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Episode 6: Jesus: Not an 'Ordinary Rabbi' Story

By Tom Gilson

Intro 00:00:04 Welcome to the Thinking Christian podcast, your weekly guide to solid Christian thinking on culture science, faith, and Christian confidence, hosted by Tom Gilson. Tom is a senior editor with *The Stream*, stream.org. He runs the top ranked Thinking Christian blog, and he's the author of several books, including the soon to be released *Too Good to be False: How Jesus' Incomparable Character Reveals His Reality*.

00:00:36 Hello, I'm Tom Gilson. There's an atheist blogger over at patheos.com named Bob Seidensticker, who thinks the story of Jesus is just a fairly ordinary rabbi story. Let's think about that. I was finishing up my book *Too Good to be False* by writing the introductory chapter — not an unusual order to take things by the way— when I ran across a quote by this Bob Seidensticker, that was so perfect. It was almost too good of it for the book. It was just amazing.

He runs the cross examined blog at patheos dot com, and if I'd seen this quote earlier, I almost could have written the book as an answer to it. That wasn't where the book came from, though. Actually, it was an outgrowth of work I started years before I'd seen that quote; and the book is all about Jesus. If you didn't know that though, I wouldn't blame you for thinking it was about Bob Seidensticker.

00:01:28 And this bit of his blog that I quoted in the book's intro, Seidensticker wrote,

Strip away any supernatural claims from the story of Alexander. The great, and you've still got cities throughout Asia named Alexandria and coins with Alexander's likeness, strip away any supernatural claims from the Cesar Augusta story. And you're left with the Caesar Augustus from history, but strip away the supernatural claims from the Jesus story. And you're left with a fairly ordinary rabbi. The Jesus story is nothing but the supernatural elements. Jesus story is nothing, nothing but the supernatural elements.

Well, let's think about that. There's the part where he seems to suggest that there's historical evidence that Alexander and Caesar lived, but there's no historical evidence that Jesus lived and did what he did. That's kind of an odd claim to make, but I'm not here to talk about that.

00:02:31 What I want to do is actually give Seidensticker every benefit of the doubt. I want to allow him every chance. He thinks it's just a story. He thinks it's just an ordinary story. So let's do this for him. Let's treat it as a story. I think it's a true story, but I'm going to leave that part out for now. It's a story. What he calls the Jesus story. Fine.

Let's take it seriously as a story. Let's allow him the other thing, too. He wants us to strip out the supernatural claims, so let's do that. Not because we have to and not because I've got any doubt that the claims are real, but just so we can meet Mr. Seidensticker on his own ground.

He wants us to view it as a story. He wants a supernatural stripped out of it. And he says, when we do that, it'll end up being just ordinary.

00:03:22 I say, let's do this thing. Let's see what happens when we remove the miracles. Does this story have anything left going for it after that? Well, how would we decide that there's the plot to a story; it's storyline; its arc; its set-up its rise of tension; the climactic turn and the ending.

There's the setting where it takes place. There's dialogue and there's character. All of these story facets count. I might have left some out, because I didn't go back and review my literature notes, iff I

even knew where to find them.

That's enough for us to work with, anyway. So how about the setting? Is it an ordinary story on that account? Actually, Seidensticker, wins on that one. Jesus walked up and down, north and south across Galilee and Judea, plus some of the surrounding region. He met people in their homes and in their houses of worship, meaning synagogues in the temple.

00:04:22 And you know, I suppose that was pretty typical for rabbi stories. We'll grant him that one. How about the plot? Remember we're allowing him his "no miracles" rule. Just for the sake of discussion. I'm gonna give him this one too. He's right. If we take out that part of the story what's left behind, isn't so far from ordinary, either. You've got a rabbi who gathered some followers, teaches some ethical wisdom, creates a bit of messianic stir and ends up getting killed. I suppose just about anyone could write a story like that. I know there were other stories of messianic rabbis.

So yeah, let's call that ordinary so far. So good for Bob Seidensticker.

But that leaves two remaining story elements, the dialogue and character, which by the way, go quite closely with each other. And for that, I'm going to lift out a few quick snippets from the gospels. We're going to take a good look at them and see how ordinary Jesus is on those accounts.

00:05:23 Before I do though, before I go into that, I want to let you know about an opportunity coming up next Sunday. I want you to know about this. On July 26th, we're doing an online book launch party for my new book, *Too Good to be False: How Jesus' Incomparable Character Reveals His Reality*. It's going to start at 7:30 PM Eastern time next Sunday.

Michael Stover and I will be talking about the story behind the book and why it's generated so much interest even before coming off the presses. I don't have the details yet on how you're going to be able to tune in to this. The easy way to get them is for you to go to my blog at thinkingchristian.net and subscribe for updates there. If you do that, as a bonus you'll get immediate access to a free preview chapter of the book that you can download.

00:06:16 That's a free preview chapter just for subscribing at thinkingchristian.net. And you'll also get word on next week's webinar, the book launch party, just as soon as I have it available for you, it'll come to you in your email. So be sure to subscribe there.

Okay. So let's go back to our question of the story of Jesus dialogue and character. Let's look at two of what I would call really quite arresting passages in the Sermon on the Mount for starters. They're both in Matthew chapter five. Now I know someone might say, how do we know Jesus actually said these things? My answer for now is we're talking about the story. And whether he said them or not, these things are in the story. I'm taking the story seriously as a story. That's all, let's see what the story says. The first one is in Matthew five verses 11 and 12.

00:07:12 That's right at the end of the blessings part that we call the Beatitudes. Jesus says to the crowds there, "Blessed are you when they revile you and persecute you and say all kinds of evil against you for my sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

Now, if you're a believer, you've read that maybe a hundred times and not caught the really astonishing thing he's saying here I'm serious. Or maybe you haven't read it before at all. That's fine. Here's the question I want to ask you. Who is Jesus comparing himself to here? Who is he presenting himself as a parallel to? Let me read it again because you need to listen to it with that question in mind, he says, "Blessed are you when they revile you and persecute you and say all kinds of evil against you for my sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

00:08:09 I'm willing to bet at least some listeners here would say Jesus was saying that he was like the prophets. "For so they persecuted the prophets who were before you." And that would be the or-

dinary thing. That would be the ordinary rabbi story, if he was comparing himself to the prophets, but he wasn't, he was comparing *his disciples* to the prophets. He said his disciples' reward would be great, just as a prophet's reward was great.

In other words, we, his disciples get the same reward for suffering for Jesus that the prophets got for suffering for God, Jesus wasn't paralleling himself with the prophets. He was paralleling himself with God. Now, does this sound like an ordinary rabbi story? Does this sound like an ordinary rabbi speaking? Not if you know anything at all about first century Judaism. This just a doesn't fit in an ordinary rabbi story.

00:09:14 So let's move ahead just another couple of paragraphs to Matthew chapter five, verse 17.

Before I read that, I want to ask you to think of this as an ordinary preacher story, just because I think it will communicate more clearly. If we move the setting up to our day, a preacher instead of a first century rabbi. Imagine there's a guest preacher who's showing up at your church. You've had your hymns. You've had your praise time, whatever your, your church service does to proceed the sermon. He gets up and he introduces himself. And he says a few nice things to kind of get warmed up with the crowd there. Then he launches into his sermon proper. And the first thing he says is this. He says, "Do not think that I came here to destroy the Bible. I did not come to destroy it, but to fulfill it." We're not talking ordinary preacher here!

00:10:09 We, I mean, there's a lot of things you could say about that preacher. "Ordinary" certainly isn't one of them nutcase, maybe. I mean, he might as well be standing at the foot of the Rockies with a pickaxe saying, "Don't worry. I'm not here to destroy these mountains." What kind of person would it take for the crowd to actually worry that he might actually do that?

Well, as you read the rest of the Sermon on the Mount, you find that Jesus reinterprets a lot of mistaken thinking that they had about their religion. That *actually is* the kind of thing that could get a crowd to wondering. "How long is he going to keep this up? Is he going to tear down the whole thing?" And so he was saying, "No, that's not what I'm here for. I'm here to fulfill instead."

As he continues through the sermon on the mountain, look at the kind of authority that he bases his reinterpretations on: His own.

00:11:06 Nothing else, nothing but his own authority. He says, "You have heard that it was said," and then he answers, "But I say to you." Again "You have heard that it was said..., but I say to you..., you have heard that it was said..., but I say to you..." That's through the rest of Matthew 5.

Look where he got his authority from. He consulted no other rabbis. He didn't even consult other scripture. He did it all on his own. his alone.

And by the way, what he said as he did this re-interpretation? He got it right. What he said made sense. He was no nutcase, that's for sure. So this Jesus, this main character in the Jesus story that we're analyzing here, Jesus looks like he's got all the authority in the world to overturn any teaching he wanted to just on his own say. So no, not an ordinary rabbi story.

00:12:03 And you know, he goes on, he says, he's there to fulfill the law and the prophets. Add that to what we saw earlier, where he was putting himself on a parallel with God — Do you think this is anything like ordinary? The crowds didn't, at least according to the story, the same story we're looking at. At the end of the sermon, in Matthew 7 verses 28 and 29, we read that they were "astonished at his teaching for, he taught them as one having authority and not as the scribes." And obviously not like the rabbis, either many of whom were scribes.

Jesus even assumed enough authority he had the — if it wasn't real, we would say he had the gall — to send his disciples on a global mission, continuing to the end of the age or to the furthestmost parts of the globe.

00:13:00 The Greek word there is ambiguous, so we don't know exactly which he meant or whether

he actually might've meant both at the same time, the end of the age or the ends of the earth. IS-speaking of ends, it's at the very end of the book of Matthew it's in chapter 28, verses 18 through 20.

And after he said that, he said, he'd be with his disciples the whole way through. He would be with them to the very end of the earth or ends of the earth.

And back up a little bit earlier, just four chapters, in Matthew 24:14 he had assured them that the good news of his kingdom would reach all the nations before the end would come. In other words, he assumed enough authority to predict and to send his disciples on a mission to cover the entire earth. That takes an awful lot of chutzpah.

00:13:53 And here's where the story really departs from ordinary. *He was right*. He predicted it 2000 years ago, and now all these centuries later we're within just a few people groups of it coming to final fulfillment. The word *nations* there is best translated *people groups*, groups that are defined by their members, language, religion, location, customs, race, that kind of a thing. He called for it. He commissioned his disciples to it and it's happening. It took all this time, but it's happening.

No quote-unquote ordinary rabbi story has the rabbi making this kind of prediction and having that prediction come true thousands of years later. And oh, by the way, if you're bothered by Jesus saying that "some would not taste death until they saw the kingdom of God coming in power," well, I'm convinced that there are alternate ways to interpret that.

00:14:56 And I think fairly in the context of what, what Jesus himself was saying at the time. And I think we could even ask someone like Bob Seidensticker to give us some grace, because we've given him some grace, where we're analyzing the story on his terms.

But even if he won't give us that grace, he has got to admit that there's something not terribly ordinary in what Jesus did get, right? His commission, his prediction of reaching the entire world in his name.

Now I've spoken of story elements, setting, plot, dialogue, and character. I've admitted that the setting was fairly ordinary for rabbi stories and that if you strip out the miraculous elements, the plots kind of ordinary too, but this character Jesus, he's anything but ordinary in the authority that he assumes, according to the story authority, to parallel himself with God, to speak on his own without having to consult even scripture and the authority to send all the disciples on this "Great Commission. "

00:16:05 And that's just based on one facet of Jesus' character. I could have looked at his incredibly self-sacrificial giving love instead, or his undeniable success as a leader, even though the story has him breaking at least a dozen of what we usually think of as essential leadership principles. The fact that he led so effectively in spite of that is one more thing that makes his story truly extraordinary.

But here I know the question's going to come up. I'd be asking it myself. If I were a Bob Seidensticker, I'd be saying well, so what, what difference does it make? Well, here's the difference? It makes it's that the story is really, really unusual. The story is the story of a person, a man who was acting as if he was God, a man who was acting as if he was God in first century, Israel in this incredibly strongly powerfully monotheistic culture, where if you made that kind of a claim, you would die for it.

00:17:15 This is not your usual rabbi story. I defy Bob Seidensticker to find anyone else in all of literature who's made a claim parallel to Jesus' claims in a place and in a time and in a culture where the claim would have the kind of meaning that it had in Jesus' time and place in culture, where he was acting as if he had the place of the creator, the one who was in charge of all the universe. I don't know how someone like Bob Seidensticker could say that story is an ordinary rabbi story.

Even if you take away the miraculous elements, what this indicates, I think is that someone like Mr. Seidensticker is, is really quite prejudiced against the story. He's not seeing what's in it. He's not seeing it for what it is, and that's not good for his understanding of reality.

00:18:10 Really. He's making his decisions about reality based on a false understanding of this Jesus, whom he criticizes so constantly and deeply.

Now, the other question is, does this prove the story is true? Not on its own. It does one thing for it, though, which I expand on greatly in *Too Good to be False*. Ordinary stories are easy to write. They're ordinary, so ordinary people can write them. Or ordinary people can even build them up, grow them up, develop them as legends, which is what the skeptics tend to think is the source, the origin of the Jesus story.

But can you do that the same way with extraordinary stories? One-of-a-kind stories? I would say, just based on what I've covered in this podcast, I would just suggest the skeptics not be so quick to assume they've got the stories, origins, figure it out that easily.

00:19:09 If you put the whole thing on the table, all the rest of the data, including what I have had nowhere near time enough to cover here; if you put the whole story on the table of specifically the character of Jesus, the kind of man the stories describe him to be; and then if you add to that, the skeptics' explanation for where the story came from, you'll find it gets really tough for them. There are some serious difficulties in the way they explain it.

And you know, my own conclusion. It's in the title of the book: Jesus is too good to be false. But t I'm getting ahead of myself here. You don't have that conclusion until you put all of that information on the table. And I've only covered a small piece of it here.

00:20:00 Bob Seidensticker said in effect that the Jesus story was so ordinary, it was hardly worth paying it any attention. I've offered a few reasons, just, just a few, just a small sampling of the many reasons to show that it's not so ordinary after all. What I've said here isn't going to be enough to convince him or any other skeptic that the story is true. I'll be content for now; I'll be content for now, if I've at least shown the story is worth paying attention to. The rest we can get to later. Maybe they'll read *Too Good to be False*. I hope they do

For the Thinking Christian Podcast, this has been Tom Gilson. Thank you for listening.

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