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S1E1 - Mike's Background

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Risen Jesus - Mike Licona

In the inaugural episode of the Risen Jesus podcast, Kurt Jaros asks Mike about his upbringing, educational background, and more!

Transcript

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(upbeat music) Hello and welcome to the Risen Jesus podcast with Dr. Mike Lacona. Dr. Lacona is Associate Professor in Theology at Houston Baptist University and he's a frequent speaker on university campuses, churches, retreats, and has appeared on dozens of radio and television programs. Mike is the President of Risen Jesus, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.

My name is Kurt Chirris, your host. Welcome to the inaugural episode of the Risen Jesus podcast. This season we're gonna be talking with Mike about his life and interests and background into apologetics and New Testament studies.

And on today's episode specifically, we're going to chat with him about his life background and upbringing. Mike, thank you for taking time out of your day-to-day to talk to us about this. - Yeah, thanks Kurt.

Great to start this. - So first, we're gonna just have some basic simple questions. For example, where did you grow up? - Well, I grew up in Baltimore, Maryland.

I was born in 1961, so I grew up during the '60s and '70s at a time when, and Baltimore and Washington, DC were two cities that were neck and neck in a competition to see who would be voted the murder capital of the US. - So I take it then that you witnessed racism in your upbringing? - Oh, certainly. When I grew up in Baltimore City for a while, I went to public schools, Govan's Elementary School, which was, I don't remember the racial ratio that was going on, but a lot of blacks, a lot of whites.

I don't know, it might've been 50/50 at that point. We generally all got along, all of us kids, we got along. - Mm, mm.

Yeah, that tends to be the case for children and over time things change. - Yeah, you know, it was kind of interesting though. I know on one occasion, there was this guy named Lewis and right down the alley from where I lived was an all black neighborhood, but it was pretty poor.

And sometimes my grandfather would send me down there to get him some tobacco for his piper to get some cigars. And back then, you know, you could be a seven and eight year old and you could purchase them for your parents or grandparents. There was no ID checks or anything like that.

So I'd say, "Hey, Mike, you go on down to highs, "highs was a, you know, like a, I don't know what you call them, "like a 7-Eleven or something like that "that they would have today." And it said, "Hey, go down to highs and get me some cigars "and here's a quarter, you can get yourself a chili willy." (laughs) And so I would do that. So one time I was coming back, riding my bike back to the house and this, something hard hit me in the chin and busted my chin open. And I looked down, it was this can, I don't know, if it's a Coke can or a beer can.

And blood was just pouring out of my chin and I looked over and it was my friend from elementary school. I'm guessing this is fourth grade. And his name was Louis.

I said, "Louis, did you throw that?" He says, "Yes." I said, "Why'd you do that?" I thought we were friends. And he said, "Well, because you're white "and you're going through my neighborhood." And I was like, "Oh, that was kind of strange." So, yeah, I mean, there was certainly those tensions and stuff back then. I didn't sense it with people in my classmates though, at least while we were in class.

- Well, during your upbringing, Mike, did you end up becoming a Christian while you were a child? Or was it something that you later came to belief in, maybe as a teenager? - Well, I can remember being, I don't know, seven or eight years old and walking to church with my mom. This is again in Baltimore City. And we went to Govean's Presbyterian

Church back then.

And I can remember asking her, "Mom, how do I get to heaven?" And she'd say, "Well, you just have to do more good than bad. "If you do more good, then you'll go to be in heaven with God." I said, "You know, at that point, I knew "that I pulled my sister's hair. "I hit her and made her cry." And so it's like, "Well, you know, what happens "if I do more bad than good?" She said, "Well, then you go to hell to be with the devil forever "and I'm thinking, well, where am I on that scale?" So I'd keep on asking that.

And when I was 10 years old, we had just moved out to Baltimore County. And it was the spring or summer of, I'm guessing it's, I'm sorry, 1971. And a Christian magician, illusionist, whatever you'd like to call him, came in.

They had a combined Sunday school class. And he would relate the gospel to the magic tricks he was doing. So it made sense to me, I guess I was tricked into the kingdom.

And he gave an invitation in a Presbyterian church and three of us went forward. 'Cause it's like, man, this is exactly what I've been looking for. And I remember going forward that day and accepting Christ.

So that was pretty cool. That's when I became a Christian. - That's great.

So for your undergraduate studies, you had considered and decided to go to Liberty University. What was your thinking behind that choice? - Well, I was a saxophonist in high school. I played Alto and tenor saxophone.

And I wanted to become a professional jazz musician. And there was a really good jazz program at a local university called Towson State College. It's now Towson University.

And I was just planning on going there. And my dad, mom and dad used to watch Jerry Falwell's, what was it called, the Old Time Gospel Hour on Sunday nights. And they offered a college for a weekend.

And so my dad suggested, well, hey, why don't we put you on the bus? Trailways and take you down to Lynchburg, Virginia, for a college for a weekend and check out a Christian school, see what it's like. And I said, no, all right. And I went down and gosh, I just fell in love with the place.

I mean, it was a Christian environment and it was so different than public schools and people were so friendly. And I figured, well, this just be like summer Christian camp all year round. All you're doing a lot of studying.

And I just loved it. So at that point, it's like, well, they didn't have a jazz program. I didn't care.

I just wanted to go there. And so that's what led me to Liberty. - Nice.

And so you were a music major there. But what, over time, what drew you into going from the arts to the humanities in Christian apologetics? - Well, I guess during my time down there, I just developed a really, really strong desire to know God and to know him intimately. And I was, by the time my senior year rolled around, I was probably reading scriptures, you know, an hour a day.

I was probably praying an hour a day. Praying an hour to two hours a day, probably closer to two hours a day. I just, man, I just was developing my relationship with the Lord and loving it.

And I wanted to learn how to study the New Testament. It's original language, Greek. So I took my last elective and I did Greek 101 and loved it, aced it.

And so I decided I wanted to do a master's degree in Greek. Well, the closest they had was an MA in New Testament study. So I enrolled in that and I used all my electives for Greek.

So they created all kinds of independent studies such as rapid Greek reading, Septuagint Greek, all kinds of things. So I took the equivalent of five years of graduate level Greek during my graduate studies. But my very last semester, I started to question my faith.

It wasn't anything necessarily that I'd learned. I had a pretty sheltered life at that point, really no exposure to atheism or any of that. But I began to say, well, how do I know this is true? I think I've got an intimate relationship with the Lord, but I had to admit people of other religions did as well.

So how do I know what I believe is true rather than I've just been kind of convincing myself, brainwashing myself to think this. And that's what caused me doubts. And so I started, began to struggle with doubts.

I went in at the recommendation of one of my roommates to see Gary Habermas who was in the philosophy and apologetics department. He sat down, we had a good chat. And I was satisfied at that point, but then I left school after the fall of '85 and began questioning my faith continuously as it was out now in the real world and engaging in conversations with skeptics.

And that's what led me into really studying this stuff and getting into Christian apologetics. - Nice. So, I mean, the equivalent of five years of Greek.

I mean, how much Greek can a guy read, huh? - Well, there's plenty more I could study and I still don't know Greek as well as I could. I wish I knew it better. But I try to read the Greek New Testament almost every day and I just, I love it.

I still love reading the New Testament in Greek. - Yeah, for someone like yourself with so much experience, I mean, you could just know all languages, right? I mean, there's

nothing that's not Greek to you. (laughing) - Well, yeah.

Picking up another language like Latin or German can be, you know, easier because I have learned Greek, but it's still difficult because, especially with Greek because it's the kind of Greek that I learned, Koine Greek, it's no longer spoken. Pronunciation's different. So it's kind of hard.

You have to just stay in it. - Yeah. So you go through this period of your life where you're dealing with doubt and you begin to seek out those answers and I know we're going to devote some episodes just to this period of your life.

But so what got you started in working in apologetics ministry? - Well, I started to bump into people that had the same kind of doubts that I had had and occasionally still had at that point. And so I recognized there was a segment out there that needed some help. And so I started to put together some talks, some lectures and I would give them to just small groups, men, prayer breakfast groups and things like that.

And it's like, wow, they were really resonating with it. And then I got recommended to speak to high school students and would do a few pulpit supplies at times and then got invited to speak on college campuses and people started resonating with these things. They wanted answers to their questions and there were more people out there having these questions than I'd been aware of.

So that's what got me started in. I was really, really enjoying it. Out there doing public speaking and ministering to these folks.

And that's what got me started and then I started to get referred to other groups and then it started to gain a momentum. And I was out there probably three times a month I'd be speaking to different groups, just small groups, sometimes larger groups, but usually small groups and then invited to do series of churches. And I was just liking it and decided, boy, this would be kind of fun to do on a full time basis.

- Yes, yes it would be and I'm sure it is. - It's a blast. I can't see myself doing anything else that would be as much fun.

- Yeah. So what led you to decide to do doctoral studies, something more advanced in terms of intellectual rigor per se than apologetics ministry? - Well, I can remember that someone had bought price. It had been suggested that bought price and Gary Habermas do a debate.

But Gary didn't like to do debates at that time. And so he turned it down and I had listened to some debates with Bill Craig, between Bill Craig and Frank Zindler, Bill Craig and John Dominic Rossin. And it's like, wow, that is so cool.

I'd love to do that sometime. I don't know that I'll ever have the ability to do it, but that

would be really neat, a lot of fun. And so I had told that to Gary and Gary said, hey, I'm turning down this debate invitation with Bob Price, would you like to debate him? I said, sure.

And but he turned it down because he said, Gary, Mike may be very well, Mike may even beat me. Bob is a good guy and he was just saying that self-effacing. In truth, he would have probably wiped the floor with me at that point.

And I didn't even know it. So I'm glad he turned it down. But he said, Gary, I have nothing to gain.

If I debate Mike and I win big, well, then I don't gain anything because I beat a guy with just a master's degree and he had two doctorates. And he says, but if Mike even does a fair showing, then I lose because a guy with just a master's degree beat me with two doctorates. And well, that made sense.

So Gary said, Mike, you ought to try to get a doctorate at some point and earn some credentials and it'll give you more respect out there. And so that's why I got into it. And then I decided I was going to do the resurrection, study the resurrection from the point of a historian, which had not really been done at that point, at least large scale.

Paul Meyer had done it, a professional historian, a classist, he had done it on a small scale basis and a small book. Paul Meyer's a great guy. But I wanted to do it, you know, laying out historical method and seeing what are the tools historians use and let's apply those and really wanted to do something large scale and then use that as an apologetic argument.

And that's why I got into the program, but about a year or two years into the program, my objectives for doing it totally changed. - So before we go into those objectives, let's talk about your choice of school at the University of Pretoria. Why did you pick that school to do your doctoral studies? - Well, I was engaged in full-time donor-supported ministry and it's, you know, my choices, my funds were limited.

And so I looked at Regent University there in Virginia Beach. I could have studied underground 12th Tree, but I was a really fine historian of Jesus. It would have been a PhD though in renewal theology, charismatic theology and a lot of the seminars I would have had to take in would have focused on charismatic theology.

And I wasn't charismatic and, you know, I wasn't because I wanted to, I had this big thing against charismatic, I did not, I do not. It was just that that's not what I wanted to study. It's not what I wanted to spend my time on.

So I looked at Union Theological Seminary in Richmond and I could have studied under, I think it was, I think it was Puffits Meyer. And that would have been wonderful. Maybe it was Acta Meyer, I forgot which one it was, but it would have been a very, very excellent

scholar.

But that was 100 miles away and I would have had to travel there several times a week. I already had a house in mortgages, I don't know. So then Gary recommended I look at the University of South Africa, which I did, but they focused a lot on social science studies.

And then so I looked around and I saw the University of Pretoria, which seemed to have a really good reputation. They had agreements with Princeton and MIT and the chair of the New Testament Studies Department was the leading New Testament scholar in South Africa, was the general editor for the review of biblical literature, was interested in my topic. And the South African rant between the US dollar was really favorable.

So I mean, I was able to go, my entire tuition was just under \$2,500 for the PhD. For a credible program. And so it was just for practical purposes.

What I have chosen, a different school, I mean, are there better schools out there? Yes, there are better schools out there. But this worked well for me. It was a credible school.

It been withering tin and Richard Burge said, "You'll never have to apologize for the University of Pretoria." It's a great school, very credible. And gosh, \$2,500 for the tuition, for the whole thing. I think it's more than that now, but man, that was just a deal I just couldn't pass up.

I had no retirement savings or very little at that point. And I figured it'd be a whole lot better for me to invest that money in my retirement rather than tuition. Okay, so you decide to go through the University of Pretoria for your doctoral studies.

And you said that during your research, your objectives changed. So what was it about maybe your life or what you were learning about where your objectives changed? Well, I am a perpetual second guesser. And I second guess everything, whether it's did I purchase the right watch, did I buy the right card, did I marry the right woman? I did purchase the right watch.

I did purchase the right card, did marry the right woman, but I second guess things for so many years. And it's just the way I'm wired. My wife hates go shopping with me because she says, "You take forever to decide." And that's the way I am with a lot of things, not everything, but a lot of things, stupid little things to some of the most important things.

So of course, I'm gonna second guess when it comes to my worldview. 'Cause you know, if I make a bad decision on a watch, I can always get a different one. Same thing with a car.

If I make a bad decision with a spouse, it's gonna make my life miserable, but it's at least only for a limited period of time. I'm only gonna live so long or if someone chooses to

divorce, they can end it. But if I make a bad decision on my worldview, it has the potential to cause me eternity and decide where I'm gonna spend eternity and what the conditions are gonna be like.

So I may only get one chance to make the right choice and I wanted to get it right. So it was, it, my, and I started to learn as I read philosophers of history that it was unanimous that there was no such thing as an unbiased, neutral historian and that all historians are, you know, they have the threat of their investigation being corrupted by their horizons, the horizon being their worldview, their biases, their preferences, you know, things, the way they look at the world through their race, gender, ethics, their nationality, their religious, political and philosophical convictions, the way they were raised, the academic institutions they attended, none of us are exempt from that. And all our horizons, it's like putting on a pair of glasses and our lenses are both shaded and distorted because of our horizons.

And that means that we all view the world a little bit differently because of this. And it is a responsibility of the historian to take those glasses and minimize their negative impact. It is not the responsibility of the evidence to shine so brightly that they render those glasses as ineffectual, but very few people recognize that they're even wearing those glasses, much less work on minimizing the negative impact that those glasses can bring and therefore their historical investigations, the integrity of them are very often compromised.

So being the second guesser that I am, I wanted to, and my primary objective at that point, became discovering and following truth rather than apologetics purposes. So it changed dramatically. And as people like Gary Habermas, William Lang Craig, my doctoral supervisor, Jan van der Vad, can testify, I wrestled mightily with my own biases and tried to get to the bottom line and as my wife can testify, I almost gave up my faith.

I was just borderline, do I keep my faith or not? And I was gonna go with wherever the evidence pointed. So again, my objective, my primary objective, sole objective at that point became discovering and following truth and rather than apologetics. Now, if I could use it for apologetics later on, great, but if not, that's okay.

It was just truth as all I was after. - So you ultimately came to the conclusion that the Christian story is the true one, historically true. I've noticed that you've gone on to debate atheists about God's existence.

You've lectured also on, say, scientific evidence for God's existence and sort of other general themes of Christian apologetics. But now you seem to be focusing more and more on the gospels and say, you know, historiography and historicity. Are you getting away from talking about apologetics in general and focusing on New Testament scholarship? - Yeah, good question.

Well, I've only debated one atheist on God's existence. I had lectured on that and like you said, I've lectured on scientific things, but the more I've learned about historical investigation, looking at the resurrection of Jesus, looking at the reliability of the gospels, gospel differences, things like that, though as confident I've become in being able to lecture on some of those other things, just because I've gained so much more knowledge in my own field and my interests lie more in that field. So am I getting away from apologetics? I'd say it's more a difference of priority.

My priority has been, has changed. I'm no longer interested in talking about general issues within apologetics. I will occasionally have asked, but I'm really, my interests are focused on things like, what can we prove about Jesus? Are the gospels reliable, gospel differences? Who did Jesus think he was? The resurrection of Jesus, these are the things for which I have passionate interest and where I'm investing almost all of my time for researching.

Now, and I'm after truth in these areas. So if they can be used for apologetics, then fine, I'll use them for apologetics. If they can't, then that's fine.

I'm after the discovery of knowledge here. And yeah, if they have some practical applications elsewhere, fantastic, if they don't, that's okay. - Mike, thank you for telling us more about your background, your upbringing, where you're from, and your faith journey along the way in this process.

- Yeah, you bet, Kurt. - If you'd like to learn more about the work and ministry of Dr. Michael O'Connor, please visit RisenJesus.com, where you can find authentic answers to questions about the resurrection of Jesus and the historical reliability of the gospels. You can check out free resources like e-books, watch videos such as debates or lectures, or simply read some articles.

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