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The Biggest Story Bible Storybook with Don Clark

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Life and Books and Everything - Clearly Reformed

In this bonus episode, Kevin talks with the brilliant artist, Don Clark, Kevin's co-collaborator on The Biggest Story and on (their new book) The Biggest Story Bible Storybook. In this fascinating conversation, Don talks about the joys and challenges of working on such a massive project and how he goes about the artistic process.

Transcript

[Music] Greetings and salutations, welcome to Life and Books and Everything. I'm Kevin DeYoung. This is a special bonus episode where we are going to talk about the Biggest Story Bible Storybook.

And I am joined by none other than Don. Clark, Don and I go back so far actually. We don't but it's been a real joy to work with Don.

We're on opposite sides of the country so we've talked and we hardly ever even see each other. So we're at least seeing each other here. Don, thank you for being on the podcast and thank you most of all for the amazing work you've done with all of this Biggest Story material.

Thank you so much. Well, it's a pleasure to be speaking to you and yeah hopefully someday we'll be able to meet in person. I know.

Yeah, no, this project is one of those kind of monumental legacy, once in a lifetime, if that type project and especially as a believer and an illustrator. So, you know, I've done a lot of, it's been a lot of time reading over what you've written and pondering how am I going to interpret this on the page. So I'm very familiar with your writings.

Yeah, that's right, more than you might want to be. So just tell, we'll talk about this book but tell us a little bit about yourself and how you got into artistic stuff. You've worked, you've done a lot of cool stuff for a lot of big companies but as you said, obviously, you're a believer and that's most important.

So just give us a little bit about yourself and some of the work you've done. Yeah, so my brother and I have always been into design and, you know, drawing ever since we can remember our grandfather was an illustrator at NASA for over 30 years so he was kind of, he was kind of proof positive that you could make a living, you know, in the arts and in kind of a blue collar fashion. I mean, you know, he punched a clock, he was in, he was an illustrator, that was his job and I think when people think of, you know, artists, they think of starving artists or they think of painters or something like that.

And he was, you know, kind of the conduit for us in terms of like, okay, yeah, we could make a career doing this. We've been doing it professionally for 22 years now, which is crazy to say. And, yeah, but most of our work is commercial illustration for clients.

However, over the last, you know, 10 years it's, it's, you know, I'm doing a lot more books and we're kind of releasing our own products and things like that so I think the most. One of the things I love about what I get to do is I never know who's going to call, you know, I don't, you know, we've done stamps for the post office and, you know, books and murals and you know it's, it's, it's a lot of fun and I'm super, super thankful. Yeah, that's great.

Lots of things I'd love to ask about there. Let me just go back to the biggest story, which came out, forget when several years, a number of years ago. And so I had this idea, it's been sort of a dream of mine.

I'd written this sermon for my congregation, a Christmas sermon. And I kind of told the story up to the Christmas point. And I even said at that, this is over 10 years ago, I said, oh, I can't draw worth anything.

I would love to someday this be a book and just picture parents and kids and grandparents sitting down around the fire reading this Christmas story. And then I told more of the story and went to the resurrection and sort of made it the whole sweep of redemptive history. And Crossway said, yeah, we'd like to, but boy, you know, children's books are really hit or miss.

And they are a lot of time, they're money to produce and sometimes they just don't do anything, but sometimes they do. So they were willing to take a chance on it. And I didn't know exactly what I wanted the illustrations to look like, but I knew what I didn't want them to look like.

Right. I didn't want it to, no offense to all these things I'm going to mention here, but I didn't want it to be the old school Sunday school sort of comic book kind of drawings. I didn't want a Disney vacation version with great big saucer eyes and features.

And I didn't want it, you know, so kind of avant-garde that you looked and you're like, oh, well, that's artsy, but I'm not sure I want to look at it. So they actually went through a lot

of, hey, what about this? What about this? And I kept saying, yeah, that's not it. That's close enough.

And then they showed some of your work and it really was immediate. This is really, really amazing. How did you come up with now? I've seen other work you've done and there's similar concepts and colors, but how did you come up with the scheme and the colors and what you wanted to do for the biggest story, which you've carried over into this story book Bible.

And I think it's fair to say, if imitation is a sincerest form of flattery, you really have, you've come up with the style that now I see other people in fine way, but other people doing something that looks similar and they're trying to get the Don Clark look. So how did you come up with the look that you wanted? So, great question. I mean, I think as a commercial illustrator, I'm always thinking about what is the task at hand? I'm being asked to do something for a specific client or company.

Who's the audience? We work with Target for 13 years, doing in-store graphics and products for them, so we know their audience. So that's part of kind of my job as a commercial illustrator. With this project, I actually had gotten asked from Crossway, "Hey, do you know of anyone that would want to do this?" Almost like, you know, asked me for recommendations and I said, "What about, what if I tried it?" They were like, "Serious? You'd be into that?" And I'm like, "Well, I collect vintage children's bibles and all kinds of old books." So as a Christian and an artist, I mean, that's like a bucket list thing.

So, kind of like yourself, I didn't want it to be cartoony and fluffy and earth tones. Obviously, we know what it looked like back then, but I really wanted to be heavily stylized while keeping the truth intact, right? And something that would draw kids and families in. Again, my love is like 1940s to 1970s illustration, so kind of that sweet era that my grandfather worked in.

And I have some beautiful bibles by this couple, Alison Martin Provenson. They're both passed away at this point, but I just love their bibles that they did. And so that was kind of the gold standard.

And so I was heavily influenced by them, but also I want it to be my own thing and its own thing and have it live in modern times, but also feel like, "Gosh, this needs to look great in 100 years." And so there's a lot of thought went into that. And it's pretty cool. One of the things I'm most proud of is it's kind of like its own, I kind of created this world that I hadn't seen before in Bible stories and children's bibles, which is super cool.

And again, going back to the things you didn't want to see, I wanted to see those stories told in a stylistic and special way, but I also wanted to create more abstract pieces that spark dialogue between parents and children. And maybe it's a beautiful image, but

maybe the child doesn't understand it right away. And then mom and dad can go, "Oh, this is what I see here.

What do you see?" And yeah, so that was, when I was at Crossway, one of the things that I thought was pretty cool is someone said, "What I love about this book is you never know what's going to be on the next page." And that was cool to hear, because so many times you kind of expect the same exact type of thing. So anyways, yeah, that was my vision. Well, you absolutely succeeded, and I'd be saying that even if I wasn't the author of it, I think everyone agrees with that, just the gifts the Lord's given you in the hard work.

I want to talk about some specifics in it, but before we get there a little bit about the process. So we did that book together in that, you know, it takes, that's 10 chapters, it probably takes 20 minutes to read through. You can read through with your kids in one sitting.

We did a little book, the ABC book, which was just a little short project. And then Crossway had this big idea. I don't know if people can see it.

This may be the biggest book I ever write. Of course, most of it's not my writing. So it's 104 stories, and it was a lot of work for me, and it was a lot more work for you.

So I worked on it over, I don't know, a few years, usually I get a study time in the summer. And I tell people it was a very different writing process for me, because if I write a different kind of book, I can get on a roll and, wow, 2000 words, I make it an argument, but each of these had to be its own self contained unit, 104 stories. And, you know, the readers will have to decide if I succeeded in this or not.

But I really took seriously that each story had to have something of its own narrative arc. I had to think about, I wanted to tell it close enough to scripture that obviously I'm not making stuff up. And yet, playful, so indifferent so that people, okay, well, I'm reading, not the Bible, but I'm reading a storybook Bible.

And so I really took a lot of time with each story. I went back, I read commentaries, I read old sermons that I had written, and say, what's the, what's the theological aim here, what's the arch of it. And so it was a much more laborious process.

And I don't mean it was bad, but it just took more time for me than I thought it would, because each of those stories had to have its own kind of life and research and took several years. Now, having said that, I know it was even more work, monumentally more work for you. Tell us about that.

And, I mean, it was basically like two years of a full time job. How did you go about this? Yeah, so it's kind of now looking back, I can kind of laugh at it because it's now now it's out and it's going to be in stores soon, but like it was a, it was a rocky start. So, this all

started with the biggest story had come out.

And Josh Dennis and I were talking about like, gosh, it would, there's just so much more that we could do in this world and Josh was like, Hey, what would you think about? I mean, should we approach Kevin on doing the whole thing? And, you know, I was like, Oh, I just finished this book. Let me know. Take a little break.

But, but, you know, the talk started. And I did all this kind of this math to figure out like how I could pull off a 400 or, yeah, I think it's like 450 pages or something. You know, I did all this math trying to figure out, okay, it would take me this much time if I kind of kept, you know, working with commercial, you know, doing my commercial illustration job but also doing this.

And I was so proud of it. I was like, I got it dialed in. Here's what it's going to take.

It's going to take three years. And so Josh was like, okay, three years. Let's do this.

And so two years go by and I haven't started. Yeah, that's not a good start. No, it's not.

So, and what it was is it's just this, it's fear, right? It's like this, this huge monumental thing that I signed on to do. And it's, you know, and as an, there's a joke with illustrators. If you give them two weeks or two years, you're going to get the same product.

So it's like that, you know, I was like, well, I got time. So finally, it's like, Don, Don, you got to start this thing. So it was a little bumpy start with that too.

I felt like I felt like I was being too derivative of the first book. And as an artist, you don't really want to go back to something you already did and kind of revisit those same exact things. So I really, I really thought about, you know, if I'm going to do this and I'm going to love it, which I, which I've already signed on to do.

I know I love the idea that I need to jump into it. It was, I want to push, I want to push myself and be, you know, just, I want everything to look better than the original book. And, but also if you put a page from the original book up to this one, it totally fits.

And I think honestly by the New Testament, I got, I was there. And then I felt really good about it because I was working on it every single day. And then honestly, the pandemic was this like, I made a comment the other day that I shouldn't have in another interview.

I said, like, thank God for the pandemic because I was able to work on this. And then I was like, I didn't mean that. I didn't mean that.

Yeah, right. Right. But this was a, this was definitely kind of a COVID lockdown book.

I mean, I, that's, you know, the phone wasn't ringing as much and I was able to just jam on this. And again, going back to my silly little math. I mean, with a project like this, you

have to do it every day.

Like, you know, you really get in the groove. I think I'm assuming most illustrators are like this with books. It's like you're in the groove.

You're in, in that world. And you don't want to, you really don't want to take a few days off. Like, you need to stay in it.

So, all that to say, New Testament, I was really happy with that. And then I'm like, well, I need to go back and, and really revisit the Old Testament and have that look just as good as what's what it's looking right now. And, you know, my deadline kept extending.

And then Josh was like, you know what, our deadline is stopping. You need. Yeah.

Yeah. So, that, that new deadline was kind of like, okay, I have to finish this. I have a little note on my screen where I paint and it just says one page at a time.

And that's, that's another thing that was getting me tripped up is that I was focusing on. Oh, I got to finish this huge thing. And what I'm really called to do what I really need to do is just focus on this page today.

Get finished with this page. And, you know, if it ended tomorrow, I'm, I'm happy with this one page. So, it was really a learning process.

And some of the, I told, I told the crossway folks just some of the best times I've had drawing and it's just I felt, I felt guided and just in a really good place. And I think that's one thing I got rolling. And, and I mean, that's wonderful.

And for me, as someone, I think a lot about the craft of writing and I really, I think of it as a craft and I hope that more Christian writers will think not just I'm communicating truth. And so, I'm not going to write it. And so you've done that.

I'm going to say as an artist, there's, I'm sure you see it all the time and, and, you know, people that in their books that have, you know, illustrations, but it's gotten pasted. But you're, I mean, you're, this is legit artistic work. And so, I think it's a classic, ignoramus.

How do you, what, how did you start each? I mean, do you go right to the computer or are you sketching in pencil or are you painting with something on a canvas? How did it work each day? And so this is a special project because I did not do any sketching for this project, which is unheard of in my world. You know, I have to present an idea to the client and, you know, it can be scratchy and rough. But here's what I'm thinking compositionally with this.

I knew that with the first book, because the first book that we did together, that was my first book ever and it was also 130 pages, which most of my, you know, most of my friends, when they do their first book, it's like 24 pages, right? So, we, we again, we're

running out of time on that first book. And I think what happened, what I realized is that a lot of the magic of the art was the fact that I was under the gun to get it done, and that I was staring at what you had written, pondering over it, and just going straight to work. So, with this, I did the same exact thing.

I work on this thing called a centique. It's a digital, it's like a giant screen that I paint on. And, and the brush, the brush technology now is such that you almost can't tell if that is digital.

It's, it's amazing. I use it. Really? It doesn't feel like an old, you know, computer screen.

It feels like you're painting. It's amazing. And I, you know, I used four different brushes on the book, and so I kind of have my little, I have my color palette and I've got my brushes, and I'm, you know, depending on what I'm doing, if I'm doing shading or something like that, I'll pick a different brush.

But my days where I get to work, I figure out what page I'm going to do. I, you know, it's already been paginated by crossways. So I know exactly what the, the page is going to say.

And so it was me literally reading what you wrote, just, you know, I have, I have basically like a bunch of Bibles and so I'd flip through stuff. I'd go look, I'd research like, you know, my favorite era is kind of the Renaissance in terms of Christian and artwork. And so like I would, I would go look at like, okay, how was Joan and the whale perceived, you know, in the 1500s.

Well, I want to, I want to heart, I want to hit those truths, but I don't want it to look like something I've seen. So, yeah, I basically have this arsenal research that I would do. But, you know, like, I would read it and go, well, this needs something compelling.

If I do it literal, it's going to be like two bearded guys talking. You know, sometimes, sometimes I would go, there's a lot of times where I would, I would take the, I would take the general thought or theme that you're hitting home on that page and, and do a piece on that. So.

I want to talk about a couple of specifics and this is like asking who's your favorite kid. Just think about any particular prints or stories or artwork and here's stand out. And while you're thinking about that, I'll give you a few seconds and ramble on.

We have, you know, I'm so excited there can be some prints. So with the first book, there are some prints available. And, you know, I have one here in my office.

You can't see it, but of Jonah and the whale. My daughters have the one you did of Mary hanging up. So there were several that you could just buy and print and they really make just outstanding artwork on their own.

And one of the things I love about the work you've done, Don, so there's colors. You said you didn't want to earth tones. You didn't want to look like, you know, realistic desert Middle East.

So there's lots of pop and bright and yet it never. So it's not somber, but it's not chipper. It's just, it's bright.

And there's some pictures that are so, dare I say majestic like some of the pictures and revelation and new heavens new earth that just have a lot of pop and bright colors and it's just a really wonderful artistic rendering that producing you. Wow, I want to go there. And then you have the ability in some of the other pictures.

I'll tell you my boys like the pictures with skulls. Yeah, totally. And I like that.

I like, you know, not, I don't think it's, you know, it's not scary or, but the Bible has scary stories and the Bible has gritty stories. And I really like that you weren't afraid to show some of those things. It's, you know, appropriate for kids, obviously, but it's not sanitized in that way.

Do you have any particular prints or stories that strike strike you as ones you enjoy doing or most proud of. Yeah, well, thank you so much. I do look at each page as something that, you know, not each page because there are spot illustrations that help tell the story that maybe you don't want to hang on your wall, but I did.

I do look at, I do look at each kind of big, broader story is like, okay, what I, can I, can this live on its own and be a print. You know, probably my favorite stuff was the creation stuff because in the very beginning is like, there, there's kind of no rules there. I could kind of do like, you know, how, how would this look, you know, in my mind, how does this look, the creation of like, and this, how do you, how do you like show this.

And I don't want to show this in art without trying to be literal of like God speaking this into existence or whatever so. It's just, I had a lot of fun with kind of the creation of Adam and Eve and, and, and, you know, I'm depicting like the ribcage and there's just, that was fun. I mean, I think that's really, I think that's the way Daniel and the lions Dan there's like, you know, Jonah, there's kind of these big stories I wanted to.

Well, I wanted to be real special, you know, because those are some of my favorite stuff in the books that I love. Yeah. Revelation was the hardest for sure.

Oh really? Yeah. I'm just looking through it right now. I mean, I think those are some of the best, but I can understand why the hardest.

Okay, give us heaven. It's interesting. I think even like the.

Some of the beast in the end of Revelation. Yeah. So like that, for instance, that lamb, I

think if I'm not mistaken in Revelation, that lamb actually has like six eyes.

And six horns or something like that. So I'm like, okay. Yeah.

This isn't going to look that that I'm having a trouble kind of depicting that in this style. So then I go back to the Renaissance and I see that there's a lot of painters that left that out. And so I was like, okay, I feel safe in in leaving some of this stuff out.

But yeah, that. Revelation was hard just because again, it's like. People have people have a lot of opinions about the Bible.

Turns out, and you know, it turns out. Yeah. It's one of those things where you don't, you know, it's, you know, that specific, that specific book, I think was probably the hardest.

However, there's a lot of my, a lot of my favorite pieces are in that section. So. Yeah, I did.

You mentioned Daniel. I love Daniel and the lion's den was great. I wonder and you may not remember this one, but one of the stories that I'm just interested as the book comes out of people comment on it.

Because I intentionally picked this obscure story that actually appears three times in the Bible. It was the daughters of Zalofa had. Yes.

Yeah. Totally. What did you think when you got that daughters as a Lofa? What do I do here with this weird story? Well, you know what, that story actually was the catalyst to me stepping up my game in illustrating females in this book because, you know, it's easy to do a bearded guy.

Right? I mean, there's a lot of them. There's a lot of them in this book. A lot of bearded guys.

Yeah. Yeah. But I wanted to.

I wanted the women in this book to also be to have as much care as I put it into all these other characters. So obviously there's a lot of men in this book. Right.

So, in the first biggest story, I kind of had nondescript faces for women. It was just kind of their eyes and maybe their nose. And so this, I think that story.

Yeah. And then, so that kind of set the stage for how I was going to interpret women in the Bible. And that turned out to be some of my favorite stuff.

Drawing women was, it was really, there's headdresses and they had, you know, I was able to just do much more unique facial features. And I even kind of went back and changed some of the stuff I had done on the first book. I mean, as a Star Wars fan, I

don't like it when George Lucas did that.

However, I had to go back and do. No Hayden Christensen appears in the book. Exactly.

Yeah. So, yeah, I thought that was like, actually, I thought that was a really cool part that you put in the book because it was unexpected. Yeah.

So last question. You got a copy probably a few weeks ago I did too. I've been reading through.

What do your kids think of it? They love it. The whole family's very proud. And, yeah, they couldn't be more excited.

You know, they supported me as I worked on this long hours and to have them hold it and to smell the paper. You know, it's awesome. Well, I just want to say again, it was a real privilege to work with you.

And if people think of the biggest story, first of all, is Don Clark's book and Kevin Deung wrote along with his illustrations. It'd be fine. You did so much work and really exceptional work.

So thanks for doing it. And thank you to Crossway who put us up to this monumental task. I remember I hesitated several years ago.

I thought, this is going to take at least several years of not my nonstop time, but making this a priority. And just some of my friends said, yeah, but you know, with Don doing it. I mean, if this comes outright, this could be the sort of thing that ends up in families bookshelves for generations.

I mean, that's up to the Lord. I hope so. Well, thank you, Kevin.

I wouldn't be here with, you know, if you hadn't had that initial idea and I'm so appreciative of your of your trust, honestly, because, you know, I've done other books I've worked in this world for a long time and it doesn't usually go as the smooth. So, thank you. Well, thank you.

And thanks for taking the time to be here. Look forward to see what your next projects are and and getting the cool NASA posters I've seen you do. And I didn't know that about your grandfathers.

So that's a connection. So thank you, Don. And thank you to our listeners until next time.

Laura, if I got enjoyed forever and read a good book and maybe even one with good pictures.

[MUSIC]

[buzzing]