

Dr. David Mathewson, New Testament Literature,

Session 1 - Course Introduction

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Have you ever wondered how you'd even begin to teach one of the most influential, complex, and, let's be honest, ancient books in the world? We're talking about the New Testament, and you've only got one college semester to do it. Well, today, we're diving into one professor's really clever strategy for tackling this 2,000-year-old bestseller. So, yeah, this is the big question, right? You've got this collection of documents that literally shaped Western civilization, all written in this super dense, specific period of history.

You've got a room full of students, just a few months on the clock. I mean, where do you start? It's a massive puzzle that any teacher of a big, important text has to figure out. And this puzzle brings us right to a classic problem in education, something called the survey dilemma.

You're always stuck with this fundamental tension. Do you try to cover everything and risk being shallow? Or do you go deep and risk missing most of the material? Either choice you make, you feel like you're giving students an incomplete picture. Now, you might think, oh, the New Testament is way shorter than the Old Testament; it must be easier.

But nope. The challenge is just as big. You're dealing with Gospels, personal letters, crazy apocalyptic literature, all of it written in and for a very specific historical moment.

The complexity isn't just about the page count. It's the sheer variety and the deep, rich context behind every single sentence. So when teachers face this problem, they usually see two main paths they can take.

But as we're about to find out, both of these well-traveled roads have some pretty serious potholes. And this lays out the two options perfectly. On the one hand, you've got the mile-wide, inch-deep approach.

You basically spring through every single book from Matthew to Revelation. The good news? Students get a taste of everything. The bad news? You're moving so fast, you never stop to really dig into any of it.

Then you have the other option, the inch-wide, mile-deep path. You just start at page one of Matthew and go deep, analyzing every little detail. Sounds great, right? The problem is, some classes literally get bogged down and never make it past the Book of Acts.

That means students miss out on all of Paul's major letters and the entire back half of the New Testament. Neither one feels right. So if both paths are flawed, what's the answer? Well, this is where Professor Dave Mathewson came up with this really elegant hybrid solution that he calls the flyover approach.

And it's all about getting the best of both worlds. I absolutely love this quote because it gives you such a clear mental picture. The whole idea is to treat the course like you're piloting a plane.

You'll spend most of your time at 30,000 feet, getting the lay of the land, seeing the whole landscape of the New Testament. But, and this is the key, at very specific moments, you're going to dive down, get really close to the ground, and take a super detailed look at something important before climbing back up to that high altitude. So here's how the flyover method works, broken down into four steps.

First, you gain altitude. You get that big picture, bird's-eye view. Second, from up there, you start to identify the landmarks.

What are the major themes, the big ideas, the mountain ranges of the text? Third, you dive down. You pick one of those crucial passages, and you really study it in detail. And finally, number four, you ascend again, always making sure to connect what you just learned on the ground back to that big picture.

It's this constant dynamic shifting of perspective that makes it so effective. Okay, so that's the how. That's the method.

But what about the what? The flyover approach isn't just a technique. It's also about the philosophical lenses you're using to look at these writings. And to do that, the course holds two ideas that might seem contradictory in perfect balance.

It's like you're looking at the New Testament with two different eyes at the same time. With one eye, you're seeing it as a historical document. I mean, these are ancient texts written by real people in a very specific time and culture to deal with real-world issues.

But with the other eye, you're viewing it as the Word of God, a text that is believed to have this timeless theological importance for people living right now. The key takeaway is that you absolutely need both of these perspectives to get the full picture. One without the other just doesn't work.

So let's dive down for a second into that historical context. The professor really stresses that these are living, breathing documents. Think about it.

Nobody in the New Testament just woke up one morning and decided, I'm going to write a chapter for a general textbook on theology. No way. For instance, when Paul wrote his letter to the Galatians, he wasn't just calmly writing an essay.

He was furious. He was responding to a very specific crisis that was making him upset. And that raw emotion is baked right into the text.

Understanding that human context is everything. Okay, but that brings up a huge, maybe the most important question. If these letters and stories were all written to solve very specific problems 2,000 years ago in a culture that's totally alien to ours, how on earth can they still be relevant or have any authority for us today? While the answer lies in this powerful concept called abiding validity, it's the theological bridge, if you will, that connects their world to ours.

It's the idea that allows these ancient, historically specific, culturally conditioned texts to transcend all of that and still function as living, authoritative scripture for people across the millennia. It's how a first century letter can speak to a 21st century situation. So you've got the framework, the flyover method, and these two lenses of history and theology.

So what are the actual practical tools you would need to start this journey? Well, the course recommends a sort of toolkit, perfect for any curious modern reader, not just a college student. And I love how these resources are framed. It's not just a reading list.

It's a set of tools. First, obviously, you have the source, the New Testament itself. Then you need an academic map, which is basically a textbook that gives you the background, themes, and structure for each book.

After that, you get a how-to guide, which focuses on that big challenge we just talked about. How do you apply these ancient texts today? And finally, this is my favorite: an immersive experience. It's a fictional story that's designed to make the daily life and culture of the first century just pop off the page.

Altogether, they give you a really well-rounded way to understand the material. So when you boil it all down, this whole approach is built on one simple but profound idea. Context is king.

It doesn't matter if you're reading a 2,000-year-old scripture or a text message you got two minutes ago. The circumstances around why it was written and who it was for completely shape its meaning. And that really leaves us with a final thought to chew on.

How does asking those simple questions- why was this written and who was it for- change what a text, any text, really, means to you?