

The Chaos Ladder

Episode 1 - Beauty amidst the chaos

[Podcast intro]

Hi, I'm Steve Flowers and you're listening to The Chaos Ladder-- a podcast that explores how the Bible is not a gaping pit waiting to swallow us but a ladder for us to climb.

[Episode intro]

In this initial episode of The Chaos Ladder, I want to introduce to you the podcast by helping you see that whatever your experience with the Bible has been, there is beauty amidst the Bible's seeming chaos.

[Main content]

Welcome to the initial episode of The Chaos Ladder. So, what is this podcast and what the heck is a chaos ladder?! Well, give me a few minutes and you'll get the answer to both. But I want to begin by sharing an experience that was the first time I remember being really startled by something someone said about the Bible that in no way aligned with what I had been taught prior to that point.

It happened back in 1987 during my first week in seminary. All new students were required to take a one-hour class called Formations that was basically a spiritual pulse check to help with the transition to seminary. The classes were led by all the professors. Dr. Hicks, a missions professor, led mine. Towards the end of our first class Dr. Hicks referenced the very end of Matthew's Gospel where a risen Jesus is speaking to the Twelve, telling them "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations." He concluded by saying something about that passage that caused me to do a literal double take. He said, "You know, it doesn't matter whether Jesus actually said those words or not in Matthew 28 because the important thing is that those words are in our Bible."

"What?! What do you mean Jesus may not have said those words?! It's in red letters in every Bible I've read. And it plainly states "And Jesus came and said to them" and then had those little quotation marks. Which, last I checked, means Jesus said it!"

After that reaction I remember looking around to find support in what I expected to be a shared look of shock from my classmates. But the only reaction was a few others doing that casual nod that means "Yea, that's true."

I was stunned by something said about the Bible by an expert on the Bible that I could not wrap my brain around and then shocked that nobody else appeared to have a problem with it. I was on the verge of a theological panic attack in my first week of seminary classes and couldn't find anyone else to join me. It felt like I was basically having my own personal Twilight Zone episode.

But I would soon discover while at seminary that there was beauty to be found amidst my personal chaos during that class. Dr. Hicks' seemingly stunning remark found its origin in what biblical scholars often call the historical critical method of studying the Bible, something which every seminary student must learn. I don't want to bore you with a description of that study method but just understand that the critical in critical study method doesn't mean finding disparaging things to say about the Bible. What I would come to understand and appreciate later through my seminary studies was that Dr. Hicks was trying to convey to us that these critical study methods we'd be learning would challenge our understanding of the Bible, but the seeming chaos these methods can elicit for the uninitiated Christian does not diminish the beauty that is still present in the Bible's pages.

I realize today that personal chaos related to the Bible can come in many forms, not just when you're trying to have an introduction to the academic side of studying the Bible. But regardless of the origin of any such chaos, we need to learn how to properly see and embrace it for what it is. I liken that struggle to a conversation between two power brokers in the TV show Game of Thrones. The first character says, "Chaos is a gaping pit waiting to swallow us all." The second character replies, "Chaos isn't a pit. Chaos is a ladder." Now the second character said that with the intention to manipulate others during any time of upheaval so he could take advantage of the situation.

But there's still a very worthwhile truth within that statement we can apply to how we approach the Bible. The Bible's nature is never a gaping pit waiting to swallow us but a ladder waiting for us to climb it. When you read or hear something in the Bible that you find puzzling or even objectionable, our immediate reaction shouldn't be thoughts of doom, guilt, or anger. Our first thought should be, "Here's an opportunity to climb." And the ladders we use to climb out of our biblical chaos begin with the very questions and doubts we may have about the Bible. It takes work to climb such a ladder. But the result will help us better hear what God has always been speaking through these sacred texts.

WWII-era German pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer expressed the idea of finding the Bible's beauty amidst its chaos in his own way when he wrote: "We must read this book of books with all human methods. But through the fragile and broken Bible, God meets us in the voice of the Risen One."¹

As I come to the end of this introductory episode, I want to share a few things to help orient you about this podcast if you choose to keep listening to it.

First, let me briefly share a little about myself so you have some background about who you're listening to. I was raised in Virginia where I also graduated from college and where I was a

¹ *Reflections On The Bible: Human Word And Word Of God* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer,

school teacher for 2 years after college. I then went to seminary in Kentucky and, while there, a church in Indiana hired me as their part-time youth minister and then after I graduated they made me full-time. I served at that church for a total of nine years including being ordained there as a minister. But I had long wrestled with pursuing a career in law enforcement and so I applied to the FBI and was hired as a Special Agent in 1997. I worked as an FBI Agent for 23 years before recently retiring last September. I live in Columbus, Ohio, and have been married to my best friend for over 33 years. My wife and I have three grown sons, a daughter-in-law, a grandson, and a 12-year-old dog, all of whom we love very much.

So why is a retired FBI Agent doing a podcast about the Bible? Well, I'm a bit of a biblical studies nerd and have always continued to educate myself on the Bible even after leaving vocational ministry. That coupled with a personal passion to quietly add to the online narrative about the nature of the Bible is my answer to that question in a nutshell. Ok, that's enough about me.

The other thing I wanted to share about this podcast was some of my vision for it.

First, the audience I have in mind for this podcast breaks down into three general groups.

The 1st group could be described as the "typical Christian" who I'll broadly define as those who have found value in believing in God, based much of that value in the teachings of the Bible, and you're simply looking for media to engage with that will help you learn more about the Bible as a whole. If that's you, welcome! I hope you'll find this podcast hopeful.

The 2nd group I have in mind for this podcast hasn't enjoyed the same privilege as the first group-- While this group has also found value in believing in God, or in their search for God, they have had no small amount of concern about the Bible's contribution to that value. This group includes those who have uncertainties about the Bible they did not feel welcome to express in a past church setting, and those who were the object of personal attack using biblical passages. If that's you, welcome, and know that this podcast is a safe space.

I don't know if anyone from the third group I have in mind will ever listen to this podcast. Well, to be fair, I'm not sure anyone other than my mom will listen to it at all. But if someone from this third group does listen, I want to acknowledge them because they matter to me. If you are Muslim, Jewish, agnostic, atheist, or of any other belief system, you are welcome! And that's not a "You're welcome because hopefully I'll convert you." It is not my goal to convert you to Christianity. But if you're interested in hearing a Christian talk about the nature of the Bible while not singling you out as some kind of enemy of God or as headed straight to hell, then this podcast might be for you and I hope you'll find it of interest.

My hope for all three groups is that they learn how the Bible does have beauty amidst its seeming chaos, and that that beauty is an inspired message for everyone regardless of whether you identify as a Christian or not.

However, there is no secret, magic decoder ring for understanding the Bible if that's what you're looking for. I encourage you to engage the thoughts of this podcast as just one tool to help in your overall journey to better understand the Bible and how God can impact your life through it.

There will be about 10 episodes in what I'm calling the first season of The Chaos Ladder. I've set them up to be a progression of episodes to help you learn how to wrap your brain around the Bible as a whole.

One administrative note-- If you ever prefer to read any of the podcast episodes or check my footnotes, there will be a link to an essay transcript posted on the page for each podcast episode on StoriesFromAVillage.org.

Thanks for listening and I hope you'll join me for the next episode of The Chaos Ladder. Take care.

[Outro statement]

The Chaos Ladder is part of StoriesFromAVillage.org, a podcast and essay ministry of Stone Village Church in Columbus, Ohio. You can find a transcript of this podcast on the web site.
