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**SERIES: WE ARE FREE (A Study of Galatians)**

**SPEAKER: NAT CRAWFORD**

**TITLE: An Interview with Michael Licona: Paul and the Reality of a Resurrected Christ, Pt. 1**

**Today on Back to the Bible, Pastor Nat Crawford interviews author and Associate Professor of Theology, Dr. Michael Licona.**

NC: Today's special guest is author and Associate Professor of Theology, Dr. Michael Licona. Mike, it is great to have you on the show today.

ML: Well, thanks, Nat. It's a pleasure to be with you again. And, I just remember you fondly from several years ago when I met you, and good to reconnect, brother.

NC: Yeah, it's been fun. I don't remember when we first met, but we've kept in contact over the years. And to be honest, you've actually been a big help to me, both in the study of Apologetics and theology, but also in my own communication. So I actually owe a lot to Mike here. And so, if anyone wants to thank the person who has influenced me so much, you can always thank Mike here. But one of the reasons why I enjoy you so much is your honesty. You're really honest about your doubt and how you struggled with your faith. And I think it would be helpful for our listeners, to hear a little bit about your story and how that got you into your field of study.

ML: Well, thanks Nat. I became a Christian at the age of 10. I can remember that ever since a few years before then, I had just a real interest in going to Heaven and pleasing God. I know that's kind of strange, but that was just my heart from the beginning. And I remember asking my mom, you know, how do I get to Heaven? And she didn't really know that, you know, and I'd ask her on the way to church, and she'd say, "Well, you know, you just have to do more good than bad." I said, "Okay". Well, you know, I had a little sister; I pulled her hair, hit her, made her cry. And so, "What if I do more bad than good?" She says, "Well, then you go to Hell, to be with the devil forever." And I'm thinking, "Well, where am I on that scale?" You know?

And then when I was age 10, I was at a Presbyterian church in Baltimore County, Towson, Maryland - where we were living at that time - and went to church, and they had a Christian magician come in. And they combined all the Sunday school - the kids' Sunday school. And he did all these magic tricks, illusions - whatever you want to call them - but he related the Gospel to them. And so for the first time in my life, I understood it wasn't by my good deeds - it was by

the grace of God, and through faith in Christ, that I could have eternal life. And he gave an invitation in this Presbyterian church. And I'm thinking, this is exactly what I've been looking for, and I went forward. I remember that day. It was a sunny day - I think it was the summer though - and two other girls went forward as well. I'm thinking, "I don't know why everybody else hadn't got up, but I don't care. This is what I want. This is what I need." And I became a Christian at that time at age 10.

I grew some - not a whole lot - but I grew some spiritually during my teens, and went to a Christian university. And there's where I really grew in my life with God, really got connected with God, spent a lot of time in prayer and Bible study, decided I wanted to learn how to read the New Testament in its original language - Greek. And so I enrolled in grad school, and as I was finishing up my last semester - this would have been the fall of 1985 - I just began having doubts. And it wasn't anything I'd learned. It was a matter of you know - Christianity is the only thing I've been brought up to believe. And I believe I've got this relationship with God. I believe I've had answered prayer, but do people of other religions feel the same way? And how do I know that I've not just tricked myself into believing, and brainwashed myself into believing? And I started to have doubts, and that's when one of my roommates introduced me to Gary Habermas, a philosophy professor at Liberty University. And I went in and I saw Gary, and he really helped me. But I struggled over the years. I mean, he helped me at that time, but then later on, I started to have doubts again. And later on, I just discovered that that's just the way I'm wired. It's not just my faith that I had doubted at times. It's little things, like did I buy the right watch - should I have purchased a different one? Or, even something more important than that. Did I marry the right woman - even though I really, really thought through this, and analyzed, and you know, I tried to make a wise decision? I still second guess, and triple guess, and quadruple guess. And so if you're going to do it with things like this, of course, you're going to do it with your worldview, [Right.] because unless reincarnation is correct, like in Hinduism and Buddhism, I'm only going to get one chance to get this right. And so I don't want to make a mistake based on, this is what I was brought up to believe. These are my own biases, and they blind me to the truth, and it costs me eternity. And that's the kind of stuff that kept me up at night. And I questioned my faith, and that's what led me into a really focused in-depth doctoral research, on the Resurrection of Jesus.

NC: And clearly, it's had a huge impact on you. And I think we'll talk a little bit more about doubt, as we progress in this discussion and in our next one. But as you said, that you got into this area of study on the Resurrection of Christ, and you know, you wrote this ginormous book called *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach*. And this is like the go-to book as far as I'm concerned. And it's also, just a great resource for people to dig into, but then you also wrote this book with Gary Habermas, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*. I love this book. Like this is my go-to, like when I'm really getting in deep. But if I just need a quick answer, this is where I go to. And then you've written another book, and you're writing another book now.

So let's just say you've been busy, but there's an area of study. Right? I mean, you are - you're a busy man. You're productive - that's better yet - but you've dedicated your life into this area of study. And there's a topic that's intricately linked to the Resurrection of Jesus, and that's the Gospel, and it's the Gospel message. The reliability of the Gospel is what I want to talk about for a while. Because here at Back to the Bible, we've been working through the book of Galatians. Now, Galatians is an important book - especially for us who have a religious background - as Paul is trying to tear down the walls of legalism, trying to remind these people, "No, remember the true Gospel message that I received from Jesus Christ Himself." And so I wanted to pick your brain a little bit. But before we get into the book of Galatians, and a couple of passages, you think Paul is important to Christianity, especially in the areas of his writings. Okay. Why is that? I mean, when I usually talk about him, I'm like, "I never knew this before", so enlighten us.

ML: Yeah. That's a fantastic question, Nat. The reason Paul is important isn't because he was a more important person than the Gospel authors. It's recognizing that there is a difference in evidence, between what we have for Paul writing certain letters that we have in the New Testament, and what we have for say the authorship of the Gospels. Okay. So the traditional authorship of the Gospels - Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John - it has some decent evidence for it. However, the evidence that we have for these - the authorship of these four Gospels - is not as good - at least for let's say Matthew and John. The evidence for Matthew and John writing those - it's there - but it's not as good as what we have for Paul writing, say Galatians. And, you know, there's 13 letters attributed to Paul in the New Testament, but for seven of them, the evidence is really good that he actually wrote those. So it's not to say that Matthew and John did not write those Gospels, or that Paul didn't write the other six. That's disputed amongst scholars, okay? [Right.] But it is to say, there is a difference in the quality and quantity of evidence, and evidence we have that Paul wrote those seven letters, is really good. And what Paul says in those letters - from that - we can get back to at least a brief outline of what the Jerusalem Apostles were preaching. And that's why Paul is really important.

And there's one other thing here. When you have Jesus' disciples reporting that He had risen from the dead, and appeared to them, of course, you know, someone can say, "Well, yeah, they're Jesus' disciples - they're biased" and so forth. And that's correct. That doesn't mean they're wrong. Otherwise you'd have to say, well, Al Sharpton, and Don Lemon, and Maxine Waters couldn't speak of racism in the U.S., because they're biased. Being biased doesn't mean you're wrong. It just means you have a bias. And it means those outsiders have to recognize that they have this bias, and you look at their things carefully, but it doesn't mean they're wrong. A Jewish historian might be the very best person to write on the Holocaust. But you can't really accuse Paul of that, because he was persecuting the church, [Right.] when he became a Christian. He hated Jesus and the movement He had started. So he's biased in the opposite direction.

NC: Right. I think Paul is such a fascinating character. And I think if there's one person that you look at for evidence, for the reality of a resurrected Christ, Paul has got to be one of those guys. It's a credible story. But you know, on the topic of Paul, you know, he discusses the one true Gospel in Galatians. He'd say that any gospel, other than the true Gospel, he would say is no

gospel at all. I like that about Paul. He just calls it like it is. But as I thought about that, it made me wonder, how do we know that the Gospel we read about in our Bible is the real Gospel? So Mike, my question to you is, how do we know?

ML: Ah, and this is where Paul really shines in these letters. As you know, in Galatians Chapter One, Paul says that three years after his conversion, Paul went up to Jerusalem, and he spent 15 days with Peter, the lead Apostle. And he also saw James, the brother of the Lord. And then in Chapter Two, he says, 14 years later, he returns to Jerusalem. And now he meets with the pillars of the church - Peter, James and John - he names them. So it's a second meeting with Peter, second meeting with James, first meeting with John. But think of this - here you've got Peter, James, John: Peter and John - two of Jesus' three closest Apostles. Then you've got James, the brother of Jesus. And then Paul, the four of them meeting together. [Yep.] How would you love to be a fly on the wall in that meeting? And Paul says the reason he went up was - he wanted to run the Gospel message he had been preaching - the Good News about Jesus he'd been preaching - to make sure that he had - was preaching - he was on message with what they were preaching. And he says that they added nothing to what he said. They extended to him the right hand of fellowship. In other words, they're saying, "Good job Paul. Keep up the good work, Brother."

Now of course, if this is true - what Paul is saying - then that's amazing. You know, because if we have somewhere, where Paul is talking about the Gospel message he preached, then we're also hearing the voice of the Jerusalem Apostles. We don't have to take Paul's word for it, because we have Clement of Rome - who was believed to have been a disciple of the Apostle Peter - and Polycarp, who was believed to be a disciple of the Apostle John. And so we look at what they say about Paul, and Clement places Paul on par with his mentor, Peter, and calls him the Blessed Paul. And Polycarp quotes from Paul's letter - one of his letters - and refers to it as part of the Sacred Scriptures. And then he says - and I quote - that Paul accurately and reliably taught the message of truth. So they're writing - both are writing - after Paul had died. So they have no reason to lie about him. So if Paul was preaching what Peter and John were preaching, or if he was preaching differently than they were on this Gospel message, then we would expect Clement and Polycarp, not to say the kind of really good things about Paul that they do.

So I think we need more evidence, but that should be enough at least to show for now, that when we hear Paul on the Gospel message - and we're talking about what we can prove here - that's not to say that Paul believed - was preaching - everything exactly like the Jerusalem Apostles were. But when it comes to him preaching the Gospel message, we also know we're hearing the voice of the Jerusalem Apostles, and that's just pretty amazing.

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NC: Joining me today is author and Associate Professor of Theology, Dr. Michael Licona. And here we are talking about Paul's account in the book of Galatians, about how he goes to Jerusalem after three years, and he meets with Peter and James. And I remember talking to you about this, and in this exchange, you talked about this word we get the English word history

from. Do you want to talk about that? Because when I heard that, I'm like, "Oh my goodness, this opens my eyes to so much about what's going on here." Talk about that.

ML: Yeah. What we have there, I think it's in Chapter One, verse 17 - I'm not sure, but I think it's verse 17 - where he says, he went and he spent 15 days with Peter. When it says *he met with*, or *spent time with*, the Greek term there is *historēsai*, from which we get the English word history. So Paul is - let's put it this way - aside from any meaning of the term - it would seem to imply that he's getting a report, a history of what Jesus was like, because Paul had not traveled with Jesus during His ministry. He may have heard Jesus, and seen Him speak. He had to know something about the teachings of Jesus, in order to know that he opposed them, right? [Right.] He might've been there at the trial. He was a Pharisee - he might've been there at the trial. He might've been there and witnessed the Crucifixion. We don't know. I'm not trying to speculate here. I'm just saying, he wasn't there to witness a lot about Jesus, so he is probably there to get a history from him: "Hey, Peter. I hear that you walked on water; that Jesus walked on water. Is that true? I heard He fed the 5,000. Is that true? I mean, did he really raise the Centurion Jairus' daughter from the dead? And things like this I've heard about? You know, and talk about - what was it like - the transfiguration and things like that?" Or "What did you ....?" So they're talking about this, and certainly apart from that term, *historēsai*, he's going up to Jerusalem. Peter's probably busy as the lead Apostle at that point. He doesn't have time to just sit around and gab about the games that are going on, that the Roman Empire is putting on, or you know, just small talk. I mean, he and Paul are talking about some important things, and he's running the Gospel message by, and they certify that he's preaching what they're preaching.

NC: Here we are, 14 years later - he's back in Jerusalem. And what I find so cool is, he says, "Look, I came back. I wanted to make sure I wasn't running in vain. You know, I want to make sure that you are holding true to the Gospel, that these Judaizers - that they haven't influenced you away from the one true Gospel. And then it says that they extended the right hand of fellowship to him. What does that signify, and why is it so important to us today?"

ML: Well, they are verifying that Paul is preaching the same thing they're preaching. So if - somehow, let's say there's a document archeologists uncover - one of the lost letters of Paul. You know, we've got First and Second Corinthians, but those are actually Second and Fourth Corinthians. We're missing First and Third Corinthians. So, and Paul - I think it's in Colossians - he talks about a letter to the church at Laodicea. What if that letter to the church at Laodicea was discovered someday? That'd be pretty cool. And what if in that letter, it said, you know, Paul was to lay out the Gospel message that he'd been preaching. Then it's like - Whoa - we know exactly what the Jerusalem Apostles were preaching. Even apart from the Gospels - Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John - we know what they were preaching in terms of the basics of the Gospel message. Well Nat, we don't have to wait for the discovery of a lost letter of Paul, because in First Corinthians 15, he starts off in verse one: *Now I want to remind you of the gospel message I preached to you.* And then later on, in verses 11, 12, and 14, he says, *this is what we preach; this is what you believed*, after he talks about the death, burial, resurrection, appearance. "This is

what we preach”. And the Greek word he uses there is *kerusso*, which refers to the official and formal public proclamation. [Right.] So what he goes over in this oral formula, this creed, in First Corinthians 15, verses three through seven - this is an oral formula that goes back to the Jerusalem Apostles. [Right.] It’s quite amazing to think about.

NC: It really is. And I think - I don't know if it was you, or maybe Habermas or someone else - said that that creed can be dated very close to the Cross. Is that right?

ML: Well, some think that it can, and it's not just evangelical New Testament scholars that say that. So for example, you've got Gerd Ludermann, who's an atheist New Testament scholar; Robert Funk - I'm not sure what he would classify himself as, or if he would even call himself a Christian. He died a few years ago - but let's put it this way - he was far, far from even being a moderate Christian. He would make Bart Ehrman look friendly to Christianity - Robert Funk. [That says a lot.] So Funk and Gerd Ludermann said within one to three years of the Crucifixion of Jesus. Now, to be honest with you - I mean, that's skeptics using that - and saying, “Wow, that's pretty cool” - I wouldn't go that far. I'd be a little more critical of that. And I'd say, we can't know. What we do know, is Paul is writing this letter, probably around 55 or 56 AD. Jesus is crucified in either 30 or 33 AD. So he's writing this maybe 25 years later, about, okay? [Right.] And he says, *I want to remind you of the gospel message I preached to you*. Well, when did he preach it to them? When he established the “First Baptist Church” in Corinth around the year 51. And he says, *I delivered to you what I also received*. So he delivered it to them around the year 51, what he received beforehand. So it was before 51 that he received this. So let's just say, it's within 20 years of the Crucifixion. Now, when did he receive it? And from whom did he receive it? We don't know, but this would have been part of the Gospel message, at least that the Jerusalem Apostles would have confirmed - this is what they're preaching. And so Paul could have received it from Ananias directly, in Damascus, right after his conversion experience, or he could have received it three years later from Peter, when he went up to Jerusalem, or he could have received it during his missionary journeys, from Silas or Barnabas, anytime in there - we just don't know - or when he went back up to Jerusalem, 14 years later. We just don't know when he received it, but we know he got it from reliable sources that can go back, and was certified by the alleged eyewitnesses of the Resurrection.

NC: Absolutely. And again, as we know the Gospel message, himself - I mean, he experienced a risen Christ. Paul knew what he was talking about. And so I think it's clear, you trust Paul. I trust Paul. Even the skeptics trust Paul. And so I think we can be fairly confident about the Gospel that he preached, and his story about Christ.

But I want to just kind of close our time with asking you a question about another passage you mentioned - First Corinthians 15:14. And we know that this verse says, *and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain*. Why does he say this? And why is this so important for you and I to remember today, as Christians, especially as we wrestle with doubt?

ML: This is a really important question. And it became really, even more important to me. I mean, intellectually, you know, I study the intellectual things, but it even touched my heart - even more back in 2013, when my mom died, and a year later when my dad died - because it became more real to me at that point. I mean, I'd been a Christian - that was real to me - but the applications became more real. You see, Paul - he is answering some questions the Corinthians had. The church at Corinth had some people saying, "Don't you think about resurrection - this life is all there is? When you die, that's it. You become worm food, period." And Paul talks about resurrection of our bodies, and then he links it to the Resurrection of Jesus.

He says, "Look", in verse 15:20, *Christ is the firstfruits of those who sleep. He's the firstfruits of those dead to be raised* with the resurrection body. And then he answers three verses later in verse 23, when we're going to be raised. He says, *each in his own order: Christ, the firstfruits, after that, those who belong to Christ at his coming*. So he believes according to Second Corinthians, when we die, we're going to be with Christ immediately. But in terms of being reunited with our corpses, and that corpse being raised and transformed into an immortal body, that's going to be when Jesus returns.

Paul is saying that the general resurrection of the dead, and Jesus's Resurrection, are intricately tied together. So Christ is the first to be raised in the general resurrection. And the rest of us will be raised later on. So if the general resurrection isn't going to occur, and we're not going to be raised, that means Christ has not been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, this life is all there is. Eat all the ice cream, all the sin that you want. Go out and live perfectly for pleasure. Because, Paul goes on to say, if the dead aren't going to be raised - eat, and drink, for tomorrow we die. Get everything out of life that you can. But Christ was raised; therefore we will be raised. Therefore, the Christian life is worth living. That's his argument there, and we're going to see our loved ones again. The reason I got excited, and did not grieve nearly as much when my mom and dad died - it was because they were followers of Jesus. And I have the assurance, because of the Resurrection of Jesus - because we've got such good historical evidence that he rose from the dead - I have the assurance that he rose, and because of that, death is not final. I'm going to survive death, be with Christ in Heaven, and see my mom and dad once again.

NC: All I can say is, Amen. He gives us such hope. And I know that theoretically, if everything else about the Bible, we were to say, "You know, we just don't know." You know, the reality is: that if Christ's raised from the dead - that is the linchpin of Christianity. And that is what really matters. We can rest in that fact. And again, can we be a hundred percent certain? I don't know if we ever can be a hundred percent certain, but we can be confident - that what Paul has said is true, and we can look forward to that day - because of Christ's Resurrection, that God will set all things straight. And we know we'll see our loved ones, and we will be reunited with them and with Christ. Mike, I am pumped, but I'm sad that our time is up. If people want to know more about you and your ministry, where do they go?

ML: Well, there's two places. One is they can visit our website, [risenjesus.com](http://risenjesus.com). The other is to go to my YouTube channel. So just go to YouTube, type in my name, Mike Licon - L I C O N

A. There's some great educational videos on there they can check out.

NC: Well, Mike, thank you for your time today, and look forward to having you back on the show.

NC: Thanks, Brother.