

Dr. David Mathewson, New Testament Literature,

Session 38 – Excursus #3: Revelation

Sponsored by Biblicalelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Welcome to our deep dive, everyone. We're going to be looking at the book of Revelation today. Oh, fascinating choice.

Yeah, it is. And we have some lecture notes from Dr. Mathewson that are going to guide us through this. Awesome.

So yeah, we're going to be looking at Revelation, but specifically how it spoke to the first Christians, like those living under Roman rule, and how they would have heard and interpreted this book. You know, it really is like a coded message of resistance and hope for them. Oh, a coded message.

That's a great way to put it. Yeah. And I think a lot of people don't realize that Revelation isn't just about predicting the future.

It's about using this vivid imagery and symbolism to encourage believers who are facing really tough times in the real world. So, like, they would have read these symbols as a way to understand their own struggles under Roman rule. Exactly.

It's like they had this secret language they could use to talk about their faith and find strength in their beliefs without attracting too much unwanted attention. That's amazing. Yeah, it's pretty incredible when you think about it.

So where do we even begin with all this symbolism? I mean, it's such a dense book. It is. And Dr. Mathewson starts us off with those two witnesses.

Oh, yeah. And Revelation 11. Right.

Those guys with incredible powers, like bringing plagues and stopping the rain. Like Moses and Elijah. Exactly.

Those Old Testament prophets. That's interesting. Why do you think they're connected like that? Well, the idea of two witnesses actually ties back to the Old Testament law.

Really? Yeah. You needed two witnesses to give a valid testimony. Oh, wow.

I didn't know that. So it seems like these two figures are more symbolic than literal, representing something bigger. So Dr. Mathewson thinks they symbolize the whole church.

Yeah. The entire body of believers standing up for their faith, even when it's tough. But could they also represent individual believers too? Absolutely.

They could represent anyone who's willing to stand up for what they believe in, even when they're facing opposition or pressure. I like that. It makes it feel more personal.

Yeah, definitely. It's like those witnesses represent the collective voice of all believers, speaking truth to power. And they're not afraid to do it.

Exactly. Their courage and resilience would have been so inspiring to those early Christians who were being persecuted by the Romans. It's like they're saying, hey, we're here, and we're not going away.

Yeah, they're not backing down from their faith. There's also this image of the temple being measured. Right, right.

Which seems to symbolize God's protection over his people. Like God is saying, this is my space, and I'm watching over it. So even though those early Christians were facing persecution, this image would have given them some comfort.

Absolutely. It would have been a huge reminder that even in the midst of their suffering, God was still with them. Like they weren't alone.

Exactly. God was protecting them, and he was going to vindicate them in the end. That's actually a really encouraging thought for us today too.

Oh, definitely. I mean, we all face challenges and opposition in different ways. Yeah, for sure.

And it's good to remember that speaking up for what's right, holding on to our values, even when it's tough, makes a difference. It does. And it might come at a cost.

Yeah. But it's worth it because we're standing on solid ground. We're on God's side.

Exactly. And that's a really powerful thing to remember. That's a great point.

So the message for those early Christians and for us today seems to be that faithful witness, even if it costs us something, is important. Precisely. It's about living a life that truly reflects our beliefs, even when it's hard.

Okay. Now, Dr. Mathieson brings up this whole concept of the millennium in Revelation 20. Oh yeah, the millennium.

And you know, there are so many interpretations of what this means. Right. It's been debated for centuries.

So many debates over the years. Yeah. You've got your premillennialists, your postmillennialists, your amillennialists.

It can get pretty confusing. Yeah, it can. But what often gets overlooked is just how mysterious this passage really is.

You mean like it's not very clear? It's not. It doesn't lay out any kind of specific timeline or tell us exactly where this thousand-year reign is supposed to happen. So maybe we're getting bogged down in the wrong details.

I think so. Instead of getting caught up in all these different interpretations, it's more helpful to look at the big picture, you know? So you're saying the millennium might not be about a literal time frame. Right.

But more of a symbol. Exactly. It's more about the idea of God ultimately vindicating his people and bringing judgment on all evil.

It's like saying, no matter how bad things get, good will win in the end. Yeah, exactly. It's a message of hope and ultimate justice.

That's encouraging. It is. And it's something that those early Christians would have clung to.

Especially in the face of Roman persecution. Absolutely. It would have given them strength to endure their trials.

I like that it's like a reminder to keep our eyes on the prize. Right. Focus on the ultimate goal.

Don't get lost in the day-to-day struggles. Exactly. It's about having that long-term vision of God's plan.

The big picture. Yes. The big picture.

It's a reminder that God is in control. And he's working everything out for good. Even when things seem chaotic and confusing.

Okay. So we've got these two witnesses, this idea of the millennium. Right.

Now, Dr. Mathewson introduces these two cities. Babylon and the New Jerusalem. This is where things get really interesting.

I know, right? It's like, what do these cities even represent? Well, they represent two completely opposite ways of life. Babylon, which most scholars think refers to Rome, is portrayed as this really seductive but ultimately corrupt power. It's all about wealth, power, pleasure.

Right. And it's all gained at the expense of others. It's kind of like those stories you hear about people who get seduced by the promise of wealth and power.

Right. But then they realize it comes at a terrible cost. They lose their soul in the process.

Exactly. And for those early Christians living under Roman rule, this would have been a very real danger. Oh, yeah.

I could see that. The call to come out of her, you know. It wasn't just about physically leaving Rome.

So it was more about rejecting what Babylon stood for. Yeah. It was about refusing to participate in its corrupt system and its values.

Like a spiritual exodus. That's a great way to put it. It was about making a conscious choice to align yourself with a different set of values.

The values of the New Jerusalem? Precisely. Values that are rooted in justice, compassion, and love. This New Jerusalem sounds pretty amazing.

Oh, it is. It's described as this glorious city. Yeah.

Built on the foundation of the 12 apostles. With gates named after the 12 tribes of Israel. Yeah.

It's a powerful image of unity and restoration. It's like bringing together the old and new covenants, you know. Exactly.

It's all about signifying the unified people of God. But we have to remember, this New Jerusalem, it's not a literal city, right? Yeah. It's not about escaping to some physical location.

So it's symbolic of something else. It is. It represents a renewed earth, a transformed creation where God dwells among his people.

Wow. That's so different from how we usually think about heaven. I know, right? It's not about leaving earth behind, but about earth being renewed and made whole again.

This is blowing my mind. It's pretty mind-blowing, isn't it? It challenges us to think differently about our relationship with this world. So Babylon represents all the brokenness and corruption we see around us.

Right. And the New Jerusalem is like the ultimate hope of healing and restoration. Exactly.

It's a vision of what could be if we align ourselves with God's values and work towards his purposes. So it's not just about waiting for heaven. No.

But about bringing heaven to earth. That's a great way to put it. It's about recognizing the inherent goodness of creation and working towards its healing and restoration.

That's a powerful message. It is. And it's one we can all participate in, no matter who we are or where we come from.

That's a great point. I think we've covered a lot of ground here, but I'm really curious to hear more about how this all applies to our lives today. Yeah, me too.

There's so much to unpack here. So stay with us because in the next part, we're going to dive even deeper into Dr. Mathewson's notes and see how these insights from Revelation can help us navigate the complexities of our own world. I can't wait.

This is going to be good. Yeah. It's a question we all have to wrestle with.

Are we building walls or are we building bridges? That's good. Yeah. What are we putting our energy into? Are we hoarding resources or are we sharing them? It's about making choices that reflect the world that we want to see.

Exactly. Okay. So that actually leads perfectly into our next point.

Okay. If this new Jerusalem is the hope, what happens to Babylon? Because Dr. Mathewson paints a pretty intense picture of its destruction. Oh yeah.

In Revelation 17 and 18. Yeah. It's quite the scene.

So is this just like random destruction? Well, no, it's not. It's portrayed as a divine judgment. Okay.

A consequence of Babylon's actions. Rome's wealth and power. Yeah.

All that. Came at a pretty high cost. It involved oppression and exploitation.

Even the lives of Christians. Exactly. So this isn't so much about God being vengeful.

No, not at all. But more about the consequences of a system built on injustice. I think that's a great way to put it.

It's like what you sow is what you reap, right? Babylon sowed seeds of corruption and violence. Yeah. And ultimately those seeds bear fruit.

So that makes that call to come out of her even more urgent. Correct. Doesn't it? Like we need to separate ourselves from these systems that are ultimately going to fall apart.

Yeah, because they're not built on a solid foundation. But how do we do that? How do we even know what those Babylonian elements are in our own lives? Well, I think it starts with asking some tough questions. Like what? Like, what are we giving our time, energy, and resources to? Okay.

Are we supporting businesses that exploit their workers? Are we participating in systems that perpetuate inequality? Or harm the environment? Exactly. So Revelation is kind of holding up a mirror to us. Yeah, it is.

And challenging us to take a hard look at our own lives and choices. And that can be really uncomfortable. It can.

Because it's easier to point the finger at the obvious bad guys, right? But Revelation invites us to look deeper, to examine our own complicity. Yeah. In the systems that are broken.

Which brings us back to the New Jerusalem. Yeah. Dr. Mathewson really dives deep into its symbolism.

He does. Highlighting how it fulfills a lot of Old Testament prophecies. Yeah, it's fascinating stuff.

So what struck you the most about this imagery? Well, I think the emphasis on unity and restoration is really powerful. Yeah. You've got the 12 gates representing the 12 tribes of Israel.

The 12 foundations represent the 12 apostles. It's bringing everyone together. It is.

It's all about uniting God's people from all different backgrounds and times. And it makes me think of all the division we see in our own world today. Oh, absolutely.

Political polarization, racial tensions, religious conflicts. And the New Jerusalem, it's like this vision of what true reconciliation and unity could look like. Yeah, it's a beautiful picture of a world where those divisions are healed.

And it's not just about bringing people together, right? Right. Remember, the New Jerusalem is situated on a renewed earth. The whole creation is restored.

Exactly. It's a vision of creation restored to its original beauty and wholeness. So Dr. Mathewson emphasizes that this isn't about abandoning the physical world.

No, not at all. But about transforming it. Yeah, it's like taking something broken and making it new again.

It's not about escaping to some ethereal realm. But about bringing heaven to earth. That's a great way to think about it.

It's about recognizing the goodness of creation and working towards its healing and restoration. I like that it's a different kind of hope. It is, isn't it? Not about escaping, but about renewing and transforming.

It's a hope that can really fuel our actions in the present. Exactly. Because it's not about passively waiting for some future event.

It's about actively participating in the process of bringing God's kingdom to earth. So how do we actually live out this message of Revelation in our daily lives? Well, Dr. Mathewson reminds us that Revelation isn't just a historical document. Okay.

It's a timeless message that speaks to the challenges and choices we face in every generation. So it's not just about ancient Rome. No, it's about recognizing those Babylonian systems in our own time.

And having the courage to resist them. Exactly. And that resistance might take different forms.

Like what? Well, it could be speaking out against injustice. Okay. Advocating for the marginalized, making ethical choices in our consumer habits.

Just living with integrity. Yeah. Living a life that reflects God's values.

So ultimately, it's about choosing allegiance to Jesus Christ over any other power or authority. That's it. That's the heart of it.

We're aligning our values and actions with the values of God's kingdom. Yes. And working through his justice and righteousness.

And holding onto that hope of a renewed creation. Where God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven. That's a vision worth fighting for, isn't it? Absolutely.

And it's a vision that can sustain us even when the challenges seem overwhelming. So much to think about. I think it's easy to get lost in the details and miss the big picture.

It is. But when we step back and see that overarching narrative of revelation, it's incredibly empowering. Yeah.

Because it reminds us that our choices matter. Our actions have consequences. And that we have a role to play in shaping the worlds around us.

Before we move on to the final part of our deep dive, let's just pause here for a moment. Yeah, take a breath. Let all this sink in.

We've covered a lot of ground. But it's worth taking the time to reflect on what's resonating with you. What are you noticing in your own life? What choices can you make to contribute to the vision of the new Jerusalem? These are questions we're going to continue to explore in the next part of our deep dive.

So stick around. Yeah. It's a good point.

It's easy to just kind of go through life on autopilot, you know? Oh yeah, for sure. Not really thinking about the bigger picture. But revelation really challenges us to wake up.

To be more intentional about our choices. Yeah, because they do matter. They do.

So Dr. Mathewson reminds us that revelation isn't just about exposing the bad stuff. It's about giving us a glimpse of a better future. A renewed creation where God's love and justice are finally fully realized.

And that brings us to the final, and I think most profound message of revelation. What's that? The culmination in a renewed earth. Oh yeah, that's a huge theme throughout the book.

It's a reminder that our hope isn't about escaping this world. No, not at all. It's about transforming it.

It is, and I think that's such a powerful message for us today. So we're not just passively waiting for heaven, but actively working to make earth more heavenly, right? Yeah, we're called to be agents of renewal and reconciliation. In a world that desperately needs it.

It does. As we wrap up our deep dive into revelation, let's just recap some of the key takeaways. Sounds good.

This book, it's not just some weird prediction of the future. Right. It's a call to faithful witness.

Even when it's hard, even when we face opposition. And it's a promise that God will ultimately vindicate those who stand with him. Yes, absolutely.

And Dr. Mathewson leaves us with this really thought-provoking question. What is it? What aspects of modern society could we consider the Babylon of our time? Oh wow, that's a good one. It's a tough question.

It is, and it requires some real honesty with ourselves. What values and systems are we aligning ourselves with? Are we contributing to something that looks more like Babylon? Or are we building the new Jerusalem? It's a choice we all have to make. We have to be more intentional about our choices.

Yeah, the things we support, the impact we have on the world. So as you go about your day today, think about those two cities we've been talking about. Babylon and the new Jerusalem.

Which one are you building? Which one are you investing in? Because those choices shape not only our own lives. But the world around us. And that's it for our deep dive into Revelation.

Wow, that went by fast. We hope you found this exploration insightful. I did.

And maybe even a little inspiring. Yeah, definitely inspiring. Until next time, keep seeking truth.

Keep asking questions. And keep striving to live lives that reflect the hope and beauty of the new Jerusalem. Thanks for joining us.