

Introduction: Welcome to Engage 360 Denver Seminary's podcast. Join us as we explore the redemptive power of the Gospel and the life changing truth of scripture at work in our culture today.

Dr. Don Payne: Hey friends, welcome again to Engage 360 from Denver Seminary, glad you're with us. I'm Don Payne, your host. And if there is a book of the Bible that has been the source of more controversy and confusion than the book of Revelation, I don't know what it is. Debatably, arguably, fittingly arguably, but the book of revelation is our subject for today, and we're delighted to have our esteemed colleague, Dr. David Mathewson, and good friend, also from the New Testament faculty here with us to talk about Revelation because he has a new or forthcoming book from Cascade called, A Companion to the Book of Revelation. Dave, welcome.

Dr. Dave Mathewson: Thank you. Great to be here. Thanks for inviting me.

Introduction: Well, it probably won't happen again, but you know, we do all kinds of things in a one off fashion.

Dr. Dave Mathewson: Especially after you hear what I say.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah, exactly. And Dr. Lynn Cohick, our Provost is here as a cohost too, because she reads the Bible and.

Dr. Lynn Cohick: You needed somebody along those lines for this Don.

Dr. Don Payne: Somebody's got to actually read the Bible. If they're going to ask questions about the Bible. So we invited Lynn and hopefully this won't turn into another New Testament nerd Fest, but you never know. Anyway, Dave, Lynn welcome and okay. Is it really true, Dave, that Christians who really want to make a lot of money, but don't want to appear to want to make a lot of money, write books on Revelation?

Dr. Dave Mathewson: Sure. Although I haven't figured out how to do that yet.

Dr. Don Payne: Well, I'm thinking this, this may be, this may be the cash cow of commentaries, right on revelation.

Dr. Dave Mathewson: Right And it has been for a long time. A lot of the best sellers are, you know, the left behind series type of books. And in going all the way back to the seventies, how Lindsey, if anybody remembers that name. So they've all, whether intentionally or not, made quite a profit off of writing on this book.

Dr. Don Payne: That's why I say, if Christians want to make a lot of money, but don't want to appear to make to want to make a lot of money.

Dr. Dave Mathewson: Because it's a biblical book. So it's legitimate.

- Dr. Don Payne: You're right on Revelation. So anyway, you've got the new book out. Tell us what led up to the writing of this book?
- Dr. Lynn Cohick: Aside from the fact that you wanted to make a lot of money.
- Dr. Don Payne: Without appearing to want to make a lot of money. Right.
- Dr. Dave Mathewson: Well first of all, they WipfandStock asked me to do it. So I guess that was a good enough reason, but one of the reasons, the main reason that I did it is because of the series the Cascade Companion series is aimed at a rather general audience. So a lot of my writing in Revelation has been a little more academic and I wanted to write something that a general readership, where I could take what I do in some of my scholarship and make it available to a broader readership, make something that's readable that would be conducive to Bible studies or just someone's personal reading. So I think there are a ton of really good technical and academic commentaries that have come out on Revelation over the last 10 years or so? But I still think there's a need to get that information out to a broader readership. And so I was delighted to write this book because hopefully it will. One of my goals was to kind of take the fear out of reading Revelation.
- Dr. Don Payne: Well, in all seriousness, I did find it incredibly readable and well-written. Well Lynn and I are just brimming with questions for you.
- Dr. Lynn Cohick: Yeah. And you mentioned some of the previous popular writings on Revelation. I remember when our son was in high school, he loved the left behind series, and I was just happy he was reading a book. So I was like, Oh, that's great. You know, you're reading, that's a win that's in the win column. And then I would add, but you know, there are other ways to understand Revelation. And I guess I said it so often that at some point he mouthed the words back to me. Yeah. And I know mom, there are other ways to understand Revelation. So my question to you is how would the first listeners or readers of the book of Revelation, how would they have understood what they're reading?
- Dr. Dave Mathewson: First of all, you've asked the right question. I find it interesting that when we approach any other New Testament book or Old Testament book, but you approach a letter like Galatians, we ask the question of who was Paul and who were the readers and what was the problem he was facing? Why did Paul write this book? Who are the Judaizes? Even if there's disagreement as to exactly who they were and what issues Paul is addressing, everyone agrees, we need to ask, how would the first readers have received that? And I've always been puzzled. Why do we ignore that when it comes to Revelation? And so I'm convinced in chapter two and three, you find the seven messages to the churches. They're actually not technically letters, they're prophetic messages to the seven churches. And by reading that you get a sense of what the readers were facing and what the problems were. And you have seven actual churches in Asia minor, which was right in the center of Imperial Roman rule. And so they're facing all the issues of what it means to try to live out their lives as God's people

in that kind of context. To what extent can they kind of curry favor with Rome and still maintain their allegiance to Jesus Christ? To what extent can they show their allegiance to Rome and the emperor, and still maintain their faithful witness to Christ and the Gospel? And so the book of Revelation is meant to address that and try to help those readers understand what it is they're facing. What is this empire that they're up against? What does it mean? And what does it look like to maintain their faithful witness as God's people in the midst of that?

Dr. Don Payne: This is already sounding creepily familiar but maybe we'll come back to that with contemporary times.

Dr. Lynn Cohick: Exactly it. I had kind of a follow up here, and that is, you write on as you're talking about these churches on page 55, you talk about how these churches struggle with complacency and the temptation to compromise with the pagan Roman environment, and thus are ineffective in their witness. And we know that for example, the church at Ephesus lost its first love. And so I wanted to ask, you know, does that critique relate at all to American evangelicals today? What might we gain from the messages to those churches all those years ago?

Dr. Dave Mathewson: Yeah, again, you've asked the right question. When you look at those seven churches, one kind of misconception of the book of Revelation, and it's not completely inaccurate. It's just incomplete. And that is revelation is written to console persecuted Christians. Well, you read those seven messages and only two churches. As most people know, the only two churches don't receive a negative evaluation as part of what crisis are those churches. And that's because they are being persecuted because they've taken a stand and refuse to compromise. The other five churches to some degree, some worse than others have so compromised with Roman government with the secular culture around them, that Christ has very harsh words for them. Some of them, he balances out with positive, but there's some like the very last letter to the Laodicea means that is very negative ends. They're so far off on the deep end that that Christ doesn't have much good to say about the church at Laodicea. But I wrote an article once, where I entitled it Laodicean Reading of Revelation. And I think for most North American Christians, we're probably not meant to identify with the two churches that are being persecuted. I doubt that we're going to face, or most of us are facing anything like they were in the first century, Roman Empire. I think we're probably more in danger of compromising in living in a society that's bent on accumulation of wealth, and the temptation to compromise our faithful witness by simply going along with, where there's pursuing the American dream or whatever it is, is probably Revelation, is meant more of a, a warning not to become too comfortable in our surroundings and to become too complacent with our life in American culture. And that would go not picking on America, but any culture that fits with the sort of thing that John was warning the first readers.

Dr. Don Payne: You mentioned Dave, that there are three types of literature in Revelation. And I'm wondering how does confusing those types of literature account for how Revelation is so commonly misused or misread?

Dr. Dave Mathewson: Yeah, the problem with Revelation, unlike, even though the Gospels throw up their own difficulties, Pauline letters do but even with the Gospels, we still have close analogies for the kind of literature through even novels, although the Gospels are historical. But a narrative type of writings and literature, we still write letters or more accurately probably send emails, but when's the last time you wrote or read an apocalypse or something like the book of Revelation? So we don't have any close literary parallels. And so, we often end up focusing on Revelations of prophecy and we treat it like a, a detailed prediction of the end, sort of like John is a fortune teller, telling simply for the sake of satisfying our curiosity, telling us what's going to happen in the future. And so I think a lot of misunderstandings of the book stem from failing to understand what kind of literature was this, that John is writing that we may not be as familiar with, but I think the first readers would have been very familiar with and they would have known what was going on when they picked it up and read that first a revelation of Jesus Christ that God gave to him to show. And later when John calls it a prophecy and when he begins and ends at like one of Paul's letters they would have immediately understood what was going on when they read this.

Dr. Don Payne: Do you think they would have, they would have picked up on those shifts, those literary shifts between the three types?

Dr. Dave Mathewson: That's a good question. I'm not sure that I'm maybe for example, a prophecy and apocalypse, I'm not sure that they would have distinguished sharply and they had a thought, Oh, now I'm reading a prophecy, Oh, this is also an apocalypse. Oh, now it's a letter as much as they would have they would have understood the literary cues and that would have helped them.

Dr. Don Payne: Like intuitively?

Dr. Dave Mathewson: Right. And that would have helped them to again, kind of navigate how, how am I, what am I going to expect from this book and how should I approach it and read it?

Dr. Lynn Cohick: I think some of the issue is that we don't have another book like this in the New Testament, parts of Daniel is a similarity. And most, I think most scholars would agree that this is a Jewish genre. So it's not something in the wider Greco Roman world that is apocalypse. So could you talk just a little bit about what is this form of communication that is so specific to the Jews and especially to Jews not living way, way back in Old Testament times at the time of Moses, but more around the time of Jesus and a couple of centuries before. And I mean, there is also in Daniel, but it's not prevalent. It's kind of an interesting genre.

Dr. Dave Mathewson: Yeah, it is. And between about roughly 200 BC and 280 there were a group of writings, and you can access them. They're not secret or hidden. They're you can Google them, they're collected in books, but a group of writings that we called apocalypse, and basically what that was and Revelation, even though it's very different, it shares features with this kind of literature. An apocalypse was basically just a written account of someone's visionary experience. And usually it addressed situations of crisis or situations of political upheaval or situations that called for this kind of communication, and what it was, it would be a record of someone's visionary experience that referred, I think, both to events that were going on, where it's trying to help the readers make sense of what they're going through. It wouldn't make any sense just to predict the future 20 centuries away from then. But it was meant to help them come to grips with their own contemporary situation. But part of that was putting their situation against the backdrop of the wrap up of history. And so you even find Revelation kind of at times, oscillating between those two, you find that some of the Old Testament, prophetic texts is making sense of their own day. Events that are happening in their own day or just in the horizon, but also events that will take place at the wrap up of history when Christ returns. And part of the way of doing that is the kind of the genius of apocalyptic literature. It communicated that through highly metaphorical, symbolic language. And so in revelation, you read of these beasts and dragons and locust with human heads and tails like scorpions and you solve for and smoke and, and, and all and frogs and all these things and the account of the plagues, because that's the way apocalypse is communicated. They did not communicate literally like you might sit down and watch a news documentary or historical documentary, but it communicated through a metaphor, or symbolic language that was meant to impact the heart as much as it was the mind and communicate information.

Dr. Lynn Cohick: So along with talking about the genre, so, you also talk about John tells a story in Revelation that there is a story throughout all of this. There's a overarching message. And I think at times people read a scene here or a scene there, and it kind of feels chopped up, but what's the story that John is communicating?

Dr. Dave Mathewson: Yeah. I think you're right. We often, we tend to compartmentalize visions of Revelation, try to make sense of them in their own. And sometimes at first reading, Revelation in places does appear to be a little bit choppy. But I think when you read it closely, it is telling a story and it starts in chapter four and five, I think with John's vision of the heavenly throne scene and all of heaven worshipping God and the lamb, and acknowledging their sovereignty. And the question that Chapter four and five raises I think, is how is this scene in heaven going to become a reality in earth? And that takes you to Chapter 21 and 22, the last two chapters where all creation, acknowledges God's sovereignty and worships the throne of God. And the lamb that was in Chapter four and five is now at the center of the new creation, the new Jerusalem. So everything in between Chapters four and five and 21 and 22 basically tells, how is God going to do that? How is God going to bring heaven down to earth? I like what Richard Baulkham a British scholar says that in a sense, revelation is an extended commentary in the Lord's prayer. When he says our Father who is in heaven,

hallowed, be your name, your will be done. Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. The as it is in heaven is chapter four and five God's sovereignty is perfectly acknowledged, all heaven worships. And then the question is, how is that part of the Lord's prayer on earth, going to be answered and 21 and 20 get you there. Heaven comes down to earth and God dwells with all his people on a new creation. And then everything in between is the story of how God through initial judgments, but also through the witnessing activity of the church brings about that scene in Chapter 21 and 22.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. The book of Revelation is often leveraged with the doctrine of eschatology, the eschaton last things. And in many systematic approaches to theology Revelation is one of the key go to places for the doctrine of the end times. But you make a really interesting claim here that that eschatology is actually not the primary doctrine of the book of revelation, even though it's a source for that, say more about that.

Dr. Dave Mathewson: Yeah. It's, and maybe that was a little bit of an overreaction to attempts to make eschatology the most important thing in the book. But again, what is behind that is John's main attempt, main intention in the book is not to give us an eschatological timeline, to answer the question here's how everything's going to work out and pan out in the end. Again, as much as it is to encourage faithfulness in the people of God, and to as I see it, John's main purpose is to get the people of God to worship God and the lamb, no matter what the consequence is. So, there's a revelation has one of the richest Christology's in the entire New Testament. It has a unique way of portraying who God is, especially in the context of anti-imperial claims where you know, what Caesar was claiming, what Rome was claiming. Now John portrays both God and the lamb as the true source of salvation, the true source of peace, the true saviors of the world, the ones who are the only ones worthy of worship. And then the calls over and over again, to follow one of my favorite texts and all of Revelation is in Chapter 14, it describes the people of God. God is those who follow the lamb wherever he goes. And to me, that kind of summarizes what Revelation is all about. It's not a prediction of the end. Yeah, it has a lot to say about eschatology and rightfully plays a major role in our understanding of end time stuff. But at the heart of revelations message is a call for the church to follow the lamb, wherever he goes, to maintain its witness, to worship God and the lamb in unqualified, obedience and allegiance, no matter what the consequences it brings.

Dr. Lynn Cohick: Yeah. Well, let me piggyback on Don's question by asking you to comment on the millennium. Yeah. You're laughing already. You knew that was coming somehow. And what is that verse? Four of Chapter 20. Yeah, it's the place where it's mentioned just once in the letter, but it takes on, casts a big shadow through over the whole letter. Talk a little bit about what's going on there. Right.

Dr. Dave Mathewson: Boy, I can say a lot about that.

Dr. Don Payne: Oh, look at the time

Dr. Lynn Cohick: First maybe just kind of describe for our readers, what and you do an excellent job in the book of laying things out. I want to encourage people to pick up the book cause you lay things out really clearly and helpfully there, but yeah. Sort of what it is and then how people have interpreted it.

Dr. Dave Mathewson: Yeah. The, I mean, the millennium just refers to the reference in Chapter 2. And as you just said, Lynn, it's the only place in the new Testament or the Bible that the thousand year reign is mentioned. And a number of theories have grown up around the millennium and often your approach to Revelation is equated with how you treat. I just had some of the other day ask me what's do you take a millennial or post-millennial pre-millennial view of Revelation?

Dr. Don Payne: As if that's what the books about?

Dr. Dave Mathewson: As if that's what the book is about, and that's the major, that's kind of the central text and you look at church history and you know, you can understand that, very early on the millennium became a rather for whatever reasons, became a key text and a key notion in the book of revelation. And but a couple of observations when you read Revelation itself I find it interesting that if you read verses four through six of Revelation 20, the reference of the millennium is so cryptic. It says it doesn't even, it's not even clear where it takes place. We assume it's on earth, but there's been some who have argued that it takes place in heaven. What is known as the, a millennial views the thousand years is symbolic of the entire period between the first coming and second coming of Christ. So, when you look at Chapter 20 itself, it doesn't tell you a lot. It doesn't even say, you know, what goes on there. Who's there? There's all kinds of questions that are raised about the millennium. And I think there's a reason for that. And that is because the millennium plays a very specific role in John's story. In my opinion, in my view, the main focus of Chapter 20 is not the millennium. It's a judgment of Satan. Chapter 20 comes at the end of, a series of judgment or removal scenes, where God is beginning to remove in judgment everything that stands opposed to his kingdom, his purposes, and in his people. And so he removes Babylon in Chapter 17, 18. He removes the two beasts in a battle in Chapter 19. And then finally he removes the primary antagonist, which is Satan in Chapter 20.

And then you have this kind of sweeping up scene, comprehensive removal of everything in judgment, the well-known, great white throne judgment. It's in the middle of that, where you find the millennium mentioned. And I think that's how we need to understand it. The purpose of the millennium, I think, is simply to show in the context of Satan's judgment. We find the people that were mistreated under Satan's rule that were accused, Satan's called the accuser of God's people back in Chapter 12 where he's first introduced. In the context of all that in the context of Satan's judgment, it's necessary in a sense for God to vindicate those who were wrongly and cute accused in this life. And so that's basically what the millennium does. Those that Satan reigned over in justly and

oppressively and put to death. Now they are raised and they reign in a profound reversal. And so to me, that's what the millennium does. Now, where all the fireworks go off is Chapter 21 and 22 there's you have just a barrage of Old Testament, quotations and illusions that this is where the Old Testament promises of a coming messianic kingdom now transpire, not in the millennium, in the new creation where God now dwells with his people. So I think our focus needs to shift instead of you know, equating the interpretation of revelation with the millennium, is our focus should be on the new creation where John puts it is as the goal of God's redemptive activity in this world and his redemptive purposes.

Dr. Don Payne: So I'm feeling as a systematic theologian, I'm feeling a bit chastised. So, are you telling me that I need to reduce the length of my lecture on the millennial schemata that you described from a couple of hours to maybe five minutes and say, okay, this is what a lot of people have believed now let's move on. We overcooked, I mean, this is really going to stir the pot. Have we overcooked that whole conversation?

Dr. Dave Mathewson: I personally, think we have but you know, the, the millennium has received so much attention it's necessary to deal with it. But again, at the end of the day, when we're thinking in terms of how we teach eschatology, I still think our focus needs to be on the new creation as the, again, this is the goal of God's redemptive activity. It's not the millennium is not the climax or the pinnacle. It's God redeeming all things in a new creative act with God dwelling with his people. You know, we were talking earlier about kind of jokingly saying, all, you need is the first two Chapters of Genesis and the book of Revelation. But there's a lot of connections between Chapter 21 and 22 of Revelation in Genesis one and two to show God has now, in light of the events of Chapter three and sin entering the world. Now God has restored everything in his creation, especially as people, but all creation in light of how he originally intended it.

Dr. Don Payne: And brings it all around. Right.

Dr. Lynn Cohick: You know, I find at times, trying to imagine this new heaven in this new earth and our raised and glorified bodies that Paul stresses so much to the Corinthians, to the Philippians. And it's a real loss, isn't it? At times when we think of Christ's work as only, or primarily forgiving our sins and not also recognizing that we will share new life with him in some sort of physical sense, an immortal imperishable body, hard to imagine, but that that's the promise of the end of Revelation, isn't it?

Dr. Dave Mathewson: It is. And I, you know, I sometimes say this jokingly, but I it's, I I'm serious is, I'm not sure that I'm not sure that I want to go to heaven at least the way it's often described. And I don't think it's wrong to say that because from, from Genesis chapter one and two God's intent for humanity has always been a physical existence, and bodies on an earth, not to escape, escape to heaven. That's kind of agnostic idea, I guess, but the hope, and to me that's what should give us hope that our, our primary hope and goal is not escape and to, you know,

preverbal leaf float around in the clouds and heaven. But our ultimate destiny and goal is a physical existence in physical bodies on a new earth. However, different that may be, as you said, Lynn, however difficult it may be to conceive of is that our goal. And to me that makes it worth sacrificing. I'm not sure I want to sacrifice this world to go float around in the air, but I'm more willing to sacrifice this earth and the things of this earth and life here for the sake of Christ, in exchange for life and new creation that far exceeds anything that I can experience here.

Dr. Don Payne: I love what you said about how that very common vision of heaven, which is this sort of floaty disembodied, ethereal something is so un compelling, it reminds me of my own childhood growing up in the church where that vision of heaven was, was very common. And I was regularly told that I should be eager to go there. And I felt very guilty for not being eager to go there, man. I had stuff to do, trucks to play with, and all kinds of fun things to do. And then nothing about that sounded appealing.

Dr. Lynn Cohick: I've had one person, and this was a student that was in the conservatory and loved to sing. And that was the only person that said, Oh, just to be able to sing all day every day, all the time, you know, and the great hymn around the throne and only doing that.

Dr. Don Payne: When I think about being in church 24/7 for eternity, I have mixed feelings about that. Yeah.

Dr. Lynn Cohick: Yeah. Well, see, that's what I'm saying. I only know one person and they were, they had a phenomenal voice. I make a joyful noise to the Lord and hopefully when I get my raised and glorified body I'll also have a voice to match.

Dr. Dave Mathewson: Even then, I hope there's a little more variety than singing all the time.

Dr. Don Payne: Dave, you really caught my attention with what you said about the particular way the book of Revelation addresses social justice. Comment on that.

Dr. Dave Mathewson: Yeah. Again, I think a couple things, number one, is Revelation addresses social justice in a very different way than you find in the book of James, for example, where Jesus, he goes after the wealthy and, and champions, the cause of the poor and the oppressed and the widow. Revelation says nothing about that. And in fact, there's some have even gone as far to say, Revelation doesn't have a social justice, but I think the way Revelation handles it is, is not by championing the cause of the poor, but by going after the etiology, that lies behind injustice, that is a godless, idolatrous, evil, murderous system that creates an economy that's out of whack. That's what I think is going on in Chapter six in the Seals is it's showing what happens when you have an economy that's bent on satisfying the greed of a godless empire and a godless society. So it goes after social justice that way by uncovering the ideology that lies behind it. And then in Chapter 21 and 22 by portraying adjust world, a world that is just and a world

that is righteous to a world, a world where there's equality where people can drink of the water of life without costs, things like that.

Dr. Don Payne: Wow, Dave, this is a great book. And I say that, not just because you're my friend. I think I would say it anyway. I'm pretty sure.

Dr. Lynn Cohick: It is a great book.

Dr. Don Payne: You can say that because you're not as friend, your an objective bystander.

Dr. Dave Mathewson: That's why, yeah. That's why we brought her in here.

Dr. Lynn Cohick: And it's accessible, it really is. And it can pick that up and be blessed by this.

Dr. Don Payne: This really should inspire. I'm not sure I would have expected to say this sometime ago, but this should inspire more interest in the book of revelation. If anything, I'm wondering now, whether I've maybe overreacted in some settings because of the type of obsession, the type of obsession with the book of Revelation that I see. So widespread, and many Christians lives. It's understandable, but you've helped clarify some of the appropriate ways of reading this book and some of the contemporary pertinent relevance of this book. And so I hope this will inspire a lot of interest in reading it, but a fresh way of reading the book of Revelation, Dave Mathewson, A Companion to the Book of Revelation by Cascade. As we record this, I think it is forthcoming.

Dr. Dave Mathewson: No, it's out.

Dr. Don Payne: It is out now. Okay, good. Good. Get yourself a copy.

Dr. Lynn Cohick: And you can give my copy back to me now, please. Cause I did have to loan that to you. Thank you. Thank you. You're handing it to me across the table, with a six foot appropriate distance

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. My long distance gorilla arms here are reaching the book to you from an appropriate distance. Yeah. This has been Engage 360 and we've been delighted to interact with our friend and colleague, Dr. Dave Mathewson from our New Testament faculty. He's made I don't know, probably several decades worth of investigation and investment in the book of Revelation. So he knows what he's talking about, we hope you'll access his work here. On that note, we would encourage you to visit our website periodically Denverseminary.edu. And there you can find all kinds of really helpful and sometimes even fun resources that will benefit your ministry and get more info about our degree programs. We would love to talk with you or with anybody you know who would love to study with us. Thanks to our administration for supporting all this and our production team. And thanks to you for spending a little time with us. I'm Don Payne, and we will look forward to talking with you again next week. Take care.

