

Dr. Dave Mathewson, Revelation, Session 1, Introduction and Background

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All right, let's kick off another deep dive. Today, we're taking on a book that's, well, it sparked a lot of debate, maybe even a little fear. I'm talking about Revelation.

Oh, Revelation, yeah. I bet when you hear that title, you probably think cryptic symbols, doomsday predictions, you know, the whole shebang. But today, we're going to go deeper.

We're going to uncover what Revelation really meant to its original audience, those early Christians living under Roman rule. Right. And we've got the perfect guide for this journey.

Okay. An expert on all things Revelation. Oh, wow.

Welcome to the show. Thanks for having me. It's a real pleasure to be here.

You know, Revelation can be a bit of a historical puzzle, and I love trying to piece it all together. That's great. So let's set the scene, right? It's not just about understanding the book itself, but the world it was written in.

What was life actually like for those early Christians under the Roman Empire? Well, you got to imagine a world where acknowledging the emperor's divinity wasn't just some, like, political statement. It was, it was like deftly embedded in everyday life. You know, you'd see temples dedicated to the emperor.

His image was everywhere. You know, it was, it was hard to escape. Wow.

Yeah. Talk about pressure. How did, how did those early Christians navigate that, that tightrope walk, right? Right.

Staying true to their faith while living in a society that basically, like, worshipped the emperor. It created a real dilemma for them. I mean, some chose resistance, you know, flat-out refusing to compromise their belief in Jesus as the one true Lord.

But this often came at a high social cost. You know, it led to isolation, even, even persecution. Yeah.

That, that sounds incredibly difficult. Yeah. Were there, were there other ways? I mean, how did they cope with this pressure? Well, yeah, some, some sought a different path.

You know, they, they tried to kind of blend their faith with emperor worship. Oh, interesting. You know, maybe for convenience, maybe to avoid conflict.

You know, it, it's a reminder that faith isn't lived in a vacuum, right? It's always interacting with the complexities of the world around us. That's a great point. It makes me wonder, where does Revelation fit into all of this? Was it, was it written for those facing this, this exact dilemma? Yeah.

You, you hit the nail on the head there. Revelation, it was a message to seven real churches in Asia Minor, you know, modern-day Turkey. Okay.

And these churches, they were wrestling with these very questions. How, how to remain faithful under Roman rule? So, so instead of being this, like, mysterious prediction of the future, it was actually grounded in the very real struggles these early Christians were facing. Exactly.

And, and here's where it gets even more interesting, right? Okay. The Roman Empire, they were masters of propaganda. They, they projected this image of peace, prosperity, justice, and all of it attributed to the divine favor bestowed upon the emperor.

It sounds like a well-oiled PR machine for the Roman Empire. Almost, almost like a carefully crafted narrative that they wanted everyone to believe. That's a great way to put it.

And Revelation acts as this powerful counter-narrative, you know, exposing the truth behind the facade. Okay. It pulls back the curtain to reveal the violence, the corruption, the idolatry that was often hidden beneath the surface of Roman power.

So it's like a critique. Yeah. A deliberate unveiling of the Roman Empire's true nature.

Speaking of unveiling, I mean, the title Apocalypse itself can be a bit intimidating. You know, most people, when they hear Apocalypse, they think end of the world. Yeah.

It's understandable, you know, why people might think that, but the original meaning of Apocalypse is actually unveiling or revealing. It's not about hiding a secret future, but about exposing a hidden present, revealing the true nature of things. Wow.

That, that completely changes my perspective on the book's purpose. It's about unveiling truth, not concealing it. But how did early Christians actually read and understand this book? With all its vivid imagery and symbolism? Well, it's important to remember they didn't have our modern preconceptions about Apocalypse, right? To them, Revelation was this blend of familiar literary genres.

Right. It had elements of apocalyptic literature with its symbolic language and visions of God's power, but it also drew on prophecy, calling out injustice and urging faithfulness. And importantly, it was also a letter, you know, a personal message of encouragement and warning addressed to specific communities facing real challenges.

So it wasn't just about abstract concepts or future events. It was a message tailored to the specific needs of these churches, offering them hope and guidance in their difficult circumstances. Precisely.

And one of the key messages woven throughout Revelation is that God, through the suffering of Jesus, will ultimately triumph. But it's not a simple God wins scenario. It's about how God wins through self-sacrificing love, not brute force.

And that has profound implications for how Christians should live their lives. That really resonates with me. This idea that God's victory comes through love, not power.

Yeah. It's incredibly powerful. It challenges me to think about how I approach conflict and challenges in my own life.

But we've talked a lot about the historical context, the Roman Empire, the pressure on those early Christians. Right. What about the book itself? What are some of the key elements of this apocalyptic genre that we need to understand to really grasp what John, the author of Revelation, was trying to convey? That's an excellent question.

Yeah. Well, one we'll explore further after we hear from our sponsors. So don't go anywhere.

So before we jump to the break, we're about to really dig into the key elements of apocalyptic literature. I'm ready to unpack this genre a bit. So let's dive in.

All right. Let's tackle this. The first thing to remember about apocalyptic literature is that it wasn't meant to be some literal roadmap to the future.

Think of it more as a symbolic language, a way to express profound truths about God, the world, and the struggle between good and evil. Okay. So not a crystal ball.

But then what was its purpose? How should we interpret it? Think of it as a way to convey this message of hope and resistance, especially for those facing oppression. It uses vivid imagery, fantastical creatures, and dramatic events to paint a picture of a deeper reality, a spiritual truth that transcends the immediate circumstances. So for those early Christians under Roman rule, apocalyptic literature provided a lens through which they could understand their suffering and find hope in God's ultimate victory.

It was almost like a coded message for those in the know, those facing persecution. Exactly. And it reminded them that even though the Roman Empire seemed all-powerful, it wasn't the ultimate power.

Right. And that makes me think about how we often try to interpret Revelation today. If it wasn't intended as a literal prediction of the future, how should we approach it? What's the key to unlocking its meaning for us in the 21st century? Yeah, that's a crucial question.

I think instead of getting lost in the details, trying to match up specific events with symbols, we need to focus on the bigger picture. The overarching themes of God's sovereignty, the call to faithfulness, and the promise of ultimate victory over evil- those are the heart of Revelation's message. So it's not about decoding the symbols like a puzzle, but understanding the deeper message, the principles, the heart of what John was trying to communicate to those early churches.

And it's about applying those timeless truths to our lives today. Precisely. The apocalyptic genre allows us to kind of peer beyond the surface and grapple with these deeper spiritual truths.

That makes me think about how some people interpret Revelation as being all doom and gloom, you know, fire and brimstone. But are you saying that it's actually a message of

hope? Absolutely. While Revelation does contain, you know, some intense imagery, it ultimately points to a message of hope and encouragement.

It reminds us that despite the chaos and suffering that we see in the world, God is in control. Evil will not have the final say, and those who remain faithful will ultimately share in God's victory. That's a powerful message, especially for those facing tough times.

It reminds us that there's a bigger story unfolding- this cosmic battle between good and evil- and that we're not alone in the struggle. But if it's not just about decoding symbols and predicting future events, how can we apply Revelation to our lives today? Where do we even begin? One way is to look for the underlying principles, the timeless truths that go beyond the specific historical context. For example, one of the recurring themes in Revelation is this call to resist idolatry.

That's interesting. You know, we usually think of idolatry as like bowing down to statues. But in the context of Revelation, it seems like it goes much deeper than that.

Exactly. In Revelation, idolatry takes on many forms. It's about giving our ultimate allegiance to anything other than God, whether it's, you know, wealth, power, status, or even a political ideology.

So it's about identifying those things in our own lives, those false gods that we might be tempted to prioritize over God. It's about examining our hearts and being honest about where our true loyalties lie. Precisely.

Revelation calls us to take a hard look at our motivations, our desires, and our priorities. It asks us to consider what truly holds the highest place in our lives. This makes Revelation feel incredibly relevant to our modern world.

I mean, we're constantly bombarded with messages telling us what to value, what to strive for, what will bring us happiness. It's so easy to get caught up in that and lose sight of what truly matters. Absolutely.

Revelation serves as this powerful reminder that true fulfillment and lasting joy are found not in these fleeting things of this world, but in a deep and abiding relationship with God. It calls us to live counterculturally, to resist the allure of worldly values, and to embrace the values of God's kingdom: love, justice, compassion, humility. You know, earlier we talked about those early Christians who tried to blend their faith with emperor worship.

It's easy to judge them from our modern perspective, but listening to you describe the pressure they faced, I can't help but wonder if we're all that different today. That's an insightful observation. We might not be bowing down to statues of emperors, but, you know, we might be tempted to compromise our values for the sake of career advancement, social acceptance, or financial security.

You know, the forms of idolatry may have changed, but the underlying temptation remains. So, so Revelation is this wake-up call, reminding us to be vigilant and to examine our own lives, to make sure we're not falling into the trap of idolatry, even in its more subtle forms. Exactly.

It's a call to be discerning, to critically evaluate the messages we're receiving from the world around us, and to make a conscious choice to put our allegiance to God first, even when it's difficult, even when it costs us something. Wow, what a journey this has been. Revelation feels so much richer and more meaningful now.

I'm seeing it in a whole new light. That's, that's the beauty of taking a deep dive, you know, going beyond the surface and grappling with these deeper layers of meaning. It's an invitation to allow those truths to transform us.

I feel like we've, we've only just scratched the surface, but I know our listeners are eager to continue exploring Revelation on their own. Any, any final words of wisdom for them as they embark on this adventure? I'd say approach Revelation with an open mind and a humble heart. Don't, don't be afraid of the symbolism or the challenging messages.

Remember, it's ultimately a book of hope, a reminder that God is in control and those who remain faithful will share in his ultimate victory. And as you read, you know, ask yourself: who or what demands my ultimate allegiance today? How do I navigate the pressures to compromise my values? Powerful questions to ponder and a perfect note to end on. Thank you so much for this incredible deep dive into Revelation.

I know our listeners will be chewing on these insights for weeks to come, and for everyone out there, keep exploring, keep questioning, and keep diving deep. We'll catch you next time for another fascinating exploration. Welcome back.

Before the break, we were getting into this idea of idolatry and how it shows up in our lives, but Revelation also talks about judgment, and it can feel, well, a bit daunting, maybe even unsettling. So how should we think about judgment in Revelation? It's a topic that definitely brings up a lot of questions and makes you think. I think the first thing to remember is that in Revelation, judgment is often shown in this symbolic, you know, really stylized language.

We see, like, bowls of wrath being poured out, plagues, natural disasters, but these aren't meant to be taken literally, like predictions of specific events. So it's not about predicting some like timeline or sequence of catastrophic events. Exactly.

Instead, these descriptions, they're meant to get across a bigger message about the consequences of sin, you know, rebellion against God. They're like a warning, a call to turn away from evil, to embrace what's right. That makes sense.

It's about understanding that deeper message behind the imagery, not getting stuck on literal interpretations. Exactly. And it's important to remember that judgment in Revelation is not random or vengeful.

It's always shown as a result of choices, a response to rejecting God's love and grace. So it's not about God punishing people out of anger, but about the natural consequences of turning away from him. Exactly.

And even when there's judgment, Revelation offers hope. It reminds us that God's desire is always for restoration and reconciliation. Even when people face those consequences of

their actions, there's always this invitation, you know, to repent, to turn back to God, to experience his forgiveness and mercy.

That's, that's a really important point. It's easy to focus on the images of judgment and miss that message of hope that's woven throughout Revelation. Absolutely.

And I think it's also key to remember that judgment in Revelation isn't just about individuals. It also critiques those unjust systems, those structures of power. Okay.

We see this in the condemnation of the Roman Empire, which is, you know, shown as this beast that oppresses and exploits the weak, the vulnerable. So it's not just about personal morality, but also about social justice. Exactly.

Revelation challenges us to think about how our actions, our choices, might be contributing to systems of oppression and injustice. It calls us to work for a world where everyone is treated with dignity and respect, where the vulnerable are protected, and where righteousness, you know, wins out. That's powerful.

It takes that concept of judgment beyond just the individual level, and it links it to our responsibility to create a more just and equitable world. It makes me think about those early Christians who were resisting, you know, the Roman Empire's oppressive regime. They must have found, well, a lot of encouragement in Revelation's message of judgment against those in power who were abusing their authority.

Absolutely. And it reminds us that, you know, we also have a role to play in challenging injustice, speaking truth to power. Yeah.

We're called to be agents of God's justice, His righteousness in the world, even when it's hard, even when it's risky. That's a challenging but inspiring call. It reminds us that our faith is not just about personal piety.

It's about working for a better world, a world that reflects God's love and justice. Precisely. And Revelation offers us a vision of what that world could be.

It talks about this new heaven, a new earth, a place where there's, you know, there's no more pain, no more suffering, no more injustice. It's a vision that can help us through those struggles and inspire us to keep working towards a better future. That's a beautiful and hopeful image to end on.

It reminds us that even though we live in a world, you know, filled with brokenness and pain, there's this promise of something better, something more beautiful, something that will ultimately make all things new. And it's a promise we can hold on to, a hope that can guide us through the complexities of life. Well, thank you so much for this incredibly insightful deep dive into Revelation.

Yeah. You've really helped me see this book in a whole new light. It's been my pleasure.

And I hope our conversation has encouraged you to keep exploring the richness and depth of Revelation's message. And for our listeners, if you're feeling inspired to take your own

deep dive into Revelation, we've got some resources for you in the show notes. And remember, don't let the complex imagery and symbolism scare you off.

Revelation is a book filled with hope and encouragement for those who are trying to lead faithfully in a world that's full of challenges. Until next time, keep exploring, keep questioning, and keep diving deep.