

LEARNING

HOW

TO

SEE

with

Brian

McLaren

Season 4, Episode 12

Listener Questions:

Jesus and Theology

Brian: Welcome to this bonus episode of season four of Learning How to See. We are responding to amazing questions that have come in over this season. And Mike, I wonder if you would share this next question with us?

Mike: Yeah, of course. “Hi Brian. I’m enjoying your latest podcast. You and your guests put into words what I’m believing and exploring. I’ve come so far from my beliefs as a Baptist and it’s so freeing. I’m getting comfortable not knowing the answers. But I’m struggling a bit with Jesus. I’ve been questioning the virgin birth and resurrection. As of now, I believe that Jesus was an amazing prophet, who was so in touch with God’s spirit that he could do miracles, and his teachings were life-changing. Would you let me know how you feel about my thoughts? Blessings to you.”

Brian: I just think that’s such an honest and good question, and I wonder if you could give us one more question, that I think is similar?

Mike: Sure. “Thanks for taking questions. I’ve got several rolling around in my heart and mind, but this is the only one I can put into words in this instant. Were you saying the church didn’t believe Christ had to die on the cross to redeem our sins for the first thousand years? Or were you saying the idea that the Father had to punish Jesus in our place wasn’t around for the first thousand years of the church? Thank you.”

Brian: Okay. And we had a couple of other questions that overlapped with these, but I think for those of us who call ourselves Christians, we face this struggle. We can be super, super interested in Jesus. We can be super drawn to Jesus. We can even say that we would like to follow Jesus, and we love Jesus, and we trust Jesus. But then, when we show up sometimes at various outposts of the Christian religion, they say, “Well, that’s not enough. You need to believe this and this and this and this and this as well.” And very often, our love for Jesus just makes us say, “Well, I’ll say whatever you want me to say if you let me in.” But eventually, we start having different questions and thoughts about these sort of things.

So let’s start with that first question. A person is having questions about the virgin birth and resurrection. I just thought I would start by telling you all a quick story by a dear friend who passed away some years ago. Many folks here who are listening have probably read some of her books or met her. Her name was Phyllis Tickle. She was an important person in the publishing world, who was also a deeply committed Christian. And she told the story of giving a talk about reading the story of the virgin birth. And afterwards, a young woman came up to her and said, “That story, I never heard it before.” And we forget that there are a lot of people who’ve never... They’re brought up in non-religious settings. She’d never heard the story of the angel appearing to Mary and Mary’s response. She said, “I never heard this story before. That was so beautiful. It was too beautiful to not be true, whether it happened or not.”

And I think there’s something going on in her response. It really struck Phyllis, because Phyllis felt the big question for a lot of people is whether you believe it happened, literally, or not. And you can believe it happened literally, and have no idea what it means. Other people think, “I’m not sure it happened. It may be a story that’s told to convey meaning.” And so I’m interested in the meaning. I just wanted to throw out that sort of paradox, and hear what the three of you think about it.

Mike: I have to jump in and say I love that. That's such a beautiful story for someone to say. It's too beautiful for it not to be true, whether it happened or not. And that's what a really, really good... And I'm not reducing the story to metaphor, but that's what a good metaphor, a good myth, or a good symbol does, is it communicates truth to us in a poetic manner that's not necessarily limited to historical happenings. We forget, the gospels are stories told about Jesus. And then theology are stories told about those stories. And then sermons are stories told about those stories. And then we have a conversation now that's a story about it. And there's beauty and truth in all of it, but it's fluid.

And we forget, I'm a devotee of so many of the mystics of the early church. When they read scripture, 100, 200 years out, when they were reading scripture, they were saying there are literal levels, there are mystical levels, there are psychological levels, there are historical levels, and we don't have to have all of them in play. Things can be true without being historical records. That was never the most important part of the story. And they would ask these questions, what did it mean when it was written? What did it mean for those people? What does it mean for you now? And what's the meaning behind all that? So anyway, those are my rambling thoughts. It's beautiful to think about it outside of simply nailing it down to, "Did this happen? If we were there with a camcorder, would it have happened or not?"

Gigi: I want to piggyback, because I had some similar thoughts. My first thought was just remembering that when these stories were first told, they were told. They weren't written down. And so the stories got changed as they were told, different people add things or take things away. And then also just to say what you also said, that originally, in Christianity, it stayed that way in monastic versions. And the Jewish religion also has this, there's more than one level of reading scripture. That it's meant to be read on many different levels. And I know personally, if I find that I have a problem with a scripture on a certain level, I take it as an invitation to look at it at a different level. That helps me.

And I also know that the etymology of the word belief has changed. That originally had more to do about loving, than it had to do about thinking. And now it's about whether you, at least in the circles I grew up in, it's about whether you think this actually happened. And that's not really belief either. And so I like Brian's story, because he separates the difference between fact and truth. And that truth doesn't have to be a fact, it has more to do with meaning. And for me, the most important things about Jesus' life are the meaning part, and what they call me to, what they invite me into, as far as I live. And I personally don't think Jesus cares whether you believe how he was born or whether he bodily rose. I think that what Jesus rose into is what we all rise into, which is the body of God, which is what we live and move and have our being in. And that's more important than whether there was actually this stone that got rolled away, and the body was gone, and then there was this body that could walk through walls.

I know that also, in cultures back then, again, before the Enlightenment, when we started taking things more literally, they had room for all kinds of levels and that just because... Someone could write that Jesus walked through walls because it reminded them of another legend that they had before, and they were saying that Jesus was in this lineage of this legend. And so they always laid other meanings on, and that was part of being an oral tradition. And that's something that we've lost as we become more literal. She can believe what she wants, she's perfectly fine.

Brian: Gigi, you remind me of something the Catholic scholar, Dominic Crossan, says. This isn't an exact quote, but it's something like this. It's not that the ancient people were so stupid as to be literalistic, and we're now more enlightened. It's that they were so literary, they were so comfortable with stories, they knew how to work with them on many levels, and many of us have lost that ability. And I would be quick to say, for someone who deeply is committed to believing that this or that story is literal, I don't want to take that away from you. And as long as that's helping you get to the meaning, that's great. And for someone who finds that that's a barrier to getting to the meaning, I'm certainly fine with that too.

And if somebody has a big problem with that, I would just remind them that one of the main features of Jesus' teaching was speaking in parables. Parables were not factually true. They were works of short literary fiction that Jesus would tell, whose purpose was to stimulate thought, and we might even say to bring people to a different consciousness or a different vantage point. If you have a high view of factual information, and a low view of meaning conveyed through story, you're going to have a little problem with Jesus' main approach as a teacher. Anything you'd add, Dawson?

Dawson: Yeah, maybe in way of practice I might say it's a fun experiment to choose a particular text, and then apply different lenses to that text, and think through, "What does this mean for me in my current moment if I read the text that way?" So sure, maybe literalism is one lens that you try on. But to your point, Brian, maybe to read literarily, if you can view any of these particular stories or symbols, and try and understand their genre or convention. To Gigi's point, think about how the mother tradition, Judaism, engages with that text, and the sort of tradition of interpretation around it. Or even integrating a womanist lens that comes from the intersection of Blackness and the female location, and holding those together in conjunction. Or a feminist lens, or maybe a liberation lens. There's so many different ways that really can come alive when you stay with one specific text, and sort of experiment with those things, and just see what does it mean to wear this? Sort of put this together.

The other thing I'll say that's just sort of fun, because I just recently learned it, is one of Richard's first ever tapes was a series called The Great Themes of Scripture, and it's only available on CD, and it's kind of hard to track down, but I stumbled upon an old copy of it here at work the other day, and I've been listening. And he just got to the symbol of the virgin birth. I come from a Protestant background, so we didn't make very much about Mary or her significance, so I didn't really have much in way of opinion there.

But one of the things that he shared that just sort of made this symbol come alive for me in a new way was to think about the symbol of the virgin birth as Mary starting with a beautiful yes to God showing up in her life. And the way that so many other stories are folks questioning, "Well, why me, God?" Or, "Not now." Or something like that. But that Mary as this sort of symbol of a yes of receptivity to God's presence in her life. There's this sort of beautiful practicality, she gets right to the how. She's like, "Well, I'm not married yet, and what does that mean about the traditional conventions?" But there's no question of whether or not she's worthy. There's just sort of this beautiful acceptance. Yeah, that just came to me. I don't know if that will

be helpful, but it was helpful for me just this week, hearing the symbol of virginity interpreted in that way.

And just in way of recognizing that there's so much in our current moment around sexual purity, and ways that interpreting that passage can be harmful. So just to name that too, that that's not the only way to engage with that text, but also to be conscious of it and see the way that it's affecting real people in real places at real times.

Brian: Let me just say, Dawson, that that's a really important insight. It's not just the story, it's how the story is used. And if you're in a setting where telling the story of the virgin birth is a way of saying sex is really dirty, and so when God wanted to get involved in the world, God couldn't really have any sex involved, that's just dirty. And you can imagine why every time, if that's what a person has been taught that story means, it's assumption that they bring that the story could do damage to their own psyche, because they know, "Well, I'm a sexual person, and that doesn't work." By the way, just playfully, I could say one of my favorite readings of the virgin birth story is a womanist reading, that says when God looks at the world that men have messed up through violence and domination and destruction, God decides, "Let's start with a woman and have no men involved." And a poor, peasant woman, in fact, who's seen as the most vulnerable and weakest part of society in that time. So at any rate, Mike, I think you wanted to add something?

Mike: I just appreciate that so much. And Brian, I appreciate you bringing in the womanist perspective, because I think it's helpful for me. One of the things we talk a lot about in the Living School is Jesus is many things to many people, like Jesus is prophet, Jesus is liberator, Jesus is Christ, Jesus is Messiah, Jesus is mystic. And it's been interesting to think about... You see something different in the Jesus story, depending on where you put the camera. And this has changed over time and over the century. There's a famous book, it's a little bit more academic, I think it's called *Jesus Through the Centuries*, maybe, by Jaroslav Pelikan. And he talks about how, at different times, Jesus has been seen in different ways because theology has solved different problems. Dr. B put a book on my radar recently called *The Non-western Jesus*. And it's just, if we look at Jesus from different cultural lenses, the story shines in a different way, and different things stand out. I think it's so, so helpful to remember that, and it opens up so many more beautiful readings and perspectives.

Gigi: I know we've been talking from a human perspective, but in many ways, there's also a way in which there could be a virgin birth environmentally. Because, at least in the Western world, the earth is seen as... It's treated like women are treated, you know? So what would that mean, that God decided to inhabit this particular earth, come as someone who was of the earth as well? So again, there's all these different kinds of ways. But I also want to plug in that we may want to also include the more than human part of our experience into how we interpret things, to come to these more deeper and fresher ways of looking at texts.

Brian: Oh, I'm so glad you bring that up now, Gigi, because in the midst of our crisis of ecological overshoot, we need to start taking the earth more seriously, and all of this, so important.

Mike: It's so interesting, we're talking about all these different ways to think about Jesus, and then the theology is a story told about Jesus. And this brings us back to that second question, which I'm actually going to read again, if everyone's okay with it, because it's so short. This person asked, "Were you saying, Brian, that the church didn't believe Christ had to die on the cross to redeem our sins for the first thousand years? Or were you saying that the idea that the Father had to punish Jesus in our place wasn't around for the first thousand years of the church?" This is a great example of how theology has been multifaceted and changed. So, I'll turn that over to you, Brian.

Brian: I know this is an area of your expertise too, Mike, but let me just start first by saying this is really an interesting question, because the idea that when the chosen one, the Messiah, the person we've been waiting for, who God would send to bring us relief, when that person shows up, that they're going to be tortured and killed? This is a pretty hard pill to swallow. And so in the early centuries of the faith, there were radically different understandings of this. And for people who are interested in this kind of theological discussion, these are called atonement theories. I'd like to just give a quick survey of them, because this could be helpful to the person who asked this question and to others. And then I'll offer a quick personal reflection. And then Mike, I'd love to hear your thoughts, and Dawson and Gigi too.

The very first of these theories in the early... You don't really see it in the New Testament, but the early church leaders seize upon one word in the New Testament, and they develop a theory around it. It's often called the ransom theory or the fishhook theory. And this was the idea that Satan had control of everybody, and humanity had sold itself to Satan. And so God wants to liberate people from being owned by Satan. And so God sends Jesus into the world, and says to Satan, "You can have Jesus, and do to him whatever you want, if you'll just let all the people go free." It's called the ransom theory because Jesus is like a ransom given to get kidnapped people free.

And then this story continues, it's called the fishhook theory because then the idea is so Satan takes Jesus and kills him, and thinks he got what he wanted, and then God tricks Satan by Jesus rising from the dead, and he got nothing. That idea is nowhere explicitly stated in the New Testament, but it becomes a very deeply held theory. And there is one place where the word "ransom" is meant, but it could have a lot of other meanings, other than being situated in this story where God makes a deal with the devil.

And what happened a few hundred years later, Christian theologians heard this and then they said, "This doesn't make sense. This sounds like the devil has more power than God, and this makes God look kind of weak, and having to play tricks, and this just doesn't elevate God very much." So a new theory developed that was called the Christus Victor theory, and in this theory, the enemy wasn't the devil. Now the devil disappears from the picture, and now it's death that's the enemy. And death has been personified. And you can see why this would become very important, especially during centuries where there were a lot of unexplained plagues. People knew nothing about bacteria and viruses and so on, and plagues would come, and death has become this personified agent. And in fact, in a lot of medieval art, death is pictured as this giant monster who swallows people, and then they get digested in his juices, in his heartburn of his stomach, and there're all kinds of wood cuts and pictures and even sculptures of this. So that was very popular for some centuries.

And then around 1000, and the question references this year, 1000, Thomas Aquinas comes along. And he doesn't like the ransom theory, and he doesn't like the Christus Victor theory, and he proposes a new theory called penal substitutionary atonement, that basically says God has to punish people who do wrong, but that punishment would be eternal conscious torment. So God becomes Jesus, Jesus dies, and God kills Jesus to vent God's wrath on Jesus. And so many people today think that's what the Bible has always taught, and what Christians have always believed.

Not only have they never believed that before Anselm really popularized it, but as soon as he popularized it, someone named Peter Abelard said, "I think that's a terrible idea! That makes God look sadistic, and cruel, and incapable of forgiving. That really dishonors God." And he holds up a very different theory that's sometimes called the moral influence theory. But he said, "Listen, when Jesus died, Jesus wasn't changing God's bad opinion, and Jesus wasn't winning any deals with the devil. The problem isn't God, the problem isn't the devil; the problem is human beings." What Jesus was trying to do in dying and offering forgiveness as human beings killed him, he was trying to change our hearts, to see that revenge and retaliation and hate is no way to live.

So, that's just a quick tour of a few of the theories that have arisen through Christian history. And if somebody tells you, "You can only believe one of these," or, "You have to believe one of these." I would just say you do not. They may say that in their church, and they certainly can do that. But in terms of the Christian faith, that doesn't fit.

And I'll just say, finally, I don't even think you need an atonement theory. The way I understand the gospel, it's not about atonement theories at all. It's about at-one-ment, it's about reconciliation, it's about discovering that God always loves us, always forgives us, and living into our inherent oneness. So anyhow, Mike, what would you want to add? Especially from the early centuries of the church?

Mike: You did that really well, so I don't want to take away from it. I would add just a few little fun grace notes, because my particular interest isn't even atonement theory, it's the theology and the mythology of hell, and the underworld, and the afterlife. And so I'm a big devotee of Origen of Alexandria, who is referred to sometimes as the father of Christian scriptural interpretation, the father of Christian mysticism, and the father of Christian theology. So he's kind of a big deal.

Brian: Kind of a big deal.

Mike: Yeah. And what I love about his theology, and the theology of the first 500 years of the church, is they had this idea of what they called the apocatastasis, which was total restoration. The idea that all of this was moving, [Ancient Greek 00:22:32] is the word for a planet orbiting completely in its full cycle. All of this movement was moving to come around again in an arc towards healing. So in that version of the story, when Jesus or Christ goes into hell, whatever hell is, and that is not clearly identified, whatever that means, it's a rescue mission. So Jesus goes in to rescue everyone who's lost, and the devil, and all the fallen angels, whatever that means.

And when we're called to the imitation of Christ, we're told that we, following Christ, also

rush into hell. He says, "Like battlefield medics, unafraid, going in where wounded people are." So in that theology, hell isn't a place that we avoid, it's a place that we invade. And it's not a place of punishment, it's whatever it is, like this world, it's a classroom, and it's a hospital.

And just starting with that, that's a very, very different religion, when you look at it from that lens, as opposed to total penal substitutionary atonement. You can see how we got there. Christianity gets influenced by empire, and then God becomes an emperor. The empire collapses, and Christianity gets inherited by feudal societies, and then God becomes a feudal lord who needs his payment.

But I love this idea of, again, whatever it means, this redemptive arc. Even Origen has this fun thing. He says, "The last enemy to be destroyed is death, and death will be destroyed by being made no longer an enemy." So the last thing that happens is we befriend death. What in the world does that even mean? What's helpful for me is Origen says that when we look at a scripture, or a symbol, and it scandalizes us; when we say that couldn't have happened historically, or, "God, that's utterly immoral. Why would the God who asks us to forgive 70 times seven punish people forever?" When we are scandalized, he says, that's not the failure of the scripture or the symbol. That's the invitation to go deeper. That's it's doing its job. So you say, "No, that belief is not good enough. There has to be something better."

And so he sort of says these symbols and stories are always asking us to deepen them, and always asking us to outgrow them. Which takes me back to what Gigi said previously about recognizing when, sometimes, we're just dealing with immature religion, and it needs to grow up a little bit. So I'll shut up. I could geek out about this stuff for hours, I find it really exciting.

Gigi: It sort of, in some ways, this kind of brings in some other things that we've talked about in previous episodes, because thinking of scripture as living, like it's a living Word. And if God was a god of control, God could have just been clear about what God was doing when God sent Jesus. But we are invited to wrestle. Maybe that's because Christianity comes from a religion whose namesake is Israel, which means God-wrestler, but we're invited to wrestle with those. And part of the danger of wrestling with them is that sometimes we come up with interpretations that harm, and sometimes we come up with interpretations that engender more love. But God seems to be okay with that kind of ambiguity. And so that was one thing.

And the other thing is just, again, playing on that living Word, is that Christianity isn't one thing. It evolves, there's a spectrum. And I find with anything, the more I know and love something, the more I can see the differences in it. For religions that I don't know very well, I just know maybe one... I could put it under one thing and say, "Okay, that's that religion." For religions that I'm a part of, I can see a whole spectrum. And so to me that's, in some ways, as awful as the idea that God is punishing Jesus so that God doesn't punish us, as awful as that is, it also shows just how willing God is to allow us to wrestle our way into learning who God is.

Dawson: I want to jump in on something that Gigi mentioned, which is that sometimes we stumble upon interpretations that produce more love, and sometimes we stumble upon

interpretations that do more harm, and to sort of bring a sociopolitical lens. If you think about what it might mean for someone to believe that their ultimate symbol of God is that God sanctions not just violence, but righteous religious violence, to make things right, you can see how we find ourselves in, particularly in the American context, but elsewhere too, this sort of state of ethno-Christian nationalism, and this surrounding sociopolitical violence that's being legitimated by this primary symbol. Obviously that's an interpretation of the cross that causes harm. So I think that's one of the helpful things to bring in when we're talking about how we view this story, is how does it cause us to show up in the world? How does it cause us to treat our neighbor?

And maybe to offer a counter to that vision that causes harm, a lens that I'm trying to get more familiar with is a Girardian lens, on the interpretation of scripture. And Girard makes the case that it's actually just the opposite; that the primary symbol of the cross is an interruption of this mimetic cycle of scapegoating that we're constantly comparing and differentiating, and that differentiation sets the stage for violence in different forms. And that the symbol of the cross is a nonviolent interruption that essentially says we don't need violence to go forward together.

And you could see how that sort of interpretation would be something that causes more love in the world. How do I, when I'm wronged, respond in a way that doesn't cause more harm? How do I make sure that I'm not legitimating violence against others who I perceive as different? There's something there to unpack that I think I'm still wrestling with in my own life, and trying to understand, is the way that interpreting the cross specifically offers justification for the way that we show up in the world. I'm not sure if that's making sense, but that's what's on my mind.

Brian: Oh my goodness, that's so, so rich. People heard you refer to René Girard, and a term like mimetic theory, and people are thinking, "I've never heard of that, I don't know what that is." And the great news about that is that we live at a time where space is being opened up to ask these questions. And a future for the Christian faith is a future of being free to see things differently, to learn how to see, to grow in the way we see.

This is one of the great gifts that Richard Rohr really has given us. Just that simple little term, alternative orthodoxy. He's not saying reject orthodoxy, throw it all out, say it's all worthless, and denigrate it. But what he's saying is "No, there are other ways to see, and we don't have to attack the conventional ways, but where we see them doing harm, we have a good reason to look for a loving alternative." And I really am grateful for this conversation with you, dear friends, to demonstrate for people that this conversation is alive and well, of new ways to see our old, cherished, sacred texts, deep, rich stories that are bottomless wells of meaning. Thank you so much.

Thanks to the Center for Action and Contemplation for all of your support for this podcast. Thanks especially to our wonderful producer, Corey Wayne, and all of his artistry and support. And a special thanks to each of you for listening, for your attention, for your care, for your interest in Learning How to See. And if you found this series helpful, I hope you'll share it with someone you know and love.