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SERIES: WE ARE FREE (A Study of Galatians)

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TITLE: An Interview with Michael Licona: The Risen Jesus

Today Pastor Nat Crawford continues his interview with 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, great to have you back on the show today.

ML: Thanks Nat. Great to be back with you.

NC: Yeah. Well, last time we talked about the book of Galatians, and the Gospel, and the reliability of Paul's message. And today, we're going to take it down a path that you are very familiar with as well, and that is the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Before we get into some of the more specifics, and actually, the objections to the Resurrection, I think it'd be helpful for our listeners to know a little bit more about you, and what brought you into the study of the Resurrection.

ML: Well, it was the Fall of 1985, and I was having some questions about my faith. It wasn't anything that I had learned. It was just a matter of just reflecting and thinking: "You know, I'm a Christian, I was raised in a Christian family, I have gone to a Christian University, and you know, I think I've got this relationship with God. I'm convinced I do. But what if I had been brought up in Afghanistan? Would I be a Muslim? If I grew up in China, would I be an atheist? Or India – a Hindu? And are they just as convinced about their worldviews as I am mine? Have I deceived myself? Does it even matter what I believe?" And this just sent me on a whirlwind with my faith and it was really disturbing. And so, one of my roommates suggested I go see Gary Habermas.

So I was doing a Master's degree in New Testament Studies. He was in Christian Apologetics. Gary Habermas was, and is, an apologist and philosopher. So, I had never had him for a class, and I went in, knocked on his door. He invited me in, and he was very collegial, and he says, you know, "What's your question?" And he didn't put me down at all. I felt totally comfortable expressing how I was experiencing doubts. And he says, "I've experienced doubts before too. There are a lot of people who experience doubts." And he told me, that when Anthony Flew, who was perhaps the most influential atheist Philosophy professor - philosopher of the latter part of the 20th century - that he said that he doubted his atheism often. These are just important

questions. They are things to reflect on a whole lot. And some of us are just that way - we're just wired that way.

So he pointed me to the Resurrection. He said, "Look, if Jesus was raised, Christianity is true. Jesus said - His resurrection - He says, "Destroy this temple. And in three days I'll raise it." And, in John Chapter Two, he says this. And then throughout Matthew, Mark, and Luke, he talks about - like in Matthew and Luke - the sign of Jonah: Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish. He'd be in the heart of the Earth, and then rise from the dead - predicted His death - and imminent death - and subsequent Resurrection. So if Christ was not raised from the dead, he's a false prophet, a failed Messiah - no rational person should follow Him. But if He did rise from the dead - and it seems to me He did so, in confirmation of His personal radical claims - and it gives us something very serious to think about. And so that just became the thing, you know, Christ rose - Christianity is true - period. If He didn't rise from the dead - Christianity is false - let's go look for a different worldview.

NC: And that's one of the things I've really appreciated about you, and getting to know you, is your honesty about your struggles and your doubt. I think it's actually a good thing, but that led you to be an expert in the area of the Resurrection.

ML: I think this is important. I'm glad you brought this up Nat, because this is important to those of your listeners who experience doubt. John the Baptist experienced doubt. The Gospels tell us that he sends a couple of his disciples to Jesus. "Are you the one or are we to expect someone else?" He's doubting. He thinks - he feels - like he's been abandoned by God at that point, [Right.] Yes, he heard the voice from Heaven. Yes, he knew all the prophecies and the stories from Elizabeth, his mother, and all that. But he's doubting, because life stinks at that point. And it's like, he's rotting away in prison. And it's like, well, Jesus, isn't doing anything about it. And so he's experiencing emotional doubt. "God, where are you?" And many of us experience this kind of doubt at times - and look at Jesus' response - He doesn't rebuke John. [Right.] He tells his disciples to go - John's disciples - to go back, and says, "Tell John what you see and hear. The blind see, the deaf hear." They'd seen the miracles - "the blind see, the deaf hear, the dead are raised. The Gospel is preached to the poor, and blessed are those who do not stumble on account of Me," which by the way - this is the end that's predicted - the Messiah - He would do these exact things at the very end. I think it's Isaiah 66, and it's also in the Dead Sea Scrolls. So, they go back, and then now Jesus is going to be honest with the crowd. He says, "Look, when you came out to see John, who'd you come to see? A person wearing great clothes? Nope, Nope. You've got to go to the King's palace for that. Did you come back here to see a reed blown back and forth by the wind?" He knew John was doubting. He says, "No, let me tell you who you came to see - a prophet - yes, a great prophet - and in fact, no greater man has been born of woman than John the Baptist."

So while John is doubting, Jesus praises him. And later on, when He rises from the dead, and you've got Doubting Thomas - which by the way, all of them - except maybe John - all of them doubted the women's testimony. You've got - He's come back - and Doubting Thomas, and Jesus

says, "Thomas, you've seen and believe. Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet still believe." In other words, that word blessed, *makarios*, He's saying, "You can flourish. You have seen and believed. Guess what? Those who have not seen, and yet believe, can still flourish - be blessed - in their walk with God. And that's something for all of us to keep in mind.

NC: Yeah. It's so important. You know, I have been thinking about, you know, Dan Brown. I've talked a lot about Dan Brown and his de-conversion - you know, he had doubts. And so he went and talked to a local priest, and he told the now famous author, you know, "Good boys don't ask those type of questions." And it sent him on a trajectory so far away from truth, that he's doing a lot more damage than he is good. But I mean, I've told my kids, "If you ever have doubt, good. Wrestle, and let's talk about it together. That's healthy." And I think when people are listeners - people at the churches, whoever - when they say, "It's okay - don't be afraid of truth. Don't be afraid of pursuing truth. Let doubt be leveraged to strengthen your faith" - I think that is so freeing. And that's what I want for our listeners, is what you want for the people you encounter, because you know that there is truth out there, but it takes some wrestling sometimes to get there.

But I love what you said, looking back at John the Baptist, and even Thomas. Thomas - I kind of - I really appreciate also - because I don't think he really was a Doubting Thomas, as people have said. Because think about it, earlier on, you know, Jesus is saying, "Let's go," and everyone else is like, "I don't think so". And Thomas is like, "Look, I'll die for you, Lord - let's go." So here was a man who was so strong, and he still had the questions. Great. It reminds me of me. It reminds me of you. So doubt is not a sin - it's a natural part of our human being. So let's lean into it, and let us let it lead us to truth.

Okay. I move on - I digress. Sorry, this is good. We're having a good conversation here, but, when we talk about faith, and we talk about doubt, I think it's only reasonable that we have questions about the Resurrection. And so that took you on this path. And so, let's start digging into it. You know, First Corinthians 15, Paul lays out the Gospel message. It says that Christ died for our sins. Paul said that Jesus was buried, He was raised on the third day, He appeared to over 500 people, including the disciples, and more. I believe this, you believe this, but why should we believe this Mike?

ML: Well, we do have this - not only are Paul and the Jerusalem Apostles proclaiming this, okay? And we have this from Paul here, which takes us back to the Jerusalem Apostles. We have it multiply attested of course, in the Gospels. But we have reports in many ancient sources, that these same disciples who are out proclaiming the Resurrection of Jesus, are willing to suffer continuously, and willing to die for this testimony. That doesn't mean that their testimony is correct, but the fact that they're willing to die for it, suggests they are sincere in their belief about what they're saying.

So it's like when a Muslim jihadist dies as a suicide bomber - and let's say they're using that, rather than forcing women and mentally handicapped people and children from doing it - but let's

say, you know, they volunteer to do it. They are doing it because of what they believe. That doesn't mean that Islam is true, but it means that they sincerely believe it's true. And what this shows with the disciples' willingness to suffer, and willing to go to their deaths - and we know at least several of them did - but we know that they all did suffer for their Gospel proclamation, and all were willing to die for their faith. That suggests that they sincerely believed what they were proclaiming - liars make poor martyrs. So the disciples were not only claiming that Jesus rose and had appeared to them, they actually believed it. And so what the task is - as you have Dale Allison, who teaches at Princeton - he talks about these disciples really believed that they had experienced the risen Jesus - that He had appeared to them - what led them to this belief? He says that is the prized puzzle of New Testament research.

NC: Wow. Well, I mean, I've heard you say this before, that, you know, they claimed to see Jesus, you know, risen Jesus. So there's two options: they did, or they didn't, right? Those are the two options. And so if they didn't, one of the things a lot of people say - I have an atheist friend who said, "Nat, you don't get it. They're just a bunch of liars." Now, granted, you know, liars make poor martyrs, but come on now. I mean, couldn't they have lied, or could they be distorting the truth? I mean, talk about that a little bit, because that's such a common pushback.

ML: Yeah. Well, of course, you know, we can't get into a time machine, return to the past and verify our conclusions. We have to talk in terms of what's plausible, what's probable here. And we do that with all of history, by the way. Okay. So what, how plausible is it, to think that all of these disciples were willing to suffer horribly, and that they were willing to go to their deaths for something they knew was a lie? That is implausible. In fact, I can tell you this, having surveyed a lot of the literature written by scholars, and even Gary Habermas even more - has done it even more - I tell you, I'm not aware of any scholars in recent times - and when I say recent times, probably the last 70 years, maybe even a century - I'm not aware of any scholars who would propose that the disciples lied. And I'm talking about scholars who study this stuff. [Right.] Even people like Bart Ehrman, who's an agnostic - or an atheist - depends what day of the week, how he feels at that time - he says that the evidence is there, that the disciples really, truly, authentically, genuinely believed, that Jesus rose from the dead, and had appeared to them. Now he thinks they probably experienced hallucinations, but lying? No! They really believed it. The evidence is there - good enough to suggest it.

NC: Joining me today is author and Associate Professor of Theology, Dr. Michael Licona. And you've just pretty much made it unexplainable that the Apostles would have lied, and would have died for a lie. That just doesn't make sense. That's not a reasonable conclusion, but you did mention hallucination. Okay. Again, I've talked to people - people online, you know - I interact with them - and they'll say, "Okay, clearly they thought they saw Him, so they must have hallucinated. Is that a plausible explanation?"

ML: It really sounds like it would be at first, wouldn't it, Nat? But when you understand, come

to understand, a little about hallucinations, then it becomes problematic. You see, hallucinations are false perceptions of an external reality. So when someone experiences a visual hallucination, they have a false perception of seeing something that isn't really there, and visual hallucinations aren't the only kind. You can have something where you hear a voice, an auditory hallucination, but you know - maybe you thought someone called your name, but they didn't. Or you smell something that's not there, taste something that's not there. Most of us have dreams where we're falling, and we wake up - that's called a kinesthetic hallucination, a sense of motion. Or maybe when we got our first mobile phones, we put these things on vibrate when we were sitting in a meeting, or a sermon, or something, and we thought it went off, and we picked it up and looked at it, and said, "Oh, nobody loves me." And so, that was a false alarm - that is called a tactile hallucination.

The group most likely to experience a hallucination are senior adults, grieving the loss of a loved one. Approximately 50% of them - in multiple studies done over the years - approximately 50% experienced hallucinations of some sort, but only 7% experienced a visual hallucination. So you've got a couple of problems here. Number one, the percentage of recipients is too high, because He appeared to the 12, He appeared to more than 500 at one time. He appeared to all of the Apostles. [Right.] You're looking at 100%, at least, for all the Apostles, and the 12. Then, you're looking at group appearances. So, because hallucinations, you're having a false sensory perception of something that's not there - it's occurring in the mind of an individual - it has no external reality. So in that sense, it's like a dream. I couldn't wake up my wife in the middle of the night and say, "Honey, I'm having a dream. I'm in Hawaii. You and I are in Hawaii. Go back to sleep, join me in my dream. Let's have a free vacation tonight." You can't do that, and participate in the same dream, because the dream has no external reality to it. You can't participate in the same dream. It's not going on. Hallucinations aren't contagious in that sense - they're not group appearances. So you've got the problem with the multiple group appearances, as well as to the 12, to more than 500 at one time, to all the Apostles. And that's not including any of the other appearances we find in the Gospels that aren't mentioned in that oral tradition.

And then finally, you've got Paul. Paul isn't grieving over Jesus' death. Paul believed Jesus was a failed Messiah and a false prophet. So Jesus would have been the last person in the universe that Paul would have expected to see, or wanted to see. [Right.] I could go on - there are some other reasons - but those, I would think would be the top three that I would give as why the hallucination hypothesis doesn't work. In fact, it's probably the most popular alternative explanation offered by skeptics today: they just caught visions - but they mean hallucinations by that. But it's perhaps the weakest, or at least one of the very weakest out there.

NC: So it's not plausible that they lied. It's not plausible they had a hallucination. Okay. But what about survival? I mean, isn't it possible that people survived crucifixion? Jesus could have survived and walked off, you know, from the grave, and said, "Hey guys, it's me. I'm good." I mean, isn't that possible?

ML: Of course, anything's possible too. You could say Jesus was an alien from a parallel

universe somewhere, and He came to Earth to try to deceive us, and that was his PhD work. He had to deceive human beings to think that He was alive, risen from the dead, and divine. And you know - but you've got to look, and say, okay, something is possible, but that doesn't mean it's plausible, or that we should believe it. Okay. So what about Jesus surviving His execution? We only have two accounts in antiquity of a person surviving crucifixion: one - Herodotus mentioned one; Josephus mentions another. But in both cases, both were intentionally removed from their crosses. And in the case of Josephus, the best medical care that Rome offered at that point was administered to the three. In spite of that, two of three that were removed from their crosses during Josephus' time intentionally, two of the three still died.

So, even if Jesus had been removed from His cross prematurely, and medically assisted, His chances of survival weren't good at all. Second, we don't have a scrap of evidence - nothing, zero zilch - nothing that would suggest that Jesus was removed while alive, or provided any medical care whatsoever, much less Rome's best. And historians can't just go with possibilities. Any goofball online who's blogging can say anything they want, because the only credentials you need to post a blog online is, you have to be able to breathe. But historians have to look at the data and go with the data. And so, without equally, at least equally, good data that Jesus survived his death somehow, the historian at least must conclude that Jesus was crucified, and that the process killed Him.

There's more that I could say too. Let me just give you one more though quickly. If given scourging and crucifixion, and how these things were described in antiquity - you've got Josephus and others who described scourging itself as exposing bones and arteries and veins - so I mean, you were really just getting your skin shredded. So you get Jesus who's been scourged so brutally, that He finds it impossible to carry His cross all the way. And they've got to enlist the services of a stranger - Simon of Cyrene. So Jesus is scourged brutally, and then He's crucified - nails through His hands and feet. Do we really imagine that just - you know, 36, 40 hours later, a day-and-a-half later - He's crucified on Friday afternoon - He appears to others Sunday morning - do we really think that if that actually happened, that he's coming forth alive? That He's going to look, and be able to convince others, He's the risen Prince of Life? The guy wouldn't even be able to walk - probably couldn't even stand up. His skin and body would be oozing. He'd have infection. He would have a fever. He would be in terrible shape. They'd be wanting to get Him a doctor, not worship Him as the risen Prince of Life. So you know, there's only a handful of people maybe - as far as I know, one relevant scholar today - who even thinks it's possible that Jesus may have survived His crucifixion.

NC: Well, and going back to what you said earlier, that definitely would not convince Paul. So, I mean, you know, again, as you've talked about it, there's only one reasonable conclusion. Jesus rose from the dead, not just - no - we're talking physically rose from the dead. And again, we have to be able to approach this logically and say, what is the best explanation? You know, I heard one person say, "Well, what about His twin brother? You know, Ted?" Well, I don't know about any twin brother, Ted, but I guess it's possible, but that's not going to inspire a movement by any means.

ML: I can tell you the guy that proposed that first - his name's Greg Cavin. I debated him back in, I think, 2012 - good guy. He's an atheist Philosophy professor in California. And he told me before that debate, that he did his doctoral dissertation proposing that. He said, that's the only likely explanation other than Resurrection. But before the debate, he says, he doesn't even take that anymore.

NC: Oh my goodness. Well, there you go. So, I mean, again, it's preposterous, but I think having this type of evidence is so helpful. And for us just to think through these alternative explanations, because those aren't refutations. We've got to remember this as Christians - we must always be prepared to give a defense. We must always be ready to contend for the faith, and in today's hostile world of conflicting world views and ideas, just because someone claimed something or retweets it, or puts it on Facebook, does not mean that it is in fact, true. We are called to use the faculties that God has given us to actually ask questions, and to look at it, and see if it actually is reasonable. That's what you did, and it got you to the place where you are today. That's what I did, and it got me where I am today. And that's why we would encourage our listeners and the people watching, don't just settle for a blind faith. Have reasons to believe. There's nothing unbiblical or ungodly about looking for evidence, and seeing where it leads. And in my experience, it's always pointed back to truth. And we know that God is the source of that truth. I mean, that's what you discovered as well.

ML: Yeah, a hundred percent there.

NC: So for anyone who is listening now, and they're going, "Okay, I get it, but I still doubt. Like, I'm still not like - what about Jonah? What about a Virgin birth? What about a universal flood?" Mike, what do you say to those people who are still doubting maybe all these other fringe pieces? What does this reality of the Resurrection do for them today?

ML: That's a great question. We have to realize in science, there's a lot of unanswered questions, but you don't throw science out. You don't throw certain conclusions within science out, because other conclusions - we don't know the answers to. We can acknowledge that there are some tensions in some of these questions. Some of them, we just don't know the answer to, and may never know them this side of Heaven. But what's important to recognize, is that Christianity is true, because Jesus rose from the dead. There's nothing out there that says everything in the Bible - it's an all or nothing. Okay? That's something that we came up with - manmade came up with - but it's not anywhere in the Bible that says it's all true, or none of it's true. All right. The truth of the matter is, if Jesus rose from the dead, Christianity's true, period - game, set, match - and it would remain true, even if, let's say, there were some errors in the Gospels. I'm not saying there are errors in the Gospels, but even if there were, Jesus rose from the dead before any of the New Testament literature was written, and thousands came to Christ from the episodic preaching, before any of the New Testament literature was written. So any perceived errors in the Gospels, even if real, it wouldn't negate the truth of Christianity, because it was true before then, because Jesus rose from the dead. So it's important to recognize that

Jesus rose from the dead - it's game, set, match. Christianity's true. Period. Don't get hung up on these other things. We can ask these - we can debate these - they're interesting topics, but they don't undermine the truth of Christianity.

NC: Amen. Mike, I appreciate your time today. Well, we would encourage you to go check out Mike's videos on YouTube, as well as his website, <https://www.risenjesus.com/> God bless you. It's been good spending time with you.

ML: Thank you Nat.