

Parish Teaching Day

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[0 : 0 0] We're in for a treat today. Paul Spilsbury is currently the academic dean and prof of New Testament at Regent College.

An academic dean is arguably the most difficult job, although I think Jeff Greenman might disagree as president. I want to say Paul is a South African.

Which means he and I probably will have a love-hate relationship. He was a student at Regent and then did a PhD in Cambridge on Josephus, and Cephas is probably the most important non-Christian source around the time contemporary of Jesus and just after.

He taught at the Canadian Bible College as a professor of New Testament, and then he was part of the creation of Ambrose in Calgary, where he was the VP for academics and taught New Testament.

And he's written a number of books, including this absolutely terrific book called The Throne, The Lamb, and The Dragon. Put your hand up if you have one. Very good.

[1 : 2 2] Who's read it? Fantastic. This is a book that is such a help to us in coming to Revelation, particularly if you've had bad experiences in the past coming to Revelation.

Those of you who are part of Paul's course on Revelation in the summer school know how wonderful it was to stunder his teaching. And so I want you to welcome with me, oh, no, one more thing, Paul had great sense to marry a woman called Ron■.

So did I. So let's welcome Paul together. Thank you. Thank you so much, David. Thank you all. It's lovely to be with you this morning.

Yes, I'm married to Bronwyn. She's a wonderful person, and she may join us a bit later this morning. So, it really is a lot of fun to teach the book of Revelation, partly because of the wide range of experiences that people have had with the book.

Some people come to Revelation with a sense of trepidation, maybe a bit of revulsion on occasion. Some people are kind of obsessed with the book of Revelation, and they're kind of like Revelation crazies.

[2 : 5 6] They're really, really into Revelation. So, that's kind of another group of people. And then I would say the vast majority of good God-fearing Bible-believing folk just ignore the book altogether.

So, I'm imagining that I've caught some of you in that net, and I'm sure there's other nuances we could add as well.

What I would like to offer us this morning and today is really a way of thinking about the book of Revelation, a way of approaching it, so that you can read the book for yourself.

And I know that you're all at the beginning of a year-long just-about preaching series on Revelation. So, at the end of the next few months, you're going to be saturated in this book.

You're going to know everything you need to know, and you're going to be good to go. So, that's great. The good thing about that, of course, is that if there's anything that I say today that's just, like, not kosher, you know, David and others are going to fix that all over the next few months, so it's going to be okay.

[4 : 00] There might be some places where you disagree with me on something that I say, but that's fine. We can have a conversation. We'll try to do an interactive thing going on.

Yeah, I'm happy to answer questions and be as helpful as I can be. And we'll just see where we go.

So, I want to start off by asking this simple question to frame our thinking about Revelation. And that is simply, what's it about?

What is the book of Revelation all about? And I find that it's helpful when I'm teaching a book like this to try to get a sense of the big picture so that when we get down to looking at individual bits of it, we can have a sense of where it might fit.

Of course, you have to keep on going back and readjusting your understanding of the big picture once you look at the details. But there needs to be always this kind of back and forth between a sense of how it all works so that the individual pieces seem to make sense in that context.

[5 : 09] If we dive too quickly into the details, we might find ourselves confused and lost and overwhelmed. Because Revelation is that kind of book. It is the kind of book that can be overwhelming and difficult at times.

And it's easy to lose our way. And I will say this, that even though I have been reading Revelation for a long time, as many of you have as well, and been studying and so on and teaching Revelation for years, there's still bits of it that don't make sense to me or are difficult to understand, and I still haven't quite figured them out.

So there may be places even today where you kind of notice where I kind of, you know, get a little bit more opaque. And that's just a kind of rhetorical way of blowing a bit of smoke and then say, let's move on to something that's more straightforward.

Okay, so the first thing I want to say about Revelation is this. Is that Revelation, fundamentally, is a book that draws us to worship God. And it's important for us to have that sense of the direction of the book so that we can understand that Revelation isn't first and foremost trying to tell us about the end of the world, for example.

It isn't trying to give us a blueprint of what's going to happen tomorrow or the next day or in the American election or whatever the case might be. Revelation is calling us to join in with that company of worship who we encounter very early on in the book, where the whole heavenly host in chapter 4 is singing, Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God, the Almighty, who is and who was and who is to come.

[6 : 44] So it's wonderful that we started off singing that hymn this morning because that is the point of the book of Revelation, to draw us into that company of worshippers.

So there's a number of places where this is made explicit. As we get later on in the book, we'll find explicit instruction that's given to John. Worship God. Okay, so that's the first high-level thing that we need to say.

Secondly, Revelation makes it clear to us that worshipping God entails following the Lamb.

We're called into discipleship. So the big picture in the book of Revelation is that we would come to understand more deeply, more profoundly, what it means to follow Jesus.

Now, one of the great difficulties of saying that is that Revelation portrays Jesus very powerfully, not as, first and foremost, a sage or a teacher or a holy man or any of the other images that we might have of Jesus.

[7 : 53] But Revelation portrays Jesus as what? As a slaughtered Lamb, right? A Lamb that has been slaughtered. And so that raises for us the question, what does it mean?

What does it mean in practical terms to think through the implications of following this figure who is portrayed as a slaughtered Lamb now standing?

And we find this important phrase along the way where it describes the followers of the Lamb as those who follow Him wherever He goes. So, these are the kinds of questions that we're going to need to ask ourselves.

What does it mean to follow the Lamb wherever He goes? Or, in another place, we're told that the followers of the Lamb are those who wash their robes and make them white in the blood of the Lamb.

What does it mean to wash our robes and make them white in Christ's blood? So, this is at the heart of the message of the book of Revelation.

[9 : 03] That we are called to follow God's agent in the world. And that that is how we manifest our worship. So, certainly there are these scenes of singing and of kind of liturgical worship.

Yet, it's clear that that act of worship is manifest in our lives by following the Lamb wherever He goes.

Now, one of the very sobering aspects of that is that Revelation spells out for us this fact that to follow the Lamb wherever He goes leads us in answerably into conflict.

So, the other great figure, as it were, that is in the narrative, in the plot, the story of the book of Revelation is the story of a conflict, an unequal battle between those who follow the Lamb on the one side and a terrifying seven-headed dragon.

So, on the one side of this battle, if you can imagine this vast field of battle scene, on the one side of the battle, you've got the Lamb, a Lamb, right?

[10 : 23] It's literally a Lamb. It's not like a Godzilla great creature. It's a Lamb. And his followers, who are dressed in white robes, and they're carrying palm branches.

And on the other side is a seven-headed dragon. And the seven-headed dragon has at his disposal other allies, one of which is called the beast that comes up from the sea.

And it, too, has seven heads. And then there's another monster that we do not really describe other than that it comes up from the Lamb. So, we've got these kind of mythic creatures, 15 heads between them.

And over against them is the Lamb and his followers, dressed in white robes, carrying palm branches. So, part of thinking through what it means to follow the Lamb is to think through what does it mean to be involved in this kind of unequal conflict.

Because, shockingly, the book of Revelation chronicles the defeat of the Lamb and of the Lamb's followers at the hands of this evil trio.

[11 : 41] The dragon, the beast, and the other beast. And so, that's also something that we're going to need to think through very carefully. What does it mean when the picture of the conflict leads to the defeat of the followers of the Lamb?

And yet, somehow, this defeat becomes the essence of what it means to overcome and to conquer. And so, there's a lot of rethinking that we have to do in our categories.

What does it mean to be someone who wins this way? What does it mean to follow a messianic figure? What does it mean to follow a savior who leads us into a battle that isn't going to be easy?

In fact, leads to death. Certainly, to life beyond that, there is resurrection and there is hope. And the story ends with a wonderful picture of hope.

The wonderful scene of the people of God, the followers of the Lamb, gathering together in the city, the new city, the new Jerusalem. And it's there that God wipes away every tear from the eyes of the followers of the Lamb.

[12 : 55] And when death is no more. And so, we have this wonderful ending to the book. A wonderful scene of hope and rejoicing and triumph. And yet, we mustn't neglect to see the path that gets the followers to that place.

So, all of that's to say that Revelation is not only difficult in the sense of how do we understand the book, but it has a very daunting message. It has a message that calls us to think very carefully about what it means to be on this pathway that we are on as the followers of Christ.

So, that's basically what the book of Revelation is about. And everything else fits into that broad framework. And if you were to doze off now because you haven't had quite enough coffee for the morning, at least you got that.

And you can say, yeah, I now know what Revelation is about. And you got your money's worth. Okay, so, there's a kind of, what I want to say is that there is at least the highest level of the book of Revelation, a straightforward message to the book.

It's not all about, and it isn't best understood through trying to create charts and diagrams that plot the end of the world.

[14 : 20] Actually, I want to say this quite clearly, and that is that folks who read the book of Revelation as a way of trying to discern how the world is going to end or when Christ is going to return and so on, are simply going about the reading of Revelation in a way that isn't going to be helpful.

It's the wrong kind of questions to bring to this book. Because Revelation isn't so much a book of prediction as it is a word of prophecy. So we need to think about, what does it mean to differentiate between prediction and prophecy?

Okay, what is the difference between those two things? Somebody give me a, how would you differentiate between prediction and prophecy? Anybody want to give me a, yes, please.

We can give it a guess, and prophecy is a direction. Okay, prophecy is a direction, and prediction you said is a guess. Okay. Fair enough.

Prophecy is a word from God. Prophecy is a word from God. And what is prediction? God could predict something. Yeah, something about the future. Okay.

[15 : 27] So, think of it this way, is that prophecy is what the Lord says. So, in the Old Testament, when the prophets speak to the people, they invariably speak in the framework of saying, thus saith the Lord.

This is what the Lord says. So, prophecy is to speak forth what it is that God is saying. So, that the Lord speaks to the prophet, and the prophet announces to the people, this is what the Lord's message to us is.

Now, that message could be about something in the present. It could be about something in the future. It could predict. So, prediction is potentially an aspect of prophecy.

But God's word could be about the past. God's word could be to help us to think about how we've come to this place. So, when we come to the book of Revelation, we need to understand that it's God speaking, but it's not all just about the future.

In fact, it encompasses the whole course of salvation history. There are scenes in the book of Revelation that are clearly about the past. They are about the death of Christ.

[16 : 39] They are about the life of the church. There are scenes that are about the present. They are about what it means to follow Christ in the present moment. And then there are also scenes about how it's all going to unfold in the future.

But the book isn't just about trying to tell us how the future is going to unfold. Okay? So, we need to have that bigger picture of prophecy and prediction.

And John, the author, speaks to us as a spirit-inspired prophet. Right? He tells us that he was in the spirit. And that the word that...

This book that he offers us now is a book of prophecy. And the angel, later on in the book, refers to him as one of the prophets. Right?

So, John is a prophet and his book is a word of prophecy. And we come to it in the same way as we would come to the book of Ezekiel or the book of Isaiah.

[17 : 39] It's a word that speaks to us from the Lord. But we shouldn't just assume that it's all about the end of the world. Because it's about a much bigger picture than all of that.

Now, there's a kind of irony, I always think, in the fact that this book is called the book of Revelation. The word Revelation that we use comes from the Greek word apocalypse.

We use the word apocalypse. Some versions of the Bible refer to this as the apocalypse of John. But there's a kind of irony in that, I always think. Because to... You know, Revelation means to uncover something.

To make something known. Perhaps to make something clear. And yet, of all the books of the Bible, this seems to be the one where we have the hardest time figuring out what exactly it's saying. There's a sense in which that rather than actually revealing something to us, that this book seems to be deliberately making things obscure.

So we sometimes, I think, find ourselves wondering, couldn't this all have been done just a little bit more straightforwardly? And so, in this respect, the book of Revelation is like one of the parables of Jesus.

[18 : 54] So, we might object that this book is difficult. And yet, if you think about the parables of Jesus, or how Jesus himself described what he was doing in his parables, it's interesting to note a point of connection.

So, have a look at what Jesus says in Mark, chapter 4. So, this is a scene where Jesus has been teaching the disciples.

They gather around him, and they ask him about the parables. And this is how Jesus responds, reflecting on what it is that he is trying to accomplish in speaking in parables.

So, it says, When he was alone, those who were around him, along with the twelve, asked him about the parables. And he said to them, To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God.

But for those outside, everything comes in parables. In order that they may indeed look, but may not perceive. They may indeed listen, but not understand.

[19 : 56] So that they may not understand and be forgiven. And he said to them, Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand all the parables? Notice how Jesus is decidedly unhelpful in that passage.

He says, Okay, to you it's been given the meaning, But for everybody outside, there's this idea that I'm telling things in parables so that people won't understand what I'm saying.

That just doesn't seem right. He says, This is so that they won't perceive, won't listen, won't understand, and won't turn.

It's like, that's not the Jesus I remember from that in school. You know, the one with the white robe and the blue sash. This Jesus is saying that the parables obscure things.

But notice how there's also this kind of interesting play on the idea that some people are on the inside group, and some people are in an outside group.

[21 : 08] To you has been given the secret of the kingdom, but to everybody else, everything comes in parables. Now that might be fairly straightforward until you start reading through the Gospel of Mark, and you find very soon that the people who are closest to Jesus are the ones who most regularly, completely misunderstand everything they're saying.

So then that raises the question for us, Well, who exactly are these so-called insiders who understand things? But they don't seem to appear. So that causes us to think through them, Okay, where do I fit?

Am I really an insider? And I'm an outsider. What does it mean to have the secret of the kingdom? So there's a kind of challenge inherent in the teaching of Jesus to really seek to be one of those for whom the message is clear, to understand, to listen, to have ears, to be genuinely attentive, to have our ears open so that we can understand what is going on.

So there's an invitation and there's a challenge inherent in this kind of storytelling, picture-oriented, metaphor-driven, symbol-laden kind of teaching.

It isn't all just straightforward, This is what you should do. This is what you should believe. It's presenting us with pictures and stories and scenes that draw us in so that we can think about it, we can reflect on it.

[22 : 38] And yet we find that even as we're being drawn into the story, even as there's an element of invitation, a hand that draws us in, yet by the very nature of this text, the very nature of how it speaks to us, it seems at the same time also to be kind of shoving us away with the other hand.

And so there's always a tussle going back and forward between understanding and not understanding, of feeling like you've got it and you haven't got it. And so there is a kind of inherent difficulty whenever we come to the book of Revelation.

I was thinking about this recently, about another example that I find fascinating. You know, we always think that the Bible ought to be straightforward and clear, and if only we were smart enough, we'd get it. The fact is it just isn't always, even though of course we believe in the perspicuity of Scripture, which I think is a very ironic word too.

Perspicuity of Scripture is a Reformation doctrine about how Scripture is clear. Then why use the word perspicuity for goodness sake? Okay, anyway, that's just a bad joke.

So, remember the story of Belshazzar's feast? Remember that bit? And there's the writing on the wall. Now, isn't it odd that the writing on the wall isn't in the language of the people in the room?

[23 : 54] Isn't that odd? That you need Daniel to come and translate and then explain what the words mean. Now, in one way that's great, because it gives biblical scholars a job, and so then, you know, you invite people to come speak.

It's awesome. But there's also always this sense that the word of God comes to us in forms that require us to think hard, to delve deeper, to reflect.

There is work to be done in understanding Scripture wherever we encounter it in the Bible. And then it's not always going to be straightforward.

So, all of that is simply to say, don't lose heart if you find that in reading Revelation, there are many times, even though you've read the book many often, and so on, that even though you might have an increasing sense of what it means in the big sense, but there's parts of it that still elude you.

Well, that is the way it's going to be, because that's the way, that's the nature of this kind of a book. So that's meant to be a kind of a roundabouts way of encouraging us all to not give up.

[25 : 07] But also to say that there is, there's a challenge here, there's an invitation to engage with something that's not always so straightforward. Now, I also find it interesting that Jesus ends the telling of his parable in Mark with this statement, let anyone with ears listen.

One of the things that we remember of Jesus when he teaches, if anyone has an ear, then listen. Of course, everyone does have ears, so what does he mean? Obviously, he's asking us to pay attention, to think carefully, to listen very closely, to not think that this is always necessarily going to be easy.

And that phrase is itself echoed over and over in the book of Revelation, because we have often repeated this statement, that anyone who has an ear, listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

So in chapters 2 and 3, there's seven messages that go out to seven individual communities of faith, and each time there's like a refrain, this recurring statement, let anyone who has an ear, listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

And then again, in chapter 13, it says, if anyone has an ear, let him hear. So, we're being drawn always in. We must listen carefully.

[26 : 35] So this is a book that needs to be approached not simply as a kind of academic task, as an intellectual task, but there's a core here for us to listen, to be quiet.

We remember that John himself was in the Spirit when he wrote down these words, when he had the experiences that formed the basis of what he's written here. So, we're invited to become, to enter into that same mode, to be in the Spirit, to be quiet, to be attentive to the still, small voice of God's Spirit.

And then, we have this blessing as well in chapter 1 that David referred to already this morning, where it says, blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near.

It's a unique statement in all of Scripture, an actual blessing attached to the reading, the hearing, and the keeping of a specific text. I think that's also partly to do with a kind of recognition of the difficulty of this book.

And yet, there also seems to be a special blessing that's attached to paying attention, to hearing, and to keeping. Obviously, it's never just about hearing.

[27 : 48] It's not just about knowing or coming to understand. But then, to take the next step of saying, well, what does it mean to live into what is being taught? What does it mean to keep the words of this prophecy?

So there's another reflection for us, and that I hope that over the next months as you're thinking about the book of Revelation, it's always to be asking ourselves, what does it mean to keep?

What does it mean to keep these words? Keep them in our heart, keep them in our life, follow them, live them, somehow shape our lives by what we've come to understand.

Surely, all aspects of what it means to keep the words of the prophecy. Now, another important aspect of this theme is that in Revelation, John hears in unusual ways.

He's hearing with his ears, but he's also, oddly enough, hearing with his eyes. So, in order to absorb all that there is for us in the book of Revelation, we have to have all of our faculties engaged in the process.

[29 : 03] Revelation is both auditory and visionary. There are things to hear, there are words that are said, but it is not just the sort of book that is about words.

It is a vision in which things are seen, and the seeing is an important aspect of the hearing, and the seeing and the hearing interact with each other all the time.

It's not just about understanding the words, it's about thinking about the pictures and the scenes, the story that's being played out before the eyes of John and being portrayed for us, so that we can enter into it, imagine, and see the scenes as well.

And sometimes we'll notice that there is a kind of interplay between the hearing and the seeing. There's a very fascinating passage right near the beginning of the book of Revelation.

In chapter 1 and verse 12, John said, John is on the island of Patmos, and he tells us that he's there because of the persecution, he's there to bear witness to Jesus, and he says that he heard behind him a loud voice like a trumpet.

[30 : 17] And so we're getting right into kind of the mode of expression of the book of Revelation. We have these scenes where things are spoken loudly. It's a very noisy book.

So there's a person who speaks behind him with a loud voice like a trumpet. John says that I turned to see the voice that spoke to me in chapter 1 and verse 12.

Now, some of our translations will say something like I turned to see who it was who had spoken to me. Now, that's a reasonable kind of idiomatic translation. But I think it's important, actually, to notice what it says there literally where he says I turned to see the voice.

And so that gets us into the sense in which Revelation is calling us to see things that are not visible, to see things that aren't usually seen, that we're being invited to see differently.

And sometimes the doing of the seen is not what we expect. Sometimes there is a disjunction, a disconnect between the things that are said and the things that are seen.

[31 : 32] I want to give you an example of what I mean. One of the passages that I want us to look at closely today, and we'll come to it again a bit later on, is chapter 5. In chapter 5, we have this very important scene in which John tells us that he hears a statement.

The statement is that the one who is worthy to open the scroll is the lion of the tribe of Judah. So if you look at Revelation 5, verse 5, it says, see, the lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David, has triumphed.

He is able to open the scroll. The lion of the tribe of Judah is the one. It says, see, behold. Then, it says, in verse 6, I saw a what?

Okay, he didn't see the thing he was told was there. He was told he was a lion, but when he turned to look, he saw another thing entirely.

That's what I mean by saying that when we pay close attention, we'll see that the words and the images are not always exactly aligned with each other.

[32 : 54] But that's an invitation, again, for us to think through, well, what does it mean that the expectation was so surprisingly unmet.

We'll come back to this passage in a little while, but what I want us to kind of grapple with is that John could not, in his own experience of all the things that happened to him, he could not rely simply on the faculty of hearing alone.

He had to look. He had to see what was in front of him. It's not that the hearing was false, but that somehow a fuller picture is provided by the seeing and the hearing at the same time so that to reflect on the identity of this one who is worthy to open the scroll entails both hearing that he's the lion and seeing that he's the lamb and somehow those two things interacting with each other.

Do you see what I'm saying? You see that? You see what I'm saying? Good job. Okay. Maybe I'll just pause there.

Does anybody have a question with what I've said so far? I know this is kind of difficult with a big room, but I don't want to just leave people behind me. We good? Ready to carry on? Okay.

[34 : 17] Now, part of what this entails is that we come to a book like Revelation with our imaginations engaged in the process.

Now, I know that that can be a little bit disconcerting for people because imagination might sound like we're engaging in make-believe.

That's not what I'm talking about. But it means coming to Revelation ready to be involved in the reading. That there are scenes that are going to be appalling.

There are going to be scenes that are awe-inspiring. There are going to be scenes that entail the description of smells and of sounds. The author is sometimes overcome by emotion.

He weeps unexpectedly. We weren't expecting him to suddenly start weeping and then he weeps. So, there's an invitation to try to enter into that way of his own experience.

[35 : 22] We're being drawn into the book. So, this is an invitation to become involved in the deep pathos of the book of Revelation.

Not to simply keep it at arm's length and say, there's a word that talks about weeping. I know what that is. But to try to understand what does it mean to have this kind of emotional reaction.

What does that teach us? and prayerfully to enter into the emotion and the sound, the whole universe that is before us.

This is a visionary experience that is all embracing for John. We're called to enter into that vision in some sense. So, one way of thinking about that that you may or may not find helpful is you might think about how down through the ages, especially in Eastern Orthodoxy, some folks have come to pray with the help of icons.

An icon is a kind of devotional tool that people have used over the centuries in which we have an image of a scene and where the worshipper, the person who is praying, reflects on the scene that is before them and uses it as a tool to enter into the spiritual realities that are being depicted in the scene.

[36 : 55] So, that's an example of a liturgical practice, a devotional practice that some folks have found helpful. This is an icon of John writing the book of Revelation, many other icons, of course.

Some famously of the face of Christ. So, the person who uses an icon as a tool for worship reflects on the deeper realities that are being depicted by the scene and in a sense uses the scene, the picture, as a portal, as a doorway into the realities that lie beyond.

So, whether that's hopeful or helpful to you or not, Revelation also is drawing us into this reality. It wants us to enter into the scene that is before us so that we can begin to understand what it is to hear and to keep the words of this prophecy.

Okay, now, as is so often the case when we come to any book of the Bible, the critical starting point is that we come to it with legitimate questions, with the right questions, with questions that we can reasonably be expected to answer.

And being able to ask the right kinds of questions when we come to the book of Revelation starts off with this question, and that is, what kind of a book is it?

[38 : 31] What kind of a book do we understand Revelation to be? If we can ask ourselves that question and get a reasonable, at least beginning answer to it, what kind of a book is this?

Then we can have a hope to bring the right kinds of questions to it. Now, we often know instinctively what it is that we're coming to when we read it. If you come to the weekend newspaper, you know what it is, you know what's going to be there, you know the kinds of information you're coming to glean from it, and so there's an instinctive understanding of the genre, the type of literature, that you have in front of you.

But the book of Revelation, perhaps it's not that obvious right at the beginning. Well, what kind of a book is this? Is it, for example, as many people have thought down through the centuries, is it a kind of allegorical outline of history?

And that is one of the ways that people have come to read the book of Revelation. They have thought, this book is an outline of everything that's happened in church history up to now.

And then it's got a little bit about what's going to happen next. If you come to Revelation with that kind of understanding of what kind of book it is, then of course your questions are all going to be having to do with, okay, here we've got swarms of locusts coming out of the ground, which part of church history was that?

[39 : 54] And down through the centuries, people have given different answers to that kind of question. In the Middle Ages, or in the Reformation, for example, the swarms of locusts were understood to be the invading armies of Islam, for example.

Or, also in the time of the Reformation, the picture of the great prostitute in chapter 17 was understood to be what? The Pope.

Right? So that's because they've decided in advance that the book is a kind of history of the world, and so then you ask questions about which bit of history does this refer to?

Okay? So that's what I mean how your questions in advance will give you a certain set of questions, your understanding of what the book is will give you a certain set of questions, and those questions may or may not help, because the book may not be set up to answer those questions.

If the book of Revelation isn't in fact a history of the world, how can it possibly ask your question about which bit of history the great prostitute really refers to?

[41 : 03] It's not about that, as it turns out. So your question is going to just be sort of an unhelpful question. So we need to think very carefully about what kind of a book Revelation is.

Can you tell me what time it is? 10.20? Is that what you said? Okay. I just don't happen to have my time. Can you tell me when it's 10.45? That's when we're going to stop, at 10.45 for a break.

Okay? 10.45. Okay, gotcha. Okay, so let me just say very quickly what kind of a book Revelation is.

First of all, there's two answers that I'm going to give to this question about what kind of a book Revelation is. the first one is that Revelation is a letter.

Now that seems rather prosaic when you think about all the stuff that's in the book. But it's very important to understand that this is the basic starting point, that Revelation is a letter.

[42 : 10] It's clearly a letter because it has all the signs, the literary signposts that indicate that this was written by somebody who had a relationship with some other people and he wrote them these instructions at a particular time and place.

So it's got the greeting that we associate with letter writing in the ancient world. In the ancient Greek world there are standard formats that are used to introduce letters and to conclude letters.

And Revelation has those signposts even though they're slightly adjusted in some ways. But it's still the case that Revelation is a letter. So for example John says at the beginning he says John to the seven churches in Asia grace to you and peace.

That is a letter of beginning. And it's familiar to us from the way Paul opens his letters as well. He says he uses the same kind of structure. And even though John expands this section quite significantly it doesn't overturn the fact that it's a letter.

and the book closes like a letter as well. So here's what's significant about that. Is that whenever you read a letter there are certain things that are entailed in coming to understand that are required if we're going to understand a letter.

[43 : 36] Most significantly if you want to understand it's what kind of information we need to understand the letter of Paul's or the letter to the Hebrews. Well we need to know something about who wrote the letter.

We need to know something about the people to whom he wrote it. And significantly we need to know something about the circumstances that led to the writing of the letter. Because usually you're going to understand the letter in the context of the circumstances that led to its writing.

Yes, if you think about the letters that you write or the letters that you receive, these are all kind of taken for granted. Imagine you picked up someone else's letter. Someone, your kid's letter was found lying around the house.

I wonder who he's writing, who wrote to him. You really want to know, who is this person? It would be very snoop of you to do this, but you would look to see who wrote it, and then you might want to see, well, what kind of relationship is involved this letter that I see before me, and what might have generated the letter, what's going on.

Those are the kinds of things that we might have in mind. So, when we want to anchor our understanding of the book of Revelation, when we understand that it's a letter, it gives us at least this framing, that it tells us that we need to understand this book in a certain context, in the context of an author, the context of recipients, and context of certain circumstances, that it's rooted in a particular time and place.

[45 : 15] It's not to say that Revelation only speaks to people in that time and place, but it can't not speak to the people in that time and place. So, one of the exegetical principles that can guide us is to say that whatever meaning we come to understand Revelation have, however we come to see it speaking to us, surely we need to be able to imagine that it could have meant something like this to those first people who read it as well, because it must have meant something to the people for whom it was first written, don't you think?

That's a kind of a principle that I have in my mind, that I don't want to kind of develop a sense of the meaning of this book that could not possibly have pertained in the first century, because it was written for them initially, and their sense of its meaning and usefulness and value is the reason they copied it and copied it and made sure that it survived down through the centuries.

There are many, many texts from the ancient world, even texts written by apostles that didn't make it down to our day. There's evidence in the New Testament that Paul, for example, wrote other letters to the Corinthians that never made it.

down to us. So just because an apostle wrote it doesn't mean it was useful. Not all of his Romans were inspired. So how does a community, why do they decide to preserve a particular text?

Well, I would suggest that one of the reasons they choose to preserve a particular text is because they have a clear sense in the reading and the use of this text that it speaks to them from God, that it speaks to something valuable, that it is relevant and there is a powerful word of the spirit to them in it.

[47 : 06] So when we come to read the book now, it's helpful for us to anchor our understanding in what must have been their understanding so long ago. That will help us to protect against certain kinds of readings that are completely kind of unrealistic in relation to the past.

so if for example you believe that the locusts that come out of the ground in chapter 9 are helicopter gunships, I would say that's an example of a reading that doesn't fit with what those first people could possibly have thought.

Helicopter gunships wouldn't have been that helpful to the first readers. The thing that would have been helpful is if it really was locusts that he saw, because they had locusts in the first century.

And there's deep theological and thematic significance to locusts already in the Bible. So what the meaning of the locusts is, is already accessible to people in the Old Testament, to people in the first century time.

It makes much more sense to spend our effort trying to understand what is the meaning of locusts, than to imagine that he didn't see locusts, but he saw something completely different. So that's kind of what I'm trying to say about the value in understanding that it's a letter, that it's rooted in a particular time and place, and that our understanding of its meaning must also be rooted in a particular time and place, without leaving the book in the past.

[48 : 37] We never want to leave it in the past. It speaks to us because it is a word of prophecy. It is the word that comes to us as the word of the Lord, and yet it came to them first, and to us second.

All right, the next aspect of understanding that we are dealing with a letter is that we want to think about the recipients.

Well, let me say, sorry, I missed a bit about the author. So we're going to, we need to understand a little bit about who the author is, and I'm not going to spend a great deal of time on this, other than to say that he calls himself John.

That's good. We know his name's John, and that he refers to himself as a prophet. His name is John, a few passages on that, and John is a Christian prophet.

He, the book is called a book of prophecy, the angel refers to him as one of the prophets. In a place like St. John's, Vancouver, it might be the desire to really delve into who St.

[49 : 50] John is. So one of the questions is, is this the same St. John? Is this John from the Gospels? Is this the disciple of John? Well, I don't know.

It might be, but it might not be. And this is kind of one of the debated things in New Testament scholarship and so on. The interesting thing about this John is that he doesn't actually call himself a disciple of Jesus in the sense of being one of the original apostles.

He only refers to himself as a prophet. So it's a kind of an open question. If this was the same person who traveled around with Jesus and so on, there'd be a number of knock-on issues that we'd have to deal with.

One would be we would have to imagine in our mind that he's traveled from Palestine, Judea, and so on, and he's made his way out to the island of Patmos and Ephesus and so on.

It's not impossible, of course. Paul did it, so we'd have to factor that in. We would also then have to think about when we think about the question of the date of the book, when was it written, we'd have to factor in the age of this character, if he's the same person.

[51 : 14] And certainly in the early church, those questions were answered, and there are traditional stories about John coming with Mary to Ephesus and having a ministry there and then being exiled to the island of Patmos and so on.

So it could be the disciple, John. that it might not be.

Interestingly, the gospel of John, which is anonymous, doesn't have John's name in it at all. There is a person called the beloved disciple, but he's never named.

And then there's the letters of John in the New Testament, which also are anonymous, but they're attached to somebody called the elder. So you've got, in the synoptic gospels, you've got a disciple called John, who's the son of Zebedee.

In the fourth gospel, you've got a beloved disciple who's never named John, but we think it's John, because John's an important person who's not there by name. And then we've got the letters of John, which are written by somebody called the elder, never named John, but we've kind of, down through the ages, we've attached these people to each other.

[52 : 31] And then we've got the book of Revelation, that actually is written by someone called John, finally. Anyway, Bruce, he was a little of that. Okay, now the recipients of the book of Revelation are members of these communities in Western Asia Minor.

Okay, so there are seven communities that are presumably within the kind of pastoral network of John, that he has been connected to them over a period of time, he knows them, he knows the circumstances, and perhaps he's a kind of wandering creature, like the Apostle Paul had been in this area as well.

So, whether it's the Apostle John or some other person by the same name, we can imagine this is the sphere of his ministry, and these towns are all within walking distance, if you don't mind walking quite a long way, over quite rough terrain, and so on.

So, these are real people living at a real time in history, and they've got presumably a long-standing relationship with John, who is a kind of pastor, a local prophet, who speaks to them, and they are familiar with him.

Now, another important aspect of understanding that Revelation is a letter, is to think about, okay, what were the circumstances that were a part of this whole scene?

[53 : 59] Of course, the immediate circumstance that we have in mind is the actual visionary encounter, that Christ encounters John on the island of Patmos. But what are the other circumstances?

What's the broader situation that John is involved in? Now, here are these, this is another one of those areas, as you know, if you've done any New Testament study, that it's difficult to place individual books in a particular moment in history.

But in the case of Revelation, we can get a broad sense that Revelation was written towards the end of the first century, at a time when there is increasing concern about the relationship between the church, this growing Christian, these growing Christian communities, and the power of Rome.

There's a growing concern about how is Rome going to react to this emerging religion, to this new faith that is growing up in its empire. So there's a sense of nervousness about the power relation between this small little community and this overwhelming, huge, dominant military force of Rome.

Not just a military force, a cultural force, an economic force, a culture-shaping force. Now, the most widely accepted era is that of the emperor Domitian.

[55 : 25] Domitian is the one on the left. That head is what remains of a huge statue of Domitian, whose reign was in the last two decades of the first century, that was found in the city of Ephesus.

So one of the cities that is mentioned in the book of Revelation, that statue would have been in a temple devoted to the veneration of the emperor and the imperial family.

So this is an example of what's called the imperial cult. Imperial cult was a system of state-sponsored religion, not just state-sponsored religion, but state-focused religion, where the ruling family, the ruling class, are elevated to the level of deity of one kind or another.

Now, the actual examples of the imperial cult varied from place to place throughout the Roman Empire. Different parts of the Roman Empire were more devoted to the imperial cult than others.

Interestingly, the imperial cult was not as dominant in Rome itself, because in Rome itself, everybody knew these guys were gods. Because, you know, they saw them growing up around here, and these are the bad things they did to each other, and so on.

[56 : 50] But as you go out into the hinterland, into the empire, as it were, and also into areas where the veneration of rulers as divine has been culturally the norm for centuries, whether it was in Egypt or in Persia, and places influenced by Egypt and Persia, there's a strong acceptance already that the ruler has got connections to the divine.

And so the Roman Empire took advantage of that and said, yes, it's true, the emperors really are divine, and now we're it. And it's not that this was necessarily simply imposed from the outside, but that local magistrates, town councils, trade guilds, and other people who are committed to the flourishing of their own towns within the Roman Empire would fall over themselves to show that they were in fact loyal to Rome and wanted to be a part of Rome's economic system, wanted to benefit from the protection that would come from Roman soldiers and from being part of the economy of the Roman Empire.

And so it's not just that Rome imposes the imperial cult, but that local rulers and magistrates and the local elites want their town to be seen to be loyal.

And so it's at the local level that you would find groups like the Christians who refuse to say that Caesar is Lord come into conflict with the people around them because it's the local people who don't want to have some other local group somehow messing up their connection to Rome because that would affect their ability to participate in the Roman network, in the Roman economy, in the possibility of flourishing.

salvation. Okay, so the imperial cult and its presence throughout this region is an important aspect of the circumstances in which the book of Revelation was written.

[58 : 54] And that will help us to understand some of the, some of the, what Revelation is pointing towards, when it points towards certain monsters and beasts and how they are interacting with the communities, when there's this warning about not taking the mark of the beast, when there's a warning that if you don't go along with the beast, you won't be able to participate in the economy of the beast.

It makes sense to think about that in the context of the Roman Empire and of the economy of the ancient world and of these towns trying to participate in what Rome has to offer and the tension that that would create for local communities of Christians who will not under any circumstances say, Caesar is Lord.

In fact, one of the things that Domitian was known to have insisted on was that the people around him would refer to him as Dominus et Deus, Lord and God.

You can just imagine that tension that that creates if you've got a supreme leader with a network of overwhelming power who dominates not just military but economic aspects of life and shapes the culture, whose persona is such that he expects people to call him Lord of God.

And then you put all kinds of loyal people around, loyal to that, wanting to make the most of that, thinking hey, we could get rich if we call him Lord of God. Then what it means to resist that? What it means to say, no, that's not us.

[60 : 26] We're not a part of that. How would that affect your ability to thrive in that town? That's the kind of scene that we need to have in our minds when you think about the circumstances in which revelation was written.

All right, so then all of that needs to be brought to bear when we think about the fact that this is a kind of letter. It was written to people who are going through real circumstances, they're living in the real world, and they've got problems.

Okay. What's the time? Four more minutes. Four more minutes. All right. So, state hostility is the thing there. Here's the second answer that we're going to start on now and we'll carry on after our coffee break.

Is this, that of course, we can recognize right away that revelation, while it might be a letter of some kind, is not like any letter any of us have ever written. So, of course, it's not just a letter.

There must be more to it than that. And what we can say about this is that revelation is an example of a kind of literary form in the ancient world, in the ancient Jewish world, that is called an apocalypse.

[61 : 40] Now, the word apocalypse comes from the book of Revelation itself. There's a little bit of circular arguing that goes on here. But the fact of the matter is, is that Revelation is not the only example of this kind of a book in the ancient Jewish world.

Remember that the first Christians were all Jews. the author of the book of Revelation is likely a Jewish Christian. And this text fits in with other texts similar to this from the Jewish world.

Apocalypse is the word that I mentioned before, the Greek word that means revelation. And when we use that as a reference to a kind of literature, we mean a kind of literature that describes a heavenly vision and that uses symbolic and metaphorical language to describe what happens.

So, there are examples of early apocalypses in the Old Testament. Can you give me an example of a book that seems like the book of Revelation was called similarities to Revelation in the Old Testament?

Okay, Daniel is an example, probably the earliest example, of a kind of text that is in this genre that's along these lines. And if you go, for example, to Daniel chapter 7, and you see that there's some very interesting similarities.

[63 : 08] You've got a prophet who has a dream or a spiritual experience. In the dream, he sees monsters coming up from the sea.

And then there's a conflict between the monsters and the saints. Eventually, the monsters are overthrown. And then there's another scene in which there is a throne.

And there is worship going on around the throne. There is an agent who comes on the clouds of heaven. He's called one like the Son of Man. And so, you've got this interesting heavenly scene that also includes monsters coming and going and so on.

And so it's strikingly similar to the kinds of things that we have in the book of Revelation. Another example that kind of has some of these features as well is the book of Ezekiel.

In the book of Ezekiel, we've got a throne scene. A throne that is surrounded by heavenly worship. We'll look at this in a little while. The one who's on the throne has got a scroll in his hand.

[64 : 11] He gives the scroll to the prophet, and the prophet is told to prophesy. So that's to say that Revelation would have been familiar in its feel in the kind of general approach that you find that people who are steeped in the Old Testament, they would have had a certain familiarity with the book, with a book like Revelation.

So for us, it might seem completely strange and odd. But for the readers of the Old Testament, it would not have been so completely strange and odd.

Now, it would still be a bit strange and odd. But there would have been a sense of familiarity. Like, oh, we've been here before. Right? We've been in a scene like this before.

And it's important for us to notice that those other books will actually help us to understand this book. That there will be a very important two-way street in understanding the book of Revelation.

That in order to understand Revelation, we have to understand what's being drawn on from the book of Daniel. How it reuses and reshapes scenes from the book of Ezekiel.

[65 : 24] How it fashions scenarios that we are already familiar with from the book of Isaiah and the book of Zechariah and from the Psalms.

So, Revelation is deeply rooted in a way of speaking that has already been introduced to us in the Old Testament. And then, in the gap, in the historic gap, between the end of the Old Testament and the beginning of the New Testament, there are other texts, other Jewish texts, that also fit into this mode.

And sometimes it's valuable to notice what some of those books said and how they express themselves. Whether it's books like For Ezra or the book of Enoch or whatnot.

Interesting intertestamental Jewish texts that also help us to understand how Revelation speaks to us. Okay, so Revelation is an apocalypse. It's a kind of book that was familiar in the Jewish world.

And our understanding of Revelation should be related to how we understand that whole set of texts as a group. Because they are, they belong to the same literary genre.

[66 : 39] And we can learn things about Revelation from those other texts. Okay, I think it's coffee time. We're going to take a coffee break for precisely 14 minutes.

It was 15, but 14 minutes of Revelation. Okay. great to be back with you again.

Welcome back. It's been nice to chat with some of you over the break and to hear just questions and engage in conversations. Great. Hopefully we can do that again at lunchtime.

So, how are you all doing? You okay? Yes. So far, they're good? We'll just grind this out here for a little bit longer. I didn't. My wife actually showed up for a few minutes there.

Is she still here in the room? Oh, there she is. Here's my wife over there, Rana. Hello. Okay. I didn't know she just came for coffee at that. Okay, so we're talking about the fact that Revelation is a particular kind of book that would have been more familiar to Jewish readers in the ancient world than necessarily to us.

[67 : 51] I want to talk just about a couple of the characteristics of this kind of a book. And one of the most obvious ones, of course, is that not only does it describe typically a vision of some kind, often in which the seer or the prophet is taken up into the heavenly realm and sees things that can't long be seen, but the point is this, that those books are portraying something in a way that is a kind of, it's heavily dependent on symbolic language, metaphorical language, a kind of poetic language.

Without writing in poetry, it uses the language that we would associate with highly figurative language. Like in the Psalms, for example, the Psalms are poems, and so we're familiar with the depiction of God in ways that are poetic.

So in the Psalms, for example, we might say the Lord is my shepherd. Now that's an easy enough kind of a metaphor when you think of God as a shepherd.

But the Old Testament also talks about God gathering people under his wings. That's what, oh, God's a bird. And that is an image of God in the Old Testament, that God is able to draw his people, his chicks underneath his, under his wings.

And we don't sort of get troubled by that because we know it's a poem, and poetry speaks to us in particular ways. This is metaphorical language. There's similes and so on. The thing that we need to understand is that apocalyptic literature also uses that kind of language.

[69 : 31] So, for example, it talks about Christ, the figure. We can understand quite clearly that it is Christ that speaks of him as a lamb. We aren't too troubled by that.

We think, oh, I can figure out what a lamb is, especially in the context of the Old Testament, the sacrificial system, the Passover lamb, and so on. We say, aha, I know what that's pointing to.

The thing for us to keep in mind is that this is a vision in which John sees things. He sees a lamb, right? Because he thought he was going to see a lion, but then he saw a lamb. But notice this.

The lamb in the book of Revelation is not your ordinary lamb. It's got seven eyes and seven horns. So when you're thinking about the lamb in the book of Revelation, don't think about a nice little sweet, you know, Mary had a little lamb kind of a lamb.

But so entering into the scene involves picturing the seven-eyed lamb. So there's something slightly off-putting about that.

[70 : 35] Right? So this is another example of a revelation drawing you in and then keeping you out. And the lamb doesn't act exactly the way that a lamb ought to act. In chapter six, there is a scene in which the people of the world are cringing in fear and hiding away in the rocks of the ground saying, who will save us from the wrath of the lamb?

What in the world is the wrath of a lamb? Have you ever seen a wrathful lamb? How dangerous would that be? Bah! Oh! But this is clearly not that kind of an unfrightening lamb.

It's clearly a scary lamb. In what way? So there's all of these images that we need to kind of grapple with. But they're pictorial images and you can't just take them literally.

It's not like you say, okay, now to be an orthodox Christian, we have to understand that Jesus was, you know, transformed into a lamb in the sky. So once we've understood that, that we're dealing with picture language and a pictorial scene, then we need to ask ourselves, well, now, how are we going to be consistent in our understanding of the scene?

We can't pick and choose and say, okay, here we've got the lamb and treat it like, okay, that's a symbolic figure. The lamb is over against the dragon and the dragon is a literal dragon. Satan really has seven heads and so on.

[71 : 51] It's like, no, if the one's a picture, the other's a picture. And then, what about the things that happen? Like there's fire falling from the sky, there's locusts coming up from the ground, and the waters turning to blood, and the stars are falling, and the moon is turning to take your color.

All of a sudden, now that's literal, is it? All of a sudden, we switch. We pick and choose which bits of this are clearly going to be picture language, poetry, we're going to understand them to be speaking to us in the way that a poem speaks to us, but then we're going to take certain other parts of it as predicted in a straightforward, literalistic way.

So, this is one of the challenges we have, is to form a way of approaching the book and coming to it to understand that it is a whole, it's a whole piece. It is a work of literary art.

It's like coming to a beautiful painting. You stand before a painting in a gallery, and you ask yourself, you might be inspired by this, you might be moved by it, and someone says, well, what do you see? What does it mean?

What does the picture mean? Does the picture speak to you? Of course it does. Pictures, paintings, art, they touch us deeply. What does it mean? That's the challenge that we have when we come to the book of Revelation.

[73 : 01] Now, it isn't all picture, there are words as well, and that's why it's important to notice the things that are said, to listen, to see the interaction between the visual and the auditory and so on. But never to forget that we have come to a kind of literary work of art that speaks to us in ways that are similar to how a poem speaks to us, so that we don't slip into the bad habit of always trying to say, well, what does this mean in a literal way?

So when I am in the classroom, I try to draw a picture on the board. It's a really bad kind of picture, stick figure version of the book of Revelation, in which I try to show that John is on the island of Patmos, and he's having a vision.

So imagine a big sort of bubble that comes out here, a thought bubble, like in a cartoon, thought bubble that comes out of his head, and there it is above him. That thought bubble is depicting a story world that is being shown to John.

That story world is its own contained story. It's its own scene. It isn't a literal vision of heaven. It is a story that's unfolding for us, that's inviting us to think about things that are not seen.

He's seeing something that's not seeable. He's being shown a true account, a true account of what is going on in the world, what's going on in history, what's going on behind the scenes.

[74 : 28] He's being given a true vision of the powers and dominions and authorities in the heavenly realm. But it's a picture of those things.

It's not a photographic snapshot of those things. So it's a poem. It is an apocalyptic vision that is trying to help us to understand things that without the help of this vision, we were not able to understand.

Okay? So that's something we ought to keep in mind on the back of our heads as we grapple with how does Revelation speak to us, so that we don't slip into the kind of tendency to always default to a literal understanding of what's being said whenever it's not sort of obviously a picture.

In fact, it's always a picture. The picture of God on the throne, for example, is a picture. Because God doesn't sit on things. God doesn't have a body, except in the person of Jesus Christ.

But the one on the throne is a picture of God's sovereignty, God's awe, God's omnipotence, his power over all things. Right?

[75 : 38] Does God actually have the throne? Does God sit on the throne? And you look at me and think, this guy's really bugging me. Okay?

Just think about that. Right? Is Jesus really a seven-eyed? And when I say really, I say, well, of course, Jesus is really a seven-eyed. He is the seven-eyed lamb in that scene. That is Jesus.

It's true. It's real. But is he literally a seven-eyed lamb? Okay? There's something that you kind of play with in your mind to think about how that's going to work out.

Now, one of the ways that Revelation speaks to us is by using numbers in interesting ways. Okay? There's lots of things that are enumerated for us. Things are counted out.

We're told how many of this and that there are. And numbers have got certain kinds of value that go beyond simply saying, you know, just kind of counting how many people there are. You know, if we were interested in data and stats, we might say, how many people do we have in this room?

[76 : 37] It just turns out that we have 144. Isn't that amazing? Actually, I think we actually do have about that many. How many people do we have in the room?

40-ish. Ish. Okay, it wouldn't be interesting to the book of Revelation to know that there were 142 people in the room.

That's not interesting. What is interesting is if there were 144, or to say that there are 144, not because it's lying about the number of people, but because 144 is a meaningful number.

Okay? The numbers have got meanings, and they can convey significant insights that go beyond simply data. We're kind of a data-driven society.

But apocalyptic uses numbers symbolically. So you can see that certain numbers in Revelation are clearly important, like the number seven. Lots of things are described for us as being there.

[77 : 34] There's seven of them. There are seven lampstands that represent the seven churches. There are seven stars in the hand of Christ. There are, interestingly, seven spirits of God before the throne.

There are seven seals on the scroll and so on. So seven is clearly a number of significance, not just to kind of count them in a data kind of way, but there's a meaning to the number seven.

And interestingly, the author has carefully constructed this book so that seven is actually built into kind of a deeper layer of the book of Revelation as well, so that if you count the number of times, that God is called the Lord God Almighty, we find that that title for God is used seven times.

Or the word, the name Jesus, occurs 14 times. And the word lamp occurs 28 times. All multiples of seven.

Now, if this happened once or twice, you might say, oh, that's an interesting coincidence. But this is too regular and too thoroughgoing for it to be other than a deliberate compositional strategy.

[78 : 46] The author has written the book in this way so that he would know something important. Numbers are being used in this kind of symbolic way.

Now, what might be the significance, for example, of the number seven? Why is seven such a big deal? Somebody tell me? Okay, completeness.

Are we familiar with that? In the ancient world and in Scripture, seven is associated with completeness. So in the Bible, of course, it goes back to the story of creation, that creation is completed in seven days.

But that in itself is part of the culture in some ways. There are lots of examples of seven being significant in the ancient world. The idea that there were seven planets.

They hadn't seen all the planets. They just saw seven of them, and the rest was something else. And the idea of seven wonders of the world and so on. So seven was a number of completeness.

[79 : 44] So without having to belabor how important seven is, it's just there as an aspect of how Revelation speaks. It's just when it wants to say that this picture is complete, that it's all there, that it's perfect, that there's nothing lacking, it uses the number seven.

Another example of a number being used in a significant way is the number 12. And the number 12 would bring up what kinds of associations in your mind? Okay, 12 disciples.

Somebody say it. What else? 12 tribes. Okay, so how would the 12 tribes and the 12 disciples be related to each other in a kind of symbolic way or a kind of thematic way?

What do they both have in common? Right. So the number 12 is a number associated with the people of God. The people of God in the Old Testament who derived from the patriarchs, who understood that the patriarchs themselves, there were 12 of them.

That was how the people of God were constituted. And when Christ comes to reconstitute the people of God as the people of the new covenant, he symbolically chooses 12 people.

[80 : 54] He could have chose 14. There were others kicking around who maybe were better than the 12 he had, but the number 12 was important. There's symbolic, there's something symbolic about 12. Right?

And so Revelation uses the number 12 in the same way. So 12 is associated with images that refer to the people of God. There are, and then also multiples of 12.

Right? So there are 144,000 people in one scene who are the followers of the Lamb. The city, the city of Jerusalem, the new Jerusalem, in the final stages of the book, the dimensions of the city are 12s and multiples of 12.

144 cubits of this, 12 gates of that, 12 foundation stones, and so on. Right? So 12 is a way of talking about things that are related to the people of God.

Okay? So that's something to keep in mind. When you come across a number, it isn't simply predicting some specific data type thing.

[82 : 00] There's a symbolic meaning to it that's asking us to look for a deeper meaning. And that applies whether you're talking about the number 666, or 1260 days, or a time, times, and half a time.

These numbers are all, interestingly, significant. without being sort of literal data-like enumerations of specific things.

Before we need to come back. Okay? So, let me give you a little example of how Revelation uses numbers.

First of all, I first want to talk about the Old Testament, then I'm going to come back to how it all fits together. The other thing, of course, that Apocalypse does is that it lives in the world of the Old Testament.

Right? So that's something for us to notice, is that the kind of, the symbolic world of Revelation is closely connected to the symbolic world of the Bible.

[83 : 09] Okay? So, the kinds of things that we've been talking about, like a lamb that is slaughtered, that is something whose meaning is made clear to us in relation to the Bible.

Right? It's not just a free-floating picture that we can give any meaning we want. It's a meaning that makes sense to readers of the Bible. Okay? And that applies over and over again.

There are plagues that are being poured out on the earth. Well, plagues are a biblical theme. There are burning mountains. Burning mountains, surprisingly enough, that's a theme from the prophets.

Stars falling from the sky is a theme from the Old Testament. And on and on we can go. The symbolic world, the poetry of the book of Revelation draws from the poetic language and the history and the stories of the Old Testament.

So, in order to understand how this language works and how it comes together to create the scene that we had before us, we need always to be thinking about how this takes us back into the Old Testament.

[84 : 26] Now, one of the very significant and interesting things about this is that when Revelation uses the Old Testament, it never uses it in a straightforward, one-to-one kind of a way.

So, interestingly, Revelation never actually quotes the Old Testament. You know, like Paul does sometimes, and other parts of the Bible do, they say, this fulfills that. When we have a specific Old Testament quotation and there's a major reflection on it or a statement of fulfillment.

In the book of Revelation, there aren't any direct quotations, and yet the Bible is there all the time. We're always dealing with scenes and statements and scenarios that are echoes of the Bible.

So, this is something to keep in mind when you read Revelation. If you ever notice that, ah, I think I've heard something like this before, you say, this reminds me of the opening chapters of the book of Ezekiel.

That's because it's supposed to remind you of that. It's there on purpose. And yet, when you look at, say, the scene in Revelation chapter 4, and you compare that to the scene in Ezekiel chapter 1, you'll find that there are strangely different from each other.

[85 : 38] They're the same. They're the same world. They seem to be drawing us into the same scenario, but they're different. There are details that are not the same. So, Revelation is never just a replay of the Old Testament.

It seems like a retelling of the Old Testament. It's like the streams or the strands of the Old Testament have been woven together in a new way so that while you feel like you're in a scene that's connected to the Old Testament, it's not just that scene again.

It's somehow different. There's movement. It's somehow taken on a new significance or there's a new feeling to it. There's a new character to what you're encountering.

All right? So, even the picture of the Passover lamb, which is clearly an important scene from the Old Testament, when you encounter Christ as the Passover lamb, he is the lamb, but he's also not the lamb. He's the lamb that can be described as a lion.

Well, that's a big transformation of the image of the lamb. So, we need to think about also how the scenes from the Old Testament are being transformed and how these different threads from the Old Testament are being woven together into a new tapestry, a new picture that is the culmination of the story of the Bible.

[86 : 55] All right? So, that's one of the things that makes Revelation such an intellectual challenge, is that there's always something new to look at, some new echo to follow down. And I would strongly recommend that when you read the book of Revelation and you do it with the kind of Bible that's got, you know, the center column of cross-references or something like that, and, you know, if you're doing a Bible study on Revelation, to look at the cross-references to the Old Testament and spend some time noticing how the scene that you're looking at kind of draws on a scene from the Old Testament and the way that it transforms that scene, how it's different and the same.

And what you'll find in many cases is that there's actually scenes from different parts of the Old Testament coming together, being spliced together in a new way. And so that will just add to your sense of the beauty of the book, the complexity of the book, and the wonder of how it all comes together in an amazing way.

Now, let me just give a little example of how this works out in practice. One of the tricky bits about Revelation, one of the many difficult scenes, is the fact that in chapter 5, you've got a number of references to the presence of the seven spirits of God.

Okay? So there's a number of places where we're told about these seven spirits. Let me just take us through. How do we...

This is like a little working example of how do we understand the seven spirits of God. So if you go to chapter 5, verse 6, it describes the...

[88 : 40] Where's the first reference to the seven spirits? Verse 6, it says, I saw a lamb, he was looking as if he had been slain, he was standing in the center of the throne encircled by four living creatures and the elders.

The lamb had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. See, there's an example of seven spirits of God. Now, what does it mean to talk about God having seven spirits?

So, here, in order to understand the seven spirits, we are taken back into the Old Testament, into the book of Zechariah, for example.

So, in the fourth chapter of Zechariah, the ancient prophet tells us about the vision that he had in which he sees a little...

He's taken into the temple. He's taken into a scene that's... He's like he's in the old Israelite temple or the tabernacle. And, he sees there the seven branched lampstand.

[89 : 44] Right? The seven branches of the lampstand, the menorah. You're familiar with that part of Jewish iconography and furniture, as it were. So, in his vision in Zechariah, the prophet asks the angelic guide for the meaning of what he has seen.

He sees the seven branched lampstand. And, this is the answer that he gets. He says, this is the word of the Lord, not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord.

Okay, so, here's a scene in which the prophet is told, he sees the picture of the seven branched candlestick, and the statement that he's given is that God is going to bring about his will, his purpose, not by power, not by might, but by my spirit.

So, there's an example of the spirit of God being associated with a sevenfold flame. And, that's the kind of scene that we have here in the book of Revelation as well, that we have the seven spirits of God, which are also the seven flames standing before the presence of God.

God. So, God's spirit is being represented by a sevenfold flame. So, in verse 5 of Revelation chapter 5, it says, coming from the throne are flashes of lightning and rumblings and peals of thunder, and in front of the throne burn seven flaming torches, which are the seven spirits of God.

[91 : 23] Seven flaming torches, which are the seven spirits of God. then the flaming torches in Revelation correspond to the seven lamps in Zechariah's vision, which in turn corresponds to the seven-branch lampstand in the Israelite tabernacle, which we're told in the book of Exodus stood before the Lord.

Okay? I don't want to get overly complex about this, but this is a way of showing how this image of the seven-fold flame, which represents the spirit of God, takes us back into the deep recesses of the Old Testament, right into the innermost part of the tabernacle, and gets us thinking about things that have been there all along.

And now when John comes into the presence of God, there's seven flames in front of God's presence. It's like this is a biblical thing, but not quite the same as we saw it, but it's clearly connected.

Right? So in order to understand why is God's spirit being represented as a seven-fold flame, well, we have to think about that tabernacle scene. And it reminds us then that what we have come into in the scene in Revelation chapter 4 is nothing other than the Holy of Holies itself.

Not the representative model Holy of Holies, which was the Israelite tabernacle, but that which the Israelite tabernacle was referring to all along, which is the true Holy of Holies in the presence of God.

[92 : 52] Right? So following these references back into the Old Testament takes you on a wonderland journey into the deep parts of the Bible.

And good luck getting back from there. That's the challenge, right? When you go into the Old Testament, you find yourself deeply immersed in biblical theology, a deep understanding of how the ancient Israelites understood their relationship to God, and so on.

Now, a little bit later on, the angelic guide explains the meaning of what he has seen, and so, and helps us to understand deeper significance of what's going on.

So, in Zechariah's vision again, the angel says to the prophet, these seven flames that you're looking at are the eyes of the Lord, which range throughout the whole earth.

Okay, so now, the seven-branch candlestick, which has been already associated with the Spirit of God, is now explicitly described as being connected to the eyes of the Lord, which range throughout the whole earth.

[94 : 07] God's all-seeing presence is in the world, and we've called now that the seven-branch candlestick in Zechariah is connected to what makes us think of the eyes of the Lord.

Chronicles tells us that the eyes of the Lord range throughout the earth, seeking to strengthen those who are faithful to him. The book of Psalms also refers to the eyes of the Lord.

The Lord looks down from heaven and sees all humankind, from where he sits in throne he watches all the inhabitants of the earth, he who fashions the hearts of them all and observes all their deeds.

A king is not saved by his great army, a warrior is not delivered by his great strength, the war horse is a vain hope for victory, and by its great might he cannot save. Truly, the eye of the Lord is on those who fear him, on those who hope in his steadfast love to deliver their soul from death and to keep them alive and famine.

There's lots of examples like that. The eye of the Lord is on those who are faithful. The eye of the Lord seeks to strengthen those who belong to him, and so on. Now, we've already noted that in the book of Revelation, the lamb has got seven eyes.

[95 : 42] And so there's a connection then between the spirit of God, which are the eyes of the Lord, which range throughout the whole earth, and the lamb. And so then that brings us to this statement in chapter 5, verse 6 of Revelation, which says that he saw a lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth.

So, folks, we could do this over and over again, but there is this ongoing connection and interactivity between the scenes that are there. So, there's one little line.

This seven-fold spirit of God can take you back and back and back, and it'll take you back to another part of the book of Revelation as well. There's interplay and interconnectivity, there's beauty, and there's just this kind of complexity that is kind of enthralling.

But it all comes together to form a tapestry, a picture. Now, remember that if you're looking at a tapestry, and you think of, you know, a picture made of threads, is that you don't see it best by being right up to it.

You have to step back from it and see it all. And you may not necessarily understand every single thread or the choice of every single color and hue, but as a whole, you can see how it comes together.

[97 : 04] So, this is a challenge to each one of us, to try to go into the deep study of Scripture, to see how the Old Testament informs and colors each part of the book of Revelation, and then without necessarily being able to perfectly explain it all, step back and have an ever-deepening sense of what Revelation is saying to us.

So, in this case, the picture of the seven spirits of God is enhancing our sense that we have come into the very presence of God in the Holy of Holies, and our sense that God's eyes are on the faithful, that he seeks always to strengthen those who are true to him, and that that strengthening happens primarily and perhaps principally through Christ himself, because the Lamb has seven eyes, the seven eyes which are the Spirit of God, which reign throughout the whole earth.

So, he can't separate the Spirit of God from the Son of God. But notice how there's a Trinitarian connection in all of that as well. This is God's own presence in the world manifest through the Spirit and through the Lamb.

We could go on and on like that, but that's where we need to see how the Scriptures work in the book of Revelation, not just in a sense of this fulfills that.

That's only one piece of how Revelation draws on the Old Testament. It's drawing on the Old Testament to create this beautiful picture, the scene that is being played out before us.

[98 : 42] And so, the more deeply enriched our understanding of the picture is, the better our understanding will be of how Revelation is speaking to us. Okay.

Alright? So, Revelation is a kind of an apocalypse and it draws on symbolic, it uses symbolic language, and it's deeply connected to the language of the Old Testament.

Now, just to kind of wrap up this whole section of things, I want us to remember that when a book does this kind of an epic like we have here, this is an epic story, a grand narrative, it's cosmic in its scale, and in its scope, it's trying to do something to us.

This book, this piece of art, is not intended just to be kind of reflected on from a distance in an objective way. It's trying to draw us in and to change us.

It's trying to change the way we think about what's really real. And one of the challenges that John has in the first century is that he's writing to people who are in danger of being overawed by their surroundings.

[99 : 55] They're surrounded by the images and the evidence of imperial power. They're surrounded by within a vast empire that seems to be invincible, that has been around for hundreds of years already, and as we know from history, it's going to be around for hundreds of more years.

So in that kind of a situation, the people might easily fall into the trap of thinking, what's the point of resisting this? This is overwhelming. This can't be stood up against.

The only way that these people can be rescued from simply being drawn into Rome's way of seeing the world is to give them another way of thinking about what's real, another way of thinking about what's true.

So what Revelation is trying to do is try to draw back the curtain, as it were, so that these readers can see what the drama really is. Where does Rome, where do the powers of this world, where do they really fit in the grand narrative of God's purposes?

So it's like when you go, and maybe this might not resonate with everyone in the room, but if you go to watch a work of science fiction, you are drawn into an alternative universe for a while.

[101 : 13] So I happen to be a bit of a Star Wars fan. You go to watch Star Wars. Anybody else here like Star Wars? The rest of you? No, okay, just take it. Don't worry about it. You're drawn into this universe, this cosmic scene in which there is this massive ongoing battle between the forces of good and evil.

There's the good guys and the bad guys. There's the empire. It's actually based on kind of an imperial scene, the Roman Empire. There's the empire, and there's the resistance.

There's this force that goes through all things. There's this small band of resistors who fight against the odds against Darth Vader, who's got a bad breathing problem, and so on. And against all the odds, this small band of resistance fighters find a way to overcome the superpower.

Now, when you're in that story, you get caught up in it, and it's an amazing thing. You feel uplifted and buoyed by the technology and the scenes and the apocalyptic kind of characteristic things that happen.

And when you're a young guy like I was when I first saw this movie, you walk out of the theater, and just for a while, you kind of imagine that your hands are so low, you know, is there, wow, wouldn't that be great?

[102 : 31] Well, there's a sense in which the Book of Revelation is doing something like that, except for this. It's telling us about this grand cosmic conflict. But what it wants us to realize is that this cosmic conflict isn't a story that's just being made up.

This is what's really real. And we really are being called to be that resistance group. We are really being called to face the facts of this overwhelming, unequal battle that we are a part of.

And it does depict the ultimate demise of the empire, and it does depict the ultimate conquest, the victory, the overcoming of the resistance.

But it also depicts the cost of what it's going to take to be those who belong to this resistance. resistance. So Revelation is trying to undermine the confidence that we have in the evidence of our own eyes, so that when we look at the society around us, when we see a secular world, an anti-God world, when we see forces of society and culture that are overwhelming, that seem to be completely invincible, that are never going to go away, we're never going to win this fight.

Revelation doesn't want us to give in to that. It wants us to understand there are other realities behind the scenes. Without creating a kind of false triumphalism, where we say, yeah, if we just hold on strong enough, we're going to kill them all.

[103:56] It doesn't work that way in the book of Revelation. It's not a book about triumphalism. It's a book about remaining faithful to the one who is depicted as a slaughtered lamb, to follow him wherever he goes.

He goes into unequal battle, and those who follow him, in fact, find that they are overcome by the forces of the dragon of the world, and yet ultimately come into the city of God in the end.

So we call, it's a call to faithfulness. It's a call to rethink and we see and we understand that the story that we are a part of, Revelation isn't just about depicting something or sort of predicting a specific series of future events.

It's about helping us to understand the story that we're in, who we are, who we belong to, and how it's going to work out in the end. And it does it by bringing us into this cosmic, epic scene.

Okay. You buy that? All right. I am now going to change scenes.

[105:05] I have to switch over here. Bye-bye. All right.

So, that was just a kind of intro to orient us to how we should approach the book of Revelation. Okay? Just, this is what Revelation is about, and this is how we should try to read the book.

And whatever details that we might grapple with, I suggest that we have to have this kind of orientation at the beginning. Okay? With me on all that?

So, one of the things that I would say, what are the implications of all of this then is this. That Revelation is not the kind of book that predicts in a detailed way any specific future sequence of events.

Now, of course you might say, well, it could also. But if Revelation does predict a future sequence of events, it does it in such a way that you would only know that after the events have already happened.

[106:25] It's a small, very good guide to the future. You know what I mean? Now, sometimes you can look back on things and say, well, isn't it amazing how the book of Revelation maybe captured this or that thing?

Maybe we will. In glory, one day, we'll look back and say, isn't it amazing how this all worked out? But what I'm urging us to understand is that Revelation is this work of literature that is deeply rooted in Scripture and that it isn't, in fact, a detailed prediction of the future.

Isn't it crystal ball? It doesn't tell us what's going to happen in a sequential way, even though it tells us he saw this and then he saw this and then he saw this other thing.

Because this is all a part of the vision world, that great thought bubble that he has in his head. It's describing the scene, the story that we are to understand is the true picture, the true understanding of what it means to be followers of the Lamb.

Okay, so now that's obviously a particular point of view that I am suggesting. Lots of people might disagree with that, but I would suggest that that's a much more helpful way to read the book of Revelation than to read it, say, for example, in the way that Hal Lindsey described the book in the late, sorry, in the 1970s.

[107:48] How many of you are familiar with the late great planet Earth? There was a book that was written in the 1970s that became a massive bestseller across the Western world really.

And it claimed to use the book of Revelation, another part of the Bible, to predict specific things that were going to happen in the future. It had to do with very much a reading of the Cold War scenario.

So in the Cold War world of North America in the 1970s, it was obvious to everybody that the USSR was the beast.

That was obvious to everybody. And then as time went on and the European Union was created, well, then you have to kind of factor that in. So then you have to put the European Union into it. And then somebody else said, well, if you look at this verse, if you look at that other verse, and you add this to that, it turns out that the world was going to end in 1988.

And there was a book that was written that said there are 88 reasons why the world's going to end in 1988. And of course, in 1989, lots of those books in the remainder section of every bookstore across that wall.

[108:58] And there were, I went to housing youth group and in church and so on, where there were these powerful popularizations of that way of reading the book of Revelation in the churches and so on.

One of the powerful popularizations was a movie called *The Thief in the Night*. Did any of you see the movie *The Thief in the Night*? Some of them? Some of you? It's an interesting, powerful kind of imagination of what would happen if you follow Hal Lindsey's way of looking at the world and you get to the rapture and a bunch of people are left behind.

It's a terrifying kind of scenario. There's people, you know, the church is whisked out of the world and other people are left behind. There's this Larry Norman song about I wish we'd all been ready.

Remember that? I have traumas from, you know, from that movie. So, you know, I was getting into a rave over there.

And then in the 90s, there was this very best-selling series of novels called *The Left Behind Series*.

[110:10] Twelve books in all, I think, and lots of spin-offs that, what was his name? Timothy LaHaye. That series of books, if you can believe it, sold more copies than all of the Harry Potter books.

So our culture has been inundated with a way of thinking about the book of Revelation that is this predictive kind of way of looking at things, which has never shown itself to have any validity.

And this is the point that I want to make, is that people who use the book of Revelation in this sort of predictive way about what's going to happen, you know, this is going to happen, Russia's going to do this, and then China's going to do this other thing, and then there's going to be a showdown between these other people and all of that.

That has been shown over and over and over again to not happen. So at some point it's just like, okay, it doesn't work. But the thing that's even more troubling about it in many ways is that it flattens the Bible.

So what I've been saying about all of these interconnections with the scriptures and the themes from the Old Testament and so on, all of that just gets jumped, it gets flattened out. It leads us to a kind of impoverished understanding of how the book of Revelation works.

[111 : 25] So that's my appeal to all of us, is to come to the book of Revelation in this enriched, biblically rooted way to understand that it's not trying to be a crystal ball for the future.

Okay. There's a little bit of a stump speech. So we've got, I think, a few minutes left here before lunchtime. Really, we're going to eat again?

So I want to jump into a few key scenes that will help us to think about how this plays out and to get a sense of how Revelation works as a whole.

Obviously, we're going to have to skip out bunches of the book of Revelation. But you always read my book. This is not really about the book. Okay.

So I want to take us to chapter four and chapter five. Okay. So once we get through the opening chapters of the book, and I don't want to all give you the impression that they're unimportant.

[112 : 24] They're very important. John is on the island of Patmos. He's told to write in a score. He's told to write down the things that he hears. And he's given messages for seven communities in Western Asia, Miami.

He does that in chapters two and three. So chapters two and three function as a kind of introduction to the book of Revelation as a whole. So many of the themes that are, that what Revelation is about are in chapters two and three.

But when we get to chapter four, we have moved beyond the kind of preface into the main vision. And it's important for us to understand this opening scene of John's vision because it sets everything in order for what comes after that.

All right. So in John chapter four, after that, he says, I looked and there before me was a door standing open in heaven. Right? So John is having a vision and he sees the door that's standing open.

And the voice I had first heard speaking to me like a trumpet said, come up here and I will show you what must take place after this. And once I was in the spirit and there before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it.

[113 : 42] Now that is the core vision of the whole book of Revelation. Okay. So that's the anchoring scene. All of the other things that we're going to encounter and that will kind of go before our eyes and vision of the vision and scene of the scene are never disconnected from this central vision in the book of Revelation.

If you think of the whole book as a kind of wheel, this scene is the hub and everything else radiates out from it as spokes from that central point. Right?

So we said at the beginning that Revelation is essentially a book about worship. And the one we are called to worship is this one who is sitting on the throne.

Okay? So notice how this scene is itself a very biblical scene. There are many examples of other prophets and other visionaries who also encountered the throne of God.

One of the earliest passages in the Bible that refers to the throne of God is from 1 Kings chapter 22, where the prophet Micah states, I saw the Lord sitting on his throne and all the hosts of heaven standing beside him to his right and to his left.

[115 : 07] And there's just a little statement of a prophet seeing the Lord sitting on a throne with the hosts of heaven. And that's essentially what we have here in the book of Revelation as well. In the book of Isaiah chapter 6, verses 1 to 3, let's quickly have a look at Isaiah.

We will see another prophet who has this experience. He says, In the year of the king Isaiah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne.

And the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphim, each had six wings. With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying.

And they were calling to one another, Holy, holy, holy, holy is the Lord God almighty, and the whole earth is full of his glory. And that's a scene that's reminiscent, isn't it, of what John encounters in the book of Revelation.

Notice how this is a kind of temple scene. Because he is imagining, he's in the temple, and he is engaged in worship.

[116 : 23] And he's imagining the throne, the hem of God's own robe, coming from the heavenly throne, down into the temple where he himself is worshipping.

It says, At the sound of their voices, the doorposts and the thresholds shook, and the temple was filled with smoke. Woe to me, I cried, I am ruined, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips.

And my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of glory. So there's just another scene from the Old Testament in which we have a prophet encountering the throne of God.

Or in Daniel, chapter 7, verses 9 and 10, you can have a look at that as well. The scene where he sees one who is referred to as the Ancient of Days, who sits on the throne, and there are other thrones around around him.

Or Ezekiel, chapter 1, verses 4 and following. And Ezekiel is one of the most dramatic and complex descriptions of the throne of God.

[117 : 33] And it's one that the book of Revelation goes back to and draws on over and over again. In fact, this is a scene from the Old Testament which in Jewish understanding in the Middle Ages was understood to be so advanced in terms of being able to understand it that it ought not to be read by anyone younger than the age of 40.

So it's kind of like, you know, you've got to be, you've got to get a certain life experience before you can read this kind of stuff. Okay, so the Bible is not all just for the young people.

Some of us older ones get to read the book of Ezekiel. So have a look at what it says. I mean, it's really a remarkable scene. I'll start in verse 4.

He says, Think of all the ways that this reminds you of the beginning of the book of Revelation, that scene in chapter 4.

In its appearance, their form was human, but each of them had four faces and four wings. Their legs were straight, their feet were like those of a calf and gleamed like burnished bronze.

[118 : 51] Under their wings, on their four sides, they had human hands. All of them had faces and wings, and the wings of one touched the wings of another. Each one went straight ahead, and they did not turn as they moved.

Their faces looked like this. Each one of the four had the face of a human, and on the right side, each had the face of a lion, and on the left, the face of an ox.

Each one had the face of an eagle. Such were their faces. They each had two wings spreading out upward, each wing touching that of the creature on either side. And so on it goes.

It's remarkable. There's this amazing scene of living creatures who have got wings and faces, who appear again at the beginning of the scene in Revelation, the throne of God, surrounded by living creatures.

But if you do a close analysis, of course, you find that they're not described in exactly the same way. It's an example of how the scenes kind of shift. It gives you the sense that the prophet is trying to describe what he sees, but it's not always quite clear that he knows exactly what he sees.

[119 : 56] So there's this kind of interesting shift in the scene. Now, what happens later on in the book, in the chapters we go through, is we find out that there are wheels. There are wheels next to the living creatures.

And the spirit of the living creatures is in the wheels. And wherever the living creatures go, the wheels go. Then it turns out that the wheels are the wheels of a chariot. The chariot is carrying the throne of God.

It's the mobile chariot of God. So it reminds us of the mobile tabernacle that goes through the desert. There without wheels. But there's wheels here, because it's heaven, if you want to say.

And the wheels are on the earth, and the throne of God is in the heavens. And so you've got this astonishingly powerful, glorious, amazing depiction of the presence of God.

And then it says in verse 22, Spread out above the heads of the living creatures was what looked something like a vault, sparkling like crystal and awesome.

[120 : 53] Under the vaults, their wings were stretched out one toward the other, and each one had two wings covering his body. When the creatures moved, I heard the sound of their wings, like the roar of rushing waters, like the voice of the Almighty, like the tumult of an army.

When they stood still, they lowered their wings. Then there came a voice from above the vault over their heads, as they stood with lowered wings. Above the vault over their heads was what looked like a throne of Lapis-Nazuli.

And high above on the throne was a figure like that of a man. I saw from what appeared to be his waist up, he looked like glowing metal, as if full of fire.

And then from there down, he looked like fire, and brilliant light surrounded him, like the appearance of a rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day. So was the radiance around him.

This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. When I saw it, I fell face down, and I heard a voice of someone speaking to me. So, here we have this remarkable encounter of a prophet with the glory of God, depicted sitting on a throne.

[122 : 03] But notice how he, there's a sense of, while there's a sense of overpowering presence, there's also a sense of distance. Because he doesn't say, this is what God looked like.

He says, this was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. He's like, this is the appearance of the likeness of the glory.

And so there's a sense of closeness, but of distance. So, when we come to the book of Revelation, we have come, we've been ushered in with John, through this door in heaven, into this central scene, that we're being called upon to deal with.

We're being called to answer this question, do we worship the one who sits on the throne, or are we ultimately on the side of the dragon? And so there's the sense of, which side are we on in the conflict?

So notice, let's just read through the scene that we have here. It says, come up here, and I'll show you where it takes place. He says, once I was in the spirit, there before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it.

[123 : 10] And the one who sat there had the appearance of Jasper and Ruby, a rainbow that shone like an emerald encircled the throne. Surrounding the throne were 24 other thrones, and seated on them were 24 elders.

They were dressed in white, and they had crowns of gold on their heads. And from the throne came flashes of lightning, and rumblings, and peals of thunder. In front of the throne were seven lamps were blazing.

They were the seven spirits of God. And also in front of the throne, there was something that looked like a sea of glass, like crystal. In the center, around the throne, were four living creatures, and they were covered with eyes, in front and back.

And the first living creature was like a lion, the second like an ox, the third had the face of a man, the fourth was like a flying eagle. Each of the four living creatures had six wings, and they were covered with eyes all around, even under its wings.

Day and night they never stopped saying, Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come. And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to him who sits on the throne, who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him, who sits on the throne, and they worship him, who lives forever and ever.

[124 : 21] They lay their crowns before the throne, and they say, You are worthy, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created, and have their being.

So I just want to emphasize the fact that this is the heart of the whole scene. Whatever else happens, and there's all kinds of drama, there's all kinds of unfolding epic cosmic conflict, this remains the heart of the matter.

This is what's at the heart of the prophetic vision, all the way through the scriptures. And here we've been called up into the scene. And as the story unfolds, we see how we've been called to, in a sense, take account of this reality in our own lives.

Okay, now that's, in a sense, if you like, that's an eternal scene. That's what's always there. But when we get to chapter 5, when we get to chapter 5, we enter into a moment in heaven, as it were.

Everything before this is what's always the case. The ongoing, perpetual worship of God, the living creatures, and all of the other heavenly hosts that are there. But now we've got something that is happening, a drama.

[125 : 32] We've been brought into the scene at just the right moment. And this drama is what sets up the rest of the story. Right? So, the foundational reality is God on the throne.

But then we've got this unfolding story that starts right here. So, John says, I saw, in the right hand of Heeran, who sat on the throne, a scroll with writing on both sides, and sealed with seven seals.

And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming in a loud voice, who is worthy to break the seals and to open the scroll? But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or even look into it.

I wept and wept because no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or to look into it. Right? So, this is a dramatic moment. It's like, the door has been opened, John has gone through the door, he's arrived just at this moment where this scroll is in the hand of God.

There's this sense that it needs to be opened. We have to imply all kinds of things. One of the things we have to imply is that it's really bad news, that it's sealed, and that no one can open it. Right? So, there's a dramatic setback.

[126 : 45] And John is overwhelmed with emotion. This is an example of how we have to kind of catch up to the emotion of the scene. He weeps and weeps. We weren't expecting him to weep and weep.

But he seems to know something, or to intuit something, about that scroll. So, we could speculate about, well, what is it about the scroll that makes it tragic that it can't be opened?

Well, one suggestion is that the scroll, in fact, contains God's purposes for the world, God's plan for salvation, for the outworking of the arrival of God's kingdom.

All that God wants to accomplish is in that scroll. And so long as the scroll is sealed shut, it's thwarted, it's on the shelf, it's not going to happen. The scroll must be opened. And no one can be found, because not just anybody can open it.

We kind of have to do all of this in the background. We think, what, you know, what's going on here? It turns out that only a particular person, a particular individual, or a personage, can open the scroll.

[127 : 45] But they have to be worthy. They can only be worthy by having proven their worth. It's not just anybody. It's not just to have a job. You know, you apply for a job, say, I can do this, I've got the CV.

There's something specific that needs to be accomplished. Like a task that has to be fulfilled in order for this individual to be worthy to open the scroll. And so that's all going on in the back of our mind, as we see this scene, where the scroll is shut, and it needs to be opened, before God's purposes can be played out.

And that takes us to the scene, that we've touched on already, where there's this wonderful, heavenly turnaround. What looks like a desperate situation now opens, because one of the elders, who were described for us, one of these heavenly elders, sitting on a throne, says to him, do not weep, see the lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David, has triumphed.

He is able to open the scroll, and it seals. Notice it says that he has triumphed. He is worthy to open the scroll, because he has accomplished some great victory.

He has proven his worth. He has triumphed. He is the lion of the tribe of Judah. He is the root of David. These are messianic titles.

[129 : 04] These are titles that take us back into the Old Testament again. Genesis chapter 49, is where we read about the blessing, the blessing of Judah, where he's described as a lion.

Or there is a, there's someone coming, who is going to be the lion of Judah. And in Isaiah, there's a reference to the root, and the branch of David, and so on.

So these are messianic titles. They're messianic, they reflect the messianic expectation, of the Jewish people. And so it wouldn't be surprising that the one who would be worthy to open the scroll would in fact be the Messiah, the one who has conquered, who has overcome the forces of evil in the world.

Then of course we have this remarkable disjunction, this surprise, this shocking moment, when what should have been a lion turns out to be a lamb standing as if it has been slain.

Notice the bizarreness of that particular phrase. There's a lamb, that's surprising already, we've touched on that, but this lamb is standing as if it has been slain.

[130 : 17] What's that? How do you stand as if you've been slain? Surely you don't stand as if you've been slain. Right? What does it refer to then?

What does it mean for it to stand as if it has been slain? Say that. He survived. Or? He came back. Right.

He was slain, but he is standing. And if we had gone through this verse by verse and we had gone through chapter 1, we would have seen there that Christ, he describes himself to John as the one who was slain and is alive.

Right? So this is the one who is worthy to open the scrolls because he has conquered. But now, how did he conquer? How did this lamb, this lamb figure, how did he in fact conquer?

What was his conquest? What was his death on the cross? Right? So notice how that then reinterprets messianic expectations and understandings of what does it mean to conquer?

[131:19] The traditional militaristic understanding of the Messiah is that he conquers by conquering for goodness sake. How complicated is that? But this one, who is the lamb, standing as though he has been slain, we're told a little bit later on is that he is worthy.

It says, You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation and you have made them to be a kingdom of priests serving our God and they will reign on the earth.

See, that's what he has accomplished that makes him worthy to open the scroll. Okay? So notice how what we've been saying about the Old Testament being woven in is all there.

We can dig into all of these different things. There's an echo of the book of Exodus in there. Right? This idea of the ransoming of the people of God from the land of Egypt but also how God has made them into a kingdom of priests.

This echoes language that is used on Mount Sinai when in chapter 19 God says to the people of Israel you have seen how I brought you to myself from the wings of the eagle and I will make you into a kingdom of priests.

[132:36] This echoes and layer upon layer taking us back into the story of Exodus not just in the figure of the pass of the lamb but of course that as well. So here we've got this drama that is unfolding that the scroll that has been sealed shut in the hand of God can now be opened because somebody has been found who is worthy and he is now able to set in motion what is inside the scroll.

Okay. So that leads us then to everything that comes next. So in chapter 6 we're told he says I watched as the lamb open the first of the seven seals.

Right? Then that leads to the opening of the second seal and the next one and the next one and the next one. Now there's this slightly frustrating aspect to all of this because once you get to the opening of the seventh seal it turns out that the seventh seal leads to another series of seven things.

It's seven trumpets that get blown. So the seventh seal is seven trumpets. So the first seal is a rider who comes riding on a horse and brings war.

The second seal brings famine. The second seal brings plague. Now these seem to be preparing the way in some sense. In some way in order for God's purposes to be accomplished in the world the way has to be prepared.

[134:19] The ground has to be made straight. And so we go through that fair enough we go through the sequence of the seven seal openings and then we get to the final seal.

If you look at the final seal it's in chapter eight and it says when he opened the seventh seal chapter eight verse one there was silence in heaven for about a half an hour and then he says I saw seven angels who stood before God and seven trumpets were given to them and then they blow the trumpets well they turn out not to be ordinary trumpets the first trumpet brings about all kinds of apocalyptic events into the world and so does the second trumpet and so does the third trumpet and so on we go we go through a whole sequence of other kind of judgments that are coming on the earth right so revelation this is one of the things that makes revelation so difficult to follow and so difficult to stomach as it were because part of the message of revelation is that in order for God's purposes to be played out to come about that there is this conflict that is engaged in the conflict involves kind of judging the evil that is on the earth and so we've got judgment after judgment after judgment and that leads to the trumpets now after the trumpets there's a delay of a number of chapters but the seventh trumpet itself leads to another series of seven that series of seven is actually seven thunders that are described briefly in chapter 10 but in a typical kind of apocalyptic way revelation will say John will say or the angel says to him don't say anything about the thunders that has to be kept secret so there's stuff right in the middle of the book that we're not told but then at the end of that there's seven bowls seven vials seven big chunks of a plague that are poured out on the earth and those relentlessly follow one after the other after the other and so it's only once we've got through all of that that the scroll is actually opened right because remember the seventh seal is the seven trumpets you go through the seven trumpets and it turns out the seventh trumpet is the seven thunders and the seventh go through the seven thunders you have to assume it's kind of you know you have to do a little bit of mental gymnastics here the seventh thunder is the seventh ball and then you go through the seven balls and by the time you get to the end of the seventh ball you haven't actually got any further than you were when you'd heard about the seventh seal be open right because they're all inside each other inside each other inside each other and one of the ways that the book of revelation sort of signals that to us is that we'll notice that each of the sequences ends in the same way they all talk about thunder and lightning and a storm there's a storm that kind of breaks out a cosmic storm not your ordinary storm but a storm that kind of shakes the whole world and each time that we go through the sequence we find that the storm becomes more violent more intense and wider in scope so first of all it's just a terrible storm then it's a terrible storm with hailstones then the hailstones become so big they're killing people then finally the storm is so big the whole world shakes and the sky splits and everything rushes away from the presence of the one who's on the throne so it becomes more and more overwhelming but in all of that all we've simply done is open the scroll okay so this is a part of the drama of the scene that we're in is that it focuses really on the opening of the scroll the opening of the scroll reveals the purpose of God and in effect brings about the purposes of God but in order for that scroll to be opened there's this preparatory stuff

that has to happen which is essentially God's judgment of the forces of evil in the world okay so that's essentially the story of the book of Revelation and then once that is all in place then it can describe the final events it describes the overthrow of the beast it describes the overthrow of the city of the beast we have the beginnings of rejoicing at the overthrow of the beast we have the return of Christ now though depicted in yet another way he has been depicted for us as a lion he has been depicted for us as the lamb but in the closing scenes Christ is depicted as a rider on a horse in essence as a kind of conqueror not dissimilar from the way that a Roman emperor would ride conquering into a scene so we've got scenes of final battle and then those scenes eventually once all of the forces of evil in the world have been wrapped up and dealt with and judgment has taken place then finally the world as we know it is wrapped up and is taken away and a new heaven and a new earth are brought into the scene and so

Revelation takes us inextricably towards this final scene which is the establishment of a new heaven and a new earth the renewal of all things so that's the narrative direction that's how the story starts from the one who is on the throne that moves into the opening of the scroll and the scroll needs to be opened in order for God's purposes to be accomplished which is ultimately the judgment of evil the restoration of God's rule on earth than the establishment of the new heaven and the new earth straightforward huh let me just draw your attention to this that an important aspect of this story that we've touched on already in chapter 5 is that the depiction of Christ as the Passover Lamb takes us into an important theme that runs all the way through the book of

Revelation and that is the depiction of the life of faith as a kind of rerun of the Exodus so the story of the Exodus is an important framing narrative for how the story of Revelation unfolds now you might say what you just described for me did not sound like the book of Exodus but stick with me here this idea is that God's people have been rescued from the land of slavery and they are being drawn to himself in covenant relationship and ultimately to the land promised that lies in the future in order for that to take place the people of God must first be marked by the blood of the slaughtered lamb just as the people of Israel were marked in the land of Egypt now the process of their being marked and of being rescued from the land of Egypt entailed the judgment of Egypt there were plagues that were poured out on the evil empire as it were and so many of the plagues in the book of Revelation remind us of the plagues of Egypt there are frogs and there's hail and there's darkness and there's water turning to blood so although it's not as I've said it's never just a direct quote of the Old

[142 : 20] Testament it's kind of like the thread of that story is being woven into a new tapestry and so the people of God in the book of Revelation are the wilderness people of God they are the people of God who have been rescued from the place of slavery they have been marked by the slaughtered lamb and they are pursued by the dragon the pharaoh of the book of Egypt continues to pursue them into the wilderness so Revelation has got many images of the people of God traversing the vast trackless waste of the desert in order ultimately to come into God's presence so once the people have started on this journey they are they are in it for the long haul this is not a story about easy salvation this is not a story about just saying you believe and then you're good it's a story about being marked by Christ and then following Christ whatever that entails and it's a call for endurance and faithfulness because the people of

God are the ones who make it to the end they call to himself in the wilderness they're brought to him on the mountain they're drawn into a covenant relationship with him so we've got lots of echoes of the story of Exodus all the way through the book of Revelation so as I've said many of the plagues remind us of the story of Exodus in chapter 12 there's a reference to a woman being carried on the wings of a great eagle to God which is an echo of Exodus chapter 19 where God says you have seen what I did to the Egyptians and how I bore you on eagles wings and brought you to myself in Revelation chapter 15 we're told that the martyrs those the followers of Christ they sing a new version of the song that Moses and the people of God sang when they crossed the Red Sea remember they sang the song of Moses in Revelation chapter 15 it's called the song of

Moses and of the Lamb and on and on it goes there's this interweaving of the theme of the Exodus into the story of Revelation but the people of God are the people of a new Exodus with all that that entails when we think about what does it mean to follow the Lamb wherever he goes okay let me stop there to see if there's a question or two before lunch thanks we've talked a lot today about the language the challenges of the language also about the context in which there are great challenges means that the followers of the Christians in the southern villages or towns were in danger but they are only by conscience and we have a context of danger and a letter that's sent in a very different kind of language which can be included somewhat through understanding of the Old

Testament how many Koreans do we put on the idea that a letter is being closed because of danger because of the danger in other words you know a right because of people they have the same to speak over the right to the amount of how to resist wrong so how that creates it has some effect that they are waiting to cover and all that is wrong excuse me yeah thank you very much I don't personally read it quite like that partly because the Roman Empire at this time was still pretty oblivious mostly to the Christians and even in the early part of the second century we got interesting evidence of Roman governors and so on in this region trying to figure out who the Christians are and what they're about and all of that so the idea that they were that afraid of Roman that they were worried that letters would be intercepted and so on

I think it's an over reading of the situation it's not quite Stalinist Russian yet this is not quite that although it certainly reads very well it's kind of what reads well in a totalitarian regime and you can certainly imagine how Revelation would take on profound significance when people are experiencing that but I don't think in the historic context that the people are yet that frightened it's more a case of they're anticipating and it's like looking ahead to what it's going to be like and they can see John can see in this Revelation is warning them that this is coming this sense of Rome becoming more and more totalitarian more and more all consuming I don't think the idea that they at the moment of writing were afraid that someone was going to intercept us I think the language of code and so on is better understood as part of this literary genre this is a tradition of writing it's a way of drawing us back into the Bible it's writing it this is a book of the Bible you might think it's obviously a book of the Bible but remember in the New

[147 : 53] Testament times the New Testament wasn't yet understood as a connection so this is a book that self consciously is presenting itself to us as a word of prophecy like the book of Isaiah or a music wants to link us back into that world that way of thinking thank you okay anyone else we're good please so and therefore be encouraged.

Yeah. You see, that's one of the John's motives. Yeah. So if we go through the first, so there's the seven letters of the seven churches in chapters two and three. There's this recurring number of themes.

One of them is a warning and a call to persevere. There's been also encouragement and the promises for those who endure and they will receive the blessings of the city that's in the future.

So Revelation is very much a word of encouragement and of hope, but also of warning and of critique. So one of the purposes of the seven letters at the beginning is a kind of, is that we would reflect on where do we fit among these different messages?

Some of them are encouraged. Some of them are sternly rebuked. Some of them are somewhere in between. And as we reflect on our own... Okay. Welcome back. Thanks for sticking around.

[149 : 36] We have about an hour left. Right? We go until 2.30. So I'm going to say as much as I can. And if you just listen as much as you can, then that'll be okay.

I'll leave a few minutes at the end for a bit of questions because there'll be things that you say, well, the one thing that I came for today was this. It's crazy. So, yes, that will happen.

There will be most things that won't be answered. But let's at least make the most of this hour. So, when the scroll gets opened, we said that it takes place over a number of chapters.

Right? So the scroll begins to be opened in chapter 6. And it takes us all the way through chapter 16. But something significant happens along the way.

And that is that in between the 6th and the 7th seal opening and between the 6th and the 7th trumpet blast, there is an interlude.

[150 : 55] There is an interlude that breaks the sequence of the seal openings and the trumpet blasts. And those interludes are very significant passages because they, as it were, pause the relentless unfolding of the wrath of God and the judgment of God in order to say something about the followers of the Lamb.

Right? So it's an interesting structural device that the book builds right into the sequence of these judgments to try to give us a sense that in the midst of all of this, there is discipleship taking place.

People are following the Lamb in the midst of everything else that's going on. So there is a kind of feeling of chaos in the book of Revelation because there's multiple things going on at the same time.

On the one hand, God's purposes are being unfolded. But on the other hand, the dragon who is opposed to the people of God is also at work. And that creates the environment, the context for discipleship.

That's the realm in which all of us seek to follow the Lord. The place in which all of these dynamics are at play. So in the time that we have together, I want to look at those two porous passages or at least as far into them as we go.

[152 : 19] So the first place that we're going to dive in is in chapter 7. And you'll notice that chapter 7 comes right after the opening of the 6th seal and before the opening of the 7th seal.

So it's this interlude. It's a break. If you look at chapter 6, verse 12, it says, I've watched as he opened the 6th seal. And that paragraph then relates to that.

And then if you go to chapter 8, verse 1, it says, when he opened the 7th seal. All right? So there's been a gap that encompasses chapter 7. All right.

So this takes us to the classic and famous scene of the great multitude, the 144,000 and so on. So what can we make of all of this?

So chapter 7 starts with four angels holding back the winds of earth so that no wind can blow on earth or sea or against any tree.

[153 : 31] And as we go down through this passage, it becomes clear that these winds are destructive winds that are about to blow on the earth. Okay?

So let's have a look at what it says. It says, After this, I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth to prevent any wind from blowing on the land or on the sea or on any tree.

Then I saw another angel coming up from the east having the seal of the living God. He called out in a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm the land and the sea.

Do not harm the land or the sea or the trees until I put a seal on their foreheads, on the foreheads of the servants of our God. Then I heard the number of those who were sealed, 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel.

Then lists the tribes of Israel, 12,000 from each of the tribes. And then in verse 8, it says, After this, I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count from every nation and tribe and people and nation standing before the throne and before the land.

[154 : 40] Okay? And then it carries on after that. So, here we've got this interesting scene. These four winds are about to blow on the earth. They're destructive winds because they're going to do harm, we're told, to the land and to the sea.

But before that can happen, this prior action has to happen, which is that the servants of God are going to be marked by God. They're going to be identified. Okay, now the first thing I want us to notice, and this will get a little bit technical for us, is that this is an example of how the narrative in Revelation does not unfold in a linear way, that there are many places where the story folds back on itself, it circles around, and sometimes tells us something it's already described, but it's going to describe it in a different way or it's going to tell us something that has to be said first.

Okay? So, sometimes you have scenes that are sequels to other scenes and other times you have scenes that are prequels to other scenes. This scene is actually a prequel to chapter 6.

Okay? So, in other words, the four winds that are about to blow are the equivalent of the four horsemen that have already been described for us in chapter 6.

Now, I'll throw that out to you just to kind of remind you that Revelation is always messing with your head. And if I've created the illusion that it's simple, I just want to dispel that. because it's very easy for me to sort of give the impression, oh, it's all straightforward, and at the end of it you go and read it again and you go, huh?

[156 : 12] Oh, it is like that. When you go, huh, that's the real experience. So, this is one of those examples of where Revelation is not unfolding in a straightforward way.

And now, the reason that I say that this is a prequel and that the winds are the same as the horsemen, there's a reason for it. There's justification for that. What is the justification? Justification is the Bible.

It's always the Bible. Okay, so, have a look at Zechariah. Everybody knows Zechariah, right? In Zechariah, see, this is the reason why Revelation will, if you study Revelation, you become a genuine scholar of the Bible.

If you read Zechariah, you will realize that the winds and the horses are related to each other. If you don't can find Zechariah.

Okay, so, in Zechariah, chapter 6, verses 2 to 5, it says this. So, he has a, Zechariah's having a vision, he says, I looked up and there before me were four chariots coming out from between two mountains of Goms.

[157 : 23] The first chariot had red horses, the second black, the third white, and the fourth dappled, all of them powerful. I asked the angel who was speaking to me, what are these, my Lord?

It's always helpful when the prophet says, what is this? And the angel answered me, these are the four winds of heaven going out from standing in the presence of the Lord of the whole earth.

Okay, so notice how we've got colored horses that are going out into all the world and they represent the winds of heaven. So that's my reason for suggesting that the four winds that are about to blow in chapter 7 are the equivalent of the four horses that ride out in chapter 6.

Now, they're not exactly the same, but then again, every time the book of Revelation uses scenes from the Old Testament, it reminds you of the scene, but it's never exactly the same. Okay?

So, in other words, if you go back to chapter 6, you'll see that the horses that come riding represent destruction and difficulty and judgment that are coming on the earth.

[158 : 35] What chapter 7 is telling us is that before all of that takes place, those who belong to God are going to be marked by God so that they are not subject to the wrath of God, they're not subject to the judgment of God.

They're going to be separated out from the general population, which is one of the reasons why we can't take any of these passages as being literally predictive of actual wars and plagues and diseases in the world.

Because as we know, real wars and plagues and diseases in the world don't separate out the Christians from the rest of the population, do they? Right? So this is in the world of that vision in that great big thought bubble that is the vision that John has in that world is a clear differentiation between those who are the followers of the lamb and those who are the followers of the dragon.

And Revelation is always calling us to reflect on which are we? Are we the ones who belong to this group or to that group? Alright? So now notice how it talks about them being marked on the forehead with the seal of the living God.

Now it turns out that the seal on the people of God is itself a biblical idea. So, if we go back to the book of Ezekiel chapter 9 verses 4 and 5 we have another you have an example of the very similar scene where God is about to bring judgment onto the city but before he does that he causes those who belong to God who share the heart of God to be marked and so differentiated from the general population.

[160:21] So, in Ezekiel chapter 9 verses 4 and 5 it says this so, God says to the prophet go throughout the city of Jerusalem and put a mark on the foreheads of those who grieve and lament over all the detestable things that are done in it.

And as I listened he said he said to the others for hearing through the city and kill without showing pity or compassion and it says to slaughter in judgment all those who do not have the mark that is to be put on the people.

Now remember this is prophetic language it's a it's again it's theological language it's not as if we can imagine all of this being played out literally in the world but it's the point is to say that God has put a mark on and has identified those who belong to him in the midst of all of the chaotic things that are taking place in the book of Revelation.

So, in Revelation the people of God are described as 144,000 followers who have been marked with the seal of the living God.

And when we encounter this same group again later on in the book we encounter the 144,000 later in chapter 14 we're told what the mark is.

[161:48] You know what is the mark? What does it actually say? The mark of the of God. In chapter 14 in verse 1 somebody tell me what it says. What is the mark of God?

Revelation 14 1 Okay? Do you see that there? Then I looked and there before me was the Lamb standing on the ground side and with them 144,000 who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads.

So that is the mark of the living God. It is the Lamb's name and the Father's name written on the forehead of those who belong to God. And this is one of the characteristics of the book of Revelation when you think about it visually and you imagine it is that everybody is identified.

The people who belong to the Lamb have got the Lamb's name written on their forehead and the people who belong to the Beast have got the Beast's name written on their forehead the so-called mark of the Beast given in numeric form.

And Christ has got his name written on him and the great prostitute has got a name written on her as well. Mother of Horson of the Earth's Abomination is one of the great ones.

[163:04] That's a great tattoo to have on her head. So everybody in the book of Revelation is identified. So when we're thinking about what does this mean for us is to say from God's perspective it is clear who belongs to whom.

Okay? God knows those who belong to him and he knows those who do not belong to him. It's a kind of spiritual identification that is clear to God and in Revelation it's clear to everybody but of course when we think about how this applies to ourselves it's not as if we are being expected now to literally have the name of Christ tattooed onto our forehead any more than we can expect the mark of the Beast to be tattooed on our forehead or implanted with a microchip or whatever the case may be.

Right? So there is this biblical significance to the idea that God has marked those who belong to him. We find similar ideas in the letters of Paul although in Paul when he talks about the seal of God he's talking about what?

What is Paul talking about in Ephesians when he talks about how we've been sealed? He's talking about the Holy Spirit. So that would be a way how we need to think about what does it mean if we were going to say bring together Paul's theology with the book of Revelation that's how I would see the point of contact is that those who belong to God are differentiated from those who are not by the presence of the Holy Spirit in our life.

That's what it means to have the seal of the living God but graphically and powerfully in Revelation the picture that we're given is on the name of Christ and of God on our foreheads.

[164 : 46] I mean that's one of the reasons why powerfully in baptism we are marked with the cross on our forehead. That's kind of the basis for it. It goes back to these kinds of passages when we think about what it means to belong to God.

And so in Revelation the company of God's people have been clearly differentiated from everybody else. Now it's significant to think about the number.

Why are there 144,000? We're told all about that. He says I heard the number of those who were sealed 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel.

Now it's significant here that the number is a multitude of a multiple of 12. We really know what 12 means. It means what? It refers to something related to the people of God.

The people of God in the Old Testament are connected to the tribes of Israel. Here we've got an example of Revelation taking a number from the Old Testament and multiplying it by itself.

[165 : 57] Because when numbers are multiplied by themselves it makes them all the more significant but it doesn't change the meaning of them. 12 times 12 times a lot is what the thousand means.

Thousand in the book of Revelation means a lot. 12 times 12 times a lot means there's a lot of people and they can be described in terms of national Israel the national hopes of Israel the hopes of the Messianic people here arranged like the people of God in the wilderness passage.

Remember in the passage through the wilderness the people were arranged in their tribal units. And they would arrange themselves around the tabernacle. This tribe over there they would all be arranged around.

You could also think of them as a kind of army. Because when the people of Israel went into battle against the Amalekites or the Midianites or any other kind of ite they went out in their tribal groupings.

So there'd be the soldiers from Zebulun over there and the ones from Issachar over there. So this is a kind of a military scene of the people of God depicted in a military fashion according to Old Testament depictions of the people of God.

[167 : 13] But remember what we said before about how there is often in the book of Revelation a surprising disconnect between the things that he hears and the things that he sees.

Remember that? When we talked about the line of the tribe of Judah there's another reference to a tribe. The line of the tribe of Judah turned out to be a lamb. Now notice that something very similar happens in this passage because it says I heard the number of those who were sealed from the tribes so and so and so and so and so and what does it say in verse 9?

After this I looked and what did he see? He saw a great multitude that no one could count. Not from the 12 tribes of Israel but from every tribe and language and people and nation.

So notice how the same thing has happened. He expected to see 144,000 from the 12 tribes but what he actually saw was a great multitude that in fact is not strictly 144,000 it's a great multitude that cannot be counted.

So does that mean that there are two people two groups called the people of God? Or is it one group of the people of God understood in different terms?

[168 : 33] Just as there is one Messiah who can be understood as the lion of the tribe of Judah and never ceases to be the lion of the tribe of Judah even though he needs to be understood as the lamb who was slain.

He never ceases to be the lamb when he's the lion or the lion when he's the lamb. Both images are true but there's still only one Messiah. And when we think about the people of God we can think about the people of God in Old Testament terms using languages for the tribes of Israel and so on.

But we must also know that when it comes down to what it's really like in the world they don't come from some literal reconstitute of Israel with you're from the tribe of Levi and you're from the tribe of Zebulun.

No, you come from every language and people and nations for all around the world. These are the people, remember, that were ransomed for God by the slain lamb.

The lamb who was slaughtered was worthy to open the scroll people from every tribe and language and people and nation. So just as you had a national reference in chapter 5 to the line of the tribe of Judah who needed to be understood as the lamb, the lamb who had ransomed for God people from all over the place.

[169 : 52] Here too we go from a national tribal kind of ethnic picture of the people of God to one where we now essentially what we have is the company of the lamb's people.

These are those who have in fact been washed by the blood of the lamb. Now the image can switch back and forth so that when we get to chapter 14 as we did we went in a minute, notice there how the images have essentially been blended together because then it says I saw standing before me the lamb and with him was the 144,000.

we would have expected the lamb to be with the great multitude but that's just because revelation likes to keep switching the images. It's like if you think of a holographic card, you know sometimes you have a picture and you can look at it in one way and you see a certain image and you turn it slightly and it looks slightly differently like sometimes on your credit card.

That's what's happening in the book of revelation as well. You've got a picture here of the people of God understood in nationalistic ethnic terms as Israel. If you look at it just slightly differently, it's the people of the land who are from every tribe and language and people and nation and it can switch back and forth between those images.

But if we try to be over literalistic about this, we get ourselves into trouble where we say, well no, there's the people of God and then there's some kind of special elite group who are in the 144,000 and that simply flattens the imagery and takes away the biblical richness of it.

[171 : 27] See what I'm saying? So this is something that you need to try to explain to our friends, the Jehovah's Witnesses when they come by and ask you if you're in the 144,000. The answer is yes, the answer is absolutely, I'm in the 144,000, I'm one of the great multitude that no one can count and it's the same group of people.

Okay? So very important to see what's going on there, this interplay between these two images. And remember that the great multitude that no one can count is itself a biblical image because it's the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham that his descendants, the descendants of faith, the people of the promise, would in fact be like the sand on the seashore or the stars in the sky.

Right? So the great multitude that no one can count is itself a fulfillment of a biblical image but one that predates the whole description of the people of God in terms of tribes.

Okay. Now, there's another distinction between these two groups and that is, I've said already, that the 144,000 of ethnic kind of national depiction, that is also a kind of a military picture.

It's a picture of the people of God lined up in their tribal groups in order to go into battle. By contrast to that, when we think about the significance of this other group of people, this other image of the people of God, the great multitude that no one can count, it turns out that they are not an army.

[173 : 09] They are a company of martyrs. These are the people of the slaughtered land. So listen to the conversation that takes place between John and one of the heavenly elders.

It says, Then one of the elders addressed me saying, Who are these, the great multitude, who are these robed in white, and where have they come from? I said to him, Sir, you are the one that knows.

Then he said to me, These are they who have come out of the great ordeal. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb.

This is a very important exchange that helps us to think more deeply about what it means to belong to this company and to follow the lamb. I want to talk about these two statements, the idea that they are wearing robes that have been washed in blood, and also there's this reference to the great ordeal.

Okay, so let's talk about the robes that have been washed in blood. The first thing that I want us to notice is that it says that they have washed their robes. There's something active about that.

[174 : 30] It doesn't say that their robes have been washed by somebody else. And so sometimes we sing songs and so on about having been washed in the blood and so on.

You know, we've been made pure by the death of Christ. Those things are true, of course. But what's striking here in the way that this is described is it says that those who have come out of the great ordeal have washed their robes.

They have washed their robes in the blood of the lamb. So they seem to have been actively involved in washing their own robes.

And what many scholars think this means, and I agree with them, is that it's referring to how these are people who have deliberately identified themselves with Christ.

These are those who have said, I belong to Christ and I want to be marked by Christ. These are the ones who stand for what he stands for and who continue Christ's work in the world.

[175 : 37] They continue his message in the world. And because of that, they share Christ's own experience of the world. So, these are those who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb.

One of the other phrases that we find cropping up regularly in the book of Revelation, it says, those who follow the lamb are those who hold the testimony of Jesus. That means they not only testify about Jesus, they not only bear witness to Jesus, but they have Jesus' own message.

They hold Jesus' message. Jesus' testimony was to the truth of the one who sits on the throne. That's the way that Revelation depicts the dynamic that's going on.

That Christ is the one who bore true witness and continues to bear witness, and that witness brings them into conflict with the dragon. Those who follow the lamb hold the testimony of Jesus, and they do not hold on to their own lives, even in the face of death.

That it costs them their lives to continue the testimony of Jesus. So, I think that's what it is talking about when it says that they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb.

[177 : 04] It has cost them their lives to be associated with Jesus. So, if we go back a little bit in chapter 6, in the fifth seal, there's an interesting scene where we've got martyrs.

So, it says, when he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they maintained. They called out in a loud voice, how long sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood.

Then each one of them was given a white robe and they were told to wait a little longer until the full number of their fellow servants, their brothers and sisters, were killed just like they had been.

This is one of the sobering aspects of the book of Revelation, that they are martyrs, the martyrs are hoping for vengeance and they are told to just wait because there's more coming.

And they are given white robes as an indication of their martyrdom. And these are the ones who are being described for us now in chapter 7. These are they who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the man.

[178 : 13] And this image of this great multitude that no one can count is an image of martyrs. And that other image of the 144,000 is simply another way of talking about this same group.

In other words, there's no other group, there's no other company of non-martyrs in the book of Revelation. Everybody who belongs to the Lamb in Revelation is a martyr.

There isn't a non-martyr option. So, this is an example of how Revelation doesn't just relate literally and directly to our lives in a one-for-one kind of a way.

In the vision that John has, in that scene, in the story, the cosmic battle, the depiction of the people of the Lamb is that they bear witness to Christ at the cost of their own lives, and they are all martyrs.

So, when we think about what does it mean for us to be a follower of the Lamb and to follow Him wherever He goes, we have to ask ourselves whether we belong to that company or not, whether or not we have been literally martyred.

[179 : 23] It's not saying that each person who ever followed Christ becomes a martyr, but it's saying that in Revelation the only people who are the true followers of Christ are in fact martyrs.

So, are we martyrs? Do we have the, can we say that we've got the mark of God? Have we been washed in the blood of the Lamb?

Have we identified ourselves with Him in the way that's being described here? What does it mean for us in our day-to-day lives to live against those who belong to the company of martyrs? Those are the kinds of questions that this needs to provoke in our own thinking as we think about what this might mean for us.

Now, that all then plays in to this other phrase, this reference to the great ordeal, or as some translations call, use the term, the great tribulation.

Now, the great tribulation is one of the reasons so many people don't like to read the book of Revelation, because if you read Revelation in this predictive sense, in the sense that Revelation gives you a blow-by-quote account of the end of the world, you fall into various kinds of schemes and ways of reading Revelation, many of them inevitably get us to this idea that in the last few years of the world's history is going to be a time of particularly gruesome persecution of the people of God, called the great tribulation, during which time some people may or may not be raptured from the middle of it, and others will kind of go through a time of horrific suffering in the world.

[181:04] But the point that I want to make here is that when it talks about people who have come out of the great tribulation, it's not in fact talking about people who have been rescued from the great tribulation, it's talking about people who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb, and in that way have come through the great tribulation.

In other words, they have suffered through the great tribulation, and have come out of it by their martyrdom. That's how to get out of the tribulation.

There's no kind of rapture back door. Notice how the scene ends.

When you get to the end of chapter 7, in verse 15, it says this, For this reason, they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated there on the throne will shelter them.

They will hunger no more, and thirst no more. The sun will not strike them nor any scorching heat, for the lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to the springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

[182:29] So notice how there's again, the language of the exodus is kind of in kind of the close background of the scene. These are people who have traversed a desert, they've come through the wilderness wanderings, as it were, and so we're told that to come into the presence of God now, finally, is to find shelter, it's to find food, it's to find water, they're no longer going to be hungry, they're not going to be thirsty anymore, the sun is not going to strike them anymore, there's not going to be any scorching, heat, these are people who have crossed the desert, and they are comforted by having the tears wiped away from their eyes.

These are the people, this is a weeping people, who now stand before the throne of God, dressed in white, and who join in the great company of worship that was described for us at the beginning of the whole scene, like in chapters 4 5.

So, notice also how chapter 6 ended with a question, so just before this whole passage in chapter 7, it says, the great day of their wrath has come, that is, God, the wrath of God, the wrath of the Lamb, it says, the great day of their wrath has come, and who can, who is able to stand?

The question is, who is able to stand? Well, the answer to that question is played out here, because this is the company of people who are standing before the presence of God.

Right there before me was a great multitude that no one can count, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They are wearing white robes, they are holding palms in their hands, and they cried out with a loud voice, salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb.

[184:18] So it brings us back to this question, who can stand in the presence of God? Those who are able to worship the one who sits on the throne. These are they who have been given white robes, the white robes of martyrdom.

So, in other words, the book of Revelation depicts the age of faith, the life of faith, as a great ordeal. The great tribulation is not some specific differentiated short period of time at the end of all things.

It is, in fact, the way Revelation talks about what it means to live a life of faith. It's a life that is always under the persecution of the dragon who pursues those who follow the followers of the Lamb.

It's a life of following the Lamb wherever he goes. It's a life of being identified with Jesus to the point of actually experiencing the kind of opposition from the world that Jesus himself experienced.

Okay? So, let me just touch very briefly on this idea of the rapture since I didn't bring it up. Is there going to be a rapture?

[185 : 34] Where does the rapture fit into the book of Revelation? Now, I know that not everybody even is interested in the rapture. Who knows about the rapture? Everybody? Lots of people? Okay.

Where does the rapture fit into the depiction of things that I've been given? Was it?

Okay. Kind of. Except that in the picture of the return of Christ that we have in the book of Revelation, it says that he comes riding with the armies of heaven who are wearing white.

Who are they? They are the martyrs who have already died. So, it's not a rapture, right? It is a return of Christ. But the rapture is this idea that in the midst of a very intense time of persecution near the end of the world, those who belong to God are going to be in a moment in the twinkling of an eye, whisked out of the world.

And what I want to say very earnestly is that the book of Revelation knows nothing about that. Because the story of Revelation, the story of salvation in Revelation is the story of Exodus.

[186 : 48] It's the story of the people of God who are marked by the blood of the Lamb, who come into the desert to encounter God on Mount Sinai, first of all, where they enter into a covenant relationship with Him.

And then they continue to be nourished by the bread from heaven and the water from the rock. They have the presence of God in the form of the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night.

and they make the journey across the desert to the other side. That's the kind of language and the kind of story that Revelation is telling us. There isn't a kind of bus that comes halfway through the desert and picks you up and says, okay, who's done?

Who wants to just drive the rest of the way? There's no kind of oasis shuttle that's going to whisk us out of the midst of it. There's only one way across and that's to walk.

So that's the important thing for us to understand that Revelation doesn't actually have a rapture moment. And so I can't in a good conscience tell you that there is a rapture.

[187 : 53] In fact, it's not even viable. So I know that could be a bit provocative for some people, but let me touch on just a couple of things. First of all, 1 Thessalonians chapter 4, verses 13 to 18, is sometimes used as being about the rapture.

But that actually relates to what you talked about. It's talking about the return of Christ rather than any kind of rapture. There is something dramatic when Christ returns, make no mistake.

But when Christ returns and people are caught up together with him in the sky, it's the end of the world. There's no kind of carrying on a sort of daily life with buses with no drivers and airplanes with no pilots.

So let's have a quick look at what it says in 1 Thessalonians chapter 4. It says, Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who are asleep, who sleep in death, so that you may not grieve like the rest of mankind who have no hope.

For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, so we believe that God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. So those who have died will return with Christ when he comes. According to the Lord's word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep, for the Lord himself will come down from heaven with a loud command and with the voice of the archangel, with the trumpet of the call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.

[189 : 25] After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words.

That's a wonderful, terse description and account of the return of Christ, that when Christ returns, the resurrection takes place. The resurrection includes people who have died and those who are still alive.

All those who belong to God at the time of Christ's return will be raised from the dead, because we are mortal and perishable, as Paul says in 1st 15, that this mortal body must put on immortality, and this perishable body must put on imperishability, this corruptible body must put on incorruptibility, because mortal, perishable, and corruptible cannot inherit the kingdom of heaven.

We have to all be transformed, changed, so in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, we will not all sleep, in other words, we won't all be dead, but we will all be changed. So that's about the resurrection, the great resurrection, at the end of the age where Christ returns for us.

That's the end of the world, everything's different after that. It's not a description of a rapture, kind of a secret rapture, where some of us disappear, other people continue on in a kind of gnarly, miserable life with no people of faith in the world.

[190 : 52] So, the one other passage we could touch on, I don't have it there, let me just say, there's one other passage that we should touch on very briefly, as we inexorably run out of time, and that is Matthew.

In Matthew chapter 24, this is another passage that is often taken as a rapture passage, and I just want to touch on it very briefly. Matthew 24, verses 38, and following.

Okay, Matthew chapter 24, classic bit of so-called rapture stuff. So, this is what it says. Actually, it starts in verse 36, Matthew 4, 36.

But about the day or hour, no one knows, that is of the Son of Man's return, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.

As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking and marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day that Noah entered the ark.

[192 : 10] And they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. Two men will be in the field, one will be taken and the other will be left.

Two women will be grinding with a handmill, one will be taken and the other one will be left. Therefore, keep watch. Okay, is that passage about the rapture?

notice that it's saying that the coming of the Son of Man will be like it was in the days of Noah. In the days of Noah, some people went into the ark and so were saved, and others were left.

Right? Some of them were left behind. It says, as it was in the days of the flood, people were eating and drinking and marrying and giving up the marriage up to the day that Noah entered the ark. They knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away.

So, let me ask you this. In that story, do you want to be taken or do you want to be left behind? So, some people went into the boat and some people were outside and the flood came and took them all away.

[193 : 28] So, let me ask you the question again. Do you want to be taken or do you want to be left? left? You want to be left behind.

Don't you? It says that the flood came and took them all away. You don't want to be taken away in judgment at the end of the age.

You want to be left behind for goodness sake. Whereas, the rapture theology has turned that on its head and says that you don't want to be left behind. It's just an example of how if you don't pay attention, you can get things exactly wrong.

Right? So, it's an example of how this is kind of flipping a biblical image on its head. What Revelation is, sorry, what Matthew is saying, Jesus is saying there in Matthew, the coming of the Son of Man is unexpected.

and when it eventually happens, it will be like the days of Noah, where the people of God will be taken to God and there will be judgment on the rest of the world.

[194 : 43] It's not a story about some people kind of unwittingly carrying on in the world as if nothing has really happened. Okay, enough of that.

So, the main point is that Revelation doesn't actually say anything about a rapture. And it doesn't open a door for a rapture. It simply isn't part of the story.

In Revelation, the logic of the whole thing is that we are those who wash our robes and make them white in the blood of the Lamb.

And we follow the Lamb wherever he goes. We become then part of that company of martyrs who have been given white robes and who stand before the throne of God and join him in the company of worship.

Now, I want us to jump ahead this a little bit now as we get ready to the closing moments of our class. And this is to the second pause passage.

[195 : 44] Okay, so between the sixth and the seventh trumpet blast, there's another one of these interludes. There's another break in sequence of things.

And here we've got another kind of depiction of the people of God. So I want us to go straight to chapter 11. And here we've got a scene in which John is told to measure the temple because it's about to be subject to a significant attack.

It says, I was given a reed like a measuring rod, and that scene itself is an echo again Ezekiel. And I was told to go and measure the temple of God and the altar and its worshippers.

But exclude the outer court, do not measure it, because it has been given over to the Gentiles. They will trample on the holy city for 42 months. And I will appoint my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1260 days, clothed in sackcloth.

They are the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth. For if anyone tries to harm them, fire comes down from their mouths and devours their enemies.

[196 : 59] This is how anyone who wants to harm them must die. They have power to shut up the heavens so that it will not rain during the time they are prophesying.

And they have power to turn the waters into blood and to strike the earth with every kind of plague as often as they want. Now when they have finished their testimony, the beast that comes up from the abyss will attack them and overpower them and kill them.

Their bodies will lie in the public square of the great city, which is figuratively called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified. For three and a half days, some from every people and tribe and language and nation will gaze on their bodies and refuse their burial.

The inhabitants of the earth will gloat over them and will celebrate by sending each other gifts because these two prophets had tormented those who live on the earth. But after the three and a half days, the breath of life from God entered them and they stood on their feet and terror struck those who saw them.

Then they heard a loud voice from heaven saying to them, come up here. And they went up into heaven in a cloud while their enemies looked on. At that very hour, there was a severe earthquake and a tenth of the city collapsed, seven thousand people were killed in the earthquake and the survivors were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven.

[198 : 20] Okay, now this is kind of unfair to ask you to think about this passage at this moment in the day. We're getting deep into things and it's all getting a little bit confusing. And we only have 16 minutes to talk about it.

And then I'm going to go away and you're going to be really confused. No, hopefully not. So what I want to suggest is this, is that this scene too is another way of talking about the people of God.

So we've seen 144,000 people, we've seen a great multitude that no one can count, and now we've got two people. Here the two people are described as witnesses.

Because fundamental to what it means to follow Christ is to bear the testimony of Jesus, is to be witnesses in the world. In the Old Testament, for a witness's testimony to be counted as true, you had to have at least two witnesses.

So this is part of that biblical theme of true witness of saying what is true in a court of law. So now the people of God, this is not just two special individuals, this is not Billy Graham and the Pope, this is the whole people of God being described in their witnessing and prophetic function.

[199 : 37] And notice how in their work they in fact live like and act like and experience the life of two Old Testament figures.

Who do they remind us of? Two Old Testament figures whose actions and experience are kind of evoked in the scene. Say that.

Moses is one of them. What makes you think of Moses? What's that? Yes, but specific things that it says about it. What does it say? The place and turn the water to blood.

Right? There's specific things there that they can do. And who else? Elijah. Because they are able to shut the sky, make it not rain and so on. Okay? So there are specific allusions here in the scene to Moses and Elijah.

In other words, they stand as the prophets par excellence of the Old Testament. And what did they have in common in their ministries? right?

[200 : 42] Exactly. They stood against the power of their day. Right? Moses stood against Pharaoh and Elijah stood against Jezebel and Ahab and the prophets of Baal and so on.

And so they are examples to us of what it means to be the prophetic people of God. What does it mean to be people who bear witness? And what's it going to entail and what's it going to cost?

Because notice their enemy. They have an enemy that comes up from the bottomless pit, from the abyss, who makes war on them and kills them. See what I've been saying all of is that the prophets who bear witness become martyrs, but at the end are raised from the dead.

And the resurrection that they experience coincides with the destruction of the world. The whole world ends at the time of their resurrection, which is what's described for us at the end of the passage.

So notice there what it says, that while they are engaged in their ministry, in their work of bearing witness, of standing against the powers of their time, in a sense they're indestructible.

[201 : 57] They have power to shut up the heavens so that it won't rain during the time of their prophecies. They have power to turn the water into blood, to strike every kind of plague, Moses and Elijah. But when they have finished their testimony, the beast that comes up from the abyss will attack them and overpower them and kill them.

And so in the end, they experience what Christ himself experienced, who stood up to the powers of his day, in a sense is indestructible all the way through his life until the moment when he lays down his life.

life. And the connection to Jesus is made explicit, the sense in which they have a parallel life to Jesus. Because it says their bodies will lie in the public square of the great city.

Now this is not a literal city. We're told specifically it's figurative. It says they lie in the great city which is figuratively called Sodom. Why is it called Sodom? Sodom is the immoral city of the world.

It's called Egypt because it's that whole story of the Exodus, the evil empire as it were, the place of slavery. And then it says where also their Lord was crucified.

[203 : 08] What? In what sense was Jesus crucified in Sodom or in Egypt? Well in the sense that Jesus was crucified in the capital of the world as it were. Because in this narrative, in this cosmic drama, Christ was crucified in the city of the dragon.

So it's a dramatic statement that's being made. That those who follow the lamb and bear witness to the lamb ultimately follow the lamb wherever he goes. They too have a powerful ministry until it's time for them to be killed.

And then their bodies are left for three and a half days and then they are raised from the dead in power at the end of it all. So revelation in this provocative, disorienting, sometimes overwhelming way is saying to us that those who follow the lamb come to be like the lamb.

We follow the lamb in all kinds of ways. We have a spiritual connection to Christ that will play out in our lives in ways perhaps that we haven't anticipated.

Ultimately, we are those who are worshippers of God. Worshipping God entails following Christ, following the lamb wherever he goes.

[204 : 28] Following the lamb wherever he goes takes us into a battle with the forces of evil, an ancient hostility that dates back to the beginning of time, all the way back to the garden.

So we're called then to answer this question, are we those who will overcome? Revelation is a call to endurance, it's a call to faithfulness.

It says those who overcome will experience all of the blessings of the end of the book. And then we do come, ultimately in the end, and I know that we're all out of time, but I don't want to end without at least giving some indication to the amazing scene that we have at the end of the book when Satan has been bound, when the judgment is complete, and he says, I saw a new heaven and a new earth, chapter 21, the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, there was no longer any sea, which is a strange reference, but it's because the sea in the book of Revelation is a kind of equivalent to the abyss, and it talks about how God himself will be with his people.

In verse 3 it says, I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, look, God's dwelling place is now among his people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, God himself will be with them, he will be their God, he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.

And the one seated on the throne says, I am making everything new. Amen. Amen.

[206 : 20] Okay, we've got eight minutes, no, seven minutes left to ask a question. Yes, please. Can you smooth out the transition from Rome to being with some people who are in God in a way that it sounded like you were just talking in the future?

So, the way that the story unfolds of course is that when the rider returns, he overthrows the dragon and the forces of the dragon.

So, in the first century, the way that Revelation depicts things is that Rome is in a sense a tool of the dragon. Rome is the instrument of the dragon in the world who the dragon is using to persecute the people of God.

So, Rome is overthrown as an aspect of the victory of God. But there is an abrupt ending in the sense that at the end of it all, the world is, the kingdom of the world is overthrown in the final battle.

That leads to the judgment, and after the judgment it says that everything that had existed was wrapped up and left, fled from the presence of God.

[207 : 34] If you go to chapter 20, it says in verse 11, the great white throne, it says, then I saw the great white throne and him seated on it.

The earth and the heavens fled from his presence. There's this moment between the end of the world and the beginning of the life to come, in which there's a scene of judgment, where God is seated on the throne.

And it says, the earth and the heavens fled from his presence. There was no place for them. And then it talks about how people stand before the great throne and they are judged and so on. And then at the beginning of 21, it says, then I saw a new heaven and a new earth and all things are made new.

So Revelation depicts kind of wrapping up of all things in judgment and then a completely new order of things in the life to come. Anyone else?

Please. start by the idea of Revelation about the new heaven and the new earth.

[208 : 48] Maybe you mentioned why there's any new heaven and it seems to believe that we die in heaven. What's wrong with that heaven when we go to heaven?

Yeah. Excellent. So Revelation and much of the New Testament, the Bible generally participates in an ancient cosmology in the sense that it views the way that it views the universe.

It understands the universe in a kind of vertical fashion. It's like the universe is a multi-story building and we are kind of in the middle.

There is earth and then there are layers of heaven above and there are layers of underworld beneath. So for example Paul talks about being caught up into the third heaven in 2 Corinthians or in other places he talks about the heavenly places talks about forces of evil in the heavenly places.

So in the ancient framework there are multiple heavens there are layers of heaven without ever getting to the throne of God. So if you were to ask an ancient person where do the angels live or where do the demons live they live in heaven they live in the heavenly places without that being the throne of God or the realm of God so when it's talking about a new heavens and a new earth it's talking about the complete recreation of everything that's created because heavens in that scheme are part of the created order along with all of the created angels and created fallen angels and so on so it's the complete renewal of all things including the unseen world but it's not the renewal of the throne of God that has been always there permanently beyond the heavens as it were through that returns to nothingness and a new one of the places or is it somehow going to be transitioned into this community from the world?

[211 : 19] I think that's a wonderful thing to contemplate. I don't think that Revelation specifically says that the language that it uses is of the current heaven and earth being sort of banished from the presence of God and then a new heaven coming down.

But the kind of scenario that you are asking about there is I think is perfectly legitimate theological reflection of what does it mean to think about renewal and about God taking up what was passed.

I guess it's the question about continuity and discontinuity. To what extent is what is new completely discontinuous with what we have now and to what sense is there continuity? We would want there to be continuity so that we can still be us.

If it was complete discontinuity then we could say well in what sense is you and I going to be in that new world even though we're raised from the dead? So the way that Paul talks about the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15 is to use the illustration of a seed and of the tree.

So the present life that we have in that passage is the seed and the tree or the plant is the fullness of life in the age of the resurrection.

[212 : 31] So we are planted and we are buried and we die as one thing and then we are raised to a new kind of thing. So he thinks of you plant a seed it seems to have died and then it grows up into this new glorious thing far beyond that seed.

But there is both continuity and discontinuity between the seed and the plant that comes after. Okay, I think that we will take one more half question.

We've had this is like a question, questions, and half a question. I absolutely cannot.

It's one of the great mysteries of the book of Revelation is the whole problem of the millennium, the finding of Satan and then the release of Satan. I would say the one thing that we might say is that the release of Satan speaks to us of the persistence of evil in the world and how radical the solution has to be in the end.

So simply finding Satan turns out to be inadequate to the task of eradicating evil from the world because as soon as he is let out he's able to deceive people again and so there needs ultimately to be the complete removal of Satan from everything into the lake of fire.

[213 : 55] But the question of why it's like that, why is he bound and then released and so on, it's just one of the very difficult things about Revelation. And I think that's a great note on which to end.

A reminder that in the end Revelation continues to be a mystery even though we say this at the level of the big picture Revelation has a clear message about the worship of the one who is on the throne and of following the Lamb wherever he goes.

Amen. Amen. Thank you.