

Dr. Dave Mathewson, Revelation, Session 3, Hermeneutics of Revelation

Sponsored by Biblicalelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

All right, let's dive deep into Revelation. You guys sent in tons of questions about this book, so we're going to tackle those today using Dr. Dave Mathewson's lecture notes as our guide. Sounds good to me.

Perfect. So I know some folks think of Revelation as this, like, super cryptic puzzle box, all doom and gloom, but Mathewson really emphasizes that it's about hermeneutics. Right, right.

How to interpret it. Exactly. And it's way more complex and fascinating than just predicting the future.

Absolutely. People often get tripped up by the symbols and metaphors. Yeah.

It's kind of like, imagine trying to understand a political cartoon from, let's say, the 1950s. You might recognize, I don't know, maybe Uncle Sam or something. But without the context of what was happening then, you'd totally miss the point, right? Totally.

And Revelation is packed with these super vivid symbols that need to be kind of decoded. Like even folks who try to read Revelation literally get stuck on some parts. Oh, yeah.

That whole beast in chapter 13, no one actually thinks there's going to be a seven-headed monster running around, right? No, definitely not. Right. It's obviously representing something else.

Just like we know those donkey and elephant parades aren't literally happening in D.C. Oh, that's a good point. Yeah. Those symbols.

I mean, everyone gets that they represent political parties. Exactly. So for John's audience, like way back then, the beast was probably symbolizing the Roman Empire.

That was a huge deal for early Christians. Makes sense, given all the persecution they faced. But how do we actually know John meant for these things to be symbolic? It feels like it could be open to a lot of different interpretations.

Well, there's this awesome part in Revelation 1.20 where John basically gives us a cheat sheet. Oh, really? He straight up tells us the seven stars are angels of the churches and the seven lampstands represent the churches themselves. So we can't just take everything at face value.

Okay, I see what you mean. It's like he's giving us the decoder ring. So if we're not supposed to read everything literally, does that mean Revelation isn't about the future at all? It's not that simple.

I mean, it was mainly meant to help those first-century Christians understand what they were going through then. Remember, they were being persecuted, so they needed a message of hope. So it was like encouraging them to keep going even when things were tough.

Exactly. It's about this, you know, ultimate victory of good over evil, but it's also rooted in their present struggles. But wait, so you're saying even the parts that sound like they're predicting the future are actually about the past? That's kind of trippy.

Yeah. Think of it this way. Revelation uses past, present, and future all at the same time.

Like it draws on past events to show how God has always been faithful. Then it connects that to their present struggles and then points to the ultimate victory that awaits them. Okay, I think I'm starting to get it.

So it's not just linear; it's kind of jumping around in time. Exactly. Mathewson calls it a cyclical structure.

The book keeps switching between the present struggles of the first-century church and these glimpses of the end times. So it's like building suspense, showing how even though things are rough now, there's a bigger picture where God is in control. Right on.

And that brings us to a really important principle for understanding Revelation. Any way we interpret it has to be something that John could have meant and that his audience back then could have understood. We can't just read it through our 21st-century lens and impose our own ideas on it.

So no more reading it like a news headline, trying to figure out what's going to happen tomorrow. Ha ha, exactly. It's not about specific future events; it's about the bigger picture.

It's interesting, though; there's that part in Revelation 22.10, right, where John's told not to seal up the prophecy because the time is near. That's a great point. And you know, that's really different from, say, the Book of Daniel, where the prophecy is sealed for a future time.

So that reinforces the idea that it was meant for immediate understanding by the people living then, not just for us centuries later. Exactly. It's like a message in a bottle for them.

So if Revelation isn't just about decoding the future, what's the main message? Yeah. What's the takeaway for us today? Well, Mathewson argues that it's mostly about encouragement and exhortation. It's meant to comfort those who are suffering and, you know, give a wake-up call to those who are getting a bit too complacent.

So it's like, hang in there to those who are going through tough times and don't lose sight of what's important to those who are getting too comfortable. You got it. That makes a lot of sense.

But even people who get the symbolism thing often get stuck on the numbers, taking them literally. But Mathewson says those are symbolic too, right? For sure. Think of the numbers as like a code where each one stands for a concept.

So what are some of the codes? Give us the inside scoop. Okay. So there's 312, which is often represented as time, times, and half a time.

That symbolizes an intense period, but it's limited. It's like half of seven, which, as you know, represents perfection. So it's not about trying to calculate a literal 312 years? Nope.

It's more about conveying this sense of trial and hardship, but it ultimately won't last forever. Got it. What about other numbers? Well, four often stands for the earth or completeness.

Then there's six, which is kind of like the 312. It represents imperfection, falling short of the perfect seven. And then of course, there's 10 and its multiples.

Those often pop up in Revelation. Right. Those symbolize completeness or wholeness.

Like, think about the 10 commandments. Yeah, that makes sense. There's a definite pattern here.

These numbers aren't just random. They carry a deeper meaning. Exactly.

And 12 and its multiples consistently stand for the people of God. It goes back to the 12 tribes of Israel and the 12 apostles. Oh, I see.

So when we see those numbers, we shouldn't be reaching for our calculators. We should be thinking about God's people. Right.

And then you have the fractions like, you know, 14, 12, 13. Those generally represent something incomplete or limited. Like it's not the full picture.

Exactly. It's a part, but not the whole. This is all so fascinating, but I can also see how it can be pretty challenging to interpret.

I mean, Mathewson really emphasizes that we need to approach Revelation with a lot of humility, right? He does. And that's such a crucial point. You know, we have to be open to different viewpoints and admit that even really smart scholars disagree sometimes.

It's not about having all the answers. It's about approaching this book with a, you know, humble and open mind. So what are some of the pitfalls, like the dangers of approaching Revelation without that humility? What kind of mistakes do people make? Well, one of the big ones is reading our own, you know, assumptions and fears into the text.

It's like we project our own anxieties onto it instead of letting it speak for itself. We already talked about the whole literal interpretation thing, but there's also this opposite danger of trying to make Revelation fit our own little pet theories, you know, or like current events. Yeah, I see what you mean.

It's tempting to try and, like, map it onto whatever's happening in the world right now. Totally. And when we do that, we kind of force the text to say things that it wasn't meant to say, and we miss out on what it was actually trying to tell those early Christians.

Right. So how do we avoid that trap? How can we read Revelation, you know, responsibly, faithfully? I think it all comes back to that humility thing and really paying attention to the context of the historical situation. We all remember that Revelation was written to a very specific group of people who were facing some pretty serious challenges.

Yeah, they were facing like real persecution, imprisonment, torture, even death. That's right. So when we read about those who are faithful unto death, it's not just some abstract concept for them.

It's their reality. Wow. That really puts things in perspective.

It does, doesn't it? And that kind of brings us back to Revelation's dual purpose. It's meant to encourage those who are suffering for their faith, but it's also meant to warn those who are maybe compromising or getting a little too comfortable. Like a two-pronged message: hang in there.

You're not alone in being persecuted. And wake up, get your act together for those who've maybe lost their edge. Got it.

It's a call to live with a sense of urgency, recognizing the eternal reality that lies beyond our present circumstances. And those warnings against compromise are pretty intense. You've got, like, lukewarm Christians being spit out, people who worship the beast facing eternal torment.

John doesn't mess around. He definitely doesn't. But we have to remember that, you know, compromise for those early Christians could mean denying their faith, offering sacrifices to Roman gods, even participating in emperor worship.

We're not just talking about, like, theological debates here. It was life-or-death stuff. Wow.

Yeah, that changes things. Those strong warnings make a lot more sense when you put it like that. It was about staying true to Christ in a world that was actively hostile to their faith.

Exactly. And those warnings can be a powerful reminder for us today too. You know, are we compromising our faith for comfort or convenience or social acceptance? Have we gotten so caught up in the things of this world that we've lost sight of what really matters? It's a good question for all of us to consider.

That's for sure. So we've talked about the symbolic nature of revelation, the dual purpose of encouragement and warning, and the importance of historical context. But how does revelation actually encourage and comfort those who are suffering? That's a great question.

And Matthew Senn has some really insightful things to say about that. He points out that revelation consistently emphasizes the ultimate victory of God and the vindication of his people. So no matter how bad things get in the present, there's this unshakable hope for the future.

Exactly. And that hope is rooted in Jesus Christ, the Lamb, who was slain but now reigns victorious. We see this over and over again throughout the book.

Images of the saints being rewarded, evil being defeated, God's kingdom being established. Yeah, like that vision in chapter seven. Countless people from every nation, tribe, and language standing before the throne of God, worshipping him.

Such a powerful image. It really is. It's a reminder that the suffering of this present age is temporary.

It's nothing compared to the glory that awaits those who remain faithful to Christ. I also find it interesting how Revelation portrays suffering as something that's, you know, not just passively endured, but actively overcome through faith and perseverance. Absolutely.

Think about those who have washed their robes white in the blood of the Lamb. Their suffering isn't meaningless. It's part of their journey to ultimate victory.

And even death itself is ultimately defeated. There's no more sorrow, no more pain, no more death in the new creation. That's right.

That's the ultimate encouragement, the ultimate comfort that revelation offers. It points us beyond our present struggles to a future where God's justice and love will reign supreme. It's a message that goes beyond time and circumstance, really.

No matter what we're facing today, we can hold onto the hope of that future reality. Absolutely. And that hope should motivate us to live lives of radical faithfulness, you know, to Christ, just as it motivated those early Christians.

One of the things that gets me about revelation is the sense of urgency. It's not just some, like, pie-in-the-sky hope. It's a call to action.

That's a great observation. Mathewson emphasizes that revelation isn't just meant to satisfy our curiosity about the future. It's meant to transform our lives in the present.

So it's not just about knowing what's going to happen. It's about doing something about it, living in a way that reflects that coming kingdom. Exactly.

And that doing involves, you know, staying true to our faith, resisting temptation, working to bring God's justice and love into the world. It's about living as citizens of that future kingdom, even while we're still here on Earth. That's it.

And that's a challenge for us, just like it was for those early Christians. We've covered so much ground: the symbolism, the historical context, the message of encouragement, the warning. It's amazing how much depth there is to this book.

It really is. And it's fascinating how Revelation weaves together these different themes to create such a powerful and multifaceted message. But there's one aspect of Revelation that I think we need to address: the portrayal of God's judgment.

I mean, let's be honest. Some of those images are pretty intense. Plagues, earthquakes, fire from heaven.

It can be overwhelming, even disturbing at times. You're right. And it's important to remember that Revelation's portrayal of judgment isn't meant to be like some source of morbid fascination or fear-mongering.

So it's not like some cosmic horror movie where we're just supposed to sit back and watch the world burn. No, not at all. The purpose of those judgment scenes is actually quite profound.

They're a reminder of the consequences of rejecting God, of rejecting his ways. So like, if you choose to side with evil, you're ultimately choosing to side with destruction. Precisely.

And those images of judgment, while intense, ultimately point to God's justice and righteousness. It's not that God enjoys punishing people. It's that he can't tolerate evil and injustice going unchecked.

Right. And it's also important to note that those judgment scenes are often balanced with images of God's mercy and grace. We see this, for example, in the sealing of the 144,000 before the plagues are unleashed.

So even in the midst of judgment, there's this thread of hope and redemption running through the narrative. Exactly. And that's a crucial point to remember.

Revelation isn't ultimately a book about judgment. It's a book about God's ultimate victory over evil and the establishment of his righteous kingdom. And that victory is for all who choose to be on his side.

Precisely. And that brings us back to the heart of Revelation's message. It's a call to choose sides, to choose life over death, light over darkness, faithfulness over compromise.

It's a choice with eternal consequences. Absolutely. And Revelation makes it clear that, you know, this choice is ultimately up to each individual.

We can't blame others or point fingers. We must each make our own decision. And that decision is ultimately about who we choose to worship, the creator or the creation.

That's it. And Revelation leaves no room for doubt about the outcome of that choice. This is a lot to process.

It's incredible how much meaning and complexity is packed into this book. It really is. It's like a tapestry woven with threads of hope, warning, judgment, and ultimately God's unwavering love and faithfulness.

Speaking of tapestries, that reminds me of something Mathewson said about how Revelation shouldn't be read as a strict timeline of the end times. It's more like a symbolic tapestry, right? That's a great analogy. It's not a step-by-step guide to predicting exactly how and when things will unfold.

So it's less about decoding specific events and more about understanding the larger spiritual truths those events represent. Exactly. Revelation is about revealing those patterns, those principles that work in history.

And those truths are timeless and universal. Like the struggle between good and evil, the consequences of sin, the hope of redemption. Those are themes that resonate with us just as much as they did with John's original audience.

For sure. And that's why Revelation continues to fascinate and challenge readers centuries later. It speaks to something deep within us, something that longs for justice, for meaning, for hope.

Mathewson also reminds us that interpreting Revelation requires a healthy dose of humility. We can't come at it with a know-it-all attitude. That's right.

This isn't a book to be used for dogmatic pronouncements or fear-mongering. It's a book to be wrestled with prayerfully, studied carefully, and approached with an open mind. And a good commentary or two probably wouldn't hurt, right? Absolutely.

There are some brilliant scholars out there who have dedicated their lives to studying this book, and their insights can be really helpful. So as we wrap up this deep dive into Revelation, what are some of the key takeaways? What do you hope our listeners will remember? First and foremost, remember that Revelation is a book of hope. Yes, it's got some challenging imagery, but ultimately it points us to the victory of God and the redemption of his people.

It's like this cosmic drama with a guaranteed happy ending for those who are on God's side. Exactly. Second, remember that Revelation is a call to action.

It's not just about passively waiting for the future to unfold. It's about actively living out our faith in the present, resisting evil, pursuing justice, sharing the love of Christ. Being part of the story, not just spectators.

Exactly. And finally, remember that interpreting Revelation requires humility and an open mind. Be willing to learn from others, consider different perspectives, and admit when you're not sure.

This isn't a book to be mastered. It's a book to be journeyed with. Well said.

This has been an incredible deep dive into Revelation. It's given us so much to think about. It's been my pleasure.

And remember, the journey of understanding Revelation is just beginning. The more you study it, the more you'll discover. To our listeners, if Revelation has always felt like a closed book, I hope this deep dive has given you a little nudge to start exploring it.

You might be surprised at what you find. Who knows? You might even discover that Revelation is more relevant to your life today than you ever imagined. Thanks for joining us on this epic journey.

Until next time, keep diving deep. You know, it's wild how Revelation can be both terrifying and hopeful at the same time. Yeah, it walks that line for sure.

It's the, uh, I guess you could say it's the brilliance of apocalyptic literature, using all those crazy images and symbols to really shake us up and make us confront the big questions, you know? Good and evil, judgment, redemption, the whole shebang. Exactly. You know, one thing that really stuck with me from Mathewson's lectures was how much he talked about the emotional side of Revelation.

Oh yeah. It's easy to get lost in all the, uh, the intellectual stuff, but you can't forget that Revelation is meant to hit you right in the feels. He actually called it emotional dynamite at one point.

Yeah, that's a pretty good way to put it. This book wants you to feel something: awe and wonder at the power of God's sorrow for all the suffering caused by sin. And a deep, deep longing for justice to win out in the end.

And even those, uh, even those really intense images of judgment, they're not just there to freak us out, are they? No, they're meant to wake us up like a divine alarm bell. The reality of sin and what it leads to. Exactly.

It's easy to try and make our faith all nice and tidy and comfortable, but Revelation doesn't let us do that. It throws the truth right in our face. You know, the spiritual battle is real.

It's a call to like really live out our faith, not just in words, but in actions, even when it's hard, even when it's unpopular, even when we might face, you know, blowback. Yeah. It's radical discipleship for sure.

Total commitment to Christ, no matter the cost. And that's where the hope comes in, right? Yeah. Knowing that no matter how bad things get, God is still in control.

He still wins. Absolutely. Revelation starts and ends with that message of hope.

In the very first chapter, there's that promise. Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy. And blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near.

And then at the very end, we hear that incredible declaration. He who testifies to these things says, surely I'm coming soon. Amen.

Come, Lord Jesus. It's like we're caught up in this massive story, this cosmic drama, and we know the ending is going to be good, at least for those who are faithful. Exactly.

And it's not just about, you know, floating off to heaven. It's about the renewal of everything. A new heaven and new earth where God's presence is everywhere.

And there's no more death, no more sadness, no more pain. That's a future worth fighting for, worth living for. And I think that's what Revelation is calling us to do.

Totally. It's about living as citizens of that coming kingdom, bringing its values of justice and love into the world we live in now. Even though it's broken and messy.

Yeah. Even then. So yeah, even though Revelation can be tough to read and understand, it's ultimately a message of hope and encouragement, a call to action.

It's a reminder that God never gives up on us. It's incredible how much this book has to offer. We've barely scratched the surface, but hopefully this deep dive has been helpful for our listeners.

Yeah. Hopefully it's given them a good starting point. And a new appreciation for how powerful and relevant this book still is.

Absolutely. Revelation might've been written centuries ago, but it speaks to something deep inside all of us. It offers a vision of hope that can carry us through anything.

So to our listeners out there, keep diving deep into Revelation. Don't be afraid to ask tough questions, wrestle with the hard parts, and let it change you. The Journey of Understanding Revelation is a lifelong adventure, so enjoy the ride.

Thanks for joining us on this epic exploration. Until next time, keep seeking, keep learning, and keep diving deep.