

You're Included - Gordon Fee - Interview

Dr. Fee talks with Mike Feazell about the book of Revelation and basic principles of understanding Scripture.

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JMF: Thank you for joining us on *You're Included*. Christians the world over look to the Bible as their guide to faith and practice. Yet from the inception of the church, there has been much disagreement over how to interpret what the Scriptures say. Our guest today has done much work in helping Christians with basic principles of rightly understanding the Bible.

Dr. Gordon Fee is a New Testament scholar and recently retired professor emeritus of Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia. He is considered a leading expert in the field of biblical interpretation, and is author of many books, including *New Testament Exegesis – a Handbook for Students and Pastors*, and *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* – which he co-authored with Douglas Stuart. Dr Fee's latest book *Revelation*, which will be part of the New Covenant Commentary Series published by Wipf & Stock [a.k.a. Cascade], is due for publication in 2010.

It's a pleasure to have you join us today.

GF: Thank you.

JMF: Before we begin, I should mention that we had several wonderful interviews with your daughter, Cherith.

GF: She will have done better than her dad would have done.

JMF: We'd like to begin by talking about your new book *Revelation*, which is based, as you explained to me, on your notes for your class at Regent, the last class before your retirement.

GF: Actually, it was my last class *after* retirement.

JMF: O, I see. And that's due to be published in the coming year.

GF: Yeah, hopefully, in early 2010.

JMF: We were talking about this earlier, and you mentioned that people either tend to approach Revelation by ignoring it all together, or by obsessing over it. What causes those two reactions?

The passion of my teaching life has been to get people not just to study the Bible but to learn to read the Bible well. And to do that, they have to have some sense of the differences of the materials that are in Scripture that make up the biblical text -- and Revelation is unique in the New Testament.

GF: I think it has to do with the kind of literature, the technical word is *genre*, the kind of literature that it is. And frankly more people, especially those raised in the King James Version, where every verse is a paragraph, so that every sentence, every verse, has equal ... to all of the rest of it, they don't think of it in terms of continuity or in terms of narrative or letter or parable, they just think in terms of little things called verses. And the net result is, not understanding the *kind* of thing that revelation is. They read it... they level it out – the whole New Testament is simply leveled out ... all read at the same level.

JMF: That's an interesting thought because it makes so much sense that we look at the Bible and it's divided up into chapters and verses, and as you just said, each verse is a paragraph, and so it does kind of come across as though verse 9 has no equal weight of the authority of the word of God and should be taken as important as verse 12 or verse 16 and we skip around like that... (**GF:** And

on its own and out of context.) but we don't read anything else like that.

GF: Nothing else. Nobody reads anything else the way we read the Bible. So the passion of my (what I call) teaching life has been to get people not just to study the Bible but to learn to read the Bible well. And to do that, they have to have some sense of the differences of the materials that are in Scripture that make up the biblical text, and the Revelation is unique in the New Testament. The only thing else like it in the canon is several chapters at the end of Daniel. But, the Revelation is not like Daniel – it's a different kind of apocalyptic material – that is very much in keeping with other intertestamental documents of this kind, of which this is but one – but certainly, the best and the greatest (what I would call) ten leagues ahead of and over all those intertestamental documents.

JMF: And intertestamental is referring to...

GF: ... between the Old and the New Testament (if you will) between Malachi and Matthew, 200-year period where a lot of these kinds of books were written.

JMF: But Revelation is the only one that appears in the...

GF: In the New Testament. Yeah, and there really is nothing as quite like it in the New Testament. But it was a common kind of literature for the people who received it. So they didn't come to it with great mystery and tried to dig out all the things. First of all, John knew his readers and they knew him. It's subversive literature. It's basically telling the Roman empire that their days are numbered – right at the height of their glory, when Rome had reached the peak of its power and universal domain, here is John, exiled, on a lonely island, basically facing towards Rome and saying, "God's got your number -- your days are coming to an end." It took 200 years for it to happen, but time wasn't John's big thing. It was the certainty of it. So that's what the Revelation is basically about. It's about God in charge of the universe and not the Roman Empire.

JMF: And so for us to read it and to try to take Revelation's symbols and act as though they're really about Mussolini, or they're really about Adolf Hitler, is to misunderstand what's going on in Revelation itself.

It's basically telling the Roman empire that their days are numbered – right at the height of their glory, when Rome had reached the peak of its power and universal domain, here is John, exiled, on a lonely island, basically facing towards Rome and saying, "God's got your number -- your days are coming to an end."

GF: Yeah, we wouldn't do that with one of Jesus' parables. Nor we do that with one of the letters of Paul. So why would we do that to this which is first of all, a letter. I mean it's to the seven churches. And he writes to them individually and everybody else is reading everybody else's mail. So, they're all in this together, but the document has to do with the fact that they are headed for a terrible holocaust. John recognizes that the martyrdom of Antipas of Pergamum [2:13] is the signal, the harbinger that it's going to get worse before it gets better. And that martyrdom is what really sort of tipped this off... trying to tell the people that the days to come are going to be far worse that you even imagine. And the catacombs are the clear example of the fact that John was right.

JMF: Let's talk about the catacombs. How do they demonstrate...

GF: Well, first of all, besides being places where Christians met, they were their tombs. And so the burials of Christians underground in huge numbers for those days – huge numbers, was clear evidence that they were an underground movement. Every time they came up above ground and lived well above ground for one emperor, another emperor comes along and wants to wipe them out so, underground they go again – literally underground. I'm curious as to where the language

"underground" comes from the fact that the early Christians literally went underground. So anyway, the Revelation is subversive literature, and the people who received it well understood that.

JMF: At the time John wrote, his readers would have understood apocalyptic literature and what the symbols are all about and so on, but when we read it today, what are the lessons we can learn from it, understanding that it's not written about our day in particular, but what do we draw from reading the book?

GF: The same thing that we would draw from reading the other New Testament book. What do we draw from reading Acts? Something about our history, something about what God was doing in the first century. What do we learn from Revelation? What God is about, how God is at work even in times of great distress. And that God is the victor. The book ends on the glorious note of triumph after all.

JMF: So we draw the same lessons they drew, but we don't have to be misreading Revelation as some kind of a book that's written *really* for us in our time as opposed to written to them, and looking for who is this beast going to be, who is this... (**GF:** Exactly. We know who the beast *was*.) who are the horns going to be and all that sort of thing. It seems that in every age, every generation of Christians, there's a big contingent that thinks that their day is the last days – that Christ is going to return in their day. They go to Revelation and find ways to manipulate the book to fit it with world events to be able to determine that their day is the end time. And that's been going on from the beginning of the church. Why do we feel the need to do that?

GF: Well, I really can't answer that question because I can't get into the heads of the people who think this way. On the other hand, we are to be ready constantly – the gospel song, "We cannot see what lies before and so we cling to him the more. Trust and obey." This is how we are to live. But "trust and obey" is how we are to live, not try to figure out all the details as to how it's all going to work out. So it's true, generation after generation went to the Revelation and claims some powerful figure like Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin, as the Anti-Christ. Come on... This is not about them, this is not about our days, it's about *that* day and where we can draw our parallels out of it like we do with everything else in Scripture. Romans wasn't written to us, but we hear it as a word for us. Revelation wasn't written to us, but we hear it as a word for us, once we understand it as a word for them, and what it was saying to them. That's a way of saying that God is in control and not the powerful empires of the world.

JMF: The tyrants are always around, and we're always safe in Christ's hands even if we die at the hands of tyrants (**GF:** right... especially if we die). Going to the Bible in general then, probably the most well-known book in any seminary is the one that you authored with Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*. And you get into some of these principles of reading the Bible, in the way that it was written, in the way that it was intended, and then looking at what sort of lessons we might draw from that. When a person sits down to read the Bible, what are the common, typical mistakes they make?

GF: The first... there are two firsts in this, ok? The first if get rid of the numbers. The numbers intrude, there are no numbers in the original text, just get rid of the numbers – (**JMF:** the verse designation and the chapter designation), the verse designation, yes. The Bible Society [Biblica] is actually putting out a translation, TNIV, without the numbers. So that's got paragraphs that are meaningful, but the numbers are out in the margin out here so you know where you are... the numbers intrude and there were no numbers in the original, I can assure you, nor in any copy for 1,500 years. The numbers were inserted by ... what's his name [Robert Estienne], he was doing it on a horse, I think, when he was traveling across Europe. But the numbers are simply ways of finding things. They have nothing to do with the text. So the first thing one has to do to learn to read well is to get rid of the numbers, in one's head – not necessarily go through and scratch them out in your Bible. And once one does that, then you start thinking and reading in paragraphs, the way you read anything.

But even before that, and this is the really important thing – what kind of thing am I reading? You don't read a love letter the same way you read a court document. People *know* that, by instinct. They come to Scripture and they have all of this marvelous variety of inspired stuff, in this variety, and level it all. (JMF: So we read everything the same way.) ...everything the same way. So it's like reading a love letter and reading a court document the same way with no sense that these really are different kinds of things. (JMF: Or of reading of poem as though it's headline news story in the newspaper.) Instinctively people do understand that the Psalter is poetry and that the doublets are doublets – most people really do catch that. Others don't have a clue that the doublets are doublets but you know they...

JMF: Let's talk about doublets. What's a doublet?

GF: Well, in poetry, a doublet is saying the same twice in marvelously different language. Sometimes parallel and sometimes in antithesis but ... and there are some triplets as well. But basically the Psalter has just made up these marvelous doublets. So people who read a modern translation which the poetry is set out as poetry – read that and instinctively recognize, "This is poetry. This is not prose." But when you read every verse a paragraph, poetry and prose are lost. So every verse a paragraph and every verse... my verse for the day and I just say, now... I don't mean to be unkind the way I'm speaking about people's habits. But they would never read anything else in their life that way. Anything! If they were to get a love poem from their lover, they would not read it as prose. But we take the Scripture and level it out and then put numbers in, and in that have a verse for the day.

JMF: I hear people talk about, "I read the Bible literally. I'm a Bible literalist." And by that, they mean to say, "I take it seriously, I believe what it says." But yet they *do* actually take it literally. What are some problems with reading the Bible literally?

GF: I don't have trouble with people reading the Bible literally, because most of it is to be understood literally. But they don't read the Psalms that way. And they shouldn't read the Revelation that way. I mean, yes, take it literally in terms of what it is. But please, let it be its thing -- don't make it something different from what it is.

JMF: Jesus speaks of a camel going through the eye of a needle. He speaks of many things even as parables, and yet these are not truths, news stories of things that actually happen, there was no prodigal son who actually... he's telling a story, a tale, to make a point. And yet we don't read those things literally.

These two parables of the harvest of grain and the trampling of the grapes, introduce the whole rest of the book -- the gathering of God's people, the gathering of the saints and the judgment on Rome and its minions.

GF: Well, actually there are some people who do. They think if there wasn't a true prodigal son and a father and another son, then Jesus was not telling the truth. They wouldn't say lie... but (JMF: But since he wouldn't...) he wouldn't tell something if it wasn't true. (JMF: So therefore there was one). And their view of story is "it's not true." A story means "not true." Come on, that's not the way you read anything. But that's a mixed-up view of how to read Scripture, and I find myself really not able to help people like that.

JMF: Isn't the Bible full of metaphors as well like any other form of language? If I say, it's raining cats and dogs, people know what I mean. They don't go outside and expect to find a puppy.

GF: Yeah, and a lot of those kinds of things (not that particular one, of course) throughout Scripture, and especially in the teaching of Jesus – and he was just rich with metaphors and using

ideas of all kinds of things around him to help people catch the fact that the kingdom of God was at hand.

JMF: In getting back to the book of Revelation, the chapter divisions... you've talked about how there are couple of places toward the end and also chapter 14 where the chapter divisions really kind of...

GF: Yeah... first of all, to give credit where credit is due, the chapters in Revelation are basically very well done. Nonetheless, the numbers have a way of separating things that should be held together. So when you get to chapter 14, it's the only place in the book where you have a series of small units and you have to come to terms with how these work. It begins with a lamb and 144,000 on Mount Zion whom they'll meet again. Later on there are the three angels who fly in and make a pronouncement. And then there are these two marvelous images of the grain harvest and the trampling out of the grapes. My instincts are that if our chapter 15 began there (as it should), everybody would read those two correctly. But at the end of chapter 14, they just hang there.

But in fact, these two parables of the harvest of grain and the trampling of the grapes, introduce the whole rest of the book -- the gathering of God's people, the gathering of the saints and the judgment on Rome and its minions. So, that's sort of the intro and then you have the final set of seven, the seven bowls of God's wrath and it's quite clear "wrath" is the right term here -- "wrath" having to do with God's final judgment of which the final one is the overthrow and collapse of Babylon the Great -- which is his language for the Roman Empire. That's followed then by the marvelous picture of Rome as a very high-priced prostitute. (Prostitute is really the wrong word. This is a call lady of the highest order.) And she is seductive, and she seduced the whole world. Rome has done that. So the very next thing is lament over Rome's fall.

And then there are the warnings to escape, and then that's followed by the three sets of woes, which is then followed in Chapter 11:1-9 by three sets of hallelujahs... three woes, three hallelujahs, this is hardly accidental. You understand? This is carefully constructed literature. And then the final thing there is the heavenly warrior defeats the Beast. Right after that, if we didn't have numbers, one would see that the so-called millennium is *an insert* that is assuring the martyrs that they have a place in God's program. The only people mentioned in this are those who, for their testimony of Jesus have been killed by the Empire. And they're given a special role. He says, the rest of the dead, those who aren't martyred, they're going to have their time at the end... I don't think you should take this literally... This means God has secured them, this is a special people, martyred because they believed in Jesus.

And then that's followed by the final judgment Satan and the dead and then you end up the book finishing with the new heaven and new earth and a new Eden. He didn't know it's going to be the last book in the Bible. The book begins with Eden; it concludes with Eden. This is just a marvelous thing that God, by his providence, saw as our canon, so that you have a restored heaven, a restored earth, and then in this restored earth, a restored Eden. And then the book ends. I mean it ends with a lot of little things that are all important, but its basic story ends in 22:5. It's a marvelous book. And I just cringe whenever I see and hear people take it and make it have to do primarily with something in our future, when the only stuff that's in our future is chapters 21 and 22. Everything else belong back in the near future of these seven churches and all other Christians at the beginning of the second century -- wonderful re-assurance.

JMF: And it reminds you of course of the passage... of the statement where Jesus talks about you're a little flock; in this world you will have... (**GF:** Tribulation!) but.. (**GF:** But I've overcome!) same message as in Revelation in a nutshell.

GF: Yeah, exactly! I'm prejudices, I love this book. This is marvelous stuff. Don't screw it up by making it mean something different from what John intended, and the Holy Spirit intended by inspiring John to write it. It has to do basically with them and with us as we follow in their train. Just as the Gospels had to do with them and with us as we follow in their train. And once one sees

that, then the glory of this book just comes alive on the pages.

I happen to be among the privileged. What pains me is for privileged people in North America to not take seriously the brothers and sisters in the world who are not as privileged as we are.

JMF: The dispensationalists' viewpoint tends to take the millennium and make it into the focal point of everything...

GF: Yeah, that's strange, because it's actually parenthetical. This is one place I really don't like the numbers, because if this began where it should, in 19:11, if [chapter] 20 began there... and then the numbers went by, one would see that what is our 20:1-6 fits squarely as a parenthetical middle point between the heavenly warrior defeating the Beast and then the judgment of Satan and the judgment of the dead. And then you have the whole new heaven and new earth.

JMF: That's a reassurance to those who will be martyred...

GF: They're reassurance to the martyrs mostly because, first of all... again, it's the end of chapter 19, if it weren't the end of chapter 19, people would see this better. But the heavenly warrior defeats the Beast. So the martyrs are given a special moment, and then the final judgments. This is so marvelously done and for the most part the numbers don't intrude, but at the end of the book they intrude a bit, and here in particular. I know I sound very confident, positive, but I lived with this book for years, and I just experience enormous pain when I hear it used in a dispensationalist way... because, frankly they almost know nothing about the book as John intended.

JMF: It's a shame to miss the reassurance, the peace, the joy, the comfort that can come... we read the Psalms all the time that way, in times of trial, we go to the Psalms and we find reassurance in those.

GF: Even though they were written for those people in Israel, they're reassurance to us.

JMF: And all the symbols have to do with Israel in that day and age. God is not a high tower, and yet we understand what is meant by that when we are being set upon by our enemies, as it were... but you brought out how this same reassurance and joy and peace, comfort, can be ours from Revelation. But instead we look at Revelation, we think, "Well, when is the end of the world going to come?" And how do we measure the horns...

GF: Frankly, a lot of our difficulties is that we're North Americans English-speaking North Americans. Mexican Christians could understand this a little better than we. But when you think of how many places on the earth, how many martyrdoms are taking place, *now*, on this planet, this book is for them. This book is telling them that your martyrdom counts for something. You're being brought into God's kingdom...

JMF: And the martyrdom of those you love.

GF: Yes, exactly. I think of the Christians in various Asian settings where this book tells them that they can still rejoice and sing hallelujah and praise our God because God is in control even though they may die. And that's what Revelation is all about – God is ultimately in charge. The problem of North Americans (and I speak as a dual citizen of Canada and the United States) is we think we have a special privilege with God... and that we should get all the breaks and none of the pain.

JMF: We do tend to think of everything from ... as though we're the center of the... not just of the universe but of the Christian universe as well. If there are missionaries, the mission should be going from us to these other places that don't have the great insight and wisdom. *We* should be the teachers. It's been such been an interesting phenomenon to see Asian missionaries come to the

United States as though we need to hear the gospel here. We're shocked by that.

GF: As my Australian colleague would say, "Good on ya, mate."

JMF: So if there is one thing that you would like people to know about the book of Revelation, what would that be?

GF: One thing? It's about the first-century church that is headed for a terrible two-century holocaust. Read it with that in view, and then ask yourself "Where do I fit in?" God is in control -- there is absolute reassurance -- there are three-fold woe over Rome, over Babylon, but there's a three-fold hallelujah to those who are God's people.

God's in control, not ourselves -- our task is to bear witness to Christ. And the Greek word for *bear witness* is the word that we have transliterated into the word *martyr*. It is the Greek word for *witness*. The ultimate witness was martyrdom, so the Greek word *martyr* -- witness -- became *martyr* -- being slain for one's witness, and now we simply think of martyrs as those kinds of people only. But that's the word for *witness*. We bear witness to Christ and we may not live long after we do that, if we're in certain parts of the world. And I happen to be among the privileged. I say that with tears, because I know that I'm among the privileged. What pains me is for the privileged to not take seriously the brothers and sisters in the world that are not as privileged as we are.

JMF: Well, thanks so much for being here.

GF: Thank you.

JMF: We've been talking with Dr. Gordon Fee. I'm Mike Feazell for *You're Included*.