

Dr. David Mathewson, New Testament Literature,

Session 37 – Excursus #2: Revelation

Sponsored by Biblicalelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Welcome back, everyone, to the Deep Dive. This time we're tackling the Book of Revelation. Oh, Revelation.

Yeah. We're going to be looking at its symbolism and its major themes and, you know, kind of its connections back to the Old Testament. Awesome.

Yeah. You guys sent in a lecture from a New Testament scholar. We're going to be taking a look at that.

Cool. Yeah. Get ready for some wild imagery.

You got your dragons and your beasts and your plagues, all that good apocalyptic stuff. But you might be surprised how relevant this ancient text is even for today in terms of understanding power. Yeah.

It really is amazing, you know, how a book written almost 2000 years ago can still speak so powerfully to our modern world. For sure. One of the things that struck me right away in the lecture was how the scholar described Revelation as this giant political cartoon.

Oh, wow. Yeah. And that it's not just, you know, trying to predict the future.

It's about using those really vivid images to expose the truth about power, particularly in the Roman Empire. Right. And, you know, political cartoons are so effective.

They kind of bypass our, like, logical filters, and they just hit us right in the gut with their message. Yeah. Like, think about, you know, the impact that a single image can have.

Right. It can be way more powerful than like a whole page of analysis. Absolutely.

And when you think about who Revelation was originally written to- you know, these early Christians who were facing persecution under Roman rule- it makes sense why that kind of really in-your-face imagery would have been so powerful for them. Exactly. Yeah.

Because, you know, these early Christians, they were caught in this real dilemma. They were being pressured to conform to Roman culture. Right.

To worship the emperor, to compromise their faith. And so Revelation gave them a way to see through all that propaganda, all that stuff going on in the empire. Yeah.

To really understand the true nature of the power that they were up against. It's like, you know, I mean, I can just imagine these early Christians huddled together, maybe like secretly reading this letter. Yeah.

And then suddenly feeling so empowered, like, wow, we can resist this. Right. It must have been such a powerful experience.

Like it was a secret code almost. Right. A way for them to communicate and find strength in their shared faith.

Yeah. And it's just so fascinating how even something as seemingly simple as a political cartoon can become this huge source of hope. Yeah.

And resistance in the face of oppression. For sure. It speaks to the power of symbols, you know.

Right. And stories to shape how we understand the world and to give us courage when we need it. Let's talk about some of those symbols.

One of the most iconic images in Revelation is the throne scene. Yes. That we see in chapters four and five.

And it's like, Caelan gets this backstage pass to heaven and witnesses this incredible display of divine power. Right. And it's not just a visual spectacle.

Yeah. It's this deliberate challenge to the power of Rome. Right.

You know, because at that time, the Roman emperor was considered a god. And so his authority was absolute. Of course.

Yeah. But in this vision, it's God, not Caesar, who's sitting on the throne. That's such a bold statement.

Right. In the context of the Roman Empire. I know.

It's almost like John is saying, like, hey, Rome, you think you're so powerful? Well, guess what? There's a higher authority here. Exactly. And it's not just about God's power, but also about his justice.

Mm-hmm. The throne scene isn't just about awe and wonder. It's about setting the stage for God's judgment on this corrupt and oppressive system.

So that brings us to this mysterious scroll and the lamb who is worthy to open it. Right. What's the significance of that? And how does it connect to these ideas of power and justice? Well, you know, the scroll represents God's plan for the world.

Mm-hmm. A plan that no one seems worthy to reveal. Right.

You know? And there's this sense of anticipation, like something big is about to happen. Uh-huh. And then the Lamb, and we understand this to be Jesus, steps forward.

Okay. And he is the only one worthy to open the scroll and to set God's plan in motion. And it's so interesting how the Lamb is described as both slain and victorious.

Mm-hmm. It's not your typical image of power. No, it's not.

Right. It completely flips the script. Yeah.

On how we think about power. Right. It suggests that true power doesn't come from brute force or domination.

Mm-hmm. But from sacrifice and love. Wow.

Even in the face of suffering and death. So how does that connect back to God's judgment on Rome? The Lamb's victory is ultimately God's victory. Mm-hmm.

It's a sign that God is in control. Okay. And that even the most powerful empires can't stand against his will.

You know, this scene also reminded me of the Lord's Prayer. Specifically that line, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Oh, yeah.

It's like the throne scene is a visual representation of that prayer. Right. God's will being established in heaven and then extending down to earth.

Yeah. That's a great connection. Yeah.

It highlights the cosmic scope of revelation. Yeah. The idea that what happens on earth is ultimately part of this much larger spiritual drama.

So we have God on the throne, the Lamb, the scroll, this really epic vision of divine power and justice. Definitely setting the stage for something big. Yeah.

What happens next? We'll buckle up because things are about to get intense. When the Lamb opens the scroll, we get this series of judgments. Yeah.

The seals, the trumpets, and the bulls. Okay. And they unleash chaos and devastation upon the earth.

So we're talking about these, you know, classic apocalyptic images. The plagues, the earthquakes, the fire and brimstone. It's like a special effects extravaganza.

I know. But what's the deeper meaning behind all that chaos? Well, remember, Revelation draws heavily on the Old Testament, especially the story of the Exodus. Right, right.

These plagues are meant to evoke those plagues that God sent on Egypt, you know. Right. To free the Israelites from slavery.

Oh, so it's like God is saying, I did it once with Egypt, and I'll do it again with Rome. Any empire that oppresses my people will face my judgment. Exactly.

It's this powerful reminder that no earthly power is absolute. Right. That ultimately all empires are accountable to God.

And you know that message isn't just for the ancient Romans. No. Right.

Not at all. It feels so incredibly relevant to our own world where we see so many systems of oppression and injustice still in place today. Oh, for sure.

It definitely challenges us to think about the ways in which power is wielded in our own time. Mm-hmm. It forces us to ask, like, who are the pharaohs of our day? Wow.

And what are the plagues that God might be sending to wake us up to the need for justice and righteousness? That's such a good question. I know. It makes you think.

You know, it's interesting, though, how these plagues, while terrifying, you know, like on the surface. Yeah. They also point to this deeper message of liberation.

Right. It's like, just like the Exodus plagues were meant to free the Israelites from slavery, these judgments in Revelation are ultimately about freeing God's people from the grip of this corrupt system. That's a great point.

And it also highlights the tension. Right. You know, between judgment and mercy that runs throughout Revelation.

God's judgment is never just arbitrary or vindictive. Yeah. It's always aimed at bringing about redemption and restoration.

It's like God is saying, I'm not just going to destroy the wicked. I'm going to create something new and beautiful, you know, out of the ashes. Exactly.

And that's where we see the connection to the new heaven and new earth. Yeah. Which is such a central theme in Revelation.

Speaking of the new heaven and new earth, we haven't really touched on that yet. Yeah. Can you give us a glimpse of what John envisions for the future? Yeah.

So John paints this picture of a completely transformed reality where God's presence dwells fully and completely. Okay. And all things are made new.

Wow. It's a world without, you know, pain or suffering or death. Okay.

A place where justice and righteousness reign supreme. So it's this vision of ultimate hope. Yes.

A reminder that even in the midst of, you know, all this chaos and destruction, God's plan is ultimately one of redemption and renewal. Absolutely. It's a vision that has inspired and sustained, you know, countless Christians throughout history, especially those facing persecution or hardship.

Okay. Let's shift gears a bit and talk about those infamous numbers in Revelation. We can't have a deep dive into Revelation without mentioning 666, the mark of the beast.

Right. What's the deal with that number? You know, it's funny how that number has taken on a life of its own in popular culture. Totally.

People see it everywhere. Right. And they often interpret it very literally.

Yeah. It's like we're obsessed with finding, you know, those hidden codes and secret messages. Yeah.

But if we're not supposed to take it literally, what's the deeper symbolic meaning behind 666? Well, remember how seven is often used in the Bible to represent completeness or perfection. Right. Like the seven days of creation.

Exactly. The seven spirits of God.

So six, being one less than seven, can be seen as representing imperfection or incompleteness. Okay. So then 666 takes that imperfection to an extreme.

Oh, wow. It's like saying that the beast and the system it represents are fundamentally flawed. Right.

And opposed to God's will. That's a powerful way to think about it. Yeah.

It's not just about, you know, some future antichrist figure, but about recognizing those patterns of evil and corruption that have existed throughout history and continue to exist, you know, even in our own time. Exactly. It's about discerning those beastly qualities in our own systems and structures.

Oh, wow. The ways in which power is often used to exploit and oppress others. What about some of those other numbers in Revelation, like 12 and seven and three and a half? Yeah.

What significance do they hold? Well, 12 is often associated with the people of God. Okay. Both in the Old and New Testaments.

Right. You have the 12 tribes of Israel, the 12 apostles, and so on. Mm-hmm.

It's a symbol of God's faithfulness to his people. Right. And his plan to redeem and restore all of creation.

So, when we see that number in Revelation, it's a reminder that God is working through history to bring about his purposes. Exactly. And seven, as we mentioned earlier, represents completeness and perfection.

Mm-hmm. So, when you see seven seals, seven trumpets, or seven bulls, it's emphasizing the totality of God's judgment and the completeness of his plan. It's like saying, this isn't just some random assortment of events.

There's a divine order and purpose behind it all. Exactly. Wow.

And then you have three and a half, which is half of seven. Right. And it often represents a limited time of tribulation or testing.

Okay. It's a reminder that even though things might get tough for God's people, their suffering won't last forever. There is always hope, even in the darkest of times.

That's a key message of Revelation. And it brings us to another powerful image: that cosmic battle between good and evil. Oh, yeah.

John's vision in Revelation chapters 12 and 13 introduces some pretty wild characters. Mm-hmm. A pregnant woman, a child, a dragon.

Okay. And not one, but two beasts. Okay, this sounds epic.

Give us the play-by-play. Oh, yeah. What's going on in this cosmic showdown? Well, it's a scene full of drama and symbolism.

Okay. We have this pregnant woman who represents God's people. Okay.

About to give birth to a child who represents the Messiah. It's interesting how that imagery draws on the Old Testament prophets. Yep.

Who often described Israel as God's wife giving birth to this new era of hope and redemption. Exactly. And then you have this terrifying dragon lurking nearby.

Oh, my God. Ready to devour the child as soon as it's born. Oh, no.

And John explicitly identifies this dragon as Satan. Oh, wow. The ancient serpent from the Garden of Eden.

So this isn't just some random monster. No. This is the embodiment of evil itself.

It is. And he's clearly threatened by the arrival of the Messiah. Absolutely.

Satan knows that the Messiah's birth signals the beginning of his downfall. So he's determined to destroy him. Wow.

But he's unsuccessful. The child is snatched up to heaven. Okay.

Safe from his clutches. That's a powerful image of God's protection over his people. Yeah.

Even in the face of such intense opposition. It is. And then things get even wilder.

Okay. To help him in his evil scheme, the dragon enlists the help of two monstrous beasts. One from the sea and one from the land.

Oh, wow. They become his agents of chaos and destruction, working to deceive and persecute God's people. So it's like a cosmic tag team match.

Good versus evil playing out on this grand scale. It is. And these beasts represent the powers of the world that align themselves with Satan's agenda.

Exactly. And this whole scene with the woman, the child, the dragon, and the beasts connects back to one of the most foundational stories in the Bible. Okay.

The Garden of Eden. You mean Adam and Eve, the serpent, and the forbidden fruit? Yeah. What's the connection? Remember how God cursed the serpent in Genesis 3, saying, I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your offspring and hers.

He will crush your head, and you will strike his heel. Right. Well, that ancient conflict between the serpent and the woman is still raging in Revelation.

Oh, wow. So the dragon in Revelation is that same serpent from Genesis. And the enmity between them continues.

And that promise of the serpent's head being crushed points forward to the Messiah's ultimate victory over evil. Exactly. Revelation is showing us that the struggle between good and evil isn't just a human conflict.

It's this cosmic battle that's been going on since the beginning of time. Wow. And that battle culminates in this final showdown.

Oh, wow. Between the forces of light and darkness. This whole scene is giving me chills.

Yeah. It's like a cosmic horror movie, but with a hopeful ending. But what does this cosmic battle mean for those early Christians and for us today? I think John is showing his readers and us that the struggles we face in life aren't isolated incidents.

Yeah. They're part of a much larger spiritual conflict. Right.

This clash between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of darkness. So it's like saying, don't get discouraged. You're not alone in this.

Right. This fight has been going on for centuries, and God is on your side. Exactly.

It puts things in perspective. Right. And it also reminds us that even though things may look bleak, the ultimate victory has already been won.

The serpent's head has been crushed through Jesus's sacrifice. Wow. And God's kingdom will ultimately prevail.

That's such a powerful message of hope, but it also raises a challenge for us, doesn't it? Absolutely. Revelation is calling us to see beyond the surface and to recognize the true nature of power. Right.

How might that change the way we engage with the systems and structures of our world today? That's a deep question. Yeah. It makes you think about where you stand in this cosmic battle.

Yeah. And how you can align yourself with the forces of good. It challenges us to examine our own allegiances.

Right. And to consider how we might be contributing to or resisting the forces of evil in our own time. It's a call to be discerning, to be courageous, and to be actively involved in working towards the realization of God's kingdom on Earth as it is in heaven.

For sure. Yeah. It feels like Revelation is calling us to be more than just passive observers in this cosmic battle.

Like we're invited to actually become active participants. Right. And fight for justice and righteousness, you know, like in our own little spheres of influence.

Absolutely. And that's where I think the practical implications of Revelation really come into focus. Yeah.

It's not just about, you know, decoding symbols or understanding the historical context. Right. It's about allowing this ancient text to really transform the way that we live in the world today.

It's like Revelation gives us this new lens through which to view our own lives, you know? Yeah. Our communities, our global systems, we start to see things differently. Right.

We start to recognize maybe those more subtle ways that evil can kind of manifest itself. Right. And to see the opportunities for resistance and for change.

That's a great way to put it. Revelation is calling us to be awake and to be aware. Right.

And to really be engaged in that fight for justice and righteousness. Okay. So we've covered a lot of ground in this deep dive.

We've explored the historical context of Revelation, its use of vivid imagery and symbolism, the cosmic battle between good and evil, the promise of a new heaven and a new Earth. Yeah. What are some of the key takeaways that you would want to leave our listener with? Well, first and foremost, I think it's so important to remember that Revelation is a book of hope.

Yeah, it contains some pretty terrifying imagery and some challenging themes. Right. But ultimately, it's a message of God's ultimate victory over evil.

Right. And his plan to redeem and restore all of creation. It's a reminder that even in those darkest of times, you know, when it feels like evil is winning.

Yeah. God is still in control, and his purposes will prevail. Exactly.

And it's also a call to action. Okay. Revelation isn't just about passively waiting for God to intervene.

Right. It's about actively participating in his work of bringing about justice and righteousness in the world. It's about being the hands and feet of Christ.

Yeah. You know, extending his love and compassion to those who are hurting and oppressed. Absolutely.

And I think it's also really important to remember that Revelation is a complex and multifaceted text. Yeah. There's no one right way to interpret it.

For sure. And there's always more to discover and explore. So it's an invitation to ongoing study, reflection, and dialogue.

We don't have to have all the answers, but we can engage with this text in a way that deepens our faith. Right. Informs our worldview and inspires us to live more courageously and compassionately in the world.

That's beautifully said. I think that's a perfect note to end on. Well, thank you so much for joining us on this deep dive into the book of Revelation.

Yes. Thank you. We hope you've gained some new insights and perspectives on this fascinating and challenging text.

And to our listeners, we encourage you to continue exploring the rich symbolism and the really profound message of Revelation. It's a book that can speak to us in really powerful and unexpected ways, offering guidance, hope, and inspiration for the journey ahead. Until next time, keep seeking knowledge and embracing the power of curiosity.