Naked Bible Podcast Transcript

Episode 28

The Bible's Literary Context: The Comedic Genre and the New Testament (Part 7 of 8-part series)
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Guest: Dr. Sam Lamerson (SL)

Summary

This episode of the Naked Bible podcast features Dr. Heiser's interview with his friend Dr. Sam Lamerson about the use of the comedic genre in the New Testament. Dr. Lamerson is Professor of New Testament at Knox Theological Seminary in Fort Lauderdale, FL. He has a specific research interest in the comedic genre in ancient Greek literature.

Transcript

Welcome to another episode of the Naked Bible Podcast.

We're going to be continuing with our series on studying scripture in its own context and, specifically, its own literary contexts with this episode. We're going to shift gears a little bit, though. I'm going to be conducting an interview. This past week, I was fortunate to have a friend in town: Dr. Sam Lamerson from Knox Theological Seminary in Florida. I interviewed Sam about genre study. Sam specifically has an interest in the comedic genre, which may surprise you as far as being related to the study of the New Testament, but that's why I wanted to interview him.

A little bit more about Sam: He has his PhD from Trinity International University (formerly known as Trinity Evangelical Divinity School). That's in Deerfield, Illinois, near Chicago. He also has over 15 years of pastoral experience. In addition to his professorship duties, he's currently an associate pastor at Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church. He was the interim morning preaching and teaching pastor during the illness of Dr. D. James Kennedy. Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church, of course, was Dr. Kennedy's church. Sam did that for many months, perhaps even close to a year before that church called its new pastor. So Sam has a lot of pastoral experience. He's good at making things simple, so I wanted to interview him as part of our Naked Bible Podcast series. So what you'll hear next is my interview with Dr. Sam Lamerson.

MH: I'm here with professor Sam Lamerson of Knox Theological Seminary. Sam teaches New Testament at Knox and he's a friend of mine. I thought, since we had opportunity to spend some time together near where I live (down at Logos), that I would talk to Sam a little bit about what we've been talking about on the podcast, and that is literary genre and how that helps to interpret the Bible (some of the things that it contributes). Sam, thanks for being here.

SL: No problem! Glad to be here, Mike.

MH: I was wondering, just in general, how much would you say that your introductory New Testament students that you get at Knox... How many of them have ever really thought about the importance of a literary approach or genre to what they do, in terms of either Bible study or sermon preparation or things like that?

SL: When they come, it's pretty unlikely that they've thought very much about that, but particularly in the hermeneutics course, I try to spend a good bit of time helping them to think about how genre affects how they look at the text and how the text was meant to be interpreted—how the author meant for the original readers to understand it. So we spend a good bit of time thinking about those kinds of things.

MH: What kind of exercises do you have them do, or do you just more or less introduce them topically to the study?

SL: I introduce them topically to the study, then we do some things like looking at the difference between, for example, a parable and a historical incident… realizing that there are certain clues in the text that help us to realize that, for example, a parable is not to be taken as a literal story. But, on the other hand, a historical incident… the author means for us to take it as an actual incident that really happened.

MH: One of the genres (you can correct me if that's the wrong term)... I know that you've done a lot of work studying comedy in ancient literature, and I've heard you speak once about the use of comedy in the Bible. I was wondering if you could say a few things about that—things like, what are a few of the stock elements that go into that particular genre, and where you see comedy in the
5:00 Bible. Where does that play out?

SL: Sure. Aristotle will talk about four different genres. There's tragic, comedic, poetic, and the long story that eventually is fulfilled. By the comedic, Aristotle will tell us that there's a way that we can tell the difference between a comedic story and a tragic story. Essentially, a tragic story starts out high, with everything good, and ends low (usually with a funeral). A comedic story, on the other hand, usually starts out low, with some kind of serious problem, but then ends high—often in a wedding. If you think of even the romantic comedies that you've seen in the movies, often they will end with a wedding, and often they will begin with some

sort of a problem. The problem is whether or not the groom will ever be able to really get the bride. Probably a really good example of this is *Shrek*. Shrek is ugly and he's an ogre and he's not the kind of person that a beautiful girl would want to marry. Yet he falls in love with beautiful Fiona, and so there's this dramatic tension there. Can Shrek ever convince Fiona that he's worth marrying? Eventually, of course, through a variety of different things, Shrek and Fiona end up married, and that's the high point of the comedy. It's the point where Shrek and Fiona get married, or in *The Princess Bride* when Buttercup marries Wesley. In any of those kinds of films like that, you'll see it's very common that the groom is socially awkward or there's something wrong with him and he somehow has to overcome those obstacles to show himself worthy of being married to the beautiful girl. Then he gets married, finally, and that's the happily-ever-after.

MH: Yeah, as you were talking there, it may me think of the *Mall Cop* movie, which is the same kind of thing. Kevin James is just not what the lead female figure in the movie would ever find in any way interesting or attractive, and you get to see him do some pretty stupid things along the way that reinforce the incongruity of the match. I imagine that to an ancient audience, you have some of that in there, too—that they would recognize immediately what a mismatch this is.

SL: Right. And so, in the early Greek comedies, often what will happen is that you will have some sort of a serious problem and there will be someone who's going to try to take care of the problem. He's called in classical Greek, interestingly enough, the *ponērós*—the loser, essentially. He's the sort of Chaplinesque kind of character who's short and unable to do things and would never be able to really save the world. Yet by the end of the comedy, we see the *ponērós* (the loser, the person whom we would never expect to be able to change the world) actually doing that which is necessary to save the world, get the girl, and eventually get married. It's an amazing thing to realize that this character of the *ponērós* is exactly the character we see in Jesus Christ. He is born in a small, little tiny town. He's not famous. He's not born in Rome. There are no fireworks that go off when he's born. Anyone looking at his birth and his childhood would have said, "Anybody who thinks this man is going to change the world needs their head examined."

MH: Nothing significant at all going on…

10:00 **SL**: Nothing going on. And yet, amazingly enough, he (being the *ponērós* in the classical sense) does, indeed change the world through his death. It's just an incredible sort of comedic... There's a sense in which we can see the gospel as comedic—not in the sense that the crucifixion is *funny* or anything like that, but because of the sense that by every stretch of the imagination, it ought to end up poorly. But, through the amazing grace of God and through this person whom we would never expect to change the world, God uses his son to save his people and change the world and marry his bride (the Church) and eventually live happily ever after.

MH: If we can summarize the point, if you were a reader, let's say of one of the Gospels, and you were familiar with this type of material (the characters, the expectations of how things are going to begin), you could actually pick up on some of that in the gospel. Is what you're saying? As you read through the life of Jesus, at least initially, there's just nothing there that would ever indicate that this is a character of note. You'd almost wonder, why did anyone produce a story about this guy? And then things just sort of proceed along and you get this amazing ending. So someone who is familiar with that could pick up those message points as they read through a Gospel.

SL: Exactly right. They would begin to realize that anyone in the first century would think that a crucified messiah was a failed messiah—that this was a simple example of the fact that you had bet on the wrong horse, so to speak. The guy who you thought was the messiah wasn't the messiah because he was crucified. And yet, amazingly enough, this crucified messiah begins to change the world through his resurrection. And you see, then, that this is an amazing, *amazing* comedic genre—the whole gospel is really comedic. There's a wonderful book by Frederick Buechner called *The Gospel as Comedy, Tragedy, and Fairy Tale*. He goes into these genres and shows how the gospel does, indeed, fit the genre of comedy and the genre of tragedy. And eventually, it fits the genre of fairy tale—not because it's not true, but because it's the greatest of all fairy tales. It's the fairy tale that really is true, in which things do all turn out right. It's just like at the end of the Lord of the Rings when Sam realizes that his friends aren't dead and he has that great line. He says, "Is everything bad going to come undone?" And amazingly enough, everything bad does indeed come undone through this *ponērós*, whom we would never expect through this Jesus Christ.

MH: I think this is a good illustration, too. Sometimes it's a struggle to communicate what is meant by genre. In the description of this, maybe a modern term would be that there's a formula for producing a particular story and if you violate that formula, then people could be confused listening to it (or watching it if it's a TV show). There would be conventions, there would be parts of the formula that make it what it is and that can produce the desired result in the reader or the listener or the viewer.

SL: Right. So sometimes, for example in the parables, those formulas will be intentionally violated to sort of shock the reader. Sometimes that shock can be comedic. One of the most obvious examples is in Matthew 18, where Jesus tells a story of a man who owed 10,000 talents. Those who were listening at the time would have immediately laughed at that because they would have known that no one could owe 10,000 talents. It would be the equivalent today of saying you sent your daughter off to college with a Visa and when she came home for Christmas she had charged up the national debt. You would say, "There's some kind of a limit! That can't really happen." No one could have owed 10,000 talents. It was more money than the Roman government had at the time. So when Jesus says, "There was a man who owed 10,000 talents..." it's immediately comedic. But then

he goes on and pushes the joke a little bit more because when the king says to the man, "You need to pay me back the 10,000 talents" (which, of course, would have been impossible), the man says, "Give me a little bit more time." Obviously, if you owed 10,000 talents—if you owed the national debt—having a little bit more time is not going to help you. So that is a case where the parable starts out comedically but ends tragically, with the man eventually being cast into outer darkness because of his unwillingness to accept the forgiveness that was offered to him.

MH: That's a good example! Do you have any other examples in the New Testament (or the Old) that really sort of stand out in this way?

SL: Sure, there are lots of them. For example, Jesus saying, "It's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle." Sometimes you'll hear people who haven't studied that passage carefully say that was sort of a door that a camel could get through if he unburdened himself, but that's not really the case. What Jesus is saying is that it's easier for a literal camel to go through the eye of a literal surgical needle (and Luke uses the word for "surgical needle" in the Greek text) than for a rich man to go to heaven. That's the reason that the disciples... They don't say, "Oh, you mean this camel that has to get down on its knees?" No. They say, "This is impossible!" And Jesus, of course, then says, "Yes, it's impossible, but with God all things are possible."

Another really interesting example is the example of Zacchaeus. One of the things we know was that Zacchaeus was short, and probably not just short, but really, really short. He was so short that he couldn't see over the people that were around him. So there's some thought among New Testament scholars that he may have been a short person, like a dwarf. So Zacchaeus wants to see this man, Jesus, whom he has heard about. Keep in mind that during this period in history, if you were a dwarf as a slave, you were worth more than a slave who wasn't handicapped in that way. That was because the Romans would buy a dwarf and they would then bring him out to dance in front of people at a party. They would make fun of him and laugh, and this dancing dwarf was something that was very common in the Roman government at the time and among upper-level Roman citizens. So Zacchaeus, as a dwarf (particularly wearing a robe), would have looked bad running. Today, people run all the time and it's not that big of a deal, but in the first century for a man to run was to sort of throw away his dignity. Zacchaeus, wearing a robe, runs so that he can climb up a tree and see this man, Jesus. So he goes from this *ponērós*—this little man who is hated by everyone and who does all that he can just to get things for himself... yet when he meets Jesus (the ultimate *ponērós*), Jesus looks up, brings Zacchaeus down, goes to his house, and Zacchaeus' life changes.

At this time in history, it was often thought that you could tell about a person's personality by the way that they looked. The shorter that a person was, it was thought that the more stingy they were. So Zacchaeus sort of fits into that mold. He's a tax-collector who's taking all that he can for himself. But then he meets

Jesus, and Jesus changes him. All of a sudden, he may be small on the inside, he may be comedic on the outside, people may be looking at him and laughing at him, but when he meets Jesus, his life is changed and he changes from that person who is getting all that he can for himself to that person who wants to do the right thing and to pay back that which he has stolen. That is the sort of happy ending that we see in a comedic story. That person whom you would *never* expect to change or to be changed is suddenly changed in an amazing way. In this case, it's because he meets the ultimate changer of men: Jesus Christ.

20:00 **MH**: Well, thanks for spending a little time with us today! I'm sure the listeners will get a good bit out of this. It's just a good example of how you read through the New Testament and some of these things are so familiar, but they have a background. There are details in the story that just become a lot clearer and, frankly, just become more meaningful, as well. We can sort of get inside the heads and the minds and the hearts of the people who would've been able to appreciate each element of a story like that.