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The Story of Abortion in America (with Leah Savas)

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Leah Savas, who reports on abortion for WORLD News Group, has written a book with Marvin Olasky, 'The Story of Abortion in America: A Street-Level History, 1652-2022' (<https://amzn.to/42PeTtl>). She joins me and my wife, Susannah Black Roberts, to discuss the book and the subject of abortion more broadly.

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Transcript

Hello and welcome. I am joined today by my wife, Susanna, and by a special guest, Leah Savas, who's in Grand Rapids and she reports on abortion for the World News Group. She's recently written a book with Marvin Elasky called The Story of Abortion in America, a Street-Level History, 1652-2022.

Thank you very much for joining us, Leah. Yeah, thanks for having me on. So, I would love to hear a bit about the book and your part within it.

What is the book setting out to do and how do you hope that it will add to the conversation around abortion within the US? Yeah, so I co-authored this book with Marvin Elasky, who is my former editor at World. He's actually the guy that hired me here. So, thanks, Marvin, for the job.

I appreciate it. When he first hired me, he actually asked me to help him with this book.

So, my role in the book was kind of providing the most recent details in the later chapters on the history of abortion in America.

So, I basically cover the mid-1990s up until 2022 after the overturn of *Roe v. Wade* with the *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Decision*. So, Marvin wrote a lot of the earlier, he wrote all the earlier chapters. He covers the period from 1652 until the mid-1990s.

So, that's a long time. A lot of his work was from his earlier book that he wrote in the 90s called *Abortion Rights*. And initially, the book was supposed to be kind of, this book was supposed to be an update on abortion rights.

But as he was doing his research, he realized there was a lot more information available online, obviously, than there was in the 90s. So, he was able to search some historical archives online that were inaccessible before, including just like newspaper archives online that before would have been a lot harder to get a hold of before the internet. So, as he was doing this research, he realized, wow, there's a lot more information out here than I had before.

I don't think we can just do an update on abortion rights. We have to do a whole new book. So, this is the whole new book.

And the story of abortion in America tries to tell the story of abortion by telling the stories of people in America affected by the abortion issue. So, you know, and the subtitle is *A Street Level History*. The whole idea behind that is we don't want to just talk about the laws, the politicians, even the ideas of abortion.

We want to talk about the people affected by the laws, the people who elect the politicians, and the people who are affected by the ideas and live out the ideas that we see in culture. So, that's kind of the purpose of the book. We wanted to take this down, what Marvin would call the ladder of abstraction, rather than just talking about the legal ideas, say, in the *Roe v. Wade* opinion from 1973.

We look at the actual history. The *Roe v. Wade* opinion makes some assertions about history that we actually can debunk in this book by looking at individual people, how they thought about abortion, how they reacted to abortions in their communities, and what they even thought about unborn life, and how scripture and how science informed those opinions. So, that's kind of what we do in this book.

Can you say a bit more about some of the disjunctions that you see between, I think, what Elaski calls in his part, the suite level and street level reality of abortion? What are some of the aspects of the picture that a street level account can provide that tend to get missed? Yeah, well, one big thing that comes to my mind is the unborn baby. Often, if you have a discussion about abortion, it's easy to talk about abortion and talk about this procedure and ignore the second person that's involved. I guess, in some cases, the

third person, because you might have the abortionist, the mother of the unborn child, but you always have an unborn child involved in this.

So, in telling these stories, we wanted to focus on, not necessarily make it the center of every story, but not ignore the unborn child that dies in an abortion. So, there are some gruesome descriptions and depictions in this book of what happens in an abortion, what happens to an unborn baby in an abortion. There are descriptions of aborted babies and their remains.

So, we don't shy away from that because that is the street level reality. We want to show people that reality rather than just talk about it at the level of choice or reproductive rights or women's rights. We want to look at the child, at the other person affected by the abortion.

This isn't really part of the book that you focused on or that you wrote, but I wonder whether you could describe some of the things that you mentioned that were claimed in the text of the Roe decision that you guys were able or that Marvin was able to debunk. Yeah, so one big assertion from the Roe v. Wade decision was just that the history and tradition of America was to basically allow for, accept abortion as a normal thing in early America up until the 1800s when there started being laws specifically targeting abortion. So, the assertion is that abortion was okay in early American communities up until quickening, which is about five months when the mother can feel the baby moving inside of her.

But in the early chapters, Marvin tells the stories of some of these early abortion cases and what actually happened, how the communities actually responded. And one case tells of a man who impregnates this woman who, he doesn't want her to give birth to this baby, and he forces an abortion on her. The baby dies and a midwife who is present at the death of this baby or sees the baby after it's dead testifies later that the baby was about three months gestation.

And that man who forced the abortion on the woman eventually went on trial for murder. And that's where this testimony comes up in the archives of Maryland. So, you know, back up a little bit, think about the Roe v. Wade opinion asserting that abortion is acceptable up until quickening in early America.

Well, this baby died before quickening. And, you know, the midwife says that he was three months along and the man went on trial for murder. So does that look like early America saw abortion as acceptable up until quickening? Well, no.

Like the street level reality here is that the community saw this as murder, even though the baby was very early along in development. So that's one of the things that we kind of look at and debunk using the street level stories. Another thing is in the Roe v. Wade decision, the authors argue that there's no consensus.

I don't know if you can really call it an argument, but they state that there's no consensus about when life begins. Well, so there might not have been a consensus among judges. There might not have been a consensus among historians, but there was a consensus among physicians about when life begins.

And even as far back as the mid-1800s, in 1839, I believe, this doctor named Hugh Hodge gave a lecture about unborn children and called them, you know, a distinct individual, a second patient. He asserted that life begins at fertilization. And even doctors around this time who thought abortion was okay still had this view that life begins at conception.

So, you know, that has been something that physicians have known since the 1800s, maybe even before. But that is something that's been around for a long time. So to assert in the Roe v. Wade decision that there's no consensus, well, you're ignoring some street level realities about what doctors were actually saying as early as 1839.

So that was another thing that we kind of get at in these early chapters. The optics of abortion really do seem to be a very important part of the debate and also the history. So the way that abortions prior to Roe were seen as back alley, dangerous, seem to occur in ways that really risk the mother's life.

And you can see the way the optics have also shaped the debate with the rise of new visualizing or new techniques of seeing the child in the womb and new images. He talks about the photographs of unborn children or children in early stages of development. How has the perception of abortion and the debates surrounding abortion, how have they been shaped by images and how have those perceptions been mobilized one way or another for the ends of the debate? Yeah, so for the pro-life movement, it was a real game changer when ultrasound technology became more widely available and pro-life pregnancy centers started introducing this technology to help women see what's going on inside of them when they're pregnant.

And in that they can see like what I was talking about before, they can see the second patient, they can see the distinct individual that's growing during this pregnancy. So the pro-life movement has certainly been able to optimize that in the last couple of decades, last few decades, as this technology has continued to be available and spread. And I think that is probably one of the big weak points for the pro-abortion movement is now they have this very undeniable image that people grow up seeing, like they grow up seeing the ultrasound images of say their cousin or a friend who's pregnant on Facebook.

These ultrasound images are everywhere and the pro-abortion movement can't really work around that reality anymore. They just find ways to ignore it or to change the discussion so that it's not about like, oh well sure maybe it's a thing developing, but is it really a human yet? It's no longer, you can no longer just deny that there is some sort of

body there. So yeah, so that's definitely been a big thing.

But it's interesting though that even though these images of abortion are very influential for some people, that you know, for some people they change someone's mind if they're thinking about getting abortion. Seeing this can convince them not to. But at the same time, like I said, you have this culture that tries to ignore that and tries to change the discussion.

So I think it shows that you can have the images and it can be very helpful, but what you really need is a worldview shift. Like you can't just change someone's view of abortion by showing them an unborn child. They also need to know why the unborn child is valuable.

So I think that's why those early stories of the early abortions where men would go on trial for murder for forcing an abortion on a woman are so informative because it wasn't a knowledge of unborn life that led to these murder charges. It wasn't like they had advanced medical technology or ultrasound technology. Like they had a kind of primitive view of how unborn life develops even, but they had a strong understanding of scripture and what God has to say about life, what he has to say about murder, and even the value that scripture gives to unborn life.

So that was ultimately what led them to, as communities, to value unborn life, to press charges against men who forced abortions on women. And today we see an absence of that understanding of scripture or that care for what the Lord has to say. And even though we have these increased access to ultrasounds or just images, like you can google and you can see what does a baby look like when it's at 20 weeks.

You can easily find that today, and yet people don't care in a lot of cases. They don't have the same concern about it as they did in 1652, for example. I do think, did you by any chance run into the whole thing that happened a couple of months ago with the Guardian article? There's an article in the Guardian, the UK paper, that had to do with basically this is what happens in, this is the tissue that comes out in an abortion.

And there were these five images that they'd gotten, that the reporter had gotten from a abortion clinic in the UK, from their Instagram actually. And the images showed, the first, most of the images, the images claim to show like what the tissue that comes out from an abortion. And it turned out that at various stages of development, I think starting at week five and going through, I think, week 12 or something like that.

And what it turned out, it was very clear that this was not the case. They were, the images were actually just of the gestational sac. And there was this incredible, bizarre denial going on in the pages of the Guardian and in the comments and on Twitter and in various kinds of interactions that people had about this piece, where despite the fact that you can in fact Google, this is not controversial.

You can Google images of embryos and fetuses at various stages. And this is not in any way cutting edge science. People just still, when you refuse to know, you refuse to know.

And that was one of the most striking examples of that, that I'd seen recently. But I think it also is something that, it still seems to me that the visuals are still incredibly important because it is what can get through to someone if anything can. It's what can really kind of turn your eyes towards moral reality by seeing the physical reality.

It seems to me, when you were doing the research for the section that you wrote, what were the sort of striking moments of cultural shift that you saw having to do with perceptions of the unborn child, just around ultrasound and that kind of thing? Yeah, I think something that's striking is just how much it spread in the pro-life movement as being kind of the face of the pro-life movement. It became, like ultrasound images became kind of the front lines. If someone's considering an abortion, what do you do? Well, you try to get them to a pregnancy center and try to get them to get an ultrasound and then see their unborn child.

So I think just seeing that become so prevalent in the pro-life movement, as opposed, because early on in the pro-life movement, there was definitely a legislative focus. There were still pregnancy centers, but it wasn't until the 90s that it really took off. The pregnancy center movement really took off in the 90s is when there started being a lot more of a focus towards getting ultrasound technology into pregnancy centers.

So it's interesting, imagining, I was born in the 90s, so I've grown up just thinking of, oh, pregnancy centers, that's the pro-life movement, but that wasn't necessarily always the front lines. So kind of seeing that become the front lines was interesting in the history. So yeah, I guess that's kind of the first thing that comes to my mind about that.

There seems to be a difference between the US and many other countries in the degree to which abortion has been a salient political issue. In many other countries, abortion is practiced like in the UK, and yet it's not really an issue of political contention. There's very little traction against abortion.

What is it about the US situation that is distinct in that regard? Can you maybe say a bit about the way that the pro-life movement developed as a political movement? How were evangelicals, for instance, mobilized for this movement historically? What things changed perhaps from earlier periods where it would have been seen more as a Roman Catholic cause? Yeah, so I guess one thing that comes to my mind about why this is so political and why there is such a strong movement against abortion is just the way it happened. So even former Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg said that she had some issues with the Roe v. Wade decision, not because she disagreed with the fact that there should be a quote-unquote right to abortion, but instead because of how it legalized abortion in the country. It was such a sweeping decision rather than more of a gradual decision that it kind of shocked this pro-life movement into action.

That's not to say that the pro-life movement didn't exist before Roe v. Wade, because in fact there were pro-life organizations before Roe v. Wade because some states had already legalized abortion. So those organizations were focusing on those individual states and trying to repeal those laws allowing for abortion. But just having this nationwide blanket of Roe v. Wade that gets rid of pro-life laws in states that, like I said, shocked this pro-life movement and people were like, we have to do something now.

So Nellie Gray, who was the catalyst in getting the March for Life started, she was inspired to start the March for Life because she thought, okay, well we have this Roe v. Wade decision, we need to get it overturned as soon as possible. So hopefully like in a few years. So she's like, let's do this march right now.

So on the first anniversary of Roe v. Wade, they have this March for Life. They're thinking, oh within the next couple years this will be gone. Well it wasn't until this past March for Life that they finally were able to march without Roe v. Wade being kind of the quote-unquote law of the land.

So it took almost 50 years when they expected it to just take a few years. So I think that urgency that they had and it kind of continued even though it's been so long. There was still that urgency like, no, we need to get rid of Roe v. Wade.

We need to make abortion unthinkable and illegal. So yeah, it's interesting seeing how that's really defined the pro-life movement in the country and kind of maintained that conflict on the abortion issue. Now you mentioned evangelicals.

It certainly was the case that there were a lot of Catholics involved right away, but I think it was people like Francis Schaeffer who called out evangelical churches and were like, hey, you guys need to be standing up on this issue. But even early on, the SBC, which is like at least less I know, was the largest denomination, evangelical denomination in America. Even they had statements early on affirming abortion in certain cases.

And yeah, just an unbiblical view. They didn't have strong convictions on the abortion issue. But today, thankfully, the SBC has a lot better position on the abortion issue and they understand it to be wrong and they're encouraging for the abolition of abortion.

So seeing that shift, I think it just takes certain leaders inside of the church to encourage one another like, hey, what are we doing about this? Is your stance on this biblical? We need to be fighting against this, preaching against it. And it is a church issue. It's a theological issue.

How do you see the pro-life movement going forward? I mean, Hilde Arcus, who was my professor, who was one of the authors of the Born Alive and Infant Protection Act, has very much been kind of like making the parallel between abortion and slavery. And obviously, the situation that we have now, post jobs, is abortion is going to be legal in

some states and illegal in others, which is the parallel is pre-Civil War America. What do you think is going to be the kind of, do you think that the coalition of the abortion movement is going to be able to hold together and focus on state level lawmaking? And or what other kinds of things are you seeing in the abortion, in the pro-life movement that are going to be sort of carrying this forward now that Roe is gone? Yeah.

So one thing that I've had my eye on is efforts, pro-abortion efforts in states to pass state level abortion rights amendments. And I think that is pretty concerning moving forward. For instance, during the last election, there were four abortion related amendments on ballots.

In four states. And none of them had a pro-life outcome. Even earlier in the year, there was another in August in Kansas, there is another abortion related ballot measure on the ballot.

And it was a pro-life measure, but it did not pass. So there you have like five pro-abortion victories, where voters are weighing in on the abortion issue. Seeing their reaction, I think is really concerning.

I think it is largely stemming from the frantic reaction to the Dobbs decision, how doctors are saying women will die because they can't get medically necessary abortions. I think people don't know what to do with that. But I also think, like I was saying earlier, I just think that there is a larger acceptance of abortion.

I know it depends on what polls you look at, whether the culture is pro-life or pro-abortion. But just looking at the culture from where I sit, I just think there is an overall support for abortion. And people are, you know, they don't like abortion later in pregnancy.

But most people are okay with abortion, at least early on. And that's because, you know, maybe you can't visualize an earlier abortion, a baby at an early gestation period as easily. Like you can't see a the body as clearly.

But what should matter is not so much like what the baby looks like, although that's helpful, but what is the baby? This is a creature of our Lord. This is God's creation. Even though we can't see this baby, we can't like look it in the eyes, we can't know anything about its personality, it has value because of who created it.

And it is in the image of God. And so I think just a carelessness for that, like people don't care about that. I think that is kind of coming out in this reaction to the Dobbs decision.

People are like, well, what about women? You know, and women do matter. Like we don't want women to die in pregnancy. But to say that abortion is the only solution to a difficult pregnancy situation is just, you know, that's disingenuous.

There are Catholic hospitals that have been taking care of these difficult pregnancy situations for decades. You know, they've been involved in this for a long time. They've never performed elective abortions.

And yet they have found a way to care for the mother and the child as two patients. Sure, maybe the baby dies in some situations. But to say that, you need an abortion, rather than like inducing labor early or performing an emergency c-section.

That's not true. So yeah. I mean, so there's a distinction here between medically necessary, what you might call medically necessary abortion to save the life of the mother.

And the sort of from what I know, at least, although the Catholic position would be a bit more stringent, it is the case in every state that there is a life of the mother exception for outright abortion, even to a degree that I think probably Catholic hospitals would not be comfortable with because of the way that they feel that they need to treat abortion and not sort of directly causing the death of the child, but sort of allowing it to die naturally. But it is just, am I right in thinking that in every state there is that life of the mother exception? Yeah. Yeah.

Yeah. And they're all, you know, each state, the way that these laws are written are a little different. So some will say to you can perform an abortion to prevent the death of a woman, you know, another one might say to save the life of a woman, or they might use the language of medical emergency, which some of these cases, like some of these specific language have become targets of lawsuits from different groups that are saying, you know, it's unclear, like, do we have to wait until the woman is actively dying to do something? There is confusion.

And we'll see how that shakes out in the coming months. But yeah, those specific exceptions are in all of the currently active pro-life laws, and including exceptions for removing an ectopic pregnancy, for removing a baby that has already died, but, you know, in a missed miscarriage, if there's still body parts of the baby or, you know, placenta, they can obviously remove that. That is not an abortion.

And that has never been considered an abortion in the colloquial use of the term abortion. I think medically, there are different definitions for the word abortion. But when it comes to how we're talking about it as a culture, no, that is not an abortion.

You're talking about elective abortion. Yeah. I find it really, it's really helpful to just like, when people try to play those semantic games, just be like, if you would like to talk about something else, that's fine.

But what I'm talking about is elective abortion. Yeah, not spontaneous abortion, i.e. miscarriage. Not even.

And to a large degree, not even, you know, the kind of medically necessary abortion in the sort of more strict sense of to save the life of mother, but genuine elective abortion. Yeah. And actually can help, I think, sort of keep some of these conversations from being derailed by semantic games.

Yeah, exactly. Let me say a bit about the way that there is a sort of interplay between the legal fights for the law of the land and the law of particular states and cultural perceptions. It's been said that law is a teacher.

And so legal sanction given to a particular practice can shift public opinion regarding it and lead to greater acceptance. But also sometimes, as you mentioned with Dobbs, there can be a backlash against it in public perception. Can you say a bit about in a street level discussion of abortion, how we can think about the relationship between public perception and legal status? Yeah.

Well, you know, it's the it's everyday voters that elect our politicians. It's everyday voters that are casting votes in these ballot initiatives. So, yeah, like you say, it's these cultural views that really affect what we see in the law.

So I guess an example would be the Sherry Finkbein case right before Roe v. Wade. She was a mother who got pregnant. She was she was known on national television through the Romper Room.

And she she was pregnant, but didn't know it until after she had been taking this one drug in particular that she later found out could cause birth defects in children. So, you know, once she knew she was pregnant, also knew like, oh, I've been taking this drug. She asked if she could get an abortion because she was concerned about potential defects that the baby might have.

So the doctors at the hospital she was at, they did approve the abortion because you could you could approve abortions in certain cases seen as threatening to the mother's life. Although this wasn't technically threatening to her life, they kind of, you know, worked it out so that it would count. You know, they kind of fudged the rules.

But then once she spoke about it to the media, there is this response from the hospital where they were like, oh, actually, never mind. We're not going to do the abortion. Sherry Finkbein was like, what? You know, so she speaks out about this.

There were these national polls that were asking, do you think Sherry Finkbein should be able to get an abortion? And it was amazing to see how many people were like really sympathetic to her story. And I think that was a big part of it was it was her story. You know, there was a specific case.

It wasn't just like a hypothetical. It was someone going through this. She was concerned about, you know, having a child with with deformities.

So she eventually was able to get an abortion overseas, actually. And a lot of people really supported her for that idea, even though generally abortion wasn't as accepted then as it is today. So to kind of see that, even another example was right after the Dobbs decision came out or after the actually, I don't know if you guys remember, but there was a leaked draft of the Dobbs decision last May.

So right after that came out, there was a Gallup poll that was going on where they were asking people, you know, would you call yourself pro-life or pro-choice? And for years, it had been, you know, 50-50 roughly, kind of a little little wiggles in the in the stats. But since the leaked draft happened right before, I think it's I think the leaked draft came out the day that this poll had actually started, which, you know, it's interesting timing. But you can actually see so many people were saying, no, I'm pro-choice.

And it was a drastic shift from what we had seen even just the year before. So looking at that, I was like, wow, you know, that was kind of exhibit A for me, since I wasn't around during the Sherry Finkbein story. That was exhibit A for me of how much what's happening at the time affects what people are thinking.

And I think their concern was, was these life of the mother situations and women will die if they can't get abortions. And, you know, we have a rogue Supreme Court that's legislating from the bench, you know, these sorts of claims. So to see how that media coverage really affected the cultural response was very interesting.

And I think it kind of continued into election season. And that's probably why we saw a lot of those ballot initiatives go pro-abortion effectively. I do find the expression, the flagship is not the fleet, a very helpful one to remember in these sorts of cases.

There are particular stories or cases or scenarios that are presented as that upon which you're supposed to adjudicate these larger cultural issues. And I'm sure that people think of the Finkstein case, if they were regarding Roe initially, and not think about the larger cultural implications and impact that that decision would have, that we still see the result that that has had within American society. And you can focus upon a single extreme scenario and miss the larger implications of something plays out in all these cases that aren't extreme in those particular ways.

It's not most children who are aborted were not the lid of my babies. Yeah, yeah. And I think it's also a lesson just for the pro-life movement of why it's important to tell the stories where the unborn child is a character.

Because that does affect how, you know, the stories we tell will affect the people who hear them, either for good or for ill. And I think the good that, say, pro-life writers, pro-life reporters can do is, one, emphasize, you know, as believers, me, as a believer who reports on the abortion issue, I would like to make sure that I'm emphasizing the gospel and the importance of, and the reality of forgiveness that we have in Christ. So anyone

who was pro-abortion, anyone who had an abortion in the past, it's not like they're stuck there.

They're not, they don't have to stay there. They have forgiveness and grace in Jesus Christ. But number two, also making sure that I don't leave the baby out of the story, because who else is going to tell the story where the baby's a character? Any pro-abortion reporter or author, maybe they would mention it, but to actually give that baby value, it's not going to be the same because they don't see the baby in the same way.

So like that guardian story, they'll take the baby out and leave the rest of the products of conception in a way. Yeah. Have you done much, sort of, both in your reporting and kind of in your sort of doing this kind of thing with the book, have you done much sort of interacting with non-Christian pro-lifers? And do you have any thoughts about how Christians can sort of build bridges with other religious people or with secular pro-lifers? Yeah, I have done some reporting on groups, specifically this one group called the Progressive Anti-Abortion Uprising.

A lot of the people involved in that group are atheists. I'm thankful that, you know, I'm thankful that they have a strong pro-life conviction, that they're against abortion. You know, they see it as oppression of the strong against the weak.

And I think in some ways, part of it for them would just be, you know, as Christians approaching people like that, it just comes down to connecting the dots and helping them see like, you know, well, the reason why human life is valuable is because of who created human life and who created human life. That's God. And he sent his son to take the punishment for sin.

Ultimately, we can't change someone's heart, but the Lord can. And sometimes he uses words like that to to show someone, to convict someone, and to ultimately change their mind. But I think it is encouraging to have people from who, you know, who don't think abortion is okay, who are atheists, just because I think it shows the how there's kind of that reality of how, oh, there's this Bible verse on the top of my tongue, you know, how the Lord's invisible qualities and his divine nature are clearly seen.

I think it's kind of evidence of that, even if they deny God, they can still see something about his creation, something about humans being different from a plant, say. A lot of these people are also like animal rights activists. So there is a little bit of a different train of thought there.

But yeah, they can at least see that these unborn babies are different from a blade of grass or a tree. So yeah, it's just interesting seeing that there's a remnant of truth that sticks around, even in people who deny the creator and God. For what it's worth, I became pro-life before I became Christian.

So, you know, it definitely happens. I know actually a lot of women who are either secular, I know this one Jewish woman called Ayala Selness, who's just incredibly passionate and has been doing some great things. That verse in Romans is one of the verses that people look to in order to kind of see a scriptural argument for natural law argumentation, which I know Robbie George, who wrote the foreword to the book, has been sort of at the forefront of doing natural law argumentation about abortion.

And it seems to me that even just really, it can be helpful even to not see people who are partnering with you about pro-life stuff, like to not focus on what they don't have and to really sort of like, you know, not necessarily see them as sort of projects for you to work on, but really sort of see what God is drawing out of them on his own and kind of marvel at the truth that they've gotten to even without a Christian background or Christian upbringing or Christian convictions. And that's just something that I, it's really in my kind of conversations with people in the pro-life movement who aren't Christian, that's something that always I try to focus on. Yeah.

Yeah. I think one thing about the pro-life movement in general though, is sometimes I do see a fear to bring up the gospel because, you know, they want to focus on the science and like the natural law arguments. They're like, oh, we don't want to bring faith into it because people can use that against us.

But I think that, I don't think that's a good attitude to have when it comes to the gospel. Like, as a Christian, you know how crucial the gospel is. Like literally you have nothing.

It was not for Christ. So to leave it out of fear or, you know, even in talking with some people at pregnancy centers, I did an article once where I was asking staff at pregnancy centers, like, at what point do you share the gospel with women? And some of them would be like, oh, honestly, it's really awkward and I don't know how to bring it up. And we don't mention it the first time.

We don't mention until they ask, you know, just very by depending on what center I was talking to. But when I heard a lot of that kind of hesitation and nervousness to talk about it, I mean, I think there's a real reason for that because you know that it's confrontational. It's something you have to have an opinion on or you have to respond to.

Like either you're like, no, I don't need to repent of sins and I don't need someone to take the sacrifice for my sins. Or you say, yeah, I mean, that is me. I'm a sinner and I need a savior.

So yeah, it's hard to talk about. But to not talk about it, I think is sad. I think it's really important to prioritize that in these conversations because ultimately it's a heart issue.

Like abortion is not just the action itself, but it stems from something deeper, you know,

just like, you know, in scripture, we read that out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks, you know, from the heart comes certain actions and behaviors. So I think that's a really important thing to keep in mind. And I think in the book, we kind of show that link between someone's view of God and scripture and not to say that you can't be pro-life if you're not a Christian, because we just talked about how there are people who are pro-life who aren't believers and you said, Susanna, that that was you.

So that's not to say that they don't exist, but there's also that link in cultures as a whole between their understanding of scripture, their value for God's word and what they think about abortion. So just seeing that in the book specifically, I think is, it has been kind of helpful for me to see and kind of reinforce what I was already sensing of like, oh, there's something really important that we can't leave out. And that's God's word.

It seems to me that one of the challenges in speaking about an issue like abortion, where there are such difficult and complicated personal experiences that people have, and it's the sort of thing that we need to tell stories about. And that's one of the things that you're trying to do within this book. It's interesting to look back through the history of arguments about against abortion from evangelicals and different quarters in which those arguments were being made and see some of the arguments that were a lot more prominent in some quarters that maybe are not so prominent now.

Think, for instance, of the very structural argument of violence against women that you find in the early evangelical left arguments against the practice of abortion, the sense of there is a sort of structural injustice here, and women are being used, or abortion is something that is an escape valve for deeper structural injustices within society about how women are treated more generally. It's interesting seeing how that particular argument does not seem to have the same traction in pro-life movements now, but for a time it was one of the real strong arguments out there. And I wonder, I'd be interested to hear your thoughts on different ways that we can creatively frame the issue of abortion in a way that can maybe shock people into forms of moral awareness that they might not otherwise have, picking up certain elements of their existing moral awareness.

So in that case, I think people often have a sense of structural injustice as a thing, and there are ways in which society can be built so that certain people are bearing the consequences of deeper, more pervasive cultural practices. And so, for instance, an unjust form of economy and the way that resources in Africa are obtained in a way that just uses child labour and has death tolls in mines and things like that, that sort of thing can be very salient to us. And in the same way, abortion seems to play a role within wider Western society.

It covers up, it deals with a lot of injustices further up the pipeline. And so what are some examples of ways we can use that argument and maybe other arguments in ways that might be more resonant with some of people's existing forms of moral awareness, and

maybe serve as bridges to a fuller perception of the moral reality of abortion as a practice that we want to convey as Christians? Yeah, so some arguments that I've heard before have to do with, well, they use the term like ageism, where so you think people should be allowed to have the right to life, but only once they're at a certain period of development. I think pointing that out is helpful.

I've also kind of heard the clarification about, you know, when we talk about a zygote, an embryo, a fetus, it's not like that's something different from a human, but that's actually a type of human. So I was talking with a pro-life doctor yesterday, and she was saying, yeah, in the medical books, it's called human embryology. You know, the human is still there.

So when you're talking about a, an unborn baby as a zygote, an embryo, or a fetus, the key is that that's a human zygote, a human embryo, a human fetus. The only thing that's different from, you know, a grown human compared to a human embryo is just a stage of development. So I think that's one thing that's been, that's probably helpful for a lot of people in thinking about this.

And I guess other, other things that come to my mind are just even location. Like, and I've heard this too, like what's so magical about the birth canal, that as soon as a baby's through the birth canal, it has some sort of right to life that it didn't have before. Now where this breaks down is where you have people arguing, like, well, and you don't hear this as often in the broader culture, but there are people arguing that babies don't have personhood until like three years along.

I don't know if that's the exact age that, that they said, but it was something, it was something along those lines. So it does kind of break down if you have someone who's really insistent upon a right for parents to decide if they want this child or not. But it's, infanticide is not broadly accepted in the same way that abortion is.

And I think if people can kind of draw the line in their minds between infanticide and abortion and show how, how there's really not much different about them, I think that would be helpful for kind of awakening their understanding. Yeah. So I, I guess that's one thing, but I mean, it's also sad when you hear stories of women who do abandon their babies, who do, do commit infanticide, like it still happens.

It's not like it never happens. But to see how the culture reacts to that, there's just a, like, even my, my sister-in-law and my brother, they recently took in an abandoned dog that they found in the park. And, you know, they were talking about how, like, you know, it's such a sad story.

Whenever people hear that, they're like, oh, who will leave the dog outside? But you don't have that sense of like, who would do that when it comes to an abortion? It's just so interesting seeing that difference. And I think it, I think it's just, people are so used to

it. Like it just happens, you know, like say you, you lived in a culture where dogs weren't cared for.

I mean, that's a thing. Like my husband used to live in Northern Iraq and dogs were not something that people thought was good. There, there were wild dogs out in the street.

It's not like they had dogs in their homes. So that culture just saw dogs as worth being in the street, not worth taking care of. And so I guess in a sense, we have that towards babies in our culture.

So to work on those arguments, to show those parallels, to draw those lines, I think is helpful. One thing I found helpful is sort of reversing the question and asking what are the conditions that enable us to recognize the unborn child as a person, as a fellow human? And I think for many people, it's the, for instance, the way that they see the child that they are expecting with their spouse or the way that some relative who's expecting a child, that sense of an expected person, an addition to your circle of love, who is already a part of that circle of love, although unknown. That person is not coming into the world as a stranger, but as one who has already got an identity.

They have a grandmother, they have a brother and sister, they have an uncle and aunt. There are, there's this whole network of relationships that provides a home for them, even before they've had their first breath. And there's something about the collapse of those structures within society that makes it very difficult for us to, we then ask the question of, is the unborn child a person? And we've taken out our eyes, the ability to actually have that moral perception that is given to us by those practices that are humanizing, that enable us to recognize not a stranger within the child and someone who's coming into the world unbidden, someone who has no place within our life, but there's something inherently hospitable and expectant and open about the structures of our life together, given, I think, particularly in a committed life-long marriage, there is, in that context, the child has this identity as the one flesh expression of the bond that exists between their parents.

And it seems to me that the story of abortion is in some sense the flip side of the story of the collapse of those humanizing structures within society. And it's very difficult to shore up one side of that without dealing with the problems on the other. Yeah, and in the book, we see a lot of that come out in, you know, at the beginning of the book, there's stories of these small communities and how they're reacting to abortion, but eventually those small communities, they just don't exist in the same way anymore.

Like you have people moving into big cities, young men, young women in big cities, holding down jobs on their own without any family structure around them to hold them accountable to what they're doing on the weekends or for, you know, in the case of some women, without a family around them to support them and to, you know, a dad to pull out his shotgun when his daughter gets pregnant outside of marriage and go find the

guy and say, hey, you're gonna marry her or else. Like that was actually a thing. Shotgun weddings happened.

But it's harder to do a shotgun wedding when your dad's not there with a shotgun. So then it's as they like spread out into these cities that you see more and more of these abortions happening, like abortion businesses thriving, abortionists making all this money off of the deaths of unplanned, unwanted children. So yeah, so it's definitely linked those two questions of like abortion and the community and and the family structure.

They go together and we can see that in how these stories progress in the book. Mm hmm. One of the things that I think is probably the biggest change in the way that I've thought about this and talked about this since I became pro-life and started kind of like, and then sort of I became pro-life in a very kind of like vibes based, like on a not particularly thoughtful way.

I was just I just saw like a booth at a county fair and there were all these like, there were these like old Catholic ladies who were part of like a birthright group and they had like, you know, the little fetus models and stuff. And I was like, you know, 15 and totally pro-choice. And I picked one up and I was like, oh yeah, I'm just not pro-choice anymore.

Like, but then I kind of did, you know, during college do quite a bit of sort of natural law type study and thinking about, you know, the right to life and thinking in those terms. And one of the things that's changed for me in the last couple of years is I would still talk about a right to life under certain circumstances, but it seems to me that like thinking about, this is a little bit connected to what Alistair was saying, thinking about the baby as though it's like this totally separate like unrelated stranger who has a right to life and the mother, the woman has a right to autonomy. And so these two rights are in collision.

That's actually not quite, it's not really a realistic description of what that relationship is because it's not just like a person who has a right to life. This is like your child and they don't just have a right to you not killing them. You actually, even though you didn't choose this on some level, you already have, they're already calling for your love.

It's not just that you shouldn't kill them, it's that you should love them. And maybe, you know, maybe that might mean giving them up for adoption, but like that, you know, you're not born as a kind of, you're not conceived as an individual, you're conceived already in relationship, you already have a mother, you know, when you're conceived. And I wonder, but I've been very hesitant about dropping the language of right to life because it's been so powerful and it's so powerful in American culture to talk about rights.

I wonder if you've thought about like the way, like that phrase and the way that we should, and maybe the weaknesses of phrasing it as a right, because then there's like

this conflict of rights vision of what's going on. Is that something you thought about? Yeah, I guess not too much. But I think I would kind of go back to what I was saying before, like there's a limit to the human understanding or even the human sense of rights.

I mean, you always have to bring God into it. And in all cases, like it ultimately goes back to, well, where do rights come from? They come from God. And I think it's interesting, like I hear these arguments about like from pro-abortion groups saying, well, there's examples in scripture of the Lord, you know, causing the death of a child or like, or, you know, in the Psalms, like, you know, talking about babies being dashed to pieces or in numbers, a case of how to discover if a woman has been adulterous, like the priest mixes this drink with the dust of the tabernacle and the woman has to drink it.

And in some translations, it says that if she was adulterous, it will cause her womb to miscarry. Now that's not how a lot of translations say it. There's actually, the term would be her thigh will fall, which is like, well, what does that mean? You know, so, but there are these arguments of like, well, your God takes people's lives, you know, but I think it's important to remember that humans aren't God, you know, God is God.

He is the the only one who decides when someone who should be able to decide when someone is going to die and when someone is going to be born or conceived. My grandma, she was encouraged to get an abortion when she got pregnant. It was 1974.

So the year after Roe v. Wade, she was pregnant late in her thirties. She had already had two children. And this was kind of a surprise.

This is my aunt. And the doctor was encouraging her that she should get an abortion or else she might have a baby with Down syndrome. And so I was like emailing with my grandma about this recently.

And, and she said that, but in reality, it's only God who gets to decide when we live and die. Like that is his role as our creator. And as, as God, as a sovereign, all powerful being that is beyond our understanding.

So I think seeing that distinction between who God is and who humans are is also crucial to understanding how we should be approaching this issue. It's not like, it's not like death is, is never going to happen if we don't have abortion, like no death still happens. It's a result of the fall.

It's a result of sin, but humans should not be, should not be assuming the role of God and trying to make these decisions that only he can make or assume sovereignty over different situations or control over different situations when he's the one that's sovereign and control. We just fail at it when we try to do it. Can you say something in, as we've reached a conclusion about how attention to the history of abortion might inform pro-life

practice and advocacy and activism in the present? Yeah.

Well, I think it's encouraging because you can see how, well, I guess, encouraging and discouraging. Well, so the reason I say that is because some people, I think when they think about the history of abortion, they, their history starts in 1973 with Roe v. Wade. So the discouraging part is like, well, you know, abortion has been in this country a lot longer than Roe v. Wade has been here.

And that just goes to show that even though Roe v. Wade is gone now, abortion will still continue. It will still be something that we'll be fighting against. But the encouraging thing is that while there have always been these people who push back against abortion, who see it as wrong, it's not like the pro-life movement or people who oppose abortion are new since Roe v. Wade.

No, they even existed before Roe v. Wade. They even existed in the 1600s. So I think that's an encouragement.

And some of these stories should also be an encouragement for how we should approach these cases, how we can respond to pro-abortion arguments, people who say that there's no consensus about when life begins. You can say, well, what about Hugh Hodge in 1839, who said that a distinct individual starts at the moment of fertilization. So I think it's just like interesting things to have in your tool belt as a pro-lifer.

Thank you very much for joining us. It's been a wonderful conversation. If people are interested in this book, I highly recommend it.

It's *The Story of Abortion in America*, a street-level history, 1652 to 2022. And I'll have a link in the show notes to places to purchase it. Thank you very much for joining us.

Yeah, thanks for having me guys.