

Dr. David Mathewson, New Testament Literature,

Session 1: Course Introduction

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All right, so we're diving into the New Testament today. You mentioned wanting a better grasp of it, and luckily, we've got this fantastic resource to work with: this lecture series by Dr. Dave Mathewson. He's a professor of New Testament literature.

His approach is really unique and blends historical context with theological insight. It's like we're getting a backstage pass to how these ancient texts came to be. It's amazing how Dr. Mathewson covers so much ground in his New Testament survey course.

He uses this thing he calls a flyover and deep dive method. Oh, nice. So it's like a broad overview, and then he zooms in on the really fascinating stuff.

I like it. So we'll be doing something similar today, pulling out what's most important and figuring out why it still matters even centuries later. You know what always throws me off is the dual nature of the New Testament.

Oh, yeah. On the one hand, we have these historical documents written by real people grappling with real life situations. Right.

And on the other, it's considered divinely inspired scripture. How do we reconcile those two things? That tension is exactly what makes studying the New Testament so captivating. Yeah.

Dr. Mathewson is adamant about approaching these texts within their historical context. Yeah. He reminds us that these aren't theological textbooks.

They're letters, gospels, even apocalyptic visions from real people facing real challenges. Yeah. Take Paul's letter to the Galatians, for example.

Okay. He wasn't just laying out abstract theological principles. He was addressing a very specific problem in a community where his authority was being questioned, his message twisted.

It's almost like we're overhearing a heated debate from centuries ago. That's wild. Yeah.

It's incredible how those ancient struggles still resonate today. But if these documents were for a specific time and place. Yeah.

How do they function as scripture for us now? Right. How do they guide us in the 21st century? That's the million-dollar question. Yeah, I know, right? And there are a few different ways to approach it.

Some scholars focus on finding universal principles that transcend historical context, while others stress understanding the original meaning and translating it for today. Okay. One way to think about it is like deciphering a code.

You need the right tools and methods. For instance, historical-critical methods help us analyze the text in its historical setting, considering things like authorship, audience, and purpose. That makes a lot of sense.

It's like you need a decoder ring to unlock the full meaning. Exactly. So where do we even start with a book as big as the New Testament? Well, Dr. Mathewson dives right into the Gospels.

But he starts by acknowledging something many of us wonder about. Why are there four different accounts of Jesus's life? Right. Wouldn't one have been enough? Right.

It's not like they had Zoom back then to coordinate notes. Exactly. But each Gospel writer had their own unique perspective and purpose, resulting in different takes on the same story.

Think about the Christmas story. Okay. Mathew emphasizes Jesus's lineage and fulfillment of prophecy.

Painting a picture of Jesus as the promised King, Luke, on the other hand, highlights Jesus's humble beginnings and compassion for the marginalized. Portraying him as a savior for all. It's like getting four different angles on the same event.

Right. No wonder Dr. Mathewson's students always want him to go deeper into comparing the Gospels. He jokes that's why there are four of them.

Uh-huh. I love it. But it underscores the importance of understanding that each Gospel was shaped by its specific historical and cultural context.

Okay. So we've got these historical documents written for a specific audience, but we're also supposed to apply them to our lives today. How do we reconcile seemingly outdated laws or customs with our modern world? Do I really need to check my clothes for mixed fabrics? Dr. Mathewson brings up that very point.

He uses the example of those perplexing Old Testament rules that sometimes pop up in the New Testament, like the prohibitions about mixed fabrics, roof parapets, or head coverings in worship. Right. How are we supposed to make sense of those things in the 21st century? It's easy to get caught up in the literal interpretations and miss the bigger picture.

I know. Instead of getting bogged down in the letter of the law, we need to grasp the spirit of the law. What was the underlying concern or value being addressed? And how can we live out that same concern or value in our own context? Okay.

For example, the principle behind head coverings might be about showing respect or humility, which we can express in various ways today. It's about understanding the heart of the matter and finding relevant applications for today that make a lot of sense. Speaking of application, I'm curious about how Dr. Mathewson structures his course.

He's assigned three textbooks, right? He has. Introducing the New Testament, which sounds pretty standard. Right.

And Making Sense of the New Testament, that one seems geared toward practical application. Yeah. But then there's The Lost Letters of Pergamum, which caught my eye.

What's that all about? That's where Dr. Mathewson gets creative. All right. The Lost Letters of Pergamum is actually historical fiction.

The author Bruce Longenecker uses fictional letters to immerse readers in the historical and cultural context of the New Testament. It's like stepping back in time to experience what life might have been like for early Christians. That's brilliant.

He's found a way to engage students on an emotional level as well as an intellectual one. It's a great example of how understanding the context can bring the text to life. Yeah.

It's not just dry facts and dates. It's about real people living out their faith in a very different world. I can see why that book is so popular with his students.

It seems like Dr. Mathewson really emphasizes understanding both the historical context and the theological message of the New Testament. Right. It's about engaging both our heads and our hearts, right? Absolutely.

He balances rigorous academic study with an appreciation for the human stories and experiences these texts represent. It's a vital balance to strike. Well, we're off to a great start.

We've already unpacked some key ideas and started thinking about how to approach the New Testament in a more meaningful way. And we've only just scratched the surface. There's so much more to explore.

Oh, yeah. But I think we've laid a good foundation for the rest of our deep dive. I agree.

But before we move on, let's pause here and give you something to ponder. We've been talking about the importance of understanding the historical and cultural context of the New Testament. But here's a question for you.

How might your own background and experiences shape your understanding of these texts? What unique perspective do you bring to the table? It's a great question to consider as we continue our exploration. And speaking of exploration, be sure to check out the show notes for links to those books we mentioned. They're a fantastic starting point for your own deep dive.

We'll be back soon to dive even deeper into the world of the New Testament. Until then, happy reading. Welcome back.

Last time, we were getting into some pretty thought-provoking stuff about applying these ancient texts to our modern lives. And it seems like Dr. Mathewson doesn't shy away from the tough questions in his lectures. Not at all.

He really wants his students to wrestle with those questions, to grapple with what it means to read the New Testament as both historical documents and divinely inspired scripture. Right. It's like holding two seemingly opposite ideas in your mind at the same time.

So what are some of the biggest hurdles we face when trying to bridge that gap between the first century and the 21st century? Well, one that constantly trips people up is the role of culture. Remember, the New Testament was written in a very specific cultural context. And some of the customs and practices described in those texts might seem foreign or even offensive to us today.

It's like the head covering thing we talked about earlier today. It means different things in different cultures, a sign of respect and a symbol of oppression in others. So how do we apply a teaching like that from the New Testament in a way that's both faithful to the original meaning and sensitive to our own cultural context? That's where careful interpretation comes in.

And honestly, there isn't always a clear-cut answer. We need to approach these texts with humility, recognizing that our own cultural biases might cloud our understanding. So it's not just about reading the words, but about understanding the world behind the words.

Precisely. That's why historical and cultural contexts are so crucial. The more we know about the world in which the New Testament was written, the social norms, the political landscape, the everyday lives of people, the better equipped we are to grasp what those texts were truly trying to communicate.

But let's be honest. Not everyone has the time to become a New Testament scholar. Yeah.

What's a practical way for someone who's not an expert to start engaging with those questions of historical context? You don't need to spend years in seminary to understand the basics. There are so many fantastic resources out there: books, websites, documentaries, even other podcasts. Okay.

I may be a bit biased toward podcasts. Right. But you're right.

The information is out there. The key is to find resources that are both informative and engaging. You don't have to get bogged down in academic jargon or tedious textbooks.

There are plenty of authors and speakers who are brilliant at making this stuff accessible to everyone. It's about finding something that sparks your curiosity and keeps you wanting to learn. It's like choosing an adventure.

You want a guide who knows the terrain but can also tell a good story. So we've talked about historical context, but what about the divine inspiration of scripture? How do we hold those two ideas together, the human and the divine? That's the heart of the mystery, isn't it? And there's no simple answer, but I think it starts with recognizing that God can work through human authors and all their imperfections and limitations. So we shouldn't expect the New Testament to be some perfect, error-free textbook dictated from heaven.

Exactly. Look for the human fingerprints on these texts, the different writing styles, the cultural assumptions, the historical circumstances, and then realize that God chose to work through all of that to communicate his message. It's almost like God is weaving a tapestry, using threads of human experience to create something beautiful and enduring.

I love that analogy. It captures the beauty and the challenge of engaging with scripture. It's not always easy or straightforward, but it's a journey of discovery that can deepen our understanding of both God and ourselves.

And Dr. Matthewson seems to take his students on quite a journey through the New Testament in his course. He doesn't just hop from one book to the next, does he? Not at all. He emphasizes the interconnectedness of the books, the overarching narrative they weave.

He shows how each book fits into the larger puzzle, helping students grasp the bigger picture of God's plan. So it's not just a random collection of stories and teachings. There's an overarching theme that runs through it all.

There are actually several key themes that weave through the New Testament. One of the most prominent is the idea of the kingdom of God. Jesus talked about it constantly, and it pops up in many other New Testament books as well.

That's a term I hear a lot, but I'm not always sure what it really means. What is the kingdom of God exactly? It's a complex concept, and different scholars have nuanced interpretations. But at its core, the kingdom of God refers to God's reign or rule over all creation.

It's about God's will being done on earth as it is in heaven. So it's not just about going to heaven when we die. It's about experiencing God's presence and power here and now.

That's a key part of it. The kingdom of God is both a present reality and a future hope. It's something we can experience in glimpses today, but its full realization is still to come.

It's like a seed that's been planted. We see hints of its potential, but the full blossoming is yet to come. That makes a lot of sense.

And it seems like it has profound implications for how we live our lives. Absolutely. If we believe that God is the ultimate ruler of all creation, that belief should shape our values, our priorities, our relationships, everything.

So it's not just about intellectual assent to certain beliefs about God. It's about embodying those beliefs in our actions and interactions. It's about aligning our lives with God's will.

Precisely. And the New Testament offers guidance on how to do that. It teaches us about love, forgiveness, justice, compassion, and a host of other virtues that are essential for participating in God's kingdom, both now and in the future.

It's like a roadmap. But instead of leading to a physical destination, it guides us toward a way of being in the world. That's a great way to put it.

It's not just about arriving at a destination. It's about the transformation that takes place along the way. We could probably spend hours unpacking all the nuances of the kingdom of God, but I want to make sure we touch on some other key themes in the New Testament.

What else should we have on our radar? Another major theme that's particularly relevant for us today is the concept of salvation. The New Testament writers are very clear that

humanity is in a broken state, separated from God because of sin. They proclaim that Jesus is the only way to be reconciled to God and experience eternal life.

So it's not about being a good person or following a set of rules. It's about recognizing our need for something more. That's the core of it.

The New Testament presents Jesus as that something more, the bridge between humanity and God, the one who offers a path to wholeness and reconciliation. This brings us back to the question of the historical Jesus: who was this man who claimed to be the son of God and the savior of the world? That's a question that has fascinated scholars for centuries.

And the New Testament offers us glimpses into the life and teachings of Jesus, even though those glimpses are often filtered through the unique perspectives of the different gospel writers. Right. It's like trying to piece together a puzzle using pieces from different boxes.

So how do we even begin to get a clear picture of the historical Jesus when we have these multiple, sometimes even conflicting accounts? That's where those historical-critical methods come into play. Scholars use them to carefully analyze the text, considering the historical context the authors intended and the intended audience. And more, it's like detective work, sifting through clues to reconstruct the most plausible historical narrative.

It sounds like a pretty complex process, but wouldn't it be easier to just accept the stories at face value? Why go to all that trouble? It's not about discrediting the stories or diminishing their significance. It's about understanding them more deeply. By understanding the historical context, we can gain a richer appreciation for what Jesus said and did.

It helps us grasp the radical nature of his teachings and the impact he had on the world. So it's not about taking away the mystery. It's about adding another layer of understanding.

Exactly. It's about appreciating the complexity and nuance of these texts. And it's about recognizing that our understanding can evolve as we delve deeper into the historical and cultural world that gave birth to them.

We've got the Kingdom of God, salvation, and the historical Jesus. Any other major themes we should be on the lookout for as we continue our exploration? One that's particularly relevant for our world today is the emphasis on community. The New Testament writers continually highlight that following Jesus is not just an individualistic pursuit.

It's about belonging to a community of believers. So it's not just about me and my personal relationship with God. There's a communal aspect as well.

Absolutely. It's about being connected to other people who share our faith, supporting one another on the journey, and working together to live out the teachings of Jesus in the world. It strikes me that we humans are wired for connection.

And that's probably even more important when it comes to something as profound as faith. You're right. The New Testament is filled with examples of communities of believers gathering to worship, to learn, to serve, and to offer support to one another.

And that need for community is just as real for us today as it was for the early Christians. So it's not just about private Bible reading and prayer. It's about finding a community where we can be challenged and encouraged, where we can grow and learn together.

Exactly. And that community can take many forms: a church, a small group, even an online forum. The key is to find people who can help us understand and live out our faith in meaningful ways.

You know, it's interesting to think about how much emphasis is placed on community in the New Testament, given that so much of our world today seems to be pushing us toward individualism and isolation. That's a great observation. And it's precisely why this theme is so relevant for us today.

We need to intentionally seek out those spaces where we can connect with others who share our values and who can help us stay grounded in our faith. The New Testament reminds us that we're not meant to journey alone. That's a powerful reminder.

Okay. We've covered a lot of ground in this deep dive, but there's always more to explore when it comes to the New Testament. What's one final thought you want to leave our listeners with as they continue their own exploration? This might sound simple, but I think it's crucial.

Don't be afraid to ask questions. The New Testament is a complex and challenging book, and there are no easy answers, but the beauty is in the process of wrestling with these texts. That's where true growth and understanding happen.

It's about embracing the mystery and the ambiguity and allowing those questions to lead us deeper into our faith. Exactly. It's not about arriving at some final definitive answer.

It's about the ongoing journey of discovery and the transformation that happens along the way. It's a great note to end on. We've still got more to unpack in our next segment, but for now, let those questions simmer.

Let those insights take root. Who knows what new discoveries await? Welcome back to the Deep Dive. I have to say this has been one of the most enriching deep dives we've done.

Incredible how much depth there is to these texts. Yeah. We've explored the historical context, tackled the challenges of interpretation, and even started to grasp how the New Testament speaks to our lives today.

Yeah. We've unpacked those big overarching themes: the kingdom of God, salvation, and the importance of community- concepts that have shaped Christianity for centuries. Yeah.

And what's striking is that these themes aren't just abstract theological ideas. They have real-world implications for how we live, how we treat each other, how we engage with the world around us. It's a call to action, an invitation to embody those teachings in our daily life, to live out the values of love, compassion, justice, and service that are so central to the Christian faith.

You know, it's easy to forget that these texts were written by real people grappling with real issues in a world that was often hostile to their beliefs. Right. It's fascinating to think about the historical context.

These weren't scholars in ivory towers. They were everyday people sharing their faith experiences, their struggles, their hopes for the future. It's like getting a glimpse into the heart of the early church.

Yeah. Through these letters, gospels, and apocalyptic visions. And their stories continue to resonate with us today.

They remind us that faith isn't just about intellectual ascent. It's about living out our convictions in the midst of real-world challenges. It's about courage, resilience, and a deep commitment to something bigger than ourselves.

And speaking of something bigger than ourselves, I think it's worth reflecting on how the New Testament came together in the first place. It wasn't just a single book dictated from on high. It was a collection of texts written over decades by diverse authors with unique perspectives.

Right. It's almost like a tapestry woven together from different threads. Yeah.

Creating a rich and multifaceted picture of the Christian faith. Exactly. And that's part of what makes the New Testament so compelling.

It invites us to explore those different perspectives, to engage with the text on multiple levels, and to discover our own understanding of what it means to follow Jesus. And that brings us back to that idea of the dual nature of the New Testament. It's both a historical document and divinely inspired scripture.

How do we hold those two truths together? It's a tension that has challenged believers for centuries. But I think it's precisely that tension that makes the New Testament so rich and rewarding. It invites us to engage with both our heads and our hearts, to wrestle with the complexities, and to discover the beauty and wisdom within these ancient texts.

And as we come to the end of our deep dive, I want to leave you with this thought. Don't be afraid to approach the New Testament with a sense of wonder and curiosity. Okay.

Allow yourself to be challenged, to be transformed, to be surprised by what you discover. That's beautiful. It's not about arriving at some perfect understanding.

It's about embracing the journey and allowing these texts to speak to us in new and unexpected ways. Exactly. And I have a feeling that the New Testament will continue to speak to you long after this deep dive is over.

I think you're right. So to all our listeners out there, keep exploring, keep questioning, and keep allowing the New Testament to shape your hearts and minds. And remember, this is just the beginning of your journey.

There's a whole world of discovery waiting for you within these pages. We'll be back soon with another deep dive into a topic you're curious about. Until then, keep learning, keep growing, and keep those minds open.