

BIB105 Biblical Hermeneutics

Unit 5c New Testament: Letters and Revelation

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Welcome back. Do you remember last lesson, we had a chance to study a little overview of the New Testament with the gospels and the Book of Acts? In this lesson, we're going to look at the other epistles of the apostles and the Book of Revelation. So let's go ahead and get started. So epistle essentially means letter. And there were five or six different authors throughout the New Testament, not including the gospels and Acts, of course. And so you have the apostle Paul who wrote 13 letters, John had three, Peter had two, James had one, Jude had one, and then the author of Hebrews. A little bit of dispute there as to who that actually was. It could be the apostle Paul. It could be Apollos. It could be someone else. So not really sure about who the author of Hebrews is. But regardless, you see that Paul was the one who wrote the lion's share of the letters in the New Testament. These letters were authoritative substitutes for personal presence. So if there were questions or issues that needed to be addressed but the apostles couldn't be physically present, they would write a detailed letter.

So how did these letters... how are they comparable to some other letters that we have from ancient times? There's a lot of other, actually, letters in the New Testament era, not biblical, of course. And so they tended actually to be a little longer than some of the ancient counterparts. Of the 14,000 private letters from the Greco-Roman antiquity, the average length was about 87 words, which is not a whole lot. Cicero and Seneca were a little wordier, if you will, in their writings. And Cicero only averaged 295 words per letter that he wrote, and Seneca averaged 995 words per letter that he wrote. Paul, on the other hand, his letters were considerably longer, at about 2,500 words per letter. Of course, Philemon being the smallest, 335. But Romans was huge. I can't even imagine how long it took him to write this, but it was 7000 plus words in that letter to the Romans.

So of course, they're authoritative substitutes for personal presence. They were situational, specifically dealing with a situation in a church, and not necessarily an exhaustive answer on a Christian doctrine. Sometimes they would even say, "Hey, we'll explain or go over this a little bit more once we see you face to face." Although Paul's letter to the Romans on salvation, as noted, being an extremely long letter, is pretty thorough and it's pretty safe to base your understanding of salvation on the Book of Romans. And of course, other letters, you add more details to that.

Point four. These were carefully written and delivered. Often, Paul had a secretary. Most of them did, although sometimes they did write with their own hand. And they usually had a trusted friend to deliver the letter, and sometimes these authors would include that in the closing remarks who was delivering or who you're going to look for who has this letter. And these were intended for the Christian community. And that's key here. This was for the body of Christ. This wasn't something that was just going to any unbeliever and just being published on public boards. These letters were often read out loud to the church, and these letters were often exchanged with letters to other churches. That was intentional. They had a small fellowship of believers and then a house church for the most part, or if they met at a synagogue, they were read out loud and then they would be swapped. And so actually, we see this in Colossians 4:16 where Paul says, "Hey, I wrote a letter to Laodiceans. You and Colossae, when you finish this one, can you swap letters with them?" And then of course, "I'm hoping to see you again."

So what's the form of some of these letters? Typical to most letters today, you have an introduction, name of the writer, the name of the recipients, a greeting, an introductory prayer. For example, in James 1:1, we see "James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations." And then he goes on. So that's very common. So from the opening verses, you see who the author is. And then of course, there's the body of the letter. Some common

elements are instruction, persuasion, rebuke, exhortation, and a few other elements there. And then a conclusion. They didn't usually just end abruptly because this was personal. They would end letters with some personal comments ranging from travel plans, like we see in Titus, to a doxology, which was a prayer, to specific greetings, to a list of individuals, like we see at the end of Romans.

So how do we interpret these New Testament letters? Well, the same five-step process. We'll stick to that because it works. What did the text mean to the biblical audience? Again, always look for context there. What were the differences between the biblical audience and us today? Step three, what are the theological principles in the text? Step four, how does our theological principle fit with the rest of Scripture? Step five, how should individual Christians today live out the theological principles? So you just want to keep that drumbeat of these five steps in your mind. Hopefully, it starts to take root.

So that was just a really quick overview of the epistles and letters. The Book of Revelation is a challenging book because it's so different than any of the other books in Scripture. And so what are some similarities, if you will? One, Revelation is a letter. It was a letter from John to the seven churches that are listed in chapters 2 and 3. It is a prophecy. We see that from the very beginning and then also at the end. But the one thing that's unique about Revelation is it's apocalyptic. Apocalypse is an unveiling, if you will. And kind of a lengthier definition: It's a divine revelation through a heavenly intermediary to a human author in which God promises to intervene in human history. And so this is a pretty special book. There's a number of different viewpoints in how to approach the Book of Revelation. And you'll get that in some additional reading that will be provided to you. And so I'll let you work through that.

As far as the historical context of the Book of Revelation, one, the early Christians were definitely eager for Christ's return. John was writing this book at the end of Domitian's reign, which was probably around 95 to 96 A.D. So this is a good 60 years after Christ had ascended into heaven. And so the early Christians, I mean, John was the last of the apostles that were around, but there was plenty of first generation Christians who had known the apostles, at this point may not have necessarily seen Jesus face to face but had definitely known the apostles and heard the stories. And so they were excited for Jesus to return. So that's something that is common.

They were experiencing persecution. John himself, as he's writing this, is exiled in the island of Patmos. We see that in Revelation 1:9. And these churches that he was writing to essentially is a post office drop in Asia Minor at the time. And some of these churches were remaining faithful even though things were tough. The church of Philadelphia was staying strong even though they were going through some tough persecution. But some were struggling. Pergamum and some others were starting to bend to some of the false teaching and starting to give in to some of the immorality. And so Jesus had some pretty strong words for each of those, a warning to each of them.

Emperor Domitian, if you don't know much about him, historically much like Emperor Nero in the 60's. He was not a good man. He ruled for about 15 years in the Roman Empire there, 81 to 96. And he was described by Roman historians as cruel, savage, devious, sexually immoral, mad, and evil. And getting some biographical information on Domitian, it makes your skin crawl. You definitely see a very, very dark side to this man, and it showed by his behavior, which was some of the things he did I can't even repeat. He wanted to be called our Lord and God, which was a direct affront to everything that we learned from Scripture about the true and living God. And so Christians obviously had to refuse to say this, but unfortunately, some had to pay with the price of their lives for this refusal.

So when you're interpreting Revelation, there's just some good reminders that I think all of us need to have as we approach it because there's a lot of different opinions as it relates to the meaning of Revelation and how to go about it. First of all, read Revelation with humility. There are some things that are just very difficult in this book. And so, as with any of the Scriptures, be willing to adjust our view to the biblical evidence. As we grow in the faith and as we become better students of God's word and the Holy Spirit teaches us more things, it's important that we're willing to adjust to the things that we learn and not try to impose our will or our frame of reference on the Scriptures. And so that's a key one. So be humble.

Two, try to discover the message that was written to the original readers before we jump in to see and look into some of the metaphors and how we can apply that to world events today. Look at the historical context and the biblical audience first. That's always a sound starting point. Number three, don't try to discover a strict chronological map of future events. If you look at the whole path of Revelation, you're looking at things that happened in the past, the present day in John's time, to future events. And sometimes things bounce back and forth. In Revelation 12, there seems to be this flashback, kind of a panorama of the history of Israel. And so just be careful of your coming up with some kind of chronology of events. There's some definite differences of opinion as it relates to some of these future things.

Number four, don't always take Revelation literally, but take it literarily. Like you would any other book, when you're looking at a simile or a metaphor, like in the gospels, for example, you don't take it literally. You are the salt of the earth. And Jesus says that in Matthew. But we take it literarily. He's obviously using a metaphor. Same is true in Revelation. Some of these images are not literal, but they do reference something that is literal. And so just kind of keep that in mind. And some of these things we just don't know. And so if you're not certain, don't then be definitive in your conclusions. Hold on to those loosely. And it's okay to say, "You know, this is what I think, but I'm not sure, and so I'm not willing to put my life on this one that this is exactly what this metaphor or this image means."

Number five, pay close attention to when John identifies an image or a metaphor. Of course, if John is saying "Hey, this is what these things mean," then there you go. It's pretty clear. So when the author himself defines the imagery, then you can feel safe with that. Another key, and this is real important. Look at the Old Testament and the context when interpreting symbols and metaphors. So many Old Testament references in the Book of Revelation, and so you want to make sure that you're understanding what's from the Old Testament and that context, and then comparing and contrasting that with what's in Revelation to try to get a more accurate understanding.

And then, of course, with so many other things, when you're getting into metaphors and similes and imagery, symbolism, focus on the main idea and don't press on the details. Again, metaphors and similes are good because they give us another way of looking at something that is literal and the main point. But like we examined with Jesus' confrontation with the Pharisees and calling them "You are like whitewashed tombs," you don't want to overanalyze every aspect of a whitewashed tomb and how those details can have some kind of literal translation into the Pharisees. Again, it starts to break down and you get lost in those. Just focus on the big picture and the main ideas.

Real simple overview of letters and Revelation. I have some additional reading material for you that will be provided. So it's kind of a supplement, especially with Revelation, but some other things as it relates to just interpretation of Scripture. So hopefully, those are helpful for you. The next overview we're going

to get into is Old Testament. We'll look at some of the narrative books as well as the law. And then, of course, the second half of that lesson on Old Testament would be on the books of poetry and the prophecy in the second half. So hopefully this is helpful. Look forward to learning with you again in the next lesson.