteristics mark the triumphant church during the passing centuries of the Christian era:

1. “They overcame him [Satan] by the blood of the Lamb.” Jesus was caught up to God’s throne so He could make His blood effective in the lives of his followers. He can clear the record of our sins and save us through His shed blood (1 John 1:7). The life-giving blood of a risen Saviour also gives us power to live a healthy Christian life day by day (1 Peter 1:18-20). (For a full explanation of the meaning of Christ’s blood, see guide 11, section 5.)

2. “They did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.” “The blood of the Lamb” made them willing to die for Christ’s cause; they did not “shrink from death.” The impact of the cross