

Season 4, Episode 13: Reading John's Gospel with an Unbeliever with Colin Smith

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Felicity: Hello, and welcome to Two Sisters in a cup of Tea. My name is Felicity and I live in the US and as ever, I have my sister Sarah here. She lives in the UK. And this week we're delighted to introduce to you our guest, Colin Smith, who is a pastor over here in America. Hello, Colin. Welcome. Great to have you with us.

Colin: Felicity, Sarah, it's a joy to be with you and thank you for inviting me to join you for a cup of tea.

Felicity: Always a joy to have a cup of tea and a biscuit. Can you just tell us a little bit about how you spend your time, where you are and what you're doing?

Colin: Yes, I'm married to Karn. We have two sons who are now married and five granddaughters have been a pastor for, well, now 40 years. Just over 40 years, 16 of them in North London. We were in Enfield, a wonderful church there. And the last 25 we've been here and in Chicago serving the Orchard Evangelical Free Church. It's a church with six different locations and it has been our joy to serve two wonderful churches in two very wonderful cities.

Felicity: You've managed to keep your Scottish accents. Yeah.

Colin: I keep going back to practice.

Sarah: So what is your cup of tea, Colin? Tell us, what's your team choice?

Colin: Sir, I have it here. I've got my tea mug kindly given by a member of the church. Thank you, Pastor, it's nice to be appreciated. And I have my Raspberry Zinger team and I have my not easy to get in America, but I have my Viddy's Orange Club biscuit here. That's a treat for me.

Felicity: That is old school. That takes me back to our childhood in our mum's biscuit cupboard.

Sarah: I always had the orange ones and you always had the mint ones.

Felicity: Decent levels of chocolate on there.

Sarah: Yeah.

Felicity: Colin, you pasta and you've been a pastor for a long time, but you have other things going on as well. So I've really appreciated a couple of books that you've written. In particular. I recently read one called Opening the Bible in 30 Days. Could you just tell us a bit more about that and what you're seeking to do?

Colin: A very simple introduction and overview to the Bible. One of the things that I think is really important for folks to grasp is that the whole Bible really is one story. It's all about Jesus Christ and from beginning to end, it points to him. And so Open the Bible In 30 Days very simply takes us through the Old Testament, where it strikes me, really, the Old Testaments about God the Father being revealed to us and then the Gospels, of course, are introduced to the Lord Jesus Christ. So we're introduced to God the Son and then in the New Testament letters, we really have a laying out of what it means to live life in the power of the Holy Spirit. So I think that's the shape of the Bible story, Jesus Christ is central to it all. And what I found was that the image of mountains and valleys really works quite well to take a tour through the Bible story. So, for example, in the Old Testament, you really have a number of mountain peaks that relate to particular characters in the Old Testament, obviously, Adams the first, and then you have Abraham, and then you have Moses and David, and then you have Ezra and Nehemiah. And between each of these great moments in which God reveals himself to and through these people, you have long, long, dark valleys. God's people are slaves for 400 years and God's people rebel against him for hundreds of years. So that very simple analogy gives people an introduction to the Old Testament story. And the same thing carries through, of course, in the life of the Lord Jesus,

the glory of God is revealed again and again in the Gospels. But then you have opposition, you have Christ crucified, then you have Christ wonderfully risen. So that kind of model works through and of course, the same story of the Christian life. We all know there are plenty of mountains and valleys there. And so it's just a simple introduction to the Bible story as a whole person could read each of these 30 chapters in, oh, I think probably seven minutes in a day, ten minutes if you're a slower reader, and you get through it in a month. So I hope that it's useful in that way. And that's really the aim that I had in mind in writing it.

Felicity: Yeah, I thought it was excellent. I think it's really accessible to someone who's never picked up the Bible before. I thought that was a really good book to give away. So if you're thinking about if you've got someone in mind, so you're thinking they don't quite see how the Bible fits together, that would be a really good book. And Connor was just saying, actually, that he's got a website, so he's part of something called Unlock the Bible.

Colin: That's right, yeah. Open the Bible.org and it has three different journeys through the Bible. You can do it in three sessions, you can do this one in 30 sessions, or you can do one in 50 sessions. So you can kind of pick your level. And the aim is to get people started in the Bible. And once you begin to discover the word of God, as you ladies are discovering and what you're doing, it's just wonderful and you never come to an end of it. And the more you see, the more there is to see. So I'm with you and what you're trying to do. Let's get the Bible open and discover the wonders of what God has for us there.

Sarah: Yeah. So we've got you on today because we want to talk about how we think about getting John's gospel item, particularly with unbelievers. So we've been running through it as Christians and thinking about it for our own hearts, but firstly, we just wanted to kind of ask, why should we even think about trying to do that? Why should we even think about getting God's word open and starting to read the gospel with an unbeliever?

Colin: Yeah. Well, I would say because the word of God itself is the living seed that brings life. I find that a lot of folks have the idea that the Bible is simply information. It's way more than information, it's actually lifegiving. So for example, in one Peter, chapter one and verse 23, Peter says that we are born again by the living and enduring seed of the Word of God. The living seed brings life. And what he's doing, of course, is he's using the analogy of how a new human life is conceived. The living seed comes and that's how a life is conceived. And the living seed doesn't always bring new life, but there's no new life conceived without the living seed. And in the same way as our lives begin in that way, Peter is saying, look, this is how new life begins through the living seed of the Word of God. So we're now talking about the question, how can we help someone who's not yet a believer? Well, the answer surely is we want to get the living seed into their lives so that new life may come to them. And that's why what you're doing and encouraging people to open the Bible with someone who's not yet a believer is the best possible thing. How better could we reach out to someone who's not yet a believer than to open the Bible with them? I think that is the number one strategy for evangelism. If we can mobilize and encourage people to open the Bible with a friend who's not yet a believer, then that is the very best thing we could possibly do, because we're bringing the living seed to them and that's the only way in which new life will come about.

Felicity: It's so big, isn't it? I was actually talking about that with a friend this morning just how much of a big deal it is to get the Bible open and what God is doing through that. And I think that's right. The more we grasp that, the more confident will be an ego we'll be to open it up. So I think that's absolutely the conviction, but then you get to it. So we've been walking through John's gospel as believers and encouraging one another and being struck again and again by the richness of what John is saying. How do we begin to think about this? I mean, I think John gospel is amazing in that it's simple, but it's profound, isn't it? In what it's saying, when I think about opening that with an unbeliever, that just feels maybe a little complicated as to how we go about thinking about it from their point of view and not just from our point of view as believers.

Colin: Two answers to that question that I hope are encouraging, Felicity. First, there couldn't be a better place to begin than John's Gospel, because at the end of John's Gospel in chapter 21, John tells us why he wrote the gospel. And he said, these things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing, you may have life in his name. So the whole gospel is written that people may come to faith

in the Lord Jesus Christ. So clearly, for us to use it in that kind of way is to use it in the way that it was intended to be used. Second thing that comes to my mind is just from our experience here, we've been saying to the congregation that I pastor for some time, who is there in your life who needs to know the God of the Bible and just might be open to open the Bible with you if you ask them? We have asked that question again and again. We just kept trying to promote that thought in people's minds. And what our folks are finding is that it's actually a far easier ask than they may have feared. So you say to someone, would you have any interest in opening the Bible with me? What would that look like? Well, maybe we could talk over a cup of coffee or even a cup of tea once a week. That's how the website that unlocking the Bible has that you were referring to a few moments ago is being used. Here are just some very short seven minute sessions that will take you through different passages of the Bible. We could both read it and then we'll talk about some questions together. And for John's Gospel, which is what you're doing, I mean, there's a marvelous resource that I'm sure you'll already have referred to in a onetoone, which is just based on John's Gospel and little booklets that help people to sit down with a friend and they actually give you the questions to talk about and even give you the answers in the back. So it's a great way to promote conversation. And we're finding that people are surprisingly open to this, and we're not asking people to believe at that point. You're just saying, would you be open to open the Bible with me? You're not asking for any great commitment. A person may say, Well, I'm not sure I believe the Bible, but would you be interested in just knowing more about what it says? That's actually a very nonthreatening question, and so I think you're encouraging people to do that is absolutely the right thing to do. And I would just say, from our experience try it, and you may well find that it's easier than you think.

Felicity: Really encouraging. Yeah.

Sarah: There is a natural fear there, isn't it? I think the fear of man gets in the way, doesn't it? And you can think, yes.

Colin: And one of the fears is always, what if we get to a passage or a verse that they ask a question and I don't know the answer? Well, then, see, I don't know the answer. There's nothing wrong with that. We're not trying to present ourselves as people who know everything. We're inviting people to open the Bible with us. And that means that we are sitting underneath the Bible, as it were, with them, and we're trying to discern how it speaks to us, as well as help them discern how it speaks to them. I mean, this is a real authentic kind of engagement. It's a real relational thing with the word of God at the center. So I think it's a marvelous thing to do.

Felicity: No, I agree. And I think you're right about sitting under the Bible together, because then actually it's almost easier than trying to have that conversation without the Bible open and you're somehow having to come up with the answers and somehow be the authority on it, when actually you've got the authority of the Word in front of you. And so you're engaging with it together, I think. Yes.

Colin: So it's not really a teacher pupil kind of relationship. It is two friends coming around the word of God together and looking honestly at what it says. And that's a marvelous, marvelous thing to do.

Felicity: So we've so enjoyed being in John chapters one to five. And I think probably for our listeners as well, the thought of getting into some of these things with an unbeliever is pretty exciting because Jesus is just I mean, it's just mind blowing, isn't it? He's so compelling in these chapters. I just personally, from your point of view, as you've been going through chapters one to five, what wows you personally and I think you can help us reflect on these five chapters. I know there's so much, isn't there? But could you pick out a few?

Colin: Maybe I can pick out a couple. You've been talking about the first five chapters of John's Gospel so far. There's a verse in John five and verse 24. Maybe I can just read that verse. Jesus says, truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life. That verse, John 5:24 is to me absolutely awesome. And I love your question. What's? Absolutely. Wowed you about John's Gospel. That would be one verse has passed from death to life. Now, what is death? We normally think of death as being something that's pronounced by a doctor. When a person stops breathing, their heart stops beating and so

forth. The brain stops sending signals to the rest of the body. But the Bible speaks about death in a different kind of a way. God said to Adam and to Eve, on the day that you eat of the fruit of the tree, you will surely die. Well, at the end of the day, their hearts were still beating, their brains were still sending signals to the body. So that means they didn't die, did they? Oh, yes, they did, because what happened was what the Bible means by death. They came under the judgment and the condemnation of God. And that's a biblical understanding of what death actually is. It is to pass from life into the place of the judgment and condemnation of God and what a prospect that is to live and then be faced by that. But here Jesus turns that absolutely on its head and speaks about as we believe in Him, we don't pass from life to death, we pass from death to life. And so whereas in the world, the reality is that there are lots and lots of living people who are heading to death and passing into that. We're being told that Jesus came into the world so that we could move in the opposite direction instead of having death. And that is the judgment and condemnation of God ahead of us. That when we believe in Him, that that would actually be behind us. That's amazing to live as a Christian believer with the judgment and condemnation of God not ahead of you, but behind you because Jesus took it for you on the cross. And he says, whoever believes in me So, I mean, this is offered to every person. You pass from death to life and that's why you don't come into judgment. He's explaining what death, biblically understood, actually is. So that to me is just a marvelous, marvelous statement that in a world in which people are moving from life to death, Jesus has come in so that we can move from death to life. So that's one how many do you want?

Felicity: Do you want to give us one more? Give us one more.

Colin: One more. Well, a million guesses as to what that would be. It's got to be John 3:16. Who can't be wowed by that? For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son. And this is particularly talking about the love of the Father here. And I think there's a lot of folks have the idea that Jesus came into the world in order to make the Father love us. No, Jesus came into the world because the Father really does love us. And how do we know that God loves us? I talk to a lot of folks, but a lot of folks listening to us just now, we'll have the idea that you can tell God loves you by how things are going in your life. I've got this great job. I'm being blessed. I've got good health. And of course, the problem with that is what happens when you lose a great job? What happens when you don't have great health? Does that mean that God doesn't love you? You can't discern the love of God simply from the circumstances of your life. How you know that God loves you is this that he sent His Son into the world for you? That is the sure and final proof of God's great love for us. And then he says so wonderfully that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. I love the word whoever and believing in Him is the way that we have everlasting life. He doesn't say whoever proves to be a really good Christian will have eternal life. Believing is to stop trusting in ourselves and even stop trusting in what we're trying to do as Christians and to look to Jesus and find rest and peace in Him because he's the one who came to give us this gift of everlasting life, eternal life that only he could give. But there's two verses. How many more are there?

Sarah: So many are so packed, isn't it?

Colin: Yeah. I presume you're going to keep going in John's gospel. I mean, there's so many more. We're only a chapter five.

Sarah: I think one of my questions comes when you open this week and I believe is even as you start in John's Gospel, that first part of the first chapter is so packed with huge Bible words and huge, big statements, isn't it? And it feels so far removed from people's world views now. And I've only just moved to this area and even at the school gate I'm thinking, gosh, this is a world away from where people are at. And when you get the Bible in front of your friends and you say, let's just have a look, did you just say, we're just going to go for it and we'll see what happens. Or do you go verse by verse, slowly? Like, how do you keep the momentum going without kind of overwhelming the person in front of you who's never done anything like this before?

Colin: Yes, I think it's important not to attempt too much to go through the whole of John. One would be very, very ambitious. So, I mean, in any conversation, you try and sort of piece the conversation. You don't rush when it's getting interesting and you don't stall around when it's drying up. You can move it on. And so perhaps that's helpful in just

thinking about walking through John's Gospel. Not to start with, there are 21 chapters and we're going to do it in 21 weeks. Pace it, view it like a conversation and don't put too rigid a boundary on it. As long as the Bible is at the center, good will come from the conversation and go at the pace that the person you've invited you to join, invited to join you in this is comfortable. And if they're asking lots more questions, take plenty of time. If it's drying up, keep moving.

Felicity: It's interesting you say that, actually. I've been reading the Bible with someone who hasn't read the Bible before and we started with Mark's gospel and because she's never read the Bible before, she just thought it was a bit like you just read it all in one go. So she was like, well, that's it, so we're done Mark. I'd like, we've only met twice. We started in John and we're taking it a bit more slowly, but I think that's a really helpful thing, sort of pacing it according to where they're at. Actually, this morning we were in chapters five and six. You want to do five and six?

Colin: Really?

Felicity: But I think that is in chapter five particularly. I mean, all through John Gospel, you do get these quite stark statements, don't you, about life and death, like a bit like the one that you were talking about 524 and the reality, the black and whiteness of hear, believe and have life. And if you don't, then I think Jesus is really stark about it. What do you do with that in the conversational setting? And how is it just you go with the conversation, whether they're interested in talking about it or not? I don't know. Have you got any advice on those.

Colin: Kind of well, I mean, the great thing here is that everyone is included when we're speaking about life and death, there's no one who can honestly say, well, that's nothing to do with me. I mean, plainly it speaks to every human life. So the advantage that we have is that we are talking about the great issues of life, we are talking to issues in which people are unavoidably engaged and that's a tremendous start in the conversation. You really don't have to do too much to establish relevance when it's about life and death.

Felicity: Yeah, that's very true. And I guess part of the challenge is that we don't talk about those things in normal life. That's not the kind of like sit down or chat at the school gate about life and death, isn't it? So there is a bit of a gear change in there, but I guess they have agreed to sit down and read the Bible with you.

Colin: Yeah, that's exactly the point. That's the agreement that we look at the Bible and the Bible takes you where you probably wouldn't otherwise go. And that's a real strength. You've given a general invitation. And the Bible will go to different places, and the conversation will focus in different places, but it will go to places that are of supreme importance for every person's life. And there will be some who may be sensitive about that. There will be others who realize this is actually speaking to real stuff here, and that will get engagement.

Sarah: And how do you talk about prayer in terms of, like do you pray with your friend you're racing at the Bible with. Do you not like? How do you approach that?

Colin: It's a good question to ask about prayer seems to me always to be a good thing. Is there something that we could pray for in the light of this together? Is there something you would like to pray for? That's an inoffensive question. It's a kind question, it's a thoughtful question and if a person says, no, not really, then I wouldn't try and force it, but in most cases someone's going to be grateful for that. I think that's also a good opportunity.

Felicity: On that note, Colin, I wonder whether you might pray for us as we think about doing this and engaging others with John's gospel. Would you mind praying for us?

Colin: I would love to do that. Father, thank you for the delight of these few minutes together. Thank you that your word and the person of your son Jesus Christ has been at the center of our conversation. We thank you that you have given to us the living seed of the word of God. We thank you that it brings new life and that it sustains the new life that it brings. We pray, Father, that as we open the Bible, we will be nourished by what we learn of the Lord Jesus Christ. And we pray that you will lay upon our hearts who we could open the Bible with and that you would give us the confidence to do that and that you would help us as we make that invitation. We really believe that the living seed brings new life and we thank you that you've trusted the living seed into our hands, that we may bring it to others. Hear our prayers for these things we ask in Jesus name. Amen.

Felicity: Amen. Thank you so much. I feel so encouraged to just give it a go and yeah, much less intimidated, I think, because it can feel quite intimidating, don't, but I think you've really helped us to see how it's possible.

Colin: Thank you for the invitation. It's an absolute delight to talk with both of you. I love what you're doing on this podcast. I think it's absolutely marvelous and maybe some other time we can enjoy a cup of tea again together.

Felicity: Well, I do think you've been our most stellar guest so far in the sense of the biscuit choice. I mean, that is outstanding.

Sarah: You really trumped everyone else so far.

Felicity: Thank you so much. So just for those of you who want to hear more of what Colin is doing, so Unlocking the Bible is the kind of umbrella organization and the website he was talking about was openthebible.org, so do check it out. Great resources for helping us to get the Bible open with others. And that book is called Opening the Bible in 30 Days. You can find it on tenofthose.com, as ever. And all that Colin is doing of great use to us as we seek to keep going and following Jesus. So thank you so much. Check out the show notes for more things to be talking about. Sarah, anything else we need to the.

Sarah: Word one to one? They've got the website. We'll link to that again in the show notes, but really useful resource. You can look at all of that online and just have a look for yourself and see what that would mean to do with the phone. Time to go. Thank you so much, Colin. Thank you everyone, and we'll see you.

Felicity: Next.

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