

Dr. David Mathewson, New Testament Literature,

Session 36 – Excursus #1: Revelation

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All right, welcome to another Deep Dive. This time we're going to be tackling the Book of Revelation. It's a book that often leaves people feeling, well, a little perplexed, I think it's safe to say, or even intimidated, right? Yeah.

But we're here to help you understand it a bit better today, hopefully. And we've got some really fascinating material to work with. We're going to be using some lecture notes from this New Testament scholar, Dr. Mathewson.

Oh yeah, I've heard of him. Yeah, he's got some really interesting insights that we're going to try to unpack today. It seems like people tend to just kind of avoid Revelation altogether, or they get really obsessed with deciphering every single detail.

Yeah, it's definitely one of those books that people talk about a lot, that's for sure. But in this Deep Dive, we're not going to get bogged down in trying to predict the future or anything like that. I mean, we could, but Dr. Mathewson really emphasizes how crucial the historical context is to understanding what this book probably meant to its original audience.

Yeah, that's really important. You can't understand a text without understanding the world in which it was written. Totally.

And the world of Revelation is a fascinating one. It was written during a time when the Roman Empire was at its peak, demanding total allegiance from its subjects. Oh yeah, they were really powerful.

What's interesting to me is that the line between political power and divine worship was kind of blurred. Yeah, the Roman emperors, they weren't just seen as political leaders; they were considered divine figures. Wow, that's crazy.

So for the early Christians who believed that Jesus was the one true God, you can imagine this created a huge dilemma. Absolutely. I mean, they were facing this immense pressure to participate in emperor worship, just to kind of go about their daily lives.

And refusing to do so could have really serious consequences, even lead to persecution. I mean, talk about a high-stakes situation, right? Yeah. It wasn't just a theoretical, theological debate for them either.

It was a real-life situation that they had to navigate. So it was real. Well, absolutely.

And one of the things that Dr. Mathewson points out is that the biggest problem wasn't necessarily outright persecution. It was this constant pressure to compromise. Right.

To kind of find a way to fit in, even if it meant bending their beliefs a bit. Yeah. Like, to what extent could they participate in Roman society without completely compromising their faith? That was the question.

It makes you think. So when we read Revelation with this historical context in mind, it just hits different, right? It becomes this really powerful message of resistance. This call to stand firm in your faith, even when faced with incredible pressure to conform.

Absolutely. It gets right to the heart of it. And that actually brings us to, like, I think the core theme of Revelation: this question of ultimate allegiance.

Like, who are you truly loyal to? The Roman Empire, with all its might and power, or to Jesus Christ? Yeah, I think that's a question that's still relevant for us today. So relevant. I mean, we might not be facing a literal Roman Empire, but there are still so many, I don't know, powers, I guess you could call them, that demand our allegiance, right? Ideologies, political systems, just all sorts of pressures to conform.

Yeah, you're right. And Revelation challenges us to really examine our own lives, I think, and to ask ourselves, where does my true allegiance lie? It's a deep question. Like, what am I willing to compromise on? And what am I willing to stand firm for? Exactly.

I have to say, I'm already starting to see Revelation in a whole new light. Like, it's not just some abstract prophecy about the end of the world. No, it's much more personal than that.

It's this really personal message about, you know, navigating the challenges of faith and loyalty in a world that's often hostile to our beliefs. That's what makes it so powerful. Yeah.

And that's just the beginning. We've got this intense historical backdrop, the Roman Empire demanding allegiance, the early Christians struggling to stay true to their faith. But there's another layer to Revelation that can be, well, frankly, pretty confusing.

And that's the whole apocalyptic genre, right? And all this wild imagery. Yeah, because Revelation isn't just a historical account. You know, it's not just a letter.

It's also an apocalypse. And when most people hear apocalypse, they automatically think end of the world, right? Like fire and brimstone, the whole shebang. Yeah, I get that.

But it's a bit more nuanced than that, I think. The word apocalypse, you know, it actually comes from the Greek word *apokalypsis*, which means unveiling or revelation. So it's not just about predicting the future, but like revealing something that's hidden.

Exactly. It's like pulling back the curtain, you know, to show the spiritual forces at play, the true nature of reality, which is often hidden from our everyday view. I like that.

So it's more about challenging the reader to see the world from God's perspective, to, like, understand the bigger picture of what's going on behind the scenes. Precisely. And for the early Christians reading Revelation, this unveiling would have been incredibly empowering.

You know, it showed them that despite the apparent dominance of the Roman Empire, God was still in control. That's a good point. It's like saying, don't be fooled by appearances.

There's a deeper reality at work here. Exactly. And it's also important to remember that Revelation is a letter.

You know, it's addressed to specific churches that were facing real challenges. Real persecution. Yeah, persecution.

So it's not just a general message about the end of the world. It's like very specific words of encouragement, you know, and exhortation for these early Christians. Absolutely.

You know, it's a call to stand firm in their faith, to resist the pressure to compromise, and to remember that, you know, their true citizenship was in heaven, not the Roman Empire. It's like a pep talk for the persecuted. Yeah.

Right? Yeah, you could say that. Wow. It's like an apocalypse, a prophecy, a letter.

It's a multilayered message that speaks on all these different levels. And that's one of the things that makes Revelation so fascinating, but also so challenging. Right? Yeah, it's complex.

You've got to take all these layers into account to really understand what's going on. Okay. So we've got this historical context, this blending of genres, but what about the authorship? Who actually wrote Revelation? Well, the book's attributed to John, but there's a lot of debate about whether it was John the Apostle, you know, one of Jesus's closest disciples, or another prominent John in the early church.

Ah. So there's a bit of mystery surrounding the author's identity. A little bit, yeah.

But what's interesting is that even if it was written by John the Apostle, the book doesn't really rely on his, like, apostolic authority, right, to make its case. Right. It leans on something else.

Instead, it positions itself firmly within the tradition of the Old Testament prophets. Yeah, the prophets. So, wait, what do you mean by apostolic authority, just to clarify? Sure.

So that means, you know, the authority that came from being one of the original twelve apostles who walked with Jesus, like, their words carried a lot of weight in the early church. Got it. So Revelation isn't saying, "Believe this because I'm an apostle, it's saying, "Believe this because it aligns with what God has already revealed through the prophets.

Exactly. And that's a really crucial distinction, because it shows that the message of Revelation is meant to stand on its own merit, you know, like grounded in this larger story of God's plan for humanity. This is fascinating.

I'm already starting to appreciate just how complex and deep this book really is. And we're just getting started. I know, right? But before we, like, dive into the crazy, sometimes wacky world of Revelation's symbolism, I think it's worth taking a moment to consider the different ways people have interpreted this book, you know, throughout history.

Yeah, good point. Because understanding those different approaches can help us, like, navigate its complexities more effectively. I totally agree.

It gives you some perspective. All right. So let's unpack these interpretive approaches.

Like, where do we even begin? What's the best way to even think about this? Well, there are a lot of different ways to approach it. But I think one helpful way is to, like, think about it in terms of these four main views or approaches, I guess. You've got the preterist view, the historical view, the idealist view, and then the futurist view.

Okay. Those are some big words. I know, right? But they each offer, like, a different lens through which to understand the book's symbolism and, you know, its timeline, really.

Okay. So break it down for me. What's the preterist view? So the preterist view basically sees most of Revelation's prophecies as having already been fulfilled, like, way back in the first century, you know, particularly during the time when the Roman Empire was persecuting Christians.

So, like, it's reading Revelation as a historical commentary on events that already happened. Exactly. Like, they might point to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, you know, as a key event that fulfills some of those prophecies.

Okay. That makes sense. What about the historical view? How's that different? The historical view kind of takes a broader perspective.

It sees Revelation as unveiling God's plan throughout history, you know, like, with the symbols and prophecies corresponding to events and movements across different eras. So it's like Revelation is providing a roadmap of sorts, tracing God's hand in history. Yeah.

That's a good way to put it. So you're not just looking at the first century. You're looking at the big sweep of history.

Gotcha. Okay. What about the idealist view? Where does that fit in? The idealist view takes a more symbolic and, I guess you could say, timeless approach.

Oh, okay. So instead of trying to tie Revelation to specific historical events, it focuses more on the big picture themes, like the struggle between good and evil, the triumph of God's kingdom, the renewal of creation, you know, those big ideas. So it's less about predicting specific events and more about understanding these kinds of overarching spiritual truths.

Exactly. For idealists, the imagery, you know, the symbolism, it's all pointing to the timeless nature of God's victory, this kind of ongoing battle between light and darkness. That's always happening.

I can see how that would appeal to people. It's a bit less literal, I guess. Yeah, for sure.

And then you have the futurist view, which is probably the most popular one, at least among certain groups today. Right. Okay.

So what do the futurists believe? They believe that most of Revelation's prophecies are still future events, particularly those related to, like, the end times and the second coming of Christ. Okay. So for futurists, Revelation is like a sneak peek into what's to come, right? A glimpse into the events that are going to unfold at the end of history.

Exactly. They might focus on those passages that describe the Great Tribulation, the Antichrist, the Battle of Armageddon, the Final Judgment, you know, all that stuff. Wow.

Okay. So we have four very different approaches. No wonder there's so much debate and discussion surrounding Revelation.

It's true. And what Dr. Mathewson emphasizes is that each of these views has its, you know, strengths and weaknesses. Right.

It's important to approach them with a lot of humility, you know, recognizing that we don't have all the answers. Humility is important with this book, I'm realizing. It really is.

And sometimes, you know, maybe a blended approach. Okay. Like drawing insights from different views might be the most helpful, but you have to be careful about just picking and choosing what you like.

Right. Right. It's got to be well thought out.

Okay. So we've got these different interpretive approaches to keep in mind, but now I kind of want to dive into some of the specific symbols in Revelation. Let's do it.

Because honestly, some of those images, they're pretty wild. I'm not going to lie. Oh yeah.

They're definitely out there. I mean, how do we even begin to understand what all that stuff means? Well, I think the key is to remember that those symbols were incredibly powerful metaphors for the original audience, you know? Okay. And to decode them, we need to try to understand the historical and cultural context, like we were talking about earlier, right? Yeah.

Like with the whole Roman Empire thing and the emperor worship. Exactly. And when we start to understand those symbols in light of the Old Testament, things become even clearer.

Because a lot of those images, they're drawn from the Old Testament for the prophets. Okay. So let's unpack this a bit.

What are some of those key symbols, and what might they have meant to, like, Sean's original audience? Okay. Well, one of the most prominent, and honestly, I think one of the most misunderstood symbols is this beast with seven heads and 10 horns that comes out of the sea. Yeah.

That one's pretty hard to miss. It pops up like all over the place in Revelation. Right.

So what's the deal with this beast? Well, for John's original audience, who were super familiar with the Old Testament, they would have immediately thought of those monstrous

creatures in the book of Daniel, the ones that represent those oppressive empires that threaten God's people. Ah, okay. I see.

So it's like John is using this familiar imagery to make a point about the Roman Empire. Exactly. The beast in Revelation, with all its power and its demand for worship, is a symbol of that oppressive Roman Empire, which was persecuting Christians and, you know, demanding their allegiance.

So it's like saying, look, this empire might seem powerful and unstoppable, but it's ultimately this monstrous force opposed to God. Precisely. And that imagery would have resonated like big time with the early Christians, especially those who were struggling to stay faithful under Roman rule.

It paints a powerful picture. Okay. What about the number 666, which is always associated with the beast? That one seems to have captured the popular imagination for centuries.

Oh, absolutely. It's definitely one of the most, I don't know, intriguing and mysterious symbols in Revelation. There are so many theories about it.

I know. What are some of the possible interpretations, though? Okay. Well, some scholars think it's a form of gematria, you know, where letters in a name are assigned numerical values.

And in this case, the number 666 might actually represent a coded reference to the Roman Emperor Nero. Wow. He was notorious for his, you know, brutal persecution of Christians.

Oh, right. I remember that. So it's like a secret message hidden within the text, a way of identifying the enemy without directly naming him.

Exactly. And that would be important, you know, for the early Christians who were living under constant threat. But that's not the only way to interpret it.

Another interpretation focuses more on, like, the symbolic significance of the number six itself. Like in the Bible, seven often represents completeness or perfection. Right.

The perfect number. Exactly. While six falls short.

Ah, so 666 could be seen as representing ultimate imperfection or incompleteness, a kind of like parody of God's perfection. That's one way to look at it. Yeah.

And when we connect that to the beast, it suggests that the Roman Empire, despite its claims of power and divinity, is ultimately flawed and, you know, destined to fail. Wow. I'm starting to see how these symbols work on all these different levels.

They're not just random images. Like they have a literal meaning connected to the historical context, but they also convey deeper theological truths. That's a great observation.

And that's what makes Revelation so challenging, but also so rewarding to study. Because it's not just about decoding symbols. It's about understanding how they point to the bigger picture, you know, of God's plan and this cosmic battle between good and evil.

It's epic. It really is. OK, so we've got the beast.

We've got 666. What about some of the other, like, really striking symbols in Revelation? I mean, there's a lot. Oh, yeah.

Tons. Well, another one that stands out is the dragon, you know, often depicted as this fiery red serpent with seven heads and ten horns. Oh, yeah.

The dragon. That's definitely a memorable one. What does this terrifying creature represent? Well, the dragon is often interpreted as Satan, you know, the ultimate enemy of God and humanity.

It's the force behind the beast, manipulating and empowering the Roman Empire to persecute Christians and oppose God's purposes. So it's like saying there's this whole deeper spiritual dimension to the conflict, like a cosmic battle playing out behind the scenes of human history. Exactly.

And for those early Christians, that understanding would have been incredibly empowering because it reminded them they weren't just facing a human enemy, but a spiritual one, and that they had God on their side in this battle. It's like saying, don't be afraid, even though things might seem really bleak. There's a greater power at work here, and ultimately, good will triumph over evil.

Yeah, exactly. That's a powerful way to put it. And that message of hope, that message of ultimate victory, it's woven throughout Revelation.

I'm starting to see that. OK, so we've got these powerful symbols, the beast, 666, the dragon, but there are also images of hope and restoration in Revelation, right? It's not all doom and gloom. Oh, yeah, for sure.

Those are crucial to understanding what the book's all about, I think. And one of the most striking, most inspiring images is this vision of the New Jerusalem. Oh, yeah, the New Jerusalem, the city of gold with the streets paved with jewels, right? I have to admit, that one always captures my imagination.

Oh, it's a beautiful vision, and it represents the culmination of God's redemptive plan, the ultimate restoration of creation, where God dwells with his people in perfect harmony. It's like a glimpse into the paradise that awaits those who stay faithful, right? Where all the pain and suffering of this world are gone. And for those early Christians who were facing real persecution and real hardship, that vision would have been incredibly comforting.

It would have given them hope to endure, you know, knowing that something far greater awaited them. It's like saying, "Hang in there. Even though things are tough right now, there's a glorious future coming, a world where God's justice and love will reign supreme.

Yeah, beautifully put. And the way that John describes the New Jerusalem, you know, all that imagery emphasizes this sense of peace, abundance, and God's presence. Like the river of life, the tree of life.

Exactly. And no need for a sun or moon, because God's glory illuminates the whole city. It's like he's painting a picture of paradise restored, a world where everything's as it should be.

No more pain, no more suffering, just perfect peace. Yeah. And the key is, you know, it's a world where God's will is fully realized.

Where his love and justice flow freely. So the New Jerusalem, it's not just a beautiful city, right? It's a symbol of the ultimate restoration of everything. Wow.

It's like saying that even though evil seems so powerful in this world, ultimately God's plan will win and his kingdom will be established on earth, just like it is in heaven. That's a powerful way to understand it, for sure. It's not just about predicting the future or figuring out these cryptic symbols.

It's about grasping this grand narrative of redemption, this cosmic battle between good and evil, and ultimately the triumph of God's love and justice. It's the big picture. It is the big picture, yeah.

This is making me think about revelation in a whole new way. It's not just about the end of the world. It's about the beginning of something new, something far greater than we can imagine.

And that's one of the most hopeful parts of it, right? It doesn't leave us in despair or fear. It points us toward a future that's full of promise, a future where God's purposes are finally fulfilled, and his people can dwell with him in this renewed and perfected creation. This deep dive is blowing my mind, honestly.

We've covered so much: the historical context, the different ways to interpret it, the symbolism, the message of hope and restoration. But before we wrap things up, I have one final question for you, if you don't mind. Hit me with it.

Okay. So we've talked a lot about how important it is to approach revelation with humility, recognizing that we might not have all the answers, but how do we balance that humility with the need to understand and actually apply this book's message to our own lives? What are some practical takeaways for us here in the 21st century? Yeah, that's a great question. It's really easy to get lost in the symbols and the different interpretations and all that.

But at the end of the day, revelation is meant to have an impact on how we live, right? Yeah. Like, how does this ancient book speak to us today? What does it mean for me right here, right now? I think that's what we all want to know. And for me, one of the most powerful things that comes through in revelation is this idea that our ultimate allegiance belongs to God, not to any earthly power or ideology.

Right. And that really connects what we were talking about earlier, right? About those early Christians facing all that pressure to conform to the Roman Empire, you know, to fit in. Exactly.

And even though we don't have, like, a Roman emperor literally demanding our worship today, there are still so many things that try to take God's place in our lives. Oh, for sure. Like what kinds of things? It could be like a political ideology or a consumerist mindset, you

know, that constant pressure to buy more stuff, or maybe it's an obsession with success or even just our own comfort and security.

It's like those things can become idols in our lives, right? Things that we end up prioritizing above everything else, even our relationship with God. You got it. And I think that's where revelation really challenges us.

It calls us to look at our hearts, you know, and ask ourselves, what am I truly living for? What am I willing to sacrifice for? What am I willing to stand up for? What really matters to me, you know, at the end of the day? Those are some tough questions, but important ones for sure. And I think if we're honest with ourselves, we all struggle with this sometimes, right? Like we can get so caught up in the things of this world that we lose sight of what truly matters. Yeah.

It happens to all of us. And I think if our allegiance is misplaced, you know, if we're putting our trust in something other than God, we're going to end up disappointed, maybe even disillusioned. Because ultimately those things can't deliver on their promises, right? They can't give us the true fulfillment and purpose that we long for.

That's it. And that's where the message of Revelation comes in, I think, with such power. It's like a wake-up call.

It reminds us that even when things look really bad, you know, even when it seems like evil is winning, God is still on the throne. He hasn't given up on us. He hasn't given up.

He's still in control. And his plan is ultimately for our good, you know, even when we can't see it. It's like a message of hope in the midst of chaos, like, don't lose heart, keep going.

There's a bigger story unfolding here. And in the end, good is going to win. That's a great way to put it.

And, you know, another important takeaway from Revelation is this idea of perseverance, of faithfulness, even in the face of really tough challenges. I mean, the book is full of examples of people who went through incredible suffering, who faced persecution, temptation, all kinds of stuff. But they stayed faithful to God.

They didn't give up. And they were rewarded for their faithfulness. Right.

They received that crown of life. They entered the New Jerusalem. They experienced God's presence in a really powerful way.

Absolutely. And I think that's a really encouraging message for us. You know, it reminds us that our faithfulness matters, even in the midst of all the craziness, all the trials and challenges.

God sees our faithfulness, and he honors it. It's like saying, keep going, keep fighting the good fight. It's going to be worth it in the end.

Exactly. And then, of course, we have to talk about the message of hope that runs throughout Revelation. I mean, even though it describes some pretty intense events, you

know, some things that are kind of hard to read about, it ultimately points us toward this amazing future, a future where God makes everything new and sets everything right.

Yeah, that image of the New Jerusalem with the streets of gold and the river of life flowing through it. It's just such a powerful picture of hope and restoration. It is.

It reminds us that even though we live in this broken world, a world full of pain and suffering, there's a day coming when all of that will be gone, when God's kingdom will be fully established, and his people will dwell with him in perfect peace and joy. It's like the ultimate happy ending, right? It's like saying, "Don't give up on hope. Something truly incredible is waiting for us on the other side of all this.

Yeah, exactly. And that hope, it can get us through anything, I think. It can give us the strength to persevere, to stay faithful, and to live lives that reflect God's love and justice, even in a world that doesn't always value those things.

So as we wrap up this deep dive into Revelation, I think the big takeaway for me is that it's a book that challenges us to live with our eyes fixed on eternity, you know, on the ultimate reality of God's kingdom and his victory over evil. It's about keeping the big picture in mind. I love that.

And when we live with that eternal perspective, it changes everything, right? It changes how we see our problems, how we treat other people, how we make decisions. It changes everything about how we live our lives. This has been an amazing conversation.

I feel like I have a much deeper understanding of Revelation now. It's not just some book about predicting the future. It's this powerful message of hope, perseverance, and faithfulness that can really transform our lives.

And that's what we all want, right? To live lives that are full of meaning and purpose. Absolutely. And I hope our listeners will be inspired to keep exploring this book for themselves.

There's so much more to discover, so much more to learn. Yeah, keep digging deeper, keep asking questions. And join us next time for another deep dive adventure.