

How Should We Read the Bible?

Interviews With Gordon Fee

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Introduction

This is a transcript of interviews conducted as part of the *You're Included* series, sponsored by Grace Communion International. We have more than 120 interviews available. You may watch them or download video or audio at www.gci.org/YI.

In ordinary conversations, thoughts are not always put into well-formed sentences, and sometimes thoughts are not completed. In the following transcripts, we have removed occasional words that did not seem to contribute any meaning to the sentence. In some cases we could not figure out what word was intended. We apologize for any transcription errors, and if you notice any, we welcome your assistance.

Grace Communion International is in broad agreement with the theology of the people we interview, but GCI does not endorse every detail of every interview. The opinions expressed are those of the interviewees. We thank them for their time and their willingness to participate.

We incur substantial production costs for these interviews and transcripts. Donations in support of this ministry may be made at www.gci.org/donate.

Our guest in these interviews is Dr. Gordon D. Fee, professor emeritus of New Testament at Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia. He received his PhD in 1966 from the University of Southern California. He has written numerous books:

- *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus* (Understanding the Bible Commentary)
- *The Disease of the Health and Wealth Gospels*
- *The Eerdmans Companion to the Bible* (edited with Robert Hubbard)
- *The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians* (New International Commentary on the New Testament)
- *First Epistle to the Corinthians* (New International Commentary)
- *Galatians: Pentecostal Commentary*
- *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul*
- *Gospel and Spirit: Issues in New Testament Hermeneutics*
- *How to Choose a Translation for All Its Worth* (with Mark Strauss)
- *How to Read the Bible Book by Book* (with Douglas Stuart)
- *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (with Douglas Stuart)
- *Listening to the Spirit in the Text*
- *New Testament Exegesis: A Handbook for Students and Pastors*
- *New Testament Textual Criticism: Its Significance for Exegesis* (with Eldon J. Epp)
- *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God*
- *Pauline Christology: An Exegetical-Theological Study*

- *Paul's Letter to the Philippians* (New International Commentary)
- *Philippians* (IVP New Testament Commentary)
- *Revelation* (New Covenant Commentary Series)
- *Studies in the Theory and Method of New Testament Textual Criticism* (with Eldon J. Epp)
- *The Text of the Fourth Gospel in the Writings of Origen* (co-authored with Bart Ehrman and Michael Holmes)
- *To What End Exegesis? Essays Textual, Exegetical, and Theological*

The interviews were conducted by Dr. J. Michael Fezell, then vice-president of Grace Communion International, now adjunct faculty at Grace Communion Seminary.

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How Should We Read the Bible?

J. Michael Fezell: 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, Dr. Gordon Fee, has done much work in helping Christians with basic principles of rightly understanding the Bible. Dr. Fee is a New Testament scholar and recently retired Professor Emeritus of Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia. He's 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 is *Revelation*, part of the New Covenant Commentary Series. Dr. Fee, thanks for joining us.

Gordon Fee: Glad to be here.

JMF: It will help all of us to hear a little of the background of how you came to write *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*.

GF: I'm a little old now, in terms of all the details, okay? But it basically came about because I used to do this in various kinds of adult Sunday school settings, churches, just trying to help people read the Gospels as Gospels, the epistles as the epistles, et cetera. I was invited to be one of the teachers during the era of the Greater Pittsburgh Charismatic Conferences in the 1970s. They had teaching sessions—morning and afternoon—and they had invited me to come. Since I did this regularly in churches and especially in my New Testament survey class, I chose to take four sessions and walk them through the Gospels, Acts, the epistles, and the Revelation.

At the end of this series, there must have been a group of about 35 people, adults who had been in the sessions, and the common denominator of their question was, Why have we never heard this before? How come we don't know this? Why do I have to be 50 years old and never knew that I should think this way in reading the Bible?

So on the way home, I dashed out the outline for the book—13 chapters, because I was raised in Sunday school, and all the lessons are in 13 chapters for the 13 Sundays of a quarter of the year. So I thought 13 chapters, and outlined the whole thing, and then realized that I *could* do the Old Testament chapters, but Doug could do them better. So I told him what the program was...

JMF: And you had known Doug for...

GF: We were colleagues. I taught at Gordon-Conwell, and so we were good friends. That's why I went to him, because he thinks the way I do about teaching Scripture. Unfortunately, it took two years for him to get a sabbatical so he could write his chapters, but once he did, then it was sent off—and it was bad timing, because it was between the big push before the beginning of school year, and somewhere in that lull period for Zondervan.

I had chosen Zondervan as a publisher, and we had a former student who was working as an editor at Zondervan. He saw that the book was going to fall between the cracks, and he took the manuscript, got it after it was published, and sent it to everybody who teaches Bible everywhere in North America. I don't know how many hundreds of copies he sent, but within a year the sales went off the charts. The reason was: it was trying to help people to get at reading Scripture sensibly instead of “every verse a paragraph” that is so destroying. Over a million of these are now in print. This is the third edition, and there's over a half million of this edition.

JMF: This was the one I remember reading.

GF: Yeah. That's the first edition.

JMF: Now we're already in the third edition.

GF: So they went over a million. It met a need because people would like to know how to read the Bible well. Doug is responsible for the title. He's clever in these ways. I always had some dumb title — “On Understanding the Bible” or something dull like that. He sat down and wrote out a whole page in two columns of proposed titles. The third one down was this one—*How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*. I knew I didn't have to read any further—it was obviously the title that was going to make the book work. That's how it came about.

JMF: You mentioned paragraphs. People read the Bible—the verses appear to be paragraphs. What's wrong with that?

GF: What's wrong is they wouldn't read anything else on earth that way. The Bible wasn't written in single-verse paragraphs. The Bible was written in poetry—which is four lines, usually two, two, and in the Proverbs the same way—two or four. The narratives are narratives. You break up the narratives the way you would break up any narrative. The epistles are letters. When the subject makes a slight change, you paragraph it there.

It's common sense to read the Bible the way you would read any other piece of literature. Yet for some reason, people think that every verse a paragraph is sacred—it came down from

heaven that way or something, when in fact, it happened because Robert Estienne was riding a horse across Europe and put the numbers in, half of them in the wrong places. We get stuck with that. Notice that the title is how to *How to Read the Bible*. Studying is a different thing. My problem is that most people do not read their Bibles well. That's what this book is for.

JMF: Let's take, just case in point, you mentioned epistles and Gospels. What is different about an epistle from a Gospel, and how would you read Gospels differently from the way you would read an epistle?

GF: What's the difference between a short story and a poem? You don't read a poem the way you read a short story, or a short story the way you read a poem. That's the difference between the Psalms and a narrative. Between an epistle and a Gospel: one is a narrative about Jesus and his mighty deeds; an epistle is a letter. The epistles (letters) and Gospels aren't even in the same league in terms of kind of literature. Why anyone would ever want to level that out as if it didn't make any difference.... It makes all the difference in the world. *God* chose to do it this way. This isn't Gordon's discovery. God did this. We need to get in touch with what God did.

JMF: So if I'm going to read the Bible...let's say when I was 10 years old and I see all these chapters and verses, and I go to a Gospel—let's say Luke (I'm opening at random) chapter 7, verse 5, "For he loveth our nation and he hath built us a synagogue." Then I might look at 1 Corinthians, which is a letter, chapter 8, verse 2, "If any man think that he knoweth anything, he knoweth nothing yet as he ought to know."

This one sounds like it has the same...because it's got a chapter and a verse and a number by it, it has the same power and merit if I put it up on the wall as this one does, if I set it up next to it, and I could use those two without anything else around them, to come to some conclusions about what I think they mean.

GF: You would have to do that thoughtlessly – carelessly, I mean...

JMF: Any way you slice it, if there's a verse on the wall, [someone could say], "oh, that's God's word."

GF: Yes, it is God's word.

JMF: Am I going to understand it just by looking at that verse all by itself like that?

GF: Let's let God have the say, and he didn't give us a verse, he gave us the Gospel. He gave us the epistle, not a verse.

JMF: If I pick up the newspaper, would I find a couple of lines in the middle of the article,

pull them out and understand what the article's about?

GF: No, but I think people tend to do that all the time. (laughing)

JMF: You're right – I guess we do that with everything to some degree. (laughing)

GF: If it's a person you disagree with, you read the whole article and you take out two sentences you disagree with and post that somewhere.

JMF: With the Bible we'll take out two verses against people we disagree with and then use it as a weapon against them. But you're pointing out the importance of reading things the way they're written, and the way they're intended for the people that they're written to.

We don't get a letter from somebody we care about... let's say an email, and we don't divide it up and just take out two lines and pretend like that has the same merit and meaning and power as the two lines earlier. We read the whole thing together...the message of the whole thing.

GF: Exactly. That's the great problem.... I tell students over the years that the first thing you have to do is get rid of the numbers. You don't go through your Bible and scratch out the numbers – just get rid of them in your head. Get rid of them because they're not there. Then get rid of the paragraphs—that is, every verse a paragraph. Get a Bible that's got it right in terms of paragraphing. There will be some differences, mostly for the sake of the readership. If the Bible is being prepared for 10th graders or below, you put more paragraphs in. If it's for older folk, you can put fewer paragraphs in. The paragraphing is not sacred – it's a way of helping the people read well. None of that is divinely given – it's a translator's or an editor's choice.

JMF: The reason for verses is just to help us find a spot so we know what we're talking about.

GF: On the ancient manuscripts (which was my first specialty in New Testament studies), they didn't have any of that. They had little indications of where you were in the text, the Gospel or the epistle. In this inner column, they'd have a little Roman numeral III or an VIII or something like that, and those numbers represented where they were in the document. It goes way back to the 2nd, 3rd century, but this is a convenience for people to find things.

JMF: But it tends to break up our understanding.

GF: It intrudes. It intrudes all the time.

JMF: We typically memorize verses and spout them, and sometimes the point is clear from the verse, just one verse, but often without the rest of the context, you can easily misunderstand

what the verse is really about in the middle of the context where it belongs.

GF: There's a famous story about the person who was doing this—"Judas hanged himself" [Matthew 27:5] and then, "Go thou and do likewise" [Luke 10:37]. That's the story that is associated with that kind of reading of the text, which is not reading. It's nonsense.

JMF: Let's go to *How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour*—you also worked with Douglas Stuart on that one.

GF: I wrote that book, and Doug edited the Old Testament portions. The publishers wanted us to do it. They asked us to do a combined Old Testament and New Testament survey. Neither Doug nor myself could get interested in it. We just couldn't do it.

So he sat down one day and did what is very much like the Genesis chapter in this book. It was much too long and therefore the book would have been much too long, and it was a little heavy. But the moment I saw it, I said yes! So I did a couple of New Testament books.

The sections are a slight overview of what the whole thing's about, and then a little more of what you need to know in order to read this well, and then we take the reader by the hand and say, "Look, now look, now look," and guide them through it without trying to interpret anything, just let them know what they're reading and when they need to pause... I ended up writing the whole book with Doug making sure that the Old Testament was up to speed, because this turned out to be an extremely useful book for an awful lot of Christians.

JMF: It's a wonderful follow-up to *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*. It's longer because you deal with every book.

GF: Again, we're trying to help people be good readers of the Bible. I'm amazed at how few people read their Bibles well. It's the same reason a lot of people don't read their Bibles. Because they don't know how to read them well – they get bogged down and weary of it. These books are attempts to say the Bible is good, readable, material. Do it this way and see if it doesn't help.

I had surgery that put me on the shelf for several months when we were doing the second book. My wife Maudine and I read every bit of that book aloud to one another, and then all of the biblical text over a two-month period when I was recuperating from surgery. We had all day to sit around, as it were.

JMF: You would have never done that if you hadn't had the surgery.

GF: Exactly. In part, the book *reads* well because we did that. Because we're listening to

one another read aloud, and when you stumble over a sentence when it goes four lines, you've got to stop and do something else. I don't want to go through the surgery again, but it was a gift, so we took it.

JMF: [In the first book] you mentioned the 13 chapters, and you have the epistles, the Old Testament narratives, Acts, the Gospels, and one chapter on parables, and one on the law. I'd like to talk about parables first. How is a parable different from a narrative?

GF: They're not terribly different, because a narrative and a parable, excuse me, there is more than one kind of parable—that's the first thing people have to hear. Often, when people hear the word *parable*, they'll think of the Good Samaritan. That's good. That's right. It's a story. The story tells the story. But the parables get listed under brief sayings, the very brief kind—the kingdom of God is like....

JMF: ...the treasure hidden in the field.

GF: Yes. So you've got that kind, and then you've got the story parable. People need to know they're both parables, but they're different kinds. One is something is like something else; the other one is also sort of like something else, but the parables are intended to "catch" a person. At the end, the people have egg in their face or whatever the parable is intended to do, particularly the one with the Good Samaritan, where the guy who asks the question gets blown away because the good guy turns out to be the people they hate, the Samaritans. That's purposeful, in your face, listen to what God is doing in the world thing.

A parable can do that in ways that straight prose can't do. Jesus could have said, love your enemies. He did say that, but he also told the story. Oh, you mean Samaritans? The story does it far better. People who can tell stories well always get their point across better than people that, like myself, would just do plain prose. I admire them, but I'm not one of them.

JMF: I've heard people say that all parables that Jesus told are true stories, but a parable doesn't have to be a so-called true story...

GF: What you mean is an actual event.

JMF: Yes, an actual event.

GF: I don't know why people feel that way—that somehow to tell a story to make a point..., an illustration, ...you tell a story to make a point. That's not lying, that's not being false. The *point* is what you're after. But there are some people who just think that that's deception or something. My wonderful in-laws, now deceased, couldn't handle me at this point because for

them, if it wasn't true (meaning it didn't actually happen), then it's not true. I had no categories for that view of what Scripture is about, so I just didn't get into those conversations.

JMF: When I was younger, there were people who felt that fiction was wrong for kids to read because it's not of true, actual events.

GF: It's not *true* (laughing). Good fiction is the best way to find truth.

JMF: Yeah, to get across a point. The stories have always been a way...

GF: They've always been useful that way. Even in the Old Testament, some of the best moments in the narratives are when somebody tells a story and a person gets zapped by the story. That's just the way it is.

JMF: Yeah. David, when Nathan the prophet came and told about the man with the sheep and [2 Sam. 12:1-10].

GF: Yes.

JMF: One of the books is this one, *How to Choose a Translation for All Its Worth*. Many people don't think in terms of the variety of translations—they either have a King James or ...the New International Version is popular and widespread...

GF: Most common...

JMF: ...best selling. There isn't much thought as to the differences between translations and what makes one translation superior for whatever the particular purpose may be over another one, and this book gets into that.

GF: You'll notice it's a different co-author in this case.

JMF: Yes. Mark Strauss.

GF: I had been asked to write this book by Zondervan, and it became very clear to me early on that we didn't need Old and New at this point, we needed old and young. I'm old, and Mark is a New Testament scholar who teaches at Bethel Seminary in San Diego, and we're on the TNIV, the NIV committee together.

JMF: The TNIV being...

GF: Today's New International Version. We're on this committee together, we're good friends, and when I was asked to write this book, I realized I didn't need an Old Testament person, I needed a *younger* person. I needed somebody who knew what was going on in the world of language, and he's a marvelous linguist. So I am totally indebted to him for this book. When we go to conferences and we present the book, he's the one who does it. He's got it all on

PowerPoint and the whole bit, and he's a marvelous communicator.

We had a lot of fun writing that book. The chapters are pretty evenly divided as to our specialties, but just trying to help people to recognize that if you can't read the Greek or the Hebrew, you're dependent on the people who can, and who try to put it into English.

There's a whole group of people out there who think loyalty to the biblical language means to be as close to that language as you can possibly be, both in form and in words. No good translator would ever think that. They would never translate a German book into something that looked more like German than English. You wouldn't do that. I cannot understand why people think that so-called literal is better when, in fact, literal is not good English.

What we're after is an English version of what the Greek and Hebrew say. But we've not taken sides on translations. At one point we have a chart showing from literal to the freest of the free and indicate that the middling area is the place that people ought to be for their Bible of choice.

But for some reason, people think that some of these more so-called literal translation have better translations. Actually, they're poorer translations. They are, my term for it, Greek-lish. They're neither English nor Greek. You can understand it in English, but nobody would ever *speak* that English. So why not take the Greek and put it into English, which is what most good translations do. We have them all listed there in terms of various usefulness, and audiences for whom they're useful.

JMF: For your own reading, which translation do you like to use?

GF: We use what is currently the TNIV, but in 2011 will become revised to become the NIV altogether. The present NIV is going to be taken up into all of the changes that have been made over the years and will be the NIV.

JMF: How will it be designated?

GF: NIV updated, whatever. This happens regularly with translations. What a lot of people don't know is that the NIV they're reading is a 1978 version of something that happened much earlier and has scores of changes from the earlier expression of it. This is not a new thing for this particular tradition of translation.

Some people use just the NASB and NASU now. That's fine, but nobody would ever speak that English. You would never speak it in the pulpit. It's Greek-lish, not English. It does very nicely put the Greek into the English language, but you're reading what the Greek looks like, not

what English looks like.

This is a universal view of translation. This is not one scholar's view. If you're going to translate Luther into English, you just can't keep the German sentences. It can't be done. In the old story, the American on tour in Germany and he kept asking the translator, "What's he saying? What's he saying?" He said, "I don't know, he hasn't come to the verb yet." Because the verb is the very end of [German sentences]. (laughing). You have to translate the whole sentence.

JMF: Unfortunately, we've come to the end of our time. We appreciate very much you being here, and thanks so much on behalf of everybody who has used these books and benefited from them, as they have been such a tremendous help—*How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, *How to Read the Bible Book by Book*, and *How to Choose a Translation for All Its Worth*.

Thanks for your good work and thanks for sharing your time with us.

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Like Father, Like Son

J. Michael Fezell: You've been preaching and writing for most of your life. What is it that you want people to know about God?

Gordon Fee: I can get at that best by telling a story. I was a freshman at Seattle Pacific College and had a remarkable encounter with God. I was there on a basketball scholarship, and it was an idolatry to me. Douglas Stuart led me to give that up to be a fully devoted follower of Jesus. That happened in early December, 1952.

Later that year we had a chapel series we called Spiritual Emphasis Week — a special speaker for each chapel in that week. Her name was Eugenia Price. She was a well-known figure in Hollywood — a writer and that kind of thing — who five years earlier had been converted in Billy Graham's first crusade in Los Angeles. She was a marvelous person and a gifted speaker.

Somewhere at the beginning she said, "You will never find a more relieved person in all the world than I, when I discovered that God is just like Jesus Christ." She admitted that wasn't theologically well-said, but her point was well-said. That's pretty much where any true believer in Jesus, any true Christian must come to terms with theology, with how one understands God.

In John's Gospel this is put on display in every imaginable way, the Son is revealing the Father. It isn't that the Son is separate from the Father; the Father and the Son and Spirit are the one God. But in the incarnation, God became present among us. My way of putting it is: He came among us, took the wraps off, and said, "Here's what I am like. Here's what God is and what God is like."

Every false theology in history has been a failure to take that seriously — that the only true understanding of God is that which comes through revelation of the Son, who is the full, perfect, absolute representation (it's hard to find language when we talk theologically, but understand...), representation of who God is and what God is like. Every false theology is steered away from what we learn about God through the revelation in the Son, because that is where the full revelation of God takes place.

The ultimate expression of that revelation is in the crucifixion. God on a cross with his creatures trying to get rid of him. And instead of getting rid of him, they got him forever. You can't get rid of him. Death followed by resurrection followed by the Holy Spirit with a total complete passion on God's part to do what was intended in the Garden of Eden, and that's to

create human beings in his image.

What God has done in Christ and by the Spirit is to recreate fallen human beings back into the image of God so that we live on this planet as the image-bearers of God, which should constantly point people to God, because we bear that image. I have a great relief that God is just like Jesus Christ.

JMF: Many Christians think of the Father being a scary God of the Old Testament.

GF: A mean old man in heaven, yes.

JMF: Jesus is the nice guy who shields us from the anger of this scary God of the Old Testament.

GF: Everybody who does this has not read the Gospel of John. “Have I been with you for so long,” Jesus asks, “and you don’t know who I am? The one who has seen me has seen the Father.” The Gospel of John takes all of that story, that Gospel, that incarnation, and raises it to the next level so that we hear the Gospel story in its theological setting of who this is.

It’s in the Synoptic Gospels as well, but John just makes it so stark that you can’t miss the point that this is not just another human being, this is God incarnate — taking off the wraps and saying, “Look, this is who God is. This is what God is like.”

JMF: John also records Jesus talking about his oneness with the Father. But he also prays that the disciples “may be one as we are one.” What is he driving at there?

GF: That’s one of the more difficult texts to spell out in detail. The concern throughout that section of the Gospel has to do with, in this case, two believers, two followers of Jesus — that they both together reflect the likeness of God that’s found in Christ in their relationship with one another. All of that had to do with how we become the bearers of the image. We do that not because we pray a lot, we do that because we love our neighbor, and our neighbor is often our enemy.

As God loved his enemies, namely you and me, and redeemed us by that love, he wants us to be his image-bearers and to be redemptive agents in a world where people not only don’t believe in him but would prefer to curse. They don’t believe in him, but they’ll use his name and curse. It’s how terribly fallen the human race has become.

JMF: When he’s saying that about the disciples, they have been at each other’s throats over who’s going to be the greatest, and he’s having to interrupt their disputes over all that, and yet he’s talking about a oneness that will transcend all of that.

GF: He does scold them a little bit here, but he's constantly bringing them back. "Look, watch... the works that I do are the works of the Father. I am doing the Father's work. Pay attention, this is what God is like." People ask me what God is like. This is not theologically well-put, but it says it. God is just like Jesus Christ.

JMF: We're not afraid of Jesus. We read about Jesus and we think, I could trust him to not surprise me with condemnation. But we are a little afraid of the Father. We're worried about what he might do next.

GF: That is understandable, because many of us have broken fathers who aren't people we would necessarily emulate. My case is different. My father was a true representation of my heavenly Father. So I never had to overcome the frailties and the difficulties and the weaknesses of my own father because I regularly saw the revelation of God and the way he treated my mother and the way that he was a pastor and the way that he created a congregation, became a professor in a Bible college, the way he treated students. He was an image-bearer, so that was never a difficulty for me.

But I wasn't long as a pastor or a teacher when I realized, that image didn't work for some people because their fathers were so bad, so brutal, that they didn't want God to be a father. In those cases they had to rethink what they would like a father to be and then come to terms with the fact that God is infinitely more than that. It's an image that in our culture does have drawbacks, but I won't leave the image, because not only is it the biblical one, but correctly expressed, it's the best one.

JMF: The Holy Spirit comes into the picture as well in John. Jesus is talking about his oneness with the Father, he's talking about "if you've seen me, you've seen the Father," he's talking about how they may be one...or how the disciples may be one as he and the Father are one. Then he starts to talk about the Comforter: "I'm going to send you a comforter. It's necessary I go away." How does the Holy Spirit fit into the relationship with Father and Son?

GF: That isn't spelled out in the text. That's where theology comes in. It's clear in John's Gospel that the Holy Spirit is the Spirit both of the Father *and* of his Son, and therefore the one Holy Spirit is the full image-bearer of the Godhead. The reason, the point, of the Holy Spirit throughout the New Testament is that the Spirit is to continue the work of the incarnation by incarnating us with God's likeness. As the Spirit, there's the fruit of the God likeness in our relationships with one another.

This is the great problem I had – in history, the solitary monk, the one who went out into the desert to get Christian perfection. That’s impossible. You can’t find out whether a person is a true Christian until they rub elbows with another Christian. That’s when you find out whether the work of the Spirit is really taking place. The solitary hermetic monk was so unbiblical that it doesn’t have a leg to stand on, because the real test is how one responds *to another* when the other is doing things that are either distasteful, wrong, deliberately evil...how we respond to that is going to be the ultimate evidence of the Spirit’s outworking, the life of Christ in us.

JMF: Christ forgives, he loves his enemies. It’s good for us, but we don’t like it when he’s forgiving our enemies.

GF: Exactly. We don’t like that part of it. We like to be Christians, but we also like to be fallen at points. Our fallen-ness can still find expression.

JMF: I’m glad he forgives his enemies, which often includes us...

GF: Yes, on the cross.

JMF: ...and our enemies. Here he is telling us that we can be one with each other, and the Holy Spirit then is continuing that incarnation...and that includes loving our enemies. It isn’t just telling us something that we need to do, because we can’t. We don’t do that. We never have. His ministry is the doing of that which we fail in.

GF: One of the difficulties with this is the enormity of the population, and that these are spoken in basically rural contexts, where people live in small villages and they have to get along, or the village won’t make it. We now live in a global village where almost no one can live in isolation anymore. The context for us is so huge that we have a hard time imagining what it’s like to love our enemies, because we don’t even know who our enemies are. I was a kid growing up in grammar school during World War II. How would one love Hitler? I’m sorry, Hitler was the incarnation of evil. So I quit thinking in those categories. The question is, how do I love the neighbor next door?

JMF: Our neighbor is the one we’re having the problem with.

GF: Yes, so this is the person that we must love, but it’s easy to overlook that person in thinking in broader people terms. I love the people in my church... I still want to have dinner with some of them. It’s the one-on-one thing that Jesus is about — not that global or larger communal. How do I love somebody out of their evil? I would assume that’s the basic reason for loving them.

JMF: But Jesus does that, and he's in us, therefore we can rest in his doing of that, without us having to take the burden.

GF: Here's where the Holy Spirit must come in.

JMF: It's a rest, isn't it? He does what we're unable to. He heals us.

GF: Yes. Good thing, too.

JMF: You've done a lot of work with reading the Scriptures in the context in which they were written. As you just mentioned, this is written in the context of a village kind of thinking. It doesn't address details and specifics of our kind of world in which we live on a block where we don't even know most of the people who drive by the front of our house.

GF: Yes, exactly.

JMF: We have a different kind of relationship from any of the relationships people would have known then. They talk about a stranger... When a stranger comes to town, everybody knows that a stranger has come to town, and it's one, or one little group. Pretty soon everybody knows a whole lot about them, because they make it their business. We can't do that.

GF: Yes. How that translates for us is very difficult. I don't pretend that I would not answer that in our context. I think the greater question is, how do I love those neighbors that are closest?

JMF: The neighbors I know.

GF: Yeah, those who are around me. Maudine and I live in a ten-unit complex of individual units. We think in terms of how do we love? We are in a very good community. We're the only believers, but we get along well with everybody. They get along well with one another. There's very little of the kind of fighting that I know happens in a lot of these communities. That would be the next step for us. How do we love? How do we care for somebody if they're ill? How do we get food to them or something like that as a way of demonstrating that we're part of this community...not trying to convert them by the four spiritual laws, but trying to love them as they are and then perhaps at some point they might ask what we're all about.

JMF: Being ready to give an answer, but not cramming ...

GF: Pushing it down their throat, yes.

JMF: Isn't there some trust in the Spirit's power to work with somebody instead of taking it all on ourselves?

GF: Altogether. On the other hand, sometimes the door sits wide open and we get hesitant and don't step through the door. Part of that is a personality matter, too. Neither my wife or I are

extroverts on one-on-one relationships, so...

JMF: Most people aren't.

GF: ...we have to push ourselves to move in that direction.

JMF: We tend to assume that everybody should be the same when it comes to evangelism, and yet there are so many different aspects of how we are with other people according to the way God has made us as individuals. We're not all the same.

GF: True evangelism has to stem out of good relationships. The only other evangelism is the kind that happens in church when there's a sermon and a visitor is there and they hear it and the Spirit speaks. True evangelism is a relational thing where the relationship is secure and you hope they might ask you, "Why are you so weird?"

JMF: So it's a good idea for Christians to make friends with unbelievers.

GF: Oh yes.

JMF: For the sake of friendship.

GF: Neither Maudine or I are good at that. But if they make the first step, we're good at it. It has to do with our personalities.

JMF: Studies have shown that people would rather live next door to almost anybody than an evangelical Christian because of the stereotypes of evangelical Christians being so pushy and judgmental...

GF: ...and aggressive.

JMF: Yeah.

GF: The New Testament makes it clear that you love your neighbor by doing good for your neighbor. Evangelism will come out of that, and no other way.

JMF: The St. Francis quote is always interesting, "Always preach the gospel. If necessary, use words."

GF: This comes from my wife: many years ago she was struck by how many times in Scripture it talks about doing good. Not doing works, but doing what is good. Somehow evangelicals have never caught on, it seems to me, that's the primary biblical text on how we live in the world.

JMF: When you hear a discussion about what we're going to do in the church, "And here are some good things we can do in the community as a church." There's always the "But then how do we set it up so that the good thing we're doing gives us an opportunity to hit them with

the gospel?” In other words, it’s like we don’t know how to do good without also having to say something, or else we haven’t done what we are supposed to do. The “saying something” is the most important, and the “doing good” is only a means to the end, rather than doing good being the end.

GF: Taking a casserole over to the young couple that just had a new baby. That’s what you do.

JMF: Not so that you can give them a spiel.

GF: No, just because you’re doing good! It’s the good thing to do. Many people who don’t make any profession of faith understand that better than Christians do — that we should do good. Too many evangelical Christians are more interested in evangelizing as the first matter of business rather than loving their neighbor as the first matter of business.

JMF: That’s a good point. I was listening to Jack Hayford once talking about that some people tend to see evangelism as scalps on your belt...

GF: Oh dear me, yes.

JMF: ...rather than living with people as Christ would.

GF: Loving them for their own sake.

JMF: For their own sake because they are people.

GF: Yes, made in God’s image. We need to be recreated into Christ’s image.

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The Book of Revelation

JMF: Dr. Fee's latest book, *Revelation*, is part of the New Covenant Commentary Series published by Wipf & Stock [a.k.a. Cascade] in 2010.

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

GF: It has to do with the kind of literature (the technical word is *genre*) that it is. Most people, especially those raised in the King James Version, where every verse is a paragraph, so that every sentence, every verse, is equal to all of the rest, 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. The net result is, they are not understanding the *kind* of thing that Revelation is. They level it out – the whole New Testament is 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 into chapters and verses, and as you just said, each verse is a paragraph, and so it does come across as though verse 9 has 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:** 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 teaching life has been to get people not just to study the Bible, but to learn to read the Bible well. To do that, they have to have some sense of the differences of the materials 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 the best

and the greatest, ten leagues ahead of and over all those intertestamental documents.

JMF: And intertestamental is referring to...

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

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

GF: In the New Testament. Yeah, and there is nothing 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. John knew his readers and they knew him.

It's subversive literature. It's telling the Roman empire that their days are numbered – at the height of their glory, when Rome had reached the peak of its power and domain, here is John, exiled on a lonely island, facing 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. That's what the Revelation is basically about. It's about God in charge of the universe, not the Roman Empire.

JMF: So for us 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.

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. It's to the seven churches. He writes to them individually, and everybody else is reading everybody else's mail. 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. That martyrdom is what tipped this off... he's trying to tell the people that the days to come are going to be far worse than you imagine. The catacombs are the clear example that John was right.

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

GF: Besides being places where Christians met, the catacombs were their tombs. The burials of Christians underground in huge numbers for those days was 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 if the language "underground" comes from the

fact that the early Christians literally went underground. Anyway, the Revelation is subversive literature, and the people who received it understood that.

JMF: At the time John wrote, his readers would have understood apocalyptic literature and what the symbols are 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 books. 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.

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... [**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. That's been going on from the beginning of the church. Why do we feel the need to do that?

GF: I 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. 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*. 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: There are two firsts in this, ok? First, 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 and chapter designations], the verse designations, yes. The Bible Society [now named Biblica] is putting out a translation, TNIV, without the numbers. It's got paragraphs that are meaningful, but the numbers are out in the margin 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 Robert Estienne. He was doing it on a horse, I think, when he was traveling across Europe. 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. 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.] So it's like reading a love letter and reading a court document the same way, with no sense that these are different kinds of things. [**JMF**: Or of reading a poem as though it's a headline news story in the newspaper.] Instinctively people do understand that the Psalter is poetry and that the doublets are doublets – most people do catch that. Others don't have a clue that the doublets are doublets ...

JMF: What's a doublet?

GF: In poetry, a doublet is saying the same thing twice in marvelously different language. Sometimes parallel and sometimes in antithesis... and there are some triplets as well. The Psalter is made up of these marvelous doublets. People who read a modern translation, in which the poetry is set out as poetry, 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 ...

my verse for the day... I don't mean to be unkind the way I'm speaking about people's habits. But they would never read anything else that way! 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." By that, they mean to say, "I take it seriously, I believe what it says." But yet they *do* 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. 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 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. We don't read those things literally.

GF: 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 he wouldn't tell something if it wasn't true. [**JMF:** So therefore there was one.] Their view of *story* is "it's not true." A story means "not true." That's not the way you read anything. That's a mixed-up view of how to read Scripture, and I find myself 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 there are a lot of those kinds of things (not that particular one) throughout Scripture, and especially in the teaching of Jesus. He was 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 a couple of places toward the end and also chapter 14 where the chapter divisions really kind of...

GF: Yeah... To give credit where credit is due, the chapters in Revelation are basically well done. Nonetheless, the numbers have a way of separating things that should be held together.

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. 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.

These two parables of the harvest of grain and the trampling of the grapes introduce the rest of the book — the gathering of God's people, the gathering of the saints and the judgment on Rome and its minions. That's sort of the intro, and then you have the final set of seven, the seven bowls of God's wrath. "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.) She is seductive, and she seduced the whole world. Rome has done that. So the very next thing is lament over Rome's fall.

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. This is carefully constructed literature. 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. 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.

That's followed by the final judgment of Satan and the dead and 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.

Then the book ends. 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 cringe whenever I see and hear people 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 belongs back in the near future of these seven churches and all other Christians at the beginning of the second century – wonderful re-assurance.

JMF: It reminds me 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!] – the same message as in Revelation in a nutshell.

GF: Yeah, exactly! I'm prejudiced, 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. Once one sees that, then the glory of this book comes alive on the pages.

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... 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 the judgment of Satan and the judgment of the dead. Then you have the whole new heaven and new earth.

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

GF: They are reassurance to the martyrs mostly because... 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, here in particular. I know I sound very confident, positive, but I lived with this book for years, and I experience enormous pain when I hear it used in a dispensationalist way... because, frankly, they know almost 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: 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... 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, “When is the end of the world going to come?” And how do we measure the horns...

GF: A lot of our difficulties is that we’re English-speaking North Americans. Mexican Christians could understand this a little better than we. 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. That’s what Revelation is 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 tend to think of everything as though we’re the center of ... 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’s a 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. 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 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. 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.

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