

# Dr. David Mathewson, New Testament Literature,

## Session 35 - Revelation

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Okay, today we are diving into one of the most fascinating and, let's be honest, misunderstood books ever written. The book of Revelation. Now, I want you to forget all the complicated charts and timelines you might have seen.

We're going to peel back the layers, with a little help from scholar Dr. Dave Mathewson, to get to the powerful message at its core. It's time to pull back the curtain. You know, for so many of us, the word Revelation immediately conjures up these images of, like, a literal step-by-step roadmap to the end of the world, a checklist of disasters, plagues, and catastrophes waiting to happen.

But what if that's not really the main point? What if Revelation was, first and foremost, an urgent, coded message written for a very specific group of people, living through a very specific crisis? Well, that's the big idea we're going to dig into. So, to get this, we first have to understand who John was actually writing to. Let's meet the original audience.

John's letter was written for Christians living in what we now call Turkey, right in the heart of the massive, powerful Roman Empire. And they were dealing with this constant, immense pressure to just fit in, to compromise their faith with the culture all around them. And it was causing a huge spiritual crisis.

Now, you might be thinking their main problem was, you know, Roman soldiers hunting them down in the streets. But according to Dr. Mathewson, it was actually something way more subtle. It was the daily temptation to accommodate.

It was pressure from their own neighbors, from local officials, to just participate in the imperial cult, you know, burn a little incense for Caesar, show your loyalty to Rome. The real fight wasn't for physical survival. It was a battle for exclusive loyalty.

It all boiled down to one question. Who is truly Lord? God or the emperor? So, to tackle this problem, John uses this absolutely brilliant strategy. Dr. Mathewson suggests that we should think of Revelation not as a screenplay for the future, but as a kind of ancient, prophetic, political cartoon.

And the clue is right there in the book's name. The Greek word is apocalypsis. It doesn't really mean end of the world.

It literally means an unveiling or a pulling back of the curtain. John is showing his readers what's really going on behind the scenes of the mighty Roman Empire. Think about how a political cartoon works today.

It takes a real political figure or situation and uses exaggerated symbolic images to make a powerful point. It's not supposed to be a literal photograph. It's a caricature designed to make you see reality in a brand new way.

That's exactly what Revelation is doing with Rome. So here's the playbook. John's crazy symbols aren't random.

He's talking about the very real Roman Empire. But instead of describing its fancy buildings and roads, he paints it as this monstrous, bloodthirsty beast. Why? To expose its true, arrogant, anti-God nature.

The goal was to shock his readers awake and call them to stop compromising. Okay, so now that we have this political cartoon key, let's try to unlock a couple of Revelation's most famous and most confusing symbols. First up, all those terrifying plagues.

You know, the seven seals, the seven trumpets, and the seven bowls of judgment that get poured out. Now, a lot of people read this as a literal forecast of future disasters, but Matthewson points out something incredible. Water turning to blood, swarms of locusts, darkness, painful sores.

Does any of that sound familiar? It should. It's the Exodus story. John is deliberately using the imagery of the plagues that God sent on Egypt.

The message would have been absolutely crystal clear to his audience. John is basically shouting that Rome, this new empire that demands worship and oppresses people, is just the new Egypt. And just like God brought judgment on Egypt for its arrogance, he will do the same to Rome.

Alright, let's tackle the big one. What about the most infamous number in history, 666, the number of the beast? People have spent centuries looking for this number in barcodes, microchips, you name it. But for the original audience, 666 was all about symbolism.

See, the number seven in the Bible represents divine perfection. So 666, 6-6-6, is a symbol of falling short, of ultimate human arrogance. And most scholars agree it almost certainly pointed to one guy in particular, the Emperor Nero, a truly wicked ruler, whose name, when spelled out in Hebrew letters, actually adds up to 666.

He was the perfect symbol of the empire's evil. So, you see, the point wasn't to start a scavenger hunt for a literal number. The number itself was a powerful symbol that represented everything Rome stood for, a human system puffing itself up in defiance of the one true God.

Okay, let's look at one more set of symbols: that terrifying dragon and the two beasts that come from the sea and the land. And again, these aren't literal monsters from some future horror film. John is very clear.

The great dragon is Satan. And his two helpers, the beasts, the original readers would have recognized them immediately. They were a symbolic caricature of the Roman Empire itself, and the whole system of emperor worship, the imperial cult, that enforced allegiance to Rome.

John uses this beastly imagery to rip the mask off Rome, to say, look, behind all the power and glory and architecture is a violent, hideous system that is energized by the dragon. He's

telling these Christians that their struggle isn't just with the local government. It's part of a cosmic battle that goes all the way back to the very beginning.

So if Revelation is this giant critique of Rome, where does that leave us? Well, it's not just about condemnation. The real ultimate message here is one of profound and lasting hope. The book presents this stark choice symbolized by two cities.

On the one side, you have Babylon the prostitute. That's John's code name for Rome. It's arrogant, oppressive, drunk on its own power, and it's destined to fall.

But on the other side, you have the bride, the new Jerusalem. This represents God's faithful people, and their destiny isn't to float away on clouds. It's to live with God in a renewed, restored, physical creation right here on a new earth.

So when you boil it all down, Revelation's message is a powerful call to action that's just as relevant for us. It's a call to worship, to give our ultimate allegiance to God and God alone. It's a call to resist the temptation to compromise with the power-hungry, arrogant systems of our own world.

And it's a call to endure, to hang on, trusting that in the end, God wins. And that leaves us with one final big question. Seeing Revelation as a political cartoon doesn't just make it a book about the past.

It turns it into a lens for our present. It forced the first Christians to take a hard look at the power structures around them, and it asks us the exact same question today. What are the modern-day empires, whether they are political, economic, or cultural, that demand our unquestioning loyalty? And how are we being called to see them in a new and truer light?