

Naked Bible Podcast Transcript

Episode 323

Dr. Ben Witherington III

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Episode Summary

Having authored more than sixty books and appearing as a frequent guest on major cable and network television programs, Dr. Ben Witherington is one of the most widely read biblical scholars in the world. He has for many years served as Professor of New Testament Interpretation at Asbury Theological Seminary in Kentucky and is an ordained minister in the United Methodist tradition. In today's episode of the podcast we chat with Dr. Witherington about his recent book, *Who God Is: Meditations on the Character of Our God* (Lexham Press, 2020), his blogging ministry, and his fiction.

Transcript

TS: Welcome to the Naked Bible Podcast, Episode 323: Dr. Ben Witherington III. I'm the layman, Trey Stricklin (also the third), and he's the scholar, Dr. Michael Heiser. Hey, Mike! What's up?

MH: Hey. It's been a busy week. But this'll be a nice break, actually. I've done lots of videos and interviews this week. Really almost ten hours of that. And last night I was feeling kind of washed out about it. But I knew we had Ben coming on and so, yep, this'll be a good break—a good conversation. So I'm looking forward to it.

TS: Yeah, absolutely. And also your *Demons* book has finally come out.

MH: What do you know?

TS: Finally! Have you gotten any feedback about that yet?

MH: Oh, yeah. People have really enjoyed it. We've gotten some Instagram things and social media feedback and email of course. So yeah, I think it's off to a good start. I'm just so thrilled to be able to say, "Look! I wasn't lying!" [laughs] "It was real! Here it is; it's out."

TS: Well, we have a great conversation happening today, Mike. Who've we got?

MH: We've got Ben Witherington III, who should be a familiar name to a lot of people who listen to the podcast or who watch Discovery Channel, the History Channel, A&E. You've probably seen Ben's face before.

TS: Or even *60 Minutes*.

MH: Yeah, even *60 Minutes*. If you watch religious stuff on those kinds of channels, chances are you've seen Ben. But he's quite a friend of *Unseen Realm* and just a friend and a scholar. So this is something I've been looking forward to doing for a while.

MH: Well, we're thrilled to have Ben Witherington with us for this episode of the podcast. Honestly, Ben, this really, really long overdue. You've been a real supporter of *Unseen Realm*, just generally (that content), and of course have contributed to Faithlife productions—the big film that we did on that and other things (Mobile Ed. and books) and... Good grief. Like I said, this is long overdue. So I'm glad this worked out. But the occasion, I think, is important because you have come out (through Lexham) with this little book, *Who God Is*. And when I got it and took a first look at it... And of course I've read it now because it's a short book. It's one of these little books that you'd carry around with you (100 pages). But there's a lot packed in here. This is some really... There's a lot of dense theology in here packed into a short space, and has the academese removed of it. So it's just really readable. And I thought this would be a great book to promote on the podcast, because I think our listeners are going to just love it. But before we... I can't wait to jump into it, and I want to jump into some of your other stuff, too, but before I give way to my [laughs] little burst of enthusiasm here, you should introduce yourself. I know a lot of people on the podcast are going to know who you are because you have a significant online presence as well. But for those who don't, could you just tell us a little bit about who Ben Witherington is? Where you got your degree, what you teach, where you teach, all that sort of thing.

BW: Sure. I'm a Tarheel. I went to the University of North Carolina. And then I did my seminary training in New England at Gordon-Conwell and at Harvard. And then being a glutton for punishment, I went to England to do a PhD in New Testament with C.K. Barrett at the University of Durham on Women in the New Testament.

MH: [laughs] You *are* a glutton for punishment.

BW: A nice, small subject. You know. [MH laughs] And not controversial in any way.

MH: Right.

5:00

BW: One of the things I like about you, Michael, is you don't shy away from controversy. You just throw those theories on out there and see if anything sticks. And that was kind of what I was doing with the study of the women in the New Testament as well. And what happened to me then... I don't know any other scholar this has happened to. Normally when you write some kind of turgid doctoral dissertation, it lumbers into obscurity and people have to hunt to find it. But what happened in my case (because of the importance of the subject, not because of me) is that it became the best-selling SNTS monograph ever in the form of *Women in the Ministry of Jesus* and then *Women in the Earliest Churches*. And then they wanted the Readers' Digest version of *Women and the Genesis of Christianity* as well. And so what happened to me is while I'm busy pastoring four Methodist churches in North Carolina (because I'm an ordained Methodist minister) is that people (publishers) started coming after me and institutions started coming after me to hire me to teach. And so I'm one of those weird people that's almost never applied for a teaching job [MH laughs] and never had to beat down the doors of publishers to find somebody who would publish my work either.

MH: Yeah, that's very unusual.

BW: I'm the only weird person that I know in regard to those sorts of things. So that kind of launched my career there as a writer. And I had been a writer. I actually had been published. My poetry had been published even when I was in high school. So I've always been a writer. I did an English Lit degree at Carolina. And I would have been perfectly happy publishing and parishing for many years. But finally, Ashland Seminary (after I'd taught a little bit part-time at Duke) followed me and said, "Well, why don't you come up here?" And I said, "Okay, what do I get to teach?" And they said, "Anything we think you're competent to teach." And I said, "Great. Can I teach the Old Testament *and* the New Testament?" And they said, "Yes. We really need you to teach Wesley studies since you're a Methodist." I said, "That's fine. That's what I taught at Duke." Then they said, "How about Apologetics and World Religions?" [MH laughs] I'm going, "Great! Okay. Wow. Cornucopia." So I went to Ashland. And the thing is that they had four campuses. So I was fulfilling my destiny as a Methodist circuit rider. I was going to Cleveland, Columbus, Ashland, and Detroit.

MH: Let me guess. The only thing they said no to was a teaching assistant, right?

BW: That's about right. [laughter] Or an office bigger than a closet. [laughter] No six feet distancing possible from students in my former office. But oh well. And so we had 11 good years in Ashland. I was married before I went off to do my doctoral work. We had two kids. And Ashland was a good place for our kids to grow up, for sure. Small town, Ohio. Safe and all of that. And then finally Asbury

called in 1995 and said, “We need you down here.” And it was hilarious. Because I went from the interview with David Bauer, the dean of the Biblical Studies area. And he asked me, “Well, which part of the New Testament do you want to teach?” [laughs] And I just laughed and said, “Yes.”

MH: Right.

BW: “I want to teach at least the whole New Testament. Thank you.” But the nice thing was that there was at that time only the one campus. Then eventually we had a campus in Orlando as well. So basically, I wasn’t running around like a chicken with my head cut off, which I had been in a variety of places. And I’ve been there ever since. Eleven years ago, we started our PhD program in Biblical Studies. And it’s really just exploded. We have now 57 students, Old and New Testament. It’s a lot.

MH: Wow. I never knew it was that large.

BW: It’s huge. And partly, as you well know, secular universities are paring down their ancient Near Eastern or Judaic or New Testament programs to bare nubs. I mean, Harvard is taking two a year. Yale is taking two a year. I mean, there aren’t scholarships. And of course, as you know, it’s labor intensive in America. It’s a five- or six-year, knock ‘em out and drag ‘em out program. And so we have had unbelievable applications for this program in the last five or six years. People with 4.0s and already published and this, that, and the other. So it’s been fun. It’s challenging, but it’s been fun. Most of the time I spend with the doctoral students, but I still teach a couple of regular graduate seminary courses a year, too.

10:00

MH: Wow. That’s a full introduction. But you actually didn’t even get into the things (and this is good) that I’m going to angle for today. To give the listeners a heads up, Ben is not shy of getting into media that, in turn, winds up on the screen, the TV, the radio, and the internet now, of just the average person in the pew (the average person who wants to get biblical content). He’s been an online presence for a long time and has a well-trafficked blog. It’s hard to turn anything on on TV when it comes to A&E, the History Channel, Discovery Channel, all this stuff, that’s about Jesus, that Ben’s not in. So this is the sweet spot for this podcast—scholars who really try to get content to the person who’s not getting a degree. We’ve just heard about all the degree side. That’s ultimately what I want to get into toward the last third or the last half of what we’ll do today. But really, the immediate occasion is this book, *Who God Is*. And I’m just going to get into it this way. The very first page... I’m just going to read this. I’m actually going to read you a few excerpts. And I just sort of want to hear you riff on them. [laughs]

BW: Okay.

MH: From what was in the book. But this is the way the book starts:

Something has bothered me for a long time. I am referring to the fact that even devout Christians seem to place far more emphasis on the adjectives applied to God in the Bible than on the nouns. This is not to say that the adjectives are not vitally important. God *is* almighty. God is righteous. God is holy. God is merciful. God is compassionate. And so on. But frankly, nouns are more important than adjectives when it comes to the character of any sentient being, whether we are talking about God or angels or human beings.

So that's a little bit of an unusual premise or starting point. But I'm just telling everybody, what you just heard me say, that's true. That's really true. And the book really does some very interesting things. This isn't academese. There aren't tons of footnotes. But this is pregnant with good biblical theology, which is really what made it appealing. And the first chapter is *God is Love*. Now as I telegraphed here, I'm going to read something here. And I'd like you and I to go back and forth with it. And feel free to hammer away, Ben. [laughs]

BW: Okay.

MH: In the part about... You're leading into the *God is Love*.

In its core character as an action, love must be freely given and freely received. It cannot be coerced. And it cannot be predetermined or else it is not love. Inherent in love is a measure of freedom. One can be wooed. One can be persuaded. One can be led to love. But one cannot be forced to love.

Now I think our listeners already know where this is going to head (at least one of the trajectories) in relationship to predestination and all that stuff. But just comment a little bit about that paragraph. About "...love is a measure of freedom... It can't be coerced."

BW: Just a little backstory. This has been niggling at me...

MH: Oh, I'm sure.

BW: ...ever since seminary. I mean, I'm a Methodist. I was never a Reformed person in the theological sense. [laughs] But when I went to Gordon-Conwell, I really kind of wanted to hear the non-Armenian side of the Evangelical/Protestant argument. And boy, I got it in spades. I had Calvin and Berkhof. I had Berkouwer. I had Van Til. You name it. I had them all. And had to read them all. And Jonathan Edwards above all. And when I was in seminary and reading Jonathan Edwards' *The Freedom of the Will*, which was so titled because it was responding to Martin Luther's *The Bondage of the Will*, and I read the really intricate argument of Jonathan Edwards about, "Well, what *The Freedom of the Will* really means is not the power of contrary choice, because God has already predetermined everything. What it *really* means is you just don't *feel* compelled."

15:00

And *that* really fried my egg. [MH laughs] I mean... No! That cannot be true. That simply cannot be true. Because God is a moral being and he treats us as moral agents whom he expects to behave by his grace and with his aid, it cannot be true that we may seem to have actual viable choices in life, but really we don't. Really we don't because it's all fate or predetermination or whatever. But what worried me about studying all that and studying that Reformed Theology, what kept getting hammered home again and again, was the adjectives. "God is sovereign." I mean, you can just hear John Piper reciting this. "God is sovereign. He is sovereign. He's wholly other. He's this. He's that. He's the other." And I thought, "Okay. True. But in what sense does God exercise his sovereignty? *How* does he exercise his sovereignty? Does he exercise his sovereignty like the Godfather?" "I'll make you an offer you can't refuse."

MH: [laughs] Right.

BW: "You'll do me a favor. After I will do you a favor. Or you will not do me a favor and then you will sleep with the fish." I mean, that God... And every fiber of my being said, "There's something really wrong with this picture of God." And so it took me a long time before it dawned on me that one of the lacunae—gaps—in that whole approach to God, however much comfort it may give you that God is in control and he's having a good day... However much that may comfort you, at the end of the day, it sure doesn't explain this central focus in both the Old and New Testament on love and on *God is Love*. And so I finally got to the point where I went, "Huh. The real problem with Reformed Theology is it majors in the adjectives and just about dismisses or ignores the nouns." And I went, "Well, that just won't do. That's not the view of the biblical writers." So that's ultimately what bugged me for so long, that I was prompted to write this.

MH: Yeah. Here's a good statement on page 11 to add to that. You wrote:

Needless to say, where one starts in describing the character of God what one thinks is most fundamental about our God will affect how we view God's attributes such as God's sovereignty and his righteousness. Is there something more fundamental we could say about God's character (not merely his omniscient nature or attributes as the only living God) than that God is love? I don't think so, and neither did the one who was called Jesus' beloved disciple.

Now this is really an important point that's going to run through the whole book, that the reason you start with *God is Love* is this notion that this is the most fundamental thing. The fundamental thing that God is, or the noun. This is the most important of the nouns. And it guides and steers our thinking (or at least should) in relationship to all these other things. It is the thing that provides the framework. So talk a little bit about that.

BW: Well, I think that's right. You may remember the old song from *The Sound of Music*, "Let's start at the very beginning. A very good place to start." And of course, the philosophers tell you where you start an argument or a thought process to some extent is really going to shape and guide where you end up. And I thought, "Well, that's certainly true." So I started asking a series of questions. Why is the great commandment "Love God with your whole heart... and your neighbor as yourself?" Why is the fruit of the Spirit... Why do we start with love? Why does Paul say that faith, hope and love are the big three, but "the greatest of these is love?"

MH: There's a pattern there. [laughs]

20:00

BW: Yeah, there seems to be a theme and it's in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. For me, one of my all-time favorite Old Testament passages is Hosea 11. And not because it directly uses the word for love (or some other word) but because it portrays God as a deeply compassionate person who's not going to act like a fickle human being. And especially in regard to his own people. And to me, I read Abraham Joshua Heschel, what he wrote about that. I found it so moving. And I thought, "God is the ultimate loving being in the universe, such that the author of 1 John can call him Love. Okay, well, what does that mean?" Among other things, it means that he freely loves us—that there is a modicum of freedom required to be able to love. And since he wants that response from us, we also must be able to do so. Because it's not like *The Man of La Mancha* and *The Impossible Quest*. What God requires of us, he enables us to do. And so it began to not only go around in my cerebral cortex, "What is the character of God?" but "What is the character of us created in the image of God?" and "Why all this emphasis on love?" Because we're supposed to have a personal relationship with the most personal loving being in the universe.

MH: Yeah. It... Boy. Let me go to an example of how that emphasis affects... I mean, you bring out a lot of these. It's hard just to pick one. I'm going to read two things. One is a little quicker than others. And I just want people who might be listening to this in the future to hear this. Because we get listened to by a lot of people, not just believers. On page 15, you write:

If the characteristic divine activity is that of loving, then God *must* be personal, for we cannot be loved by an abstraction or anything less than a person.

That's actually an important thought for (for lack of a better label) the New Age spirituality. Because there's a lot of talk about love. And there's a lot of distancing from God being a personal being as opposed to some abstract force or just some sort of thing that lies behind synchronicities and all this sort of stuff. Or this sort of living entity that's not really an entity or thing, because if it is then, "Boy, I could be accountable to it," [laughs] You know?

BW: Right. “It’s a higher power or [inaudible] with you. Don’t tell me that there’s an actual being up there.”

MH: Exactly. But that is a fundamental disconnection: that idea and love. And I just thought that was really important to point out. And then on the very next page, you bring this core element of who God is. You go to 1 John 4:9-10 and you write:

Notice that in 1 John 4:9-10 God sent his Son so that we might have everlasting life through him. But he also sent him as an atoning sacrifice for sin. If God is love, then no wonder a holy God is also righteously angry about our sin and must do something about it if we are to be reconciled to him.

MH: Footnote. There’s the motivation: reconciliation.

After all, it is sin that has destroyed our relationship with our loving God just as sin destroys our relationships with other human beings. Love and life are the antitheses of hate and death and yet the substitutionary sacrifice (the atoning death of Christ) is the prime example of God’s love for us.

MH: I wanted to bring this up. Because there is a... (I don't know if you want to call it a movement. Maybe it is a movement.) But there’s this undercurrent about getting rid of the substitutionary aspect of the atonement. I’m one of these “Open Tent” atonement people, where, “Okay. They all have something to contribute (all these perspectives). But please don’t use these other perspectives to nudge substitutionary atonement out of the tent. That is an over-response and an overreaction.” And even worse, what you just wrote in that paragraph, there’s this notion that a substitutionary atonement is somehow incompatible with a loving God. And that is not the case.

25:00

BW: No, I agree with you 100% on that one. And here’s something that’s really interesting to me. There’s a lot of paradox in that. The greatest expression of love involved death, which gave life. But the interesting thing to me about that is the Church Fathers were wise enough to say that we need as many hand-holds and images and ideas to come to grips with the profundity of what happened on the cross, including substitutionary atonement. And yet there was never an ecumenical council on atonement. Never has been. In some ways, that’s astounding. We’ve had ecumenical councils on how many angels can stand on the... [MH laughs] But not anything as fundamental as atonement. We’ve gotten our Christology straight or our Trinity straight, but not atonement. Well I think it’s because people get uncomfortable with one or another of these images or ideas or concepts applied to the atonement. And we would much rather have a God that is not Holy Love, or it’s holy Love (with a little *h* and a big *L*). We would rather have a God like my Intervarsity kid that was in one of my Intervarsity groups who was a brand-new Christian and clearly didn’t have her atonement

theology straight and said, “The way I see it, it all works out very well. I like committing sins. God likes forgiving sins. Woo hoo!” [MH laughs] Not quite.

MH: There’s some clear thinking right there. [laughs]

BW: Not quite, because it cost God the life of his only Son so that forgiveness could be possible. And so this is not cheap grace. This is not superficial love. This is a profound love that is in sync with all the other attributes of God’s character. And there was only one way for that to happen and that’s through the death of his Son, according to the scriptures.

MH: You know, I think a lot of the discussion here... I think one of the things that creates confusion is, “What’s God angry at?” Because typically, it’s, “Well, he’s angry at sin. And sinners.” And the way it gets talked about is, “God is angry at behavior.” What God is really angry at (as you said in that paragraph) is that “Sin has destroyed a relationship that I want.” It’s not this, “Oh, this is another failed performance. Here’s a dose of wrath. And then I’m going to pile all your failed performances on my Son, and boy, then I really get to vent my anger.” It’s really misguided, but it’s actually a common way, especially among today’s younger demographic who’ve been led down a path on how to think about this, that they can’t see that there’s a loving motivation behind this. Even... In *Unseen Realm* I get into... I don’t do... There’s not a full-blown theodicy in it. But I take theodicy back to: “God wants a relationship. He wants a family. And he’s not going to scrap the plan. And every time God moves to restore that which has been lost in these little, incremental stages... And he’s doing it with people. He’s also not going to erase their freedom, because then they wouldn’t be imagers anyway, and it’s an admission that it was a bad idea.”

BW: Right.

MH: I mean, God is going to work the plan as he laid out the elements of it. And he’s doing that ultimately because he wants you. And so how can we possibly be angry at God or dismissive of God’s decisions if really the lone path to avoid wiping the pieces off the board or wiping the players off the board, even out of the room, or just changing the rules in midstream... If the only way to accomplish this is the incarnation to fulfill the covenants and to reverse the curses, how could you possibly be angry with him? How could you possibly resent that? But we’re just not taught the...

30:00

BW: Or like Job, eventually we may need to get to the point where we have a Come to Jesus meeting and realize, “Wait a minute. God created all this. And God has the right to set the rules about this. Who are we to question God’s rules?”

MH: Yeah.

BW: Or the way that he acts. And eventually, as Job says, “I have uttered things I shouldn’t have uttered, because I was ignorant.” And I think that happens a lot with us. I think part of the problem, Michael, in our time, is that love is such a buzzword in the particular kind of oversexualized culture that we live in, that the danger in talking about “God is Love” is it’s going to be seen through the filter of all kinds of modern and unbiblical ways of looking at love. And the danger is that the equation is reversed to “Love is our god” rather than “God is love.” And so I think that you have to really do some careful defining of what you mean, or otherwise it gets sucked up by the vacuum cleaner of our cultural assumptions.

MH: Mm hmm. Over on page 25 (since we’re hitting things that obviously aren’t controversial at all)... [laughs] Over on page 25, here’s the header. And I was so gratified to see this. It wasn’t a surprise, but it’s still gratifying.

Election is not salvation.

[laughs] I mean, this is a trajectory I have gone off on because of the very obvious thing that, “Okay, Israel was elect, but how do we have an exile? If election means salvation, what’s going on there?” But here we have Ben Witherington—a *New Testament* scholar—who goes off in the same direction. So I don’t know if you want to comment on that at all, but I had to throw that in. Because when I say that, people are like, “What?! Well maybe that works in the Old Testament, but not the New Testament.” And here we have a *New Testament* scholar saying the same things.

BW: Well, think about Jesus just for a minute. In *Ephesians*, amongst other places, Jesus is clearly called the “elect one of God.” However, Jesus didn’t need to be saved. [MH laughs] So there’s something wrong with equating election in the Bible with salvation. It just doesn’t make sense. I mean, when you look at what happened to Israel, they were elect and yet, wow, lots of them fell by the wayside. And even when you get to somebody who is a chosen one, even an anointed one of God like Cyrus the Persian, he wasn’t a card-carrying Yahwist at all. But he was elect. So there *has* to be some kind of distinction between election and salvation. And to me, one of the most revealing conversations I’ve had in the last ten years was with Chad Thornhill, who is a very fine *New Testament* scholar at Liberty.

MH: Yeah, I read his dissertation. I was a reader. I know who you’re talking about.

BW: And what he shows is that in early Judaism, that distinction between election and salvation was pretty clear. And so it’s not wrong to see that in the *New Testament* as a further manifestation of how early Jews would have thought about these kinds of issues. For sure.

MH: Yeah, and if one is a subset of the other, then the subset can have this language said of them in certain contexts. But it's the equation that's the problem.

BW: Yeah, exactly. I like to say, "You're not eternally secure till you're securely in eternity." [MH laughs] But talking about election versus salvation, salvation has three tenses in Paul's letters, clearly. "I have been saved." "I am being saved." "I shall be saved to the uttermost when I'm totally conformed to the image of Christ. But by the way, that hasn't happened yet." So between now and then, unless you get through all three tenses of salvation, the situation is... Wait for it... Tense. [MH laughs] In other words, there is the possibility of apostasy.

35:00

MH: Yeah, we spent a lot of time on that. We did a Hebrews series here. And it's like... The writer of Hebrews wouldn't have expressed this concern over and over and over again if he wasn't really concerned that people who had embraced the gospel... "Okay, I believe it. I believe what you're telling me about Jesus." And then all of a sudden, five, ten years later, they reject it. It's not as though it's unwittingly lost, "Oh, I crossed this sin line here and now I've lost..." That's a mischaracterization of the concern. It's *always* about believing loyalty. It's *always* about that.

BW: Yeah, absolutely it is. And I mean, for me, when I'm reading 1 John 4, "God is love," 1 John is loaded with ethical warnings. Well, what point would there be in warning a whole group of people (not just the non-elect in the group, but the whole group of people) that you assume to be your beloved, as he calls them, against doing this, that, or the other, if they couldn't do otherwise? I mean, think about that for a minute.

MH: Right. Yeah, warnings and commands suggest [laughs] that those things can happen. Yeah.

BW: Or adherence to that whole idea. Okay. I had this discussion with Greg Beale (and God bless him) one day. We were discussing 1 Thessalonians. And I said, "So who exactly are these warnings for?" "Oh, these warnings are for the people who are not really elect and are going to fall away." I'm going, "Well, what was the point of warning them if they couldn't do otherwise?" Right? I mean, it sounds to me like Paul's warning everybody. Because there's a tension in the Christian life in regard to this sort of issue. And the thing about love is, again, it has to be freely given, freely received, and freely responded to. It's not automatic. It's not like putting somebody on a conveyer belt and they're going to inevitably get to the finish line, come what may, do what they will.

MH: Yeah. I'm hoping that those of you who are listening... This is a book... The subtitle is *Meditations on the Character of Our God*. This is a lot of theology. There's a lot of theological discussion in this book. It's very short. You can read this in a couple of hours. But this is the kind of thing that would be great for

personal studies or small group study. Honestly, if you're a pastor, there's good stuff in here that'll preach. I'm just hoping this gives you a flavor.

One more thing before we branch off into something else. On page 66, you're talking about *God is Spirit*. And you say:

I take it that when [Jesus] says [in John 4]] God is Spirit, 1) Jesus is talking about the heavenly Father and his very nature, and 2) he is denying that God's nature involves materiality or flesh.

And then over on page 69 (you're still talking about John 4), you write this:

Jesus in John 4 makes another crucial point. As the kingdom comes, it is not about sacred space—worshiping *on* Mount Gerazim or *on* Mount Zion, nor is it about sacred time—a holy hour—necessarily. True worshipers will worship God whenever and wherever, for all the earth is the Lord's, and any time can be a sacred time, and any place can be a sacred space. But the character of true worship is to worship in spirit and in truth.

So what you do in those two paragraphs is you go from sort of an ontological observation to a more... Jesus is bringing this up to make a specific point. It's not just a point of application. It is, but there's also theology there. But to how this being (God who is a Spirit) doesn't need time and place. And I think that's a good reminder. And for many listeners out there it may not be a reminder. You may not have heard that cast that way. But especially now in these quarantine conditions. And you know, who knows what the new normal is going to be? But this holds. This observation holds. So if you could say a few things about those two excerpts, about God is Spirit, both in terms of God is a person, and then just how you apply it there.

BW: Well, obviously one of the implications of saying God is Spirit is, "The Mormons are wrong." [laughter]

MH: You had to go there. [laughs]

40:00

BW: They're really wrong about this. Jesus didn't have to come to earth so that he could have a body because without a body you're just an incomplete being. No. That's not true. God is wholly other. He doesn't require a body to be entirely who he is. Not required. The point of the incarnation was for *our* benefit, not for God's because he was incomplete. And so that's part of it.

But what Jesus is saying as he's bringing in the kingdom and inaugurating new covenant is, "Shouldn't our worship be more commensurate with the character of God?" Thank you very much. God doesn't need sacrifices. He's not hungry (unlike some pagan deities). He's not lacking anything. So why are we doing

what we're doing? We're doing this in order to enhance our relationship with God and further that loving relationship of freely-given, freely-received love of God. That's what it's about. We should be caught up in love and wonder and praise of God genuinely, wholeheartedly, in spirit as well as in truth. Not truth without spirit and not spirit without truth.

I remember Richard Lovelace, my church historian professor at Gordon-Conwell once saying, "It's like wine and wineskins. Wine without wineskins has nothing to give it a definite shape or to protect it or to contain it in a way that could go on serving a good purpose. But wineskins without wine doesn't vivify anything. It doesn't give life to anything. If you have worship that's just hammering the truth at people over and over again rather than speaking the truth in love, and it's not about being caught up in love and wonder and praise of God as well as hearing the truth, then that's incomplete worship. That's not fully engaging the person both mind and spirit, both emotions and will. And Jesus is saying, "The day is coming and now is, where it's not going to be focused on a location or for that matter a particular preacher," etc., etc. It should be focusing on the character of the worship and the character of the One worshiped and the one who's doing the worship.

MH: Mm hmm. Yeah, this is good stuff. Again, the book is *Who God Is: Meditations on the Character of Our God*, Ben Witherington III, from Lexham Press.

I want to transition a little bit to get to something else that I mentioned and that is, your activity as a scholar (and we'll be very broad here) in the public sphere... Can you tell us a little bit about your blog or your blogging history? What prompted you to get started on this? And again, just to telegraph this, Ben is one of a handful of scholars that when something either wacky comes along (like *The Da Vinci Code* years ago)... It was wonderful to find your blog because it not only confirmed I wasn't the only one [laughs], but it was just good stuff. Because here we have a New Testament scholar that's actually taking the time to look at this thing that's sweeping through the populous here, "Ooh, secret knowledge about the New Testament—about Jesus," and addressing that. But it wasn't just that. You address these sorts of things, but you also will address things in the academy. I think you have always had a good sense of knowing, "Well, this is going to trickle down, either in the pulpits or maybe on the impulse shelves in the grocery store." Like the Jesus Seminar or the Quest for the Historical Jesus (the Third Quest). You'll take things like that and take them apart for a lay audience and assess them. And it's been really valuable. So could you say something about your blogging history, where people can find it? And just how'd you get into this?

BW: Well, a long time ago in a land far, far away, there was a website named Beliefnet.

MH: Mm hmm. I remember that. [laughs]

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BW: And they asked me if I would I do blogs for them and be their Bible answer man. And they would just send me unlimited numbers of questions from the wild and wacky to the wonderful to give short answers to on Beliefnet. And really that's how I got started with blogging. But I've always thought... My former president of the seminary (three presidents ago now) said to me, "Ben, your best gift is the ability to distill profound biblical stuff to any level of discourse. And you need to keep using that gift." So I don't know that I'd ever thought that was my very best gift, but I realized I do have a responsibility.

MH: Mm hmm.

BW: And especially in an age of increasing biblical illiteracy. I mean, you mentioned *The Da Vinci Code*. I actually went on a tour throughout the country for InterVarsity talking to people about *The Da Vinci Code*. And the thing that struck me more than any other thing (besides just naiveté of wanting to read a novel that has 150 historical errors as if it was historical fact)... It was hysterical fiction, not historical fiction. [MH laughs] You know? But the fact that the public's knowledge of the Bible or Christian understanding was *so thin*, even in the churches, that they were interested in this, "Well, maybe this could be true..." And then were disappointed when it wasn't true! "No, Mary Magdalene was not Mrs. Jesus. Sorry. Didn't happen." You know? I mean, when Jesus rose from the dead and Mary Magdalene saw him, she didn't say, "Honey! I'm glad you're back! Let's jumpstart our marriage and read a Dobson book!" No, that didn't happen. Right?

MH: [laughs] Right.

BW: But to me, that was an alarm bell going off. Our culture is going off the rails of having any kind of Judeo-Christian understanding of the Bible or the general theological and ethical truths that we stand for. And therefore, it's incumbent on people like you and me to have a public face and to be willing to talk to all kinds of people. And now, my blog is on Patheos. It's called Bible and Culture. And I get everything from zombies to devout Christians chiming in on the blog and saying all kinds of strange and wonderful things. And you know, I try to respond to a lot of it, because I think it's important. It's the same reason I've done a lot of television on various networks (really all of the major ones now) and why I think that's important too. Because unfortunately, people don't read the Bible anymore. Even a lot of church people don't read the Bible. So you've got to reach them by any good means necessary. And I take that very seriously.

MH: Mm hmm. You know, if this is "inside baseball," you can tell me and we can discuss it offline, but I just have to know. With the TV, is there anything you do to alleviate your concern (or do you just live with it) that you're going to be edited in such a way to distort what you really think?

BW: Well, I guess I have been really fortunate. I started doing TV all the way back in Peter Jennings' ABC days. He was of the mind that religion is such an important part of American culture that we need to have some shows on Jesus and Paul and early Christianity and this, that, and the other. And of course, he was right. But the people that I have dealt with, like Peter Jennings and David Gibson from CNN (and now he's teaching at Fordham, actually) or more recently Alex [unintelligible] who works for Nutopia.... Most of them had a certain level of theological understanding or chops and thought that one of the key things here is to be fair to various different points of view and all the better if we *have* some different points of view. So you know this recent one, *Jesus: His Life*, that we did for Discovery/History Channel *did* have some variety of opinions. Now of course, it's always true that you don't have any control over the editing.

MH: Right, right.

BW: My worst experience was actually doing NBC Dateline during the height of *The Da Vinci Code*. They brought me all the way to New York; interviewed me in St. John the Divine cathedral for, like, three hours; and then edited me down to one word: "No."

MH: "No." [laughs]

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BW: "Is *The Da Vinci Code* historically credible?" "No." That was it. [MH laughs] That was it.

MH: Is that on IMDB? [laughs]

BW: Yes. And you know...

MH: You got a credit for it. [laughs]

BW: Well at least I got a free trip to New York and saw a play. That was awesome. And went to a concert. So, you know... So there's always that danger, but at least they didn't misrepresent me. So far, I haven't been badly misrepresented. And what I have found in these networks is that there are a lot of very thoughtful people doing television, whether it was a cable network or one of the old original networks. And many of them care deeply about this. Some of them are even genuine people of faith who really would like to get to the bottom of some of these things and treat the thing with respect. The one person I had difficulty with (a little bit) was Bob Simon on 60 Minutes some years ago when we were doing an interview about the James Box. And you could tell he was just as sarcastic and cynical as he could be about the thing. He was not about to give this idea any credence whatsoever. But at the same time, he allowed me to answer without him correcting me. So at least I got another opinion in addition to his. So I felt okay about that.

MH: That's interesting. Because there are just things I regularly say no to because I can't get over the distrust hump. But I don't know. Pray for me [laughs], what to say.

BW: [laughs] One of the things you have to do... One of the things that Paul says about himself is that you have to be prepared to be a fool for Christ in some ways and leave the results in God's hands. You know? And if you get misinterpreted, then you do. But for any audience that you speak to thereafter, you have an opportunity to say, "Well, that really wasn't fair. This is what I actually think." And you can talk about it on the blog and lots of people will read that as well.

MH: Mm hmm. Well, the last thing I want to transition to is you also write fiction. And I think a lot of people will not know this. So can you tell us about the fiction you write and what it's about, what you're trying to accomplish there, and of course where to get it?

BW: Sure. Again, I have an English Literature degree. So my English prof (who's still a good friend, who just retired after 53 years of teaching at Carolina) said, "Now, Ben, you're finally using your English Literature degree. [MH laughs] Finally! You're in your sixties, but you're finally doing this." [MH laughs] Well, I'd always intended to do some of this. The first thing I really did was I wrote a series of archeological short thrillers (because I love thrillers and I love mysteries and I love detective stories and whatnot) about an evangelical Christian named Art West who was good friends with a Jewish scholar at Hebrew University in Jerusalem and also with an antiquities dealer named Khalil Al-Saeed in Jerusalem. So there was this whole series of explorations of various biblical sites and archeological findings and exciting things. For example, finding the tombstone of Lazarus that said, "Died 29 A.D. and died 45 A.D." which confused a lot of people. Right? Dead twice. Okay.

MH: It must've been repurposed. [laughs]

BW: Exactly, exactly. So I did it not mainly for entertainment, but to emphasize the importance of history and archeology for the understanding of a biblical faith, and in an increasingly Gnostic age. If you really want to know my motivation, part of it was that Gnostic Christianity is not Christianity. We decided that in the second century. Let's not do it again. You know? And I had a lot of fun doing that. I didn't ever consider it haute literature. It was just fun. And lots of people enjoyed it and still do. You can get it as a boxed set from Faithlife/Logos, even, these days. So that was kind of the first venture. But then I thought, "I should do something more specifically to deal with the New Testament." So over varsity hot dogs in downtown Atlanta with Dan Reid, my Intervarsity editor, I proposed to him a series of short novellas called *A Week in the Life of...* And he obviously had eaten enough hot dogs to think that that was a good idea (and a few French

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fried onion rings). And so we started off with *A Week in the Life of Corinth*. And that thing has just blown up.

MH: Wow. I'm glad to hear that.

BW: It's in its 12th or 13th printing now. And used in a lot of classes. But what was distinctive about that whole series is, not only is there the story (and you could just read the story), but there were *Closer Look* sections that actually explain some of the important historical and contextual things that you needed to understand what's going on in the story and why it's different from our world and those sorts of things. And that became wildly popular and prompted them to sign on for a whole series of those kinds of little novellas with *Closer Look* sections. And they're still going. I did one more like that called *A Week in the Fall of Jerusalem*. And of course, the key is to pick a key week. So the first one I picked the week of Paul's trial before Gallio in Corinth. In *A Week in the Fall of Jerusalem* I picked the week the Temple went down for the count, what happened to the Christians who fled to Pella, amongst other places. So there was that. I did that. But I also wanted to do something that's a little hard to define in terms of genre. So I did something called *The Gospel of Jesus*. And what it is is it's a narrative that puts... In some ways it's kind of like the Diatessaron. It puts the whole story together in one story (the four Gospels). And the narrator is like an omniscient narrator because it deals with Jesus' thoughts and Mary's thoughts as well along the way, as well as the thoughts of the people he runs into. And I did this to have a continuous narratological flow without it being fiction. All of the episodes are true. Added to it is a logical extension of what's there. I filled in a few gaps that are plausibly historical along the way. And really that has had an incredible ministry. I mean, I actually had people go on a tour of the Holy Land with me who had read this, who were not Christians in fact. One couple that were living together and weren't married who came on this tour and the guy (the young man) said to me, "This is the first time (after I read this novel) that Jesus actually made sense to me. And his world made sense to me." And I thought, "Excellent. That's what I was really hoping for." It's not really fiction. It's not just a straight regurgitation of this verse pasted to that verse either. It's a narrative along the way. And that has prompted one more of those. I've just done one for Cascade, which they called *Encounters with Jesus*. What this is is each individual person whose life Jesus changed gets to speak for themselves.

MH: That's an interesting idea.

BW: So blind Bartimaeus tells his own story, Lazarus tells his story, Mary Magdalene tells her story, etc., to give a more full-orbed picture of what kind of persons they were and what a difference Jesus made in their life.

MH: What are the titles of both of those again?

BW: The first one is *The Gospel of Jesus*. And the second one was originally entitled *He Touched Them*, but in our current situation, the publisher didn't like that [laughs] in a world of social distancing. So we went with *Encounters with Jesus*.

MH: Okay.

BW: The second one is not out yet. But it will be sometime probably later this year, from Cascade.

MH: That's very interesting.

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BW: Yeah. I did one other novel for my mother's 90th birthday. I'm a great lover of Southern fiction like Flannery O'Connor and William Faulkner and all that sort of stuff. So I wrote a novel called *Southern Discomfort*, which is the story of a widow who doesn't want a highway paved through the front of her yard. It's a humorous story that I wrote for my mom. And that's done okay. But it showed me that I should stick to my primary subject, which is biblical studies and that sort of stuff.

MH: Well, you know, did your mom like it?

BW: Oh, she did!

MH: Well then it did well.

BW: [inaudible] my relatives. Because when we had a surprise 90th birthday party, they all got copies of this (all of my relatives). My in-laws and my outlaws from both sides of the family came, and they all got copies of this. And some of them were just laughing and laughing about this story. Because in many ways, it's like the Southern humor literature that Southerners love where they get to laugh at themselves and their foibles. And that's kind of what it is. But it's also dealing with the real situation where somebody was going to be snookered out of their land by having it condemned by the state. And that just wasn't going to go well with this particular widow.

MH: I wasn't aware of that last one. And the other one of, course, isn't out yet. But that actually sounds like yet another thing that would be really good for people to read not only individually but as a group. Because that's... Like *The Gospel of Jesus* thing and then *Encounters with Jesus* when that appears, that's bound to generate discussion.

BW: It does. Because in one way... And I think there's something... I like what C.H. Dodd says. "You're supposed to tease the mind into active thought." It's okay to make a devout Christian uncomfortable for a while if it really stirs up some deeper understanding of their God and their faith. So I'm okay with the fact that some people will read *The Gospel of Jesus* and say, "Well, some of this

you're making up as you go along." And I said, "Well, it's not just fiction. It's historical conjecture that I'm doing here," and based on the evidence we actually do have. So it's not *The Da Vinci Code* in any way, shape, or form. I had one publisher who looked at this and said, "We like this, but we don't know what this is. Is it history? Is it fiction? What exactly is this?" And I said, "Well, no." [laughs]

MH: [laughs] "To quote myself from a famous episode about Jesus, 'No.'" You got to quote yourself there—your epic line.

BW: Exactly. So at this point, after writing 60-some books and writing all the commentaries I ever wanted to write, I feel like I'm playing on the house's money. And what I discovered... In terms of ministry, here's the deal: You can squeeze more theology sideways into lay people through fiction than by handing them a theological tome. That's just the facts. So a lot of my laity enjoy reading these fictional accounts that are faith-affirming, but raise important questions that they may need to think about.

MH: Yeah. Well, this has been good. I'm glad we got to do this. We'll have to do something else down the road.

TS: Mike, can I interrupt here?

MH: Oh, sure.

TS: I was on Ben's blog and somebody asked him last week about Matthew 16:8-19 where Jesus is at the grotto of Pan and challenges the bad guys literally as "this is the rock." And I was wondering if I could get some back and forth between y'all discussing that, if you've got some time.

MH: Ben, would...?

BW: Sure! I'm happy to do that. I think we have time, Michael. [laughs]

MH: Yeah.

BW: My particular view on this is, there is a particular reason Jesus went outside of the normal bounds of the Holy Land to Caesarea Philippi to raise the question, "Who do they say I am?" And the reason he went to that particular place, which Pnias or Baniyas or renamed Caesarea Philippi is right there in this huge stone wall there were all these niches with pagan deities, and right there was the temple of Augustus as well—so furthering the Emperor cult. Surely the point is... I mean, and context is everything here. The point is, "These are the pretenders and I'm the contender. These are the parodies of which I am the reality. I really *am* the Son of God and these folks are so not the Son of God." So there's a dramatic contrast in the setting. And I also... I agree with you, Michael, that probably the cave of Pan was seen as one of the portals into Hades. So what /

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say about that is that when Jesus says that the gates of Hades will not prevail against it, that *could* mean nobody's going to snuff out the Church. It's going to be deathless. It's not a movement that's going to rise and fall. The community is going to last forever and a day. In regard to the issue of the rock, the way I interpret that is, first of all, there's actually two words there, one of which means rock and the other which means a shelf of rocks. Not just an isolated rock. So when he says, "You are Cephas, and on this shelf of rocks I will build my community," what I take that to mean is that he's going to build his community on people like Peter who make this kind of confession. That's how I would interpret this. So it's not just all about Peter.

MH: Yeah. And I would emphasize the geography there, but that is not to say that what you just said isn't true. It's kind of obviously true. [laughs] You know, it *has* to be. Because this is where everything starts. It's this group. He's not going to ditch them and start with somebody else. So I think this is an episode that, like so many other things, what... I have to be a little careful here. The sorts of things that you just said here, some of that is going to be *Unseen Realm 2* layering. And that's about all I'll say to that. But this is like so many other things, not just in the Gospels, but in Scripture—that it's unusual to encounter passages that not only have some pretty deep theology going on but that occur in places with deep histories, and the theology serves not just one trajectory but several. It's really hard to find much in Scripture that isn't that way. And I think that's intentional. I think that shows the intelligence not only of the writers, but of the Spirit who's prompting them. But just the overall story.

BW: I think in the Markan context, this is really critical. To me, obviously, there's a general chronological structure to the Gospel of Mark. But there's also theological structure. And what I mean is, in the first eight chapters of Mark, you have the "who" and "why" questions raised. "Who is this masked man? Who's this who can walk on water? Why are his disciples eating with the sinners?" Etc., etc. But then the "who" question is given a partial answer in Mark 8 by Peter, even though it's clear from what immediately follows he doesn't understand all the implications of that. But it's not an accident that it's not until then that we have a fourfold Jesus explaining "the Son of Man must suffer many things, be killed, and on the third day rise" in various forms. And then in chapter 10, following even those three in three straight chapters, you have 10:45, "I came not to be served, but to serve and give my life as a ransom for many." In other words, you have to answer the "who" question before you can understand why he came and why he had to die, in terms of the theological structure. And then that goes immediately into Mark 11 and following, which is the Passion narrative. So there's a very simple theological structure: raise the right questions about Jesus, have the question about who he is answered, then explain what was the mission, and then explain the mission accomplished. That's a theological structure. And the pivot is that Mark 8 story at Caesarea Philippi.

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MH: Yeah. And writers (brace yourselves) make decisions. And that's okay. And they're not always going to make the same decisions, and that's okay, because every writer has an audience in mind, a goal in mind, an agenda in mind. None of these are bad things. And they're also not self-contradictory—mutually contradictory things. But this is just the nature of the enterprise. And it's important to recognize the layering. In a book like *Unseen Realm*, I've just been surprised at how many times I have to remind people of this, "Did you read the introduction?" [laughs] This is not a theory of everything. "This is," to quote myself, "the starting point." This is the beginning. This isn't the end. This is where we start. I'm trying to give you a framework into which the other things fit. And then, you know, Lord willing, we will add layers. We'll add new things that fit into the framework or we will expand something so that you can see it from a different angle within the framework here. But this is one of those ways where I think the book has become popular enough where people think that this is *the* book. Well, no, it's not *the* book, it's a starting point. It's exactly what I said it was. [laughs] There's no end, honestly, to how you could accrue these kinds of things. And you still have the structure. But the picture becomes more full. It's like... I use the puzzle analogy and all that sort of thing. You could look at a partially complete puzzle and think, "I know what that's about. I know what that's going to be." That's good, but you can appreciate the intelligence of it, how this thing was created, and even the beauty of it once it's fully assembled, when you have the whole thing. This is what we're trying to do. We're just trying to—each step, each little thing that's created—trying to give you a little bit more fullness to the picture. But that would just never end.

BW: One of the things I've noticed about the reaction to your book is there were quite a lot of people for whom it was unsettling. But the *reason* usually why it was unsettling is because it forced them to take seriously the supernatural. [laughs] You know? Even devout Christians have a hard time coming to grips with angels and demons and that sort of stuff. And for some of them, they're going, "Whoa! Really? Is that who the Nephilim are? Oh! And is that why the conquest went the way it did?" And to me, that was a very revealing thing to see how they reacted to some of those ideas. Because the real truth is, we are all still post-Enlightenment, post-modernity people. And our default is not to immediately jump to a discussion of "What are the roles of otherworldly beings in our lives?" but rather to explain things with natural causes and this, that, and the other. Even if you're a devout Christian person.

MH: I think you can appreciate this because you have interacted with the public, too, for a long time at a thoughtful level. And you know the trajectories that are going to be meaningful to an unbeliever who desperately wants to tear the biblical story down, desperately needs it not to be true. And I'm going to say this. There's something brewing within the world of evangelicals (but even the conservative evangelical wing of that) and that is, I think there's going to emerge a resistance to the way *Unseen Realm* makes people think about the

supernatural. And it's not because... How can I say this? It's not because there's any sinister intent. That's not the case. That's not the case at all.

BW: No.

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MH: But I think it's a failure to see how the unbelieving world... There's going to be people out there, and there's going to be a few clever ones, a few that have very loud voices, but there's going to be a lot of them, just numerically, that will instantly see, "Okay. You're accepting certain things that this book says about the supernatural world. You accept some of them. And they're really important to you. But then you reject other things that the same book says about the supernatural world and you either assign less importance to them or you de-mythologize them. So how are you being consistent? Why should I align my faith... Why should I put faith in the things that you say we can believe, and then just sort of pretend that these other things aren't there? Give me a reason to believe this set of things while you simultaneously reject these others." Because they come from the same source. And they're about the same thing. We're not talking about the world of nature and something you can put under a microscope and test with the natural sciences. We're talking about the spiritual world. That inconsistency... I think a lot of evangelicals are blind to the fact that if they do that, there are going to be a lot of people who will notice and who will use it as a wedge not only to not believe but to prevent other people from believing.

BW: Oh, yes. I think that's right. And one of the things I appreciated in your book is it made even devout Christians "nervous in the service," in a good way. It made them really rethink what the default was. I'm going to tell you a short story. When I was going up to be ordained a deacon in the Methodist Church... Because we had two levels of ordination there. So this was my first ordination, before I became an elder. This was at the beginning of the charismatic movement in the early '70s in the Methodist Church. And so they started asking me some theological questions. And then they sent me to the conference counselor. And really, he turned on a bank of cassette tapes and said, "Okay, first of all, do you believe there's a personal devil?" I said, "Yes." They said, "Do you believe there are demons out there in the world bewitching, bothering, and bewildering people?" I said, "Yes." "Do you believe in angels?" I said, "Yes." They delayed my ordination for a year. [laughs]

MH: Wow.

BW: They also asked me, "Do you believe in speaking in tongues is a real spiritual gift and that sort of stuff?" which I also said yes to. And so the thing that struck me was (among other things) my own naiveté. I had assumed that since these are my elders... They are sincere Christian people. "Of course they believe in these things." Not so much. [laughter] Right?

MH: Yeah.

BW: Or at least they found it deeply troubling.

MH: Yep. I mean... What can you say? I mean, I just think that this is already brewing. And my concern isn't that readers agree with Mike. My concern... This has emerged as the chief concern in my head and my heart, that there will be people who will think nothing of this inconsistency. They'll think nothing of what it means for the unbeliever who's being asked to believe the subset but not the other stuff. I think it's going to matter for just general apologetics, just how we approach the Bible. It's a question of biblical authority. I think there's going to be a significant number (and I'm talking evangelical scholars as well) who somehow either can't see this as really problematic or they resist seeing it as problematic. And I think that's going to cause some harm, both within and outside the Church.

BW: Well, what I see happening (because of my connections with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship) is the deep lust for tangible certainty about all kinds of things, including your eternal security. And the fear that if you open your mind to some of the things that are in the unseen realm, well then things suddenly get squirrely. Because "I don't have control. If it's just the set of ideas that I need to stand up and salute the flag of, that's one thing. If there are really creepy crawlies out there in the world like demons and the devil, well then wow, I can't control my world and my future just by learning a set of facts or theological or ethical doctrines and getting my ducks in a row. All of a sudden I have to rely on God all the time." [MH laughs] "He's the 500-pound gorilla who overrules all that sort of stuff." Right? And so I think, in this age especially, it's profoundly unsettling to a lot of evangelical folks or those who have grown up in evangelical families.

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MH: Yeah, and what's really troubling in the way you described that is we... There's a group within evangelicals that has convinced themselves that they do sufficiently understand how the Trinity works, how the incarnation works. And the reality is, "Actually you don't. You can't explain those things within a naturalistic framework. You can pretend that you're intellectually sort of safe there. But you're... It's just not true. You're deceiving yourself. Because none of those things conform to a naturalistic approach to reality, to the whole question of "Is the only thing that is real the material world?" These things escape that set of assumptions. But I just don't think that people see the magnitude of the inconsistency. But there will be people who are enemies of the faith or Christians who are unduly influenced by the discussion or by something they'll see on TV or whatever that will not be able to recover from this. Or will use it as a tool to steer people away from the gospel.

BW: Or even in their own lives, they'll hold God at bay. "No, I don't have to..." And that's another thing that I really learned from the whole touring around the country about *The Da Vinci Code*. People were looking for permission *not* to take seriously all this stuff in the Bible. They were looking for permission to take a very pick-and-choose approach to things in various ways. And what I was saying was,

“Actually, no, Dan Brown’s not a good theologian or a good historian. And no, you don’t have our permission to do that. This is God’s word. And it’s not your opinions about God’s word. It’s God’s word. And as such, you need to take it all that much more seriously.”

MH: Yeah. Well, Ben, thank you for being with us. I’m sure the audience will be provoked and challenged in good ways, just to think about things and agree or dispute with you in their head. But that’s a good thing, because there’s something happening there that... [laughs]

BW: Absolutely. Actual thinking is happening.

MH: Right. Yep, absolutely. And we appreciate too (especially this audience) just the effort to do something for the masses. It’s important, especially in this culture. Lord willing, there will be more people from this generation who are used to the interaction—interactive media and such—that will emerge as scholars who do that... But you’re way ahead of the curve for that, so we appreciate it.

BW: Well, it’s a pleasure, Michael. I’m happy to help any way I can. And I’ve thoroughly enjoyed our conversation.

MH: Thank you.

TS: Alright, Mike. I had to jump in there and ask that question, because I was not ready for you and Ben to quit the conversation. So I had to keep it going there.

MH: That’s fine, that’s fine. Ben... Listeners can tell you. We’ve had conversations about this or that. Because he’d pop in at Faithlife every now and then and we’d do lunch, and we’d see him at conferences. So yeah, that’s fine.

TS: Yeah, that was great. What was his book again that you referenced there at the beginning?

MH: The most recent one is *Who God Is: Meditations on the Character of Our God*.

TS: Alright, Mike. Well, that was a great conversation. We appreciate Ben coming on. And with that, I want to thank everybody else for listening to the Naked Bible Podcast! God Bless.
