

John, 1 John, and the Book of Revelation

Father, as we approach the end of this course,, I know these students have much on their minds, and I know that there is a lot of work ahead. There is a lot of stress and pressure at the end, and we would again avail ourselves of the peace that is offered in Christ, who says that He has rest that He offers to us and that His burden is light. I would pray that these students would know that light burden of serving their Lord Jesus, even in these last couple of weeks of class. Father, I would also ask that You be glorified in what we do today, for we ultimately desire to be Your servants, because You have given Your Son to us. You have given us all that we have; You have given us hope of eternal life; You have given us the privilege of calling You Father; You have given us the privilege of availing ourselves of the confidence of Your redemption and of the justification we have in Christ, as Your servant Paul has taught. You have given us the privilege of belief and of the instruction we have in Scripture, including the instruction we have in Your servant John. All of this we would desire to understand better, in order that we might glorify You in our ministry. And we pray that You would use this class to that end, in Your wonderful name, Amen.

When we left off last time, we were talking about John and Johannine theology. I had argued that the authorship of the Johannine literature—namely, the Gospel of John, 1, 2, and 3 John, and the Book of Revelation—is ascribed to John. In order to prove such, I had interacted a bit with Papias and the way that Eusebius, in my mind, misinterprets Papias. That is what we covered last time. We had also noted that there are a couple of explicit purpose-statements, especially in the Gospel of John and then also in 1 John. What I would like to do in this hour is answer this question: “What are the three or four things I really need to know in order to interpret John correctly?” That is what I want to address. I want to give you interpretive keys. I have mentioned before that my goal is not to give you an overview of the whole Gospel or the book of Revelation or any of the other works of John. We have other classes that cover that material. The way I want this class to function, as we talk about John and Paul especially, is to answer the questions, “What should I constantly have in the back of my mind as I interpret John? What should I have constantly in the back of my mind as I interpret Paul?” So I am giving you interpretive keys.

There are certain keys that I think are important as you look at the Gospel of John. The first has to do with its structure, and then we will look at the intended audience, and that will take us into the discussion of “believe” in the Gospel of John. I am also interested in the portrayal of Jesus there.

This the structure of the Gospel of John, roughly speaking: you have a prologue, which is 1:1-18, and you have a kind of epilogue, which is chapter 21 of the Gospel. Then in between you have the main body of the Gospel. Let me give you an example of that. You will of course recognize that the whole part in the beginning of the Gospel: “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God” takes us through to verse 18, and then finally we start getting into the narrative. John first sets us up with the cosmic perspective of what is happening. There is a Word, he is God, there is a witness to that word, he is John the Baptist, and then the Word becomes incarnate. That is kind of the big cosmic overview, and then he launches into what John the Baptist actually said. So that is the prologue.

The epilogue has to do with the end of John. There is a sense in which after Thomas sees Jesus and actually believes in Him, there is what is almost a concluding sentence: “Many other signs therefore Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may

have life in his name.” And there is a nice kind of concluding feeling to that, but then he goes on: “After these things Jesus manifested Himself again to the disciples in Tiberias.” And you have the reinstatement of Peter and a specific statement, too, about the disciple whom Jesus loved, and the question of whether he will die or not. There is a sense in which you kind of feel like the Gospel has concluded in chapter 20, but then there is also this concluding epilogue.

Now, some people have gone so far as to say that it is as if you do not need the prologue and the epilogue, and maybe they were added later. I do not think that is what is going on. Certainly the prologue, chapter 1:1-18, is related to the book, because a lot of the concepts that arise there—the discussion of light and darkness and even the incarnation of the Word (although the word “word,” *logos* in Greek, does not appear elsewhere in the Gospel with that exact meaning; it has other meanings) are signaled repeatedly throughout the rest of the Gospel of John in various ways. For example, the idea of the incarnation is highlighted in the way that Jesus gives these “I am” sayings—“I am such-and-such” and even just “I am”—which is, as you may know, effectively the name for the Deity coming out of the Old Testament. The same theme is especially apparent in the way that the section in this whole center part ends in chapter 20 with the proclamation of Thomas falling at the feet of Jesus and saying, the Greek says, “to him,” He speaks to Jesus and says, “My Lord, my God,” looking at Jesus. So you have an explicit statement of deity at the end of the Gospel just as you have in the prologue. We could work through this, but what I am saying is that the themes in the prologue are then picked up elsewhere in the Gospel, which shows that the prologue is intentional and coheres very nicely with the rest of the Gospel.

The issue with regard to the epilogue in chapter 21—is this just kind of tacked on to the end? Well, there is a sense in which the verses that I read from chapter 20—about other signs that Jesus also performed, and then the statement that John has written these things in order that the readers may believe that Jesus is the Christ—feel like a nice conclusion, but they are not a necessary one. It is a statement of purpose of the book, but that does not mean that that is all there is to say in the book. And in point of fact, the book seems very interested in reinstating Peter. You will remember that Peter is asked three times whether he loves Jesus, and Jesus each time tells him to “shepherd [his] sheep” or “Take care of [his] flock.” Well, of course, earlier in the Gospel, Peter denies Jesus three times. So you have a very clear structural reinstatement of Peter that parallels very nicely what went on earlier in the Gospel. Then there is this question of tension related to the beloved disciple, apparently a tension during the time he wrote that some people thought he was not going to die. He wants to make sure to clarify in chapter 21 that that is not what Jesus said. So although there is a sense in which it ends in chapter 20, the things in the epilogue cohere very nicely with what came before, so the whole Gospel fits well together.

Now in terms of the center section of the Gospel, the rest of chapter 1 through chapter 11, and chapters 12 through 20 are often divided in that way, between the end of chapter 11 and the beginning of chapter 12. In particular, in these first 11 chapters, Jesus presents seven signs, and He also makes the “I am” sayings. That seems to cohere together, so people will speak of this as “the book of the seven signs” as if the first half is about the seven signs, and then they will group together the material that comes afterward as if it is the action leading up to the crucifixion and resurrection, as well as Jesus’ last prolonged instructions to his disciples. That is what you have in the latter half of the book.

I think, roughly speaking, that this structure works well; however, I would note that there are not just seven signs in the Gospel of John. In addition to the seven signs or the seven miracles, starting with the changing of water to wine in Cana, there is also an eighth sign in the Gospel of John. It is very important that you recognize it, and it is the death and resurrection of Jesus. The resurrection of Jesus functions as a sign such that when Jesus appears and Thomas says, “My Lord and my God,” and He talks to them, saying, “Because you have seen me, you have believed. Blessed are those who do not see and yet

believe.” The next thing is the passage that I have already quoted twice and will now quote for a third time: “Many other signs therefore Jesus also performed in the presence of his disciples.” In other words, from the point of view of the Gospel, Jesus’ resurrection appearance was a sign that He is who He claims He is.

And in this first book, chapters 1 through 11, where he does present a lot of signs and the “I am” sayings, they mutually confirm each other. In other words, the signs prove that what Jesus says about Himself—“I am the truth, I am the light, I am the door, I am the resurrection,” those famous sayings—are proved by the actions that He does. So when He raises Lazarus from the grave, the whole point is that He has just told them, “I am the resurrection,” and He proves the point that He is the resurrection. So the signs confirm who Jesus is. In many ways, the whole Gospel is about who Jesus is, which is of course true of all the Gospels, but it is also very true of this one. So those are some comments on the structure of the Gospel of John.

Next we will discuss the intended audience of the Gospel of John, and I will weave this in with our third point as well, which is what it means to believe in the Gospel of John. Please turn to chapter 20 of the Gospel of John. I just read to you this very important passage about Thomas and what Jesus is doing with Thomas. The narrative all has to do with belief. What is Thomas’ issue? Well, Thomas was not there when Jesus appeared. Thomas is there now, and the other disciples tell him that they have seen the risen Lord. Thomas’ response is, in verse 25, “Unless I shall see in his hands the imprint of the nails, and put my finger into the place of the nails, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.” So the issue is that he will not believe unless he sees it. After eight days, Jesus shows up and says, “Peace be with you,” verse 27, and then he says to Thomas, “Reach here your finger, and see my hands; and reach here your hand, and put it into my side; and be not unbelieving, but believing.” The whole point is to create faith in Thomas. “Thomas answered him and said, ‘My Lord and my God!’” Jesus’ response—and this is about you and me—is “Because you have seen me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see and yet believed.”

Has anyone here seen the risen Lord? You do not have to raise your hand if you have. Most of us have not. I expect you will grant me that. You are more blessed than Thomas—that is the point here—because your faith is in a context that you did not actually have to physically see Him and hold on to Him. There is a sense in which Thomas’ faith is not up to where yours is. You see these kinds of gradations in belief that are assumed there. The ones who do not need to see are more blessed than those who need to see in order to believe. In point of fact, it is then in that context that John says, “These things are written in order that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God and that believing you may have life in his name.” That is the context of our point about belief.

I pointed out to you last time that belief here is not a light switch, but it is more of a knob that you can turn from lower to higher. There are degrees of belief, and if you want an illustration of that you can go to chapter 11 of the Gospel where there is this whole series of people who are at different stages of faith. The initial context is that of Lazarus, and Lazarus is dead, and Martha and Mary are extremely sad, because he is their brother. Jesus hears about this, as we read in verse 3, “‘Lord, behold, the one whom you love is sick.’ But when Jesus heard it, he said, ‘This sickness is not to death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified by it.’” He is expecting to be glorified by this, and so, having heard that this great comrade and friend of His is sick, He sits around for a couple of days. He waits until the man is completely dead and buried in a tomb before He shows up. Then He says that it is time to go. So the text says, “Jesus said, ‘Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep,’” verse 11, showing that Jesus knew that by His waiting around, Lazarus was going to die and end up in a tomb. Jesus knew what He was doing when He waited around. Then he decides to go there. Jesus says plainly, “Lazarus is dead,”

verse 14, because the disciples do not understand that he is dead, and then Jesus appears on the scene. Beginning in verse 14, we read, “Lazarus is dead, and I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, so that you may believe, but let us go to him.” Now wait a second! These are the disciples who have given of their lives, followed Jesus around, and heard His “I am” sayings. Repeatedly throughout the Gospel there are groups of people who are said to believe. The disciples are clearly in that group, and yet somehow this resurrection of Lazarus is supposed to help them believe, but they already believe. Well, effectively, what I think is going on there is that Jesus is taking the knob of where they are in their belief and He is turning it up a few notches, making it a little brighter, so that they believe even more and understand even more who He is.

When Jesus arrives, Martha comes to Him and she is quite distraught, and Jesus says to her, “Your brother will rise again.” Martha says, verse 24, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” Well, that is belief. It is belief that the resurrection will occur on the last day. Jesus says to her, “I am the resurrection and the life.” There is that “I am” saying that He is going to prove by His miracle. “I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me shall live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?” You see, this is all about belief again. And she says to Him, “Yes, Lord, I have believed”—*I have believed*—“that you are the Christ, the Son of God, even he who comes into the world.” Martha is already a person of faith, and yet there is a sense in which her faith is not yet appropriate to the context. Mary runs to Jesus and He weeps with her, and then we get to verse 39. Remember, Martha is the one who has believed, and what has she believed about Jesus? Not just that He is a great man, but she has believed that He is the Christ, the Son of God, the one who comes into the world. All of that is high Johannine Christology; she believes the things that one needs to believe about the Messiah. That is who Martha is in verse 27. We get to verse 39, where Jesus tells them to remove the stone. Martha, the same person who just professed her belief, “the sister of the deceased, said, ‘Lord, by this time there will be a stench, for he has been dead for four days.’” In other words, he is going to stink! “Jesus said to her, ‘Did I not say to you, if you believe, you will see the glory of God?’” And so they remove the stone and Jesus raises His eyes and He says, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me, and I know that you always hear me, but because of the people standing around I said this, that they may believe that you sent me.” And he says, “Lazarus, come forth!” Now, the result, verse 45, “Many, therefore, of the Jews, who had come to Mary and beheld what he had done, believed in him. But some of them went away to the Pharisees, and told them the things which Jesus had done.” And then the thing the Pharisees are concerned with, verse 48, “If we let him go on like this, all men will believe in him.”

How many times can John mention the word “believe” in a single narrative? It is as if he is saying, “Do you get the point?” But do you also see that there are a variety of characters with whom Jesus is interacting? Understand that we are supposed to identify with them in various ways, or not identify with them, depending on who they are. And in this narrative, there are the Pharisees, who do not believe. They refuse to believe, even though Jesus raises people from the dead. There are also the people in the crowds, some of whom run off to the Pharisees and tell them what happened, and others of whom clearly believe, because the text says they believe, but they only believe because they have seen it. There is Martha, who already professes belief, but she needs her belief to increase, to really believe that Jesus can do in that moment exactly what He says He can do, because He really is the resurrection and the life. You see, then, that there is this whole range of belief in the narrative, and in each instance, what Jesus is trying to do is take people from where they are and increase their belief a little bit more.

If that is the case, then what is the intended audience of the Gospel of John? It is not just unbelievers, but it is everybody who follows Christ or who is interested in Christ, because all of us need to be challenged again with who Jesus is. This is the man who, if He came right now to earth, and one of us

had recently had a brother die, He could say, “I am going to raise him from the dead right now.” That is who Jesus is. That is the kind of power He has, and that proves that He is the resurrection and the life, and thus, the final resurrection and eternal life is in his hands at this point in time. We need to believe that in the deepest parts of our souls. It is hard to believe sometimes, especially when you face death. Many of you are young, and you have not really faced death yet, but when you sit next to a corpse, as I have done, what is your response in that moment? Your response is ultimately to be, “Jesus is the resurrection and the life.” That is where our faith is really put into practice. So that is the intended audience. In other words, you are the intended audience. Even though John speaks simply and uses simple Greek and repeats himself a lot, especially about belief, this book is for you, so read it again and again and again.

Let me also note that the other aspect of the intended audience is that he plunges right into the Gospel with the prologue: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” Just pretend for a second that you have not heard that dozens, if not hundreds or thousands, of times before. Pretend for a second that this is the first time that someone has come and said this to you, and this is the beginning of the book: “In the beginning was the Word.” What is your initial response? What is a “word”? “And the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” What is your response? How in the world can a “word” be a “god”? “He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being by him, and apart from him nothing came into being that has come into being. In him was life, and the life was the light of men.” What is a “light of men”? What is a “life”? How can a person be life? “And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not comprehended it.”

What I would challenge you to do is to read through the Gospel of John as if you never knew it, and just see how often things come up in the Gospel that fundamentally, your initial reaction should be (and I would argue, should properly be), “What in the world are you talking about, John?” Then you will realize that later in the Gospel, Jesus is the resurrection and the life—illustrated by the resurrection. He is the light of the world, as we have seen light mentioned just now in chapter 1. So everything comes back again, and the whole thing coheres, but there is a sense in which you are not prepared to read the prologue of John until you have read the whole Gospel of John. This is, in my mind, like movies today. Movies go so fast today because, in part, the filmmakers want you to buy the DVD so that you will watch it again to catch up on the things you did not catch before. John is like that, only even more so, because you read through it, and it is just so shocking initially that it takes multiple readings before you start to understand what is really going on and some of the complexities of the Gospel. That is another argument that the intended audience here is not naïve unbelievers, although it certainly includes them, but it is also people who have been Christians all their lives, perhaps, and need to read the Gospel again as if for the first time. There are some comments on the intended audience and “belief” in John.

Obviously, the question that all of this raises is “who is Jesus?” That is what John begins with: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” Who is this Word? He effectively starts you with a question by beginning with this statement that is supposed to cause you to think, “Who is this man?” That is effectively what is happening again and again. With the seven “I am” sayings and the signs, he is supporting the proposition that the Word was God and what that means with all of its implications for our lives. The implication when he says, “I am the way and the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father but through me” is that we have one access to God the Father, and that is through God the Son. That is the challenge of the Gospel.

If you go to the Gospel with that mindset, then I think you will find it exciting to read. Instead of saying, “Oh, yes, I know that already,” go again with a blank slate and let it challenge you, because that is what the Gospel is supposed to do. That is all I wanted to say about the Gospel of John, although I do want to

answer a few questions before we go on. The first question has to do with the purposes of 2 and 3 John, which I did not talk about. The purposes of 2 and 3 John have a lot more to do with interacting with specific heresies that were going on in the church and warning people not to be hospitable to those who are fundamentally heretics.

The next question has to do with the passage in John 20:31, which says that Jesus did many other things that John did not write down. The question is why John chose to be so selective. There is a sense in which John is saying that he was selective, and he chose to write what he did for a purpose, that is, of producing belief that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. That is the basis of his selection, but he is also acknowledging in that verse that there is a lot more that Jesus did. Some of the church fathers had the idea that John knew the other canonical Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—possibly all three, but at least one of them, and he intentionally included in his Gospel the things that they did not include, and thus he says that many other things could be said, but he has selected the material that we need to know about in order to produce belief. That is possible, as well. Certainly it is acknowledging that in three years of ministry, Jesus did a lot more than John tells us about in the Gospel. In effect, he is also saying that Jesus is even more amazing than He was able to represent in just 21 short chapters.

I want to talk about 1 John for a moment. In our beginning Greek series, we read through 1 John in Greek, and so I have taught through 1 John a number of times. One of the things that is very striking when you go through 1 John is that the man keeps returning to certain topics. The word “walk” occurs repeatedly, as does the word “love.” He cannot get over the concept of love, and we say, “You have already said that, John; we know we are supposed to love one another.” He comes back to it again and again, as well as to issues of light and darkness and issues of how we conduct ourselves.

The way I view the Gospel of John is that I would hate to be asked on an exam to provide an outline of the Gospel of John. I have seen a variety of outlines of the Gospel of John, and inevitably they are either too simple or too complex. They are either too simple, so that if you look at the three parts of the outline, they do not adequately represent what is in each of the sections, or they are too complex, so that you have so many levels of detail that there is no way that anybody could remember it. And the reason why I think it is difficult to outline John’s Gospel is because of the way I see John’s writing in 1 John. His writing is like this: here is a theme, and here is another theme that kind of goes along with it. Then he leaves that one for a while and then comes back to another theme, then he brings this one back in, and the point of all the repetition of the themes is to make sure that when you leave the book, you really do have the idea that we are supposed to love one another.

This is similar to some forms of preaching that go on in some third-world contexts, where the preacher will repeat himself again and again. The flow of the logic is not “A to Z,” but it is “A, B, A-prime, B-prime, C, A-prime, B, C, C, A, B”—it just keeps coming back to a few key things so that by the time you finish, you have a feel for how one ought to conduct one’s life, instead of a single “A to Z” kind of logical sequence. If you approach 1 John that way, I think it frees you to enjoy why he is bringing up each theme again. If there were one key I would give you to reading 1 John, it would be that: let him recapitulate his themes. Let him come up with things again and again, and enjoy that.

It makes it difficult to preach through 1 John, honestly, because either you have to take the book as a whole, or, if you start breaking it down into certain chapters, you will realize that people will hear the same sermon for several weeks, because the same topics come up again and again. Another way to approach it is to go through 1 John topically and first take the “love” theme, then the “walk” theme, then the “light and dark” theme, and so forth. That is an issue that comes up in preaching and teaching this book. Anyway, in 1 John you have a recapitulation of themes and a lot of the same purposes, basically,

that are in the Gospel of John: the essence of the Christian life, the importance of belief, and the importance of love are all found in both.

Well, I want to do the book of Revelation in 10 minutes, so that should be pretty straightforward. If there is a book in the New Testament that people are the most afraid to read, it is the book of Revelation. On the other hand, there are groups of people who are not afraid of Revelation at all, and my response to them is, “You should be a lot more afraid than you are,” because they are more confident of their interpretation of it than they should be. However, somewhere in between, I think, lies the way we should approach the book of Revelation. If you are afraid of it, do not be afraid; if you are not afraid, then be afraid. I am trying to encourage you to approach it with some more trepidation than you might, but do not be unwilling to read it.

We go through four class periods on Revelation in my course on the general epistles and Revelation, so there is a lot that can be said, but if I were to distill it into a few pieces of advice that would help get you into the book, the first would be—and these may not be where you would think of starting, but here it is—the book of Revelation is, in my mind, a mixed genre. People argue over whether the book of Revelation is an apocalypse; some say it certainly is, because after all, the book kind of coined the term. “Apocalypse” is the Greek word we translate as “revelation.” If it is part of the apocalyptic genre, that would make it most similar, for instance, to the end of the book of Daniel, parts of Zechariah, and certain Old Testament books like that and then also this whole Jewish genre of apocalyptic literature—some books that you have probably never read and I am not asking you to, like 1 Enoch, 4 Ezra, and books like that that have an apocalyptic feel to them. Apocalyptic literature is effectively an unveiling of heaven, permitting someone to go up into heaven (as is done in the book of Ezekiel, for instance) and see what is there so that they can go back to earth and report that with the point of encouraging people to service, knowing that ultimately they are going to win in the end. That is the apocalyptic approach.

Now obviously the book of Revelation does that, but there are also chapters 2 and 3, which have these so-called letters to the seven churches. I do not think that is the proper way of speaking of chapters 2 and 3. There are not seven different letters in the book of Revelation. The book of Revelation is itself a letter. The whole book is a letter. If you turn to the beginning of Revelation, I will read from Revelation 1:4, which says, “John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace, from him who is and who was and who is to come; and from the seven Spirits who are before his throne.” That is a modified, but still typical, address to a letter—“John to the seven churches.” John did not write to individual churches. He wrote to seven churches all at once. He has specific things to say to each of the seven churches, and that is what he does in chapters 2 and 3, but they are not seven different letters. So this is a letter, and as such, John has an intent to the letter, and that is ultimately to encourage these people in their Christian walk, in spite of the possibility of persecution, and also in spite of the way that they have been Christians for a while now and they are somewhat falling away from their first love.

If Revelation is apocalyptic, then you have to understand it in some ways on the basis of analogy with the books of Ezekiel and Daniel, and so forth, in the apocalyptic genre. In the apocalyptic genre, there are symbols that are represented as heavenly symbols that stand for things. Certainly, you would recognize that that is the case in the book of Revelation; we have symbols in the book of Revelation that are presented for us, and so at times you have to decode the symbols. That is true. At the same time, if the book of Revelation is an epistle, if it is a letter, then you have to understand that it has a purpose, and that is to address seven literal, historical churches in the first century. So it is a very contextualized book; it speaks to a group of churches in Asia Minor in the first century, which means you need to understand the situations in those churches in order to rightly understand what is going on in the book. Thankfully, in chapters 2 and 3 you get hints of what he is particularly concerned about in those

churches. Some are in danger of falling prey to the practice of the Nicolaitans, which was a kind of heresy. Some have undergone persecution and will undergo more persecution, and they need to be reminded to overcome in the midst of that. Some have lost their first love.

If you remember those things, the facts of those seven churches, then, as you go on in the rest of the book of Revelation and say, “Now let me see: if I were undergoing persecution, how would the rest of this book feel to me?” Or, “Let me see: if I were in danger of being entrapped in heresy, how would the rest of the book of Revelation appear to me?” Or, “If I had allowed my love (there is a question as to what the love is, but we will say the love of Christ) to fade and to be entrapped more and more in the earthly possessions of the world that is around me, how would I read the book of Revelation then?” And some suggestions would be, if I were undergoing persecution, the book of Revelation will say, “You think persecution is bad now, but you just wait. And do you know what? There is a heavenly reward for those who undergo persecution. For those who overcome, Jesus will establish them in the kingdom to come.” So I will endure the persecution. For those who are undergoing heresy, the rest of the book of Revelation will tell them that there is Jesus, and there is one right way to worship and follow Jesus. There is also satanic opposition that will attempt to lure away the church, and we dare not go on that path, because where that ultimately ends up is, literally, in the pit, whereas if we persevere and overcome and follow Jesus, we are secure in the end. If I am caught in the materialism in the world around me—I think this is perhaps the most applicable to the context of most Americans—Revelation will tell me to realize that that is under the god of this age, and that god is failing, and that I need to be willing to forsake all things in order to passionately follow Jesus, because the reward at the end is greater than any reward I will find in the present.

So if you view the historical situations of the churches, that gives us a lens with which to view the rest of the book of Revelation. We need to read it as if we are in the first century, enduring what they are enduring, and then apply it to our lives today. I think one of the great problems that people have with the book of Revelation is that they skip that step of “What did it say to people in John’s day?” and they immediately go to, “Okay, what does it mean to me today?” There are some extremes there. One extreme is to say things like, “I wonder if Gorbachev is 666.” I had that conversation across the table when my wife and I were raising financial support to go on staff with a college ministry. We had this wonderful couple who prayed a lot, and they were convinced that Gorbachev, who at the time was the leader of the Soviet Union, was the antichrist. Obviously, you know, there have been misidentifications of those kinds of figures throughout time, and that is because people too quickly rush to modern application instead of thinking about how to view the book from a first-century lens. So that is one of the consequences of understanding the genre of epistle.

The last aspect of the genre of Revelation is that it is intended to be prophecy. It is intended to be prophetic in a sense similar to the prophetic books of the Old Testament, especially Ezekiel and Daniel, that use the apocalyptic genre. We see this because the book ends with John saying, “...and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of *this prophecy*, God shall take away his part from the tree of life and the holy city, which are written in this book” (emphasis added). This is prophecy, so it does speak of the future, at least in some respects. That is why I have a predilection to viewing this as at least having some future referent. Second, prophecy is a lot more complex than we like to think.

I tried to illustrate that toward the beginning of this course when we looked at prophetic statements about the Messiah, or prophetic statements about whether the Messiah will die or whether He will be resurrected. We had to acknowledge that there is a trajectory in the Old Testament that was heading in a certain direction, but exactly what it would look like in the end was a little hard to say. I may have used the illustration that came from Willem VanGemeren, who is a very fine Bible theologian and Old

Testament scholar. I wrote a thesis under him. Have I used the rose illustration? He is a Dutchman, and he has a garden, and there is a rose that is planted there in the garden. You know that it will be a rose, because you planted the rose, and you know that it will come up, but you do not know if it will go to the right or to the left, and you do not know the exact coloration or which flower will come up first or where the thorns will be or where the leaves will be. There is an exciting dynamic about gardening where you plant something and you know what it will be, but yet at the same time nature is constantly doing things that you do not expect. So there is a wonderful dynamic of engaging in, “I know, and yet I do not know,” and being surprised and enjoying the surprise in the process. I think if you view prophecy in those terms, then it also frees you to a certain extent, when you come to New Testament prophecy in the book of Revelation, to see that we have trajectories here as well. We know that there will come a point in time where Christ returns, and we also know that the Church will undergo a variety of persecutions before that, but we do not know all the events and the times and the places and how and why it will all happen. And I do not think that we absolutely have to know all that, either, because in a sense, really what matters with the book is the big picture. If I am undergoing persecution, I need to overcome, and this gives me warrant to see overcoming as worthwhile. That is effectively what is going on in the book.

So I am arguing, then, that the mixed genre should dictate the way we read Revelation. The apocalyptic genre calls us to look at the symbols, the epistolary genre calls us to look at the first-century context, and the prophetic genre calls us to understand the trajectory but also to hold it a little loosely and not claim that we know that, for example, this particular aircraft constitutes what is proclaimed in the book of Revelation.

Someone might ask if I see any issues with the seven churches being limited to Asia Minor and none being in Achaia or other places. I think that is just John’s context. We know that he is off the coast in Patmos and that he has a connection to the church in Ephesus. He knows those churches. He knows their situations, and there is a sense in which Jesus reveals to him the specific situation of the churches there, the ones to whom he naturally would minister. He is not just talking about the persecuted in Asia Minor, because if you read about the seven churches in chapters 2 and 3 of Revelation, there are at least two churches where there is no mention of persecution. Not all the churches seem to be undergoing persecution at this time. There is the danger that the Church as a whole will undergo persecution, and that is certainly part of the book of Revelation, but not everyone is experiencing it, as far as I can tell, at least, in the book at this time.

By the way, have we talked about persecution in this course? I teach Sunday school occasionally at a local church here, and the first Sunday school class I ever taught, six years ago when we first moved to town, was a class on 1 Peter, because I really love the book of 1 Peter, as you may know by now. You know that 1 Peter talks a lot about suffering. I found that to be a very difficult Sunday school class to teach in a fairly well-to-do suburban American church, where suffering is basically, for most people, kind of like, “Someone made an obscene gesture at me while I was driving because of my Jesus bumper sticker,” or even more innocuous than that: “There were some people who kind of glared at me over coffee at the office because they know that I follow Jesus.” We do not understand what real suffering is, in many respects, at least compared to the rest of the church worldwide, and so trying to apply the book of 1 Peter in that context was difficult. Now, after I taught 1 Peter, I thought, “I am going to choose a book that does not deal with suffering,” because literally almost every Sunday school class had to do with suffering. So we would talk about suffering. I decided to teach on Philippians. Philippians is a book about joy, is it not? And right in the middle of the book of Philippians, there is all this suffering! And so I was stuck in my next Sunday school class talking about suffering. I cannot remember what I did right after that; I also eventually taught 2 Corinthians and 1 and 2 Thessalonians, and I kept looking for a book that did not have suffering in it. It was getting annoying, you can imagine, because I have the same

people in the Sunday school class time after time and they are thinking, “Why is he so interested in suffering?”

What I learned from that experience is that suffering is throughout the whole of the New Testament, because the church was in some ways a persecuted church in the New Testament period. It was not nearly as persecuted then as it is about to be, but there was the beginning of some persecution there. The Church worldwide, as a whole, undergoes persecution and suffering. In many ways we are inoculated to it in America. There is a German theologian named Helmut Thieleke, and Thieleke says, “Americans have an inadequate theology of suffering,” and that is so true. Do you want an example of it? Try to find a systematic theology or even a book on Christian ethics that has more than just a few pages on suffering. In fact, most of the systematic theologies will not even mention suffering as a theological theme, and yet it is a huge theme throughout the whole of the Old and New Testaments, but especially in the New Testament. So we do not have a theology of suffering, and the danger of that is that if true suffering ever comes upon Christians in America, they will not know what to do with it. That is very dangerous, and so one of the things I would challenge you to do is to be receptive to developing your own sense of how a Christian should approach suffering as you read through the New Testament. That is something that is important, and it is very much a part of the book of Revelation. I think one of the reasons why Americans end up speculating about tanks and helicopters when they come to the book of Revelation is that they do not understand the context of suffering and persecution and how this immediately speaks to that.

I want to talk about four different interpretive approaches to understanding the book of Revelation. Basically what you will find, if you read anything about the book of Revelation, is the author will ultimately end up having to take one of these four positions, and so you should at least know what these positions are. They are mentioned, as well, in Ladd.

The preterist position says that the book of Revelation is fundamentally about events before and leading up to 70 AD, when the temple was destroyed. So the preterist will come to the book of Revelation and will read the bulk of it as a prediction of the kind of sufferings that the church and the people of God experienced leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem. A preterist believes that when Jerusalem was destroyed, a new age began in which the church was then free, no longer bound by the temple and by Judaism, to proclaim its message. That, effectively, is the millennium, as many preterists will understand it.

The historicist approach says that the book of Revelation is about the history of the church. You will especially see this in the way that some people interpret Revelation chapters 2 and 3. Some people will argue that the seven churches that are mentioned in chapters 2 and 3 of the book of Revelation go sequentially through the history of the church, and so each church represented gives you maybe 200 or 300 years in the life of the church. I find this a very improbable way to read the book, because in my mind, when John was writing to seven churches in Asia Minor, and eventually the book was distributed in Asia Minor, how would they read it except, “Well, he says Ephesus. We are in Ephesus. He must be talking about us”? They would not have thought, “Oh, he must be talking about the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation.” So this is, I think, an improbable way to read chapters 2 and 3.

The idealist approach is that this is a book about ideas or themes that will occur repeatedly throughout the history of the church. You will actually have some very fine commentators, for instance, who will say, “What is the beast in the book of Revelation?” Well, there are a variety of ways that the beast is described. The interesting thing, certainly, is that there are correlations to the historical situation in Rome, so they will say, on the first instance, that the beast is Rome. It is the Roman opposition to the

church. Then the question is, "Where else do you see opposition to the church?" Well, you see opposition to the church in Albania today, you saw opposition to the church in Russia under the old Soviet Republic when atheism was officially endorsed, and you see opposition to the church in secular American society. So what is the beast? Well, the beast is the theme or idea of opposition to the church. When do you have the beast? Any time there is opposition to the church. So there is not just one beast, in terms of application, but everything that opposes the church is a beast.

The last position is the futurist position, and it holds that the book of Revelation is fundamentally predictive and looks to the future and describes the tribulation that will lead up to the millennium, the 1000-year reign of Jesus. (Whether the millennium is symbolic or not, whether it will be a literal thousand years or more or less, is a different question.) The futurist position says that there will be a 1000-year reign of Jesus, then Satan will be unleashed again, and Jesus will come again and judge the dead and then there will be a new heavens and a new earth and a resurrection reality. That will be the end of the old age as we know it. If you read through the book of Revelation sequentially, you have a predictive understanding of the book of Revelation.

By the way, Ladd breaks the futurist position into two positions. I forget his exact terminology, but he calls them something like a moderate futurist position and a radical futurist position. The latter is a dispensational understanding, and the former is what is known as the historic premillennial approach, where there is a millennium, but the church undergoes the tribulation leading up to the millennium. That is my own approach, by the way.

So you understand that there are these different matrices, and you can see how different they are: the book of Revelation is largely done with, the book of Revelation is largely yet to come, the book of Revelation is true for all time. That is effectively the distinction that is happening here. I cannot resolve for you which approach you should use, but if you understand that there are those different approaches and then you start reading about the book of Revelation, I would encourage you to read from several different perspectives and see which one makes sense to you. That is all I can really say at this stage. I can say that I find the historicist position to have some major problems, because it is difficult to fit the book of Revelation into the history of the church. It almost always feels like someone is kind of forcing it in there, so I do not think that is very likely.

Well, let me tell you where I come from personally, just so you have some sense of that, all right? There are aspects of, for instance, the description of the beast in Revelation that really are parallel to Rome in the first century. There is a mention of seven horns, for instance. Well, there are seven mountains that surround Rome, and so there are a lot of interesting correlations that could be made there. The problem is that the book of Revelation, if it is a preterist book, does not do a very good job of explaining the events leading up to 70 AD. It takes you in weird directions that simply do not seem to pan out with what we understand from history. Because of that, I do not think that it seems to be a preterist book, so I would be left with the idealist or the futurist position.

The other issue that I find in the book of Revelation is that there is sequence involved, such that the beast is introduced, and then some of his colleagues, and then Babylon is introduced, and then Babylon is destroyed, the colleagues of the beast are destroyed, and then the beast is destroyed, in that order. There is an order and a shaping to the book of Revelation. It is very well crafted and put together. But that order and shaping also assumes a temporal sequence in the introduction of the characters, which makes it more difficult for me to understand it in a kind of idealist, thematic way. It seems to me that it pushes you to an understanding of a kind of temporal sequence. That is kind of where I come from on this, and you will see Ladd argue about these things as well.

However, regardless of which one of these approaches you take, the best thing to see with the book of Revelation is that you have to stay with the big picture. You have to look at the forest and not just the trees, because the big picture is simple enough that any 10-year-old could read through the book of Revelation and tell you fundamentally what it is about. He or she would come out and say, “Wow, there are all these beasts and dragons and all this kind of thing,” and you would ask, “Well, what is it trying to say to us?” and he or she would say, “Well, I guess it is trying to say that the church is going to face a lot of trials, and it needs to endure.” And you would say that this person understands the book; that is what the book is about. So when you read through the book of Revelation, what I would really encourage you to do is to find yourself a whole hour where you can read from chapter 1 to chapter 22. There will be a lot of times when you will just be mystified, but you will get the big picture when you get to the end. If you understand that, then I think that fundamentally the book of Revelation has accomplished in you what John set out for it to do. So stay with the big picture, and you will be a lot more comfortable reading the book itself.