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Annie: Hi friends, welcome to another episode of That Sounds Fun. I'm your host, Annie F. Downs, and I am so happy to be here with you today. Don't forget the *Let's Read the Gospels Guided Journal* comes out tomorrow. Yes, yes, yes.

A bunch of us are going to go through it together in April. So grab your copy, head to the link in the show notes to sign up to be in the Gospels Guided Journal book club. You'll get access to a private Facebook group and to five prayers that we've written to go alongside our journey through the Gospels. You can find *Let's Read the Gospels guided journal* wherever you love to buy books.

Before we dive into today's conversation, I want to tell you about one of our incredible sponsors, [AG1 by Athletic Greens](#). Taking care of your health is not always easy, but it should be simple. I like to drink AG1 first thing in the morning to cover my nutritional bases.

I fill up my shaker with extra cold water, one scoop of AG1, and some frozen lemon juice cubes — they are so good — and then I shake it up and I'm ready to go. If I'm running short on time or I can't mix my AG1 beforehand, I just grab one of the travel packs. It's so helpful. Each is an individual serving of AG1 that is easy to mix on the go, helping ensure I get my daily nutrients no matter what. That's because each serving of AG1 delivers vitamins, minerals, and pre and probiotics and more. It is a powerful, healthy habit that is also powerfully simple, you guys.

If there's one supplement you should start today, it's AG1. And that's why I've partnered with them for so long. We are so grateful for them. So if you want to take ownership over your health, start with AG1. Try AG1 and get a free one-year supply of vitamin D3 plus K2. And for a limited time, you get 10 free AG1 travel packs. Yeah, that is 10 free travel packs with your first purchase at drinkag1.com/soundsfun. That's drinkAG1.com/soundsfun. Check it out while this offer lasts.

Intro: Okay, today on the show, I get to talk with our friend and one of our favorite theologians around here, Dr. Nijay Gupta. You may remember him from Episode 464, where we talked about women and the Bible and the way his book, *Tell Her Story*, literally blew my mind. But he is back today.

And since the *Let's Read the Gospels Guided Journal* comes out tomorrow, you know we talked about the Gospels, we talked about Jesus and Nijay's new book, *Strange Religion*, which just released last week. Listen to the subtitle of this book, y'all: *How the First Christians Were Weird, Dangerous, and Compelling*. Interested? I know, I know.

Y'all, I love when our author friends have books that let us talk about a zillion other things. Just get ready. I need you to know he's not only a professor of the New Testament, but he's also a senior translator of the NLT, the New Living Translation, which is the one we are using for the month of April, our last month on Let's Read the Gospels, where we'll be reading the gospel. So clearly this is our guy for all the questions.

So here's my conversation with Dr. Nijay Gupta.

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Annie: Professor Nijay Gupta, welcome back to That Sounds Fun.

Nijay: Thanks, Annie. It's great to be with you again.

Annie: Oh, it's such an honor. I can't tell you how many people reached out to me after you were on last time and they want to do a book club about *Tell Her Story*.

Nijay: It's an honor. It's an honor.

Annie: It's just incredible.

Nijay: I had a great time. I feel like we met once, but I feel like I've known you my whole life. I think we're kindred spirits.

Annie: I know, the friendship's so real. I absolutely agree. Okay, now give us some inside scoop before we talk about *Strange Religion*. Are you writing the book that follows up to *Tell Her Story* right now?

Nijay: You know, I hadn't originally thought of doing another book because *Tell Her Story* is kind of comprehensive, it covers a whole lot. But I was asked to give a talk at a conference and they want something covering the whole Bible. One thing that's been in the conversation a lot as I've had talks about *Tell Her Story* is kind of the assumption in a lot of people's minds that women have to be dependent on men, they have to be contingent.

And I just noticed a pattern that you have these women who are both single or independent in some way of their husbands and prophets. So you have Miriam, you have Anna the prophetess, you have the daughters of Philip in the book of Acts, you have Deborah, who's married, but we don't know what's happened to her husband.

So I just thought, gosh, what is God doing to say, I'm going to invest, I'm going to electrify the lives of these women and speak through them? And you know what? I don't feel like we have a place in most of our Protestant churches for prophecy or prophets. We're either confused or we put it at a distance, or our Pentecostal friends...

Annie: Or it's super charismatic. Yeah, that's right.

Nijay: Yeah, they have a deeper understanding of that. But I grew up in a pretty, you know, vanilla church that doesn't do much with prophecy. It's a huge deal in the Bible, Annie. You know this. So I just thought, gosh, what is God doing by investing His voice in these women like Miriam that sing the song of freedom, and women like Deborah, and women like Hannah who's not a prophet but speaks prophetically, like Mary of Nazareth who's not a prophet but speaks prophetically? Something going on there. That's going to be the next book. It's tentatively called *God Spoke Through Her*.

Annie: I love it. I love it. I can't wait. I think what you're modeling for us, and I think this helps a lot of us, even those of us who don't write books about theology but are just curious Bible readers, is chase the curiosity that comes up to you.

Nijay: Yes, absolutely. And what happened with *Tell Her Story* is there are just these people we don't pay attention to. I've never heard a sermon on Miriam. Ever. But almost every woman in the New Testament world was named Mary. It was like Heather in the 90s. You just have a very common name. Why are all these women being named after Miriam? There's something really special about that. We gotta chase that up.

Moses was called a prophet. Jesus was called a prophet. Samuel was called a prophet. Prophets are a big deal. So let's put a spotlight on these women prophets, see what comes out of it.

Annie: It makes me think of Christine Caine's last book because literally the whole book is about remember Lot's wife. I mean, it's just like she saw this one sentence and she was like, Wait, Jesus didn't tell us to remember anyone else except remember Lot's wife. And so then she just chased that whole thing and it changed her life and therefore changed all of our lives as readers as well.

Is there anything in your like... I'm trying to think through mine too. Is there anything going on in your personal scripture life right now that you're chasing as well? Is it the prophet thing or is there anything else when you're reading in the morning that you're kind of chasing now?

Nijay: The project I'm currently just finishing up is about a theology of love and how we really need to capture this as the heart of scripture. People, as you know, justify bad things and they can cherry-pick text from the Bible. So the early church devised something called the rule of faith, which are these theological center points in scripture, like the Ten Commandments, the Shema, love the Lord your God, the teachings of Jesus, specifically the Sermon on the Mount, and Paul's letters like 1 Corinthians 13.

We need to recover this rule of faith to say, this is what it actually means to be Christian. Yes, we trust the whole Bible, it's all authoritative, it's all inspired, but there are some fingerprint elements of Christianity that we are getting away from. And one of them is compassion and love.

Annie: I think everyone who isn't a Christian would tell you that that's one of the things we've gotten away from, right? I mean, that would probably be one of our greatest... One of the things people would say against us quickly is that they don't love us.

Nijay: So just let me give you a quick text. In Philippians 1, Paul is in prison. He's missing the Philippians, and he says, "I long for you with the compassions of Christ Jesus." He could have just said, I miss you. But it's almost like he represents the ongoing ministry of Christ in heaven as a repository or storehouse of compassion.

The literal word is guts. Of guts. Or you might say heart or emotion. We would say heart or emotion. So as if Christ is a repository of feelings and affection. And we draw from that well to experience divine-like love for each other. So the tentative title of the book is *The Affections of Christ Jesus*. How can we tap into that for today?

Annie: I mean, the world where you are writing two books while you're releasing a third and you're teaching at seminary every day. I mean, how in the world?

Nijay: Much like you, I love my job.

Annie: Yeah, yeah. It helps, doesn't it?

Nijay: Yes.

Annie: It helps. It makes you not want to quit. Okay, I do have a theology question for you that was brought to me last week.

Nijay: Sure.

Annie: Someone was talking about the verse Jesus wept, and she said to me, "When I am sad, does Jesus still cry with me?"

Nijay: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, if we're called to mourn with those who mourn and rejoice with those who rejoice, how much Christ... You know, His intercessory ministry, according to Paul and the book of Hebrews, is a ministry of compassion. Compassion literally means to feel something with someone else. So if Christ has compassion at all, and the scripture says He does, then yes.

You know, a verse I've been quoting a lot from Hebrews is, "Let us approach the throne of..." And in the ancient world we could talk about this with *Strange Religion*. It would be the throne of power. The throne of glory. The throne of authority. The throne of judgment. But in Hebrews, it's let us approach the throne of grace. And not just the throne of grace, but the throne of grace with confidence. We can approach with confidence.

We do that because we have a compassion. So I would encourage that friend to read the book of Hebrews. He can sympathize with us. He knows what it's like. He learned obedience through what He suffered. It could take us a lifetime to meditate on the power of that.

Annie: I gave uneducated thoughts on it because I just said, Okay, let me tell you what we can read. Here's what we can read. We can read that He's caring. We can read that He did cry. There isn't anyone who says He is still crying. And I was like, but the tears haven't been wiped away yet. That's coming. So this is why, this is why a theologian really helps me in my daily life.

Nijay: Well, the mystery of the incarnation is Jesus remains human. He's certainly divine, but at one point in time He wasn't human and He became human. And even with His resurrection and ascension, He continues to be human. And as a human, I can't imagine He's not compassionate for us, and weep with us, and rejoice with us, and celebrate with us. Think about the angels rejoicing over every sinner that repents. He doesn't just sit there like a robot. I mean, He's...

Annie: But my Enneagram 7 is like, I bet He's having a great time, but never crying.

Nijay: No.

Annie: He does not feel sad.

Nijay: To be human is to experience the range of our emotions. So I'm gonna side with that.

- Annie:** I love that. Man, one of my favorite things just when I am bored and I'm thinking, I like to think... I think everyone likes to think, but I try to stay off my phone like when I'm at a stop sign or stoplight or when I am at the airport. If I can say to myself, think about something instead of getting on your phone. I've been thinking about how Jesus isn't held by time and that our understanding of time does not match what is actually going on in the world, and how when He died for our sins that that actually covered back to front the whole thing. The idea of Him still feeling sadness with us is the human part of Him that will always be, I have not thought about that. So that gives me something new. While I'm thinking about how time doesn't limit Him, His humanness also doesn't limit Him in understanding us.
- Nijay:** Well, you know, if we look at God the Father, you know, He will have conversations with Abraham or conversations with Moses that feel like in-time conversations, even though somehow God already knows everything that's going to happen. So you have the mystery of what's called imminence and transcendence. Transcendence is the idea that God's out of time, and imminence is the idea that God is in time. And it's just a mystery that will break our brain if we try too hard to think about it.
- Annie:** That's what got me started. And I'm sorry I cannot quote... It may have been you. I cannot quote where this came from or can't give credit, but we'll try to find it when the show comes out. But someone was talking about in their writing... I was reading something and they were talking about how when Jesus was on the Mount of Transfiguration, we don't actually know that that was at the same time that Moses... and that they all weren't actually happening in real-time for Moses and in real-time for Jesus and in real-time for Elijah. That's wild, dude.
- Nijay:** It's a multiverse of madness.
- Annie:** It's the best. It'll keep us from getting bored. If you want to put your phone down for Lent, this will keep you from getting bored if you think about whether Jesus and Elijah and Moses were all there in their generation but standing on the mountain at the same time in front of Peter, James, and John.
- Nijay:** God's time works in mysterious ways.
- Annie:** I mean, you talk about it. Okay, we gotta talk about *Strange Religion*, because I love... well, a) I want you on the show anytime you want to be on the show. So you could just be like, I have this idea I want to chop up.
- Nijay:** Standing invitation.

Annie: Can we do that on That Sounds Fun? Standing invitation. But the cool thing about *Strange Religion* is I have never read a book like this. I've never read a book like this at all, where you literally go into like, here's why the Romans thought Christianity was so weird. It's so different. You literally are doing the "I think about the Roman Empire every day". You wrote a book because you think about the Roman Empire every day.

Okay, so back me up. My first question that I wrote down when I was reading the book is, how did you even collect all this information about the Roman world in order to tell us how weird they thought Christianity was?

Nijay: I'll get to that question. Let me start with what inspired the book. I live in Portland, Oregon, a highly unchurched area. It's very different than Nashville in that sense. The problem here is people's perception of Christianity is that Christianity is basically the worst of American culture. They just amplify and take to an extreme sexism, racism, misogyny, abuse of power because they're reading the news, they're seeing all these scandals. And so they're just thinking the church just collects all this power and then abuses people with it.

That's not the people I meet when I read the Bible. So how did Christians, and I'm not blaming all Christians, but we definitely have a reputational problem, how did Christians become like this? And then we had this issue. I was writing this during the pandemic, where people stopped going to church because you couldn't meet. And then when you could come back to church, people didn't come back because church wasn't interesting. At least they didn't come back here. Because it was just like, Ah, if I could watch it online, then I'll try to catch a few podcasts. I'll try to..."

Annie: Yeah, there was something they didn't miss.

Nijay: Yeah. There was this, oh, I'd rather be skiing. I'd rather be... And I just thought, but for the early Christians, this was life itself. You weren't like, I could miss church. You're like, I can't miss church. Like, I will literally die if I don't make it to church because these people are lifeline. This is where I fellowship and know God.

So I was thinking, "What is happening? What is happening?" And the conclusion... and Portland is known for the tagline: Keep Portland Weird. And the whole idea behind that is, not just conforming to the masses, being different, being who you are, being weird. It's okay to be weird, right? It's okay to dress different. It's okay to be different. I just thought, have we lost our way?

You know, the question behind the book is, would our spiritual ancestors recognize us as their true descendants? And the answer is, I think, Annie, mostly no, because too often, not always, but too often in modern Christian culture, we are basically

just trying to sprinkle some baptismal water on secular culture. Whereas the very first Christians deviated on pretty much all levels from Roman culture.

So there's this quote I have at the beginning of the book by a second-century critic of Christianity named Celsus. And he says this, and I just love starting the book out with this, he says, "Celsus says, "If all people wanted to be Christians, the Christians would no longer want them." His point is, Christians are extreme deviants. They are nothing like us. And he's exaggerating.

What he's basically saying is, if culture goes right, Christians go left. If they go up, they go down. If we're this way, they're upside down. What he's saying is, they don't fit with us. They don't fit with popular culture. And I'm wondering, what have we done where we have this reputation of being hate-filled, of being angry, of being judgmental?

Now, I think some of the things we're doing are misunderstood, but some of them are just the fact that we're not actually holding to the value system and theology of the first Christians, our ancestors. So what I do in the book is, you kind of pointed this out, I wanted this to be an immersive experience to get us into a world that we're completely unfamiliar with.

Annie: It totally was for me. That's a great way to describe it. Because I was like, I did not know the Romans were like that or that the early Christians were like that.

Nijay: I try not to use Christianese. So for example, I don't talk about the lordship of Jesus. I talk about the supremacy of Jesus. Because we get lulled into Christianese, and then we just assume this has kind of always been. But to look at the Roman world, I mean, it was completely different than the way we think of religion.

It was a world of Jupiter and Mars and Venus and Pluto, all these Roman gods and statues and temples and sacrifices. And here come the Christians, and they don't just change one thing. You know, the staple diet of religion was temple, priests, sacrifices, and statues. And Christians didn't have any of those things.

Annie: Yes. I mean, I need you to know even as I was reading this, I had this moment of like, we named all the planets after gods.

Nijay: We did.

Annie: I mean, silly me. But my whole life I've just... those are the names of gods and those are the names of planets, never realizing that like even now our world rotates around the Roman gods and the Roman culture in a ton of ways. And we are supposed to look different and we don't.

Nijay: Oh, even our Senate is based on the Roman Senate, right?

Annie: Right.

Nijay: There's so much that's the same. But you asked, how did I collect this information? I chose-

Annie: Did you just read everything?

Nijay: I chose not to interact much with biblical scholarship because I wanted to give people something completely different, something they've never had before. Because there have been other books like this that have been written, but more for the academic world. And I wanted something that was really jarring and something that was really disorienting.

My undergraduate degree was in classics, and so I kind of knew this world a little bit. But really I relied on archeologists, I relied on classic scholars, and Roman and Greek historians. And I just spent a couple of years just reading, especially source books where they give you primary sources from Seneca and Valerius Maximus and Pliny, and the Plutarch. I wanted to live in that world and look around.

So I went to my publisher... You'd get a kick out of this. I went to my publisher... Traditionally, they don't do pictures. And I went to my publisher, I said, "I want there to be pictures because I want people to feel like they're living in this world. You know, I used pictures from Pompeii. I used pictures of lots of ancient statues.

And it was funny. He said, "You can do it as long as they're free." And he said, "If there are pictures that aren't, you gotta pay for it out of your pocket." So there's one picture that wasn't free and he ended up paying for it. But I needed to have this picture of chickens. So the picture of chickens is the one that's not free.

So I spent a couple of years and I kind of knew where to look, Oxford Press, Cambridge Press, and I have some understanding of Roman historians. I just geeked out on it. I have like a 200-page document of notes and I just collect all these notes and I just decide which ones...

So here's something weird about the book you may have noticed. Lay readers don't like lots of footnotes because it can be overwhelming. So traditionally, they're endnotes. But academics don't like endnotes. So we actually compromised. If you notice, it's kind of a weird thing in the book.

So I do put endnotes because I want it to be enjoyable, continuous reading, armchair reading, sit in a coffee shop, read the book. But we would do numbered notes for the endnotes. And then we do these little asterisk notes for things you absolutely needed to know that I put in the footnote.

Annie: Yes, you did do that.

Nijay: Like the explanation of a Latin phrase or something like that. I use a lot of Latin in the book because I want people to feel like they're living in another world. So I use *pax deorum* and [00:22:35], I explain what they mean. But I wanted you to feel like you were kind of living a documentary of the Roman world.

Annie: I mean, you even pulled one guy who wrote satire about Christians.

Nijay: Yes.

Annie: Even what you do for us, what you do for me as a reader who likes to geek out about this stuff too, is you give me names and give me people I can Google and go look at what else they wrote. But then to go like, oh yeah, people wrote things making fun of what Christians were doing, just like late night shows may make fun of something political. Just like Saturday Night Live may make fun of something happening in culture, that was happening 2,000 years ago around... And they were disseminating it how? Papers?

Nijay: Yeah, I mean they're texts and they're kind of for public. A lot of them were for public consumption. There's Valerius Maximus who writes kind of dirty humor kind of stuff. And so people just circulated it because it was really entertaining. I don't put this a lot in the book, but you have like graffiti from Pompeii and some of it mocks Christians.

You have this one graffiti from Rome, which seems to be like a teenager who is kind of doodling. And he draws an image... This is one of the earliest images of the public perception of Christianity. He draws the image of a cross with a man on it with a donkey head.

Annie: Yes, it's in the book.

Nijay: It's in the book.

Annie: It's so bizarre.

Nijay: And there's another stick figure by it who's looking up at the donkey head and it says, "Alexamenos worships his God." And scholars think that this is making fun of

a Christian worshiping a crucified man, Jesus. And it's basically saying... yeah, you're showing it right now. It's basically saying to worship Jesus would be like worshiping a donkey. It's as stupid as worshiping a donkey.

So this just paints a picture... because we are over-familiar with Christendom, with Christian culture, because we've grown up with it, you know, America and its foundations and all of that. But what would it mean to live in a world where none of that was assumed, none of that was positive, none of that... like there's no national day of prayer, no prayer breakfast, there's no God bless America, you know, there's nothing like that. So how do the Christians actually get this thing started? What courage did it take?

Annie: Oh my gosh, and to convert. I mean, one of the things you talk about in the book is it's one of the only religions, if not the only back then, that they were trying to get other people in. Everyone else was trying to circle up and be those mystery cults and be quiet. And Christianity was going, no, come in, come in, come in. And that was abnormal.

Nijay: In my subtitle, I say, you know, why the first Christians were weird, because they were weird, dangerous, and this is one of the ways they were dangerous, and compelling. Well, the dangerous part is just like what you're saying. Rome had a tolerance policy for foreign religions, so like Judaism. They'd say, okay, the more the merrier as long as you Romanize, meaning you find a way to make your God support the Roman order. That was crucial.

This was called the *pax deorum*, peaceful coexistence with the gods, specifically the Roman gods. It was almost like, okay, you could bring your God in as long as they recognize they're underneath Jupiter, who's best and greatest. i.e. Zeus, the emperor who was kind of worshiped as godlike in the era of the emperors.

But the Christians use this language about Jesus saying He is Lord of all. It would be fine to say He's Lord. But to say He's Lord of all, now you're threatening the *pax deorum*, you're threatening peaceful coexistence with the gods. You just shouldn't do that.

Even in the book of Acts we see these people complaining about Christians. They're number one, turning the world upside down in a bad way. And number two, they're proclaiming another king other than Caesar, the unlawful decrees.

One of the things that Paul does when he goes to the Athenian Council, the Areopagus Council... several hundred years before Paul, Socrates was condemned to death by that same council and he was forced to commit suicide by poison.

Several hundred years later, Paul appears before the same council with the same criticism that he's introducing dangerous foreign gods.

Annie: Wow.

Nijay: And most of the committee thinks that he's doing wrong and they want him to leave. And then there's these precious few. That's the compelling part to say, okay, there's something really interesting going on. But everywhere Paul went, there was the accusation that he is doing something very dangerous, which is why he ends up in jail so much.

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Sponsor: Hey friends, just interrupting this conversation to tell you about one of our amazing partners, [Shopify](#). When I started podcasting, an online store was the furthest thing from my mind, but 10 years later, we get to sell tank tops and work robes and guidebooks at [shopannieffdowns.com](#), and it is so easy because of Shopify.

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Okay, now back to our conversation with Dr. Nijay Gupta.

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Annie: This is kind of an embarrassing question that I'm having to ask. Do we know how Paul died? Is that in the Bible?

Nijay: No. The book of Acts ends with him in prison in Rome, and there's legends of him continuing on and continuing his mission west and eventually being martyred. But there are legends, but we don't have anything in the Bible about that.

Annie: Okay. Okay, great. So that's not as dumb a question as it felt like coming out of my spirit. Okay, great. Because as you're saying that, I just think Socrates did not survive that and Paul did.

Nijay: Yeah. There's this mystery throughout the Book of Acts of miraculous safety for Paul. So, for example, shipwreck. He's on the high seas and it's like...

Annie: Can you imagine? I would have retired so fast after the shipwreck.

Nijay: And it's almost like Paul is choosing to go to prison rather than... So do you remember the old Bugs Bunny cartoons where, you know, Bugs Bunny's in handcuffs, and then he takes his hands out of the handcuffs and realizes that people are going to recognize, he puts his hands back in the handcuffs. It's almost like he's pretending to be in custody, but it's by his choice.

There's almost that atmosphere in the Book of Acts where Paul's like, I got to get to Rome, so maybe I'll hitch a ride on this prison transport as a prisoner. So then he's shipwrecked, and then God miraculously saves them. They end up on this island with quote-unquote barbarians, who you think... I can't think of the Ewoks, I don't know why, but I think of the Ewoks from Star Wars because they raise them up as a god, like C-3PO.

But you think, okay, the barbarians will kill him, or this snake that bites him, and then the snake doesn't kill him. The barbarians don't kill him. And then he ends up being a healer for the island. And then the barbarians give him another boat. And what does he do? He says, Okay, let's get all 270 passengers back to prison. We're on our way to prison. There's that sense of like nothing will stop his mission. And whatever's going to get in the way, he's going to use to God's glory. Even being in prison.

Annie: But there isn't a trusted text after the Bible, a historical text that says what happened to him.

Nijay: No. There are lots of legends of his martyrdom, but no. I think beheading was the common story.

Annie: That's so cool.

Nijay: But I think Acts ends with that openness to say, like, Let's keep the story going. I mean, that's the idea. There's no definitive, like, tie a nice bow on it because it's over.

Annie: As I was reading *Strange Religion*, one of the things I loved the most is when you talk about that we're called believers. How have I never thought about what we are called? In fact, I'm writing a talk for a Have Faith conference next weekend, and I was like, "I think I'd like to quote my friend Nijay when he writes about how we're believers." Thank you. Thanks for your permission. It's public now. Will you talk about how that was a really unique thing about Christians, is their belief? I think what you said... hold on, I'll quote you to yourself. You said, "Jesus people were absolutely obsessed with belief." That's cool.

Nijay: It's on a number of levels. So this is actually one of the sparks that got my book going because someone asked me several years ago in a lecture, why did the early Christians call themselves believers? And they also asked, was that terminology other religions used? Because we think of it, if someone said like, are you a believer and they weren't talking about Christianity, it might be a conspiracy theory today or something like that. So they were wondering, did other people do this?

And I just kind of assumed yes, because people were religious. But what's interesting is almost no other religious groups talked about the language of belief because they took their understandings of the gods as facts. You don't question. So the everyday Roman... Now the philosophers were different. I'll talk about them in a moment. But the everyday Roman didn't actually wonder whether the gods exist, you just assume they did.

Annie: This is factual. Oh, wow.

Nijay: It's like I've never met the President of the United States, but I assume he exists because I see these reports and these news things, but you just take it for granted.

Annie: I was thinking I've never been to Japan, but I assume it's a fact that Japan exists, but I've never been there.

Nijay: Absolutely. Or even things in space. We've been talking about planets. Okay, we've seen pictures. We've never been there, but we just assume other people don't. Some people-

Annie: I like thinking about that stuff, too, Nijay. I have to tell you, I like to think about what if we don't. That's a whole other podcast for us. Love it.

Nijay: But these Christians, I think they use this terminology for a number of reasons. Some of them are pretty obvious. One is Jesus is called a believe. He says, believe in the gospel, believe in me, things like that. Okay, that's fine. But they don't tend to call themselves believers in Jesus. They call themselves just believers. And then they call non-Christians unbelievers. And it may be kind of code language.

But I think another reason is they believed what seemed impossible. I call this believing the unbelievable. So it was actually a whole framework of existence. 2 Corinthians 5:7, walk by faith, not by sight. Well, if you think about it, that's nonsensical. Like when I'm walking down the sidewalk, you walk by sight.

You know, I remember when I was a kid, a teenager walking down the street to the grocery store or to the gas station to get a drink with my friends, we would sometimes close our eyes and see how straight we could walk, you know, that kind of thing. And then you kind of get off track and you run into a tree and it's funny.

Well, we have our eyes for a reason, but these Christians believe that faith was actually a second form of sight and that you could see things that are crucial but impossible to see with the eyes.

Annie: Wow. Crucial but impossible.

Nijay: For example, the way you look at the poor, the way you look at the least of these. Christians said, from God's perspective, we see a whole different way of looking at reality, using faith as another set of visions. Take the book of James. James says, you know, rich person shows up to church, don't usher them to the front, give them the best seats in the house, get them a latte, you know, get them the best donut of the bunch. So put them in the back. Put them in the back.

But then you have a poor person come in, you know, driving a beat-up old Toyota Corolla. I had a Toyota when I was 19. 1987 Toyota. Give them the best seats. Well, from a Roman standpoint, that's nonsensical. You gain nothing socially, in terms of social capital for doing that.

But James says that's not the way we do things. Jesus says to His disciples, It is normal for the Romans to lord it over each other, to wield power over and against each other. But seeing with the eyes of faith, we say, first shall be last, last shall be first. Think about how nonsensical that is, even in today's world. Think about lining up to get on an airplane. You do this a lot. Right?

You travel more than I do, but I have a certain number of travel points that get me some benefits of getting on the planes early. What if the airline just said, Okay,

we're going to do last is first today, and let's put the... You know, it'd be like, oh no, how do I get my luggage in? You know, we-

Annie: People, I'd like to act like I wouldn't lose my mind. People would. I'd like to pretend like I... but you're right. It would be a surprising-

Nijay: Or let's say, you know, you were going to go to like Broadway production of *Hamilton*, and you paid all this money for these front row seats, and they said, No, we're gonna put everybody in the back. We're gonna put the back people... No. Or we're gonna kick you guys out, we're gonna bring people out from outside. We wouldn't like that.

But that's what Jesus says. I think that's a part of them being believers is we're gonna see the world through an entirely different framework that almost seems upside down. We're gonna do it completely differently. And I think that earned them the title believers because they believed things so outlandish.

Now, that doesn't mean there wasn't evidence, right? Evidence of the resurrection, evidence of Jesus, signs and testimonies, and healing. But in terms of what fit with popular culture, they were upside down and backwards. And that earned them the title "believers" because they believed in the impossible.

Annie: Like I'm thinking about in Acts when Peter and John, the guy says, they say silver and gold we don't have, but get up, you're healed. Were Romans able to heal people too? Were there other spirits at work that were healing people?

Nijay: Good question.

Annie: And Christians were doing that too?

Nijay: Seemingly yes, but there were some patterns to what we call magic. It's better to say sorcery or else we think of like Houdini. So there were some rules of sorcery.

Annie: I love your chapter on magic, by the way. People are going to love it. That's so interesting.

Nijay: Well, we can use examples from the Bible. There was a man in the book of Acts named Simon Magus, which literally means Simon the Magician. The Magi are similar to Simon Magus. And he actually wants to buy the Holy Spirit's power off of the apostles. They have to rebuke him. Why? Because if you're a sorcerer in the ancient world, and I think there's reason to believe that they could use spells and charms and amulets to wield wicked power, to do miracles, but you're asking about healing, more commonly they would be used to curse people.

Annie: Oh, to put the name in name.

Nijay: You would go to sorcerers, usually to do dark magic, usually to hurt people.

Annie: Like voodoo doll kind of stuff.

Nijay: Totally. Because you want to curse somebody. There are actually Roman laws prohibiting the use of sorcery.

Annie: Oh, wow.

Nijay: There's something called the Cornelian law of assassins and sorcerers. And it was basically saying if you try to wield this power, because they didn't like people wielding power outside of a Roman structure, you were liable to crucifixion or being burned alive.

So here's a couple things you need to know about sorcery. One is people did it for money. People did it for money. So look at the slave girl in Philippi in the book of Acts. She is a slave, but she has what Luke calls a Pythian spirit. This is the spirit of the python — this goes back to Oracle Delphi — that is within her that gives her prophetic gifts. And she can proclaim what's true from a divine perspective, which is crazy. And she actually proclaims that the apostles have their God on their side. And Paul is annoyed with her and is just like poo. And then curse out that demon. But then the owners of the slaves are upset because they've lost income. So that proves that money was a big part of this.

So number one, sorcerers typically worked for money. And two, they often did negative activities with sorcery, harmful activities with sorcery. Prophecy is helpful and things like that. But you'd often go to a prophet in the Greco-Roman world to know whether your spouse was cheating on you or to know whether you're going to win in a battle or whether your enemy is going to betray you, that sort of thing.

One thing that's really cool about Jesus and the apostles and I love this, and I think we can draw from this today, is they didn't charge money. I think this is from the Gospel of Matthew. Paul says the apostles after... Jesus, excuse me, says the apostles after He's given them His authority, he says, freely you have been given, therefore freely give.

Annie: Whereas the Romans and the people, or I guess everyone around them was going, "You can help or you can use these spirits, but you better get paid for it."

Nijay: Yes. Yeah, absolutely because it was a huge moneymaker. When they burned the magic books in Ephesus, it totaled millions of dollars. So think about what they're doing to the economy when they're offering grace and healing for free. They are killing the magic trade industry.

Annie: They took down industries left and right.

Nijay: They did. And then instant compassion. So, for a sorcerer, the motivation was essentially greed or power. For the apostles in the book of Acts, it's compassion. Paul's giving this speech. I can't remember where he was, but it's in the middle of the book of Acts. He's given a speech. And normally when he gives a speech, he rallies, he gets a whole bunch of conversions.

He actually stops in the middle of his speech and he sees a person who's hurting. And he says, do you want to be healed? Luke used this language of the gaze, this gaze that people give of kind of connecting. He has this gaze of this person. He stops his speech. And he says, do you want to be healed? "Yes." And he heals him and it starts kind of a riot. And then he doesn't get to finish his speech. But it all comes from this compassion that he has.

You were talking about Peter having this compassion at this poor man sitting by the gate of the temple and says, "I don't have silver or gold. It's not about money. But what I have I give you of free." This idea of freely giving. And it's a beautiful thing. There are economic things, but I think the main thing that I see is the compassion to serve and help and to wield gospel power for those purposes.

Annie: You do this really beautifully in the book. It is so fun to read. I was just blowing through it. But it's the reminder that our God isn't the only God. There isn't the only spiritual force at work. And the Romans had spiritual forces at work, they just didn't know what to do with how believers were responding to their God. And the way it was... even the way they treated each other in community was unlike what they were seeing in the Roman world.

Nijay: Yeah, yeah. One of my favorite chapters in the book is actually on how the theology of the early Christians and their understanding of God led them to seeing each other differently. So in America today, at least theoretically, we have a value of the inherent dignity and worth of the individual. And we just take that for granted in discussions about laws and discussions about ethics, crimes.

But you have to remember that that wasn't a widespread phenomenon in the first century. The Romans believed in stratification, that there are more important people and less important people. And we kind of understand that because at the beginning

of American history, we treated slaves as one-third of a human, and women didn't have voting and all that.

But I wrote this chapter called To Treat All as Equal because there's this phrase in the New Testament that's repeated, God does not show favoritism. This is one of the most un-Roman things you'll ever find. And for the early Christians to say, no male or female, Jew or Gentile, slave or free, it's not erasing those differences.

I'm proudly Asian-American. I think there's, you know, important to understanding who you are as a woman, who you are as a man. But what it meant was we're not going to create systems of power and importance and privilege based on those indicators. That was extremely dangerous. But Christians said, we're going to treat each other as equals.

Annie: Also the other thing I'd love for you to talk about that I... We love talking about prayer around here. I think you talked about it with us last time. But you said, if a first-century Roman were to stumble on a collection of early Christian writings and thumb through it looking for patterns of religious practice, I would propose that the most mentioned feature they would notice is prayer. Did Romans not pray to their gods or was prayer just so different for Christians?

Nijay: Prayer was ritualized. So you would have just the expectation that you're going to pray at major events, you're going to pray... You know, they did pray, but they prayed often for the blessing and favor of the gods in a very cold and distant way. The Roman gods in a very cold and distant way.

Annie: More of an exchange. Like we have to do this in order that god will respond.

Nijay: It's kind of manners. It's kind of like what's polite and what is civilized. It is almost like saying a prayer at a Thanksgiving meal that is just kind of like something that you do traditionally is you say grace. Maybe you don't say grace all the time, but you do when the family gathers at Thanksgiving, and it's important, and it's a tradition. And they believed it and they thought it was significant. But it was paying homage and respect to the gods.

So, for example, I call my parents, they raised me, I love them, I call them as often as I can, but I don't live anywhere near my parents. So when I have my kids talk to my parents, they don't feel that same personal love that I do because I grew up with my parents. So it's one more step removed. So they don't mind talking to my parents, but it's more of an obligation. They love them, but they don't love them the way I love them because my mother took care of me when I was sick and all of that.

I think it's kind of like that with the gods. But Paul says things like, pray continuously. Jesus has these all-night vigils of prayer. You know, you're in a kind of continuous communicative mode. Imagine meeting a celebrity, your hero that you've always wanted to meet. Typically, if you did that after an event, you want to meet them, but you want to keep it as short as possible because you know they're important.

So you go through a receiving line... This happened once with N.T. Wright, where I waited for a very long time to be able to say hello to him after a talk. And you just waited in this huge line and you got your like three seconds to say, "Thank you so much. I love you so much," and then he ushers you off. That's just the way it is.

That's the way the Romans would have viewed their gods. It is important to put in the effort to say thank you, say hello, but you don't want lots of time because that's going to be something that they don't want. The Roman gods didn't want your... they wanted you to just do your job. Just do your job, give the sacrifices, say your prayers. But the God of Scripture, Jesus Christ, He says, "Commune with me at all times. Let's be one." Imagine a king saying that, like, let's be one to all the subjects. No, that doesn't make any sense in a world-

Annie: Or Zeus saying that. Zeus said nothing like that.

Nijay: No, he doesn't want that. He wants to use and abuse humans as often as he can but he doesn't want continual communion. You know, read John 17, the high priestly prayer. As the Father and the Son commune in warmth, so he wants them to commune.

There's this beautiful image of, in the Gospel of John, of the Son resting at the chest of the Father. That actually comes from Greco-Roman meal practices. You'd actually be lying down at a meal, and you'd be lying on your side with your head towards the food, your feet away because they're stinky dirty, and you're lying on your side so someone's at your back, and if you're sitting close enough, you could literally lean on them. That probably happened with family members, close friends.

So when the Son is leaning on the Father, it would evoke images of, let's say, a child resting at a meal, leaning on their parents saying, like, "I love you. Thank you." And then you have the beloved disciple doing that with Christ.

Annie: Yeah. I was going to say that's John, right?

Nijay: That's John as well. That's a meal thing.

Annie: And Peter's all the way somewhere else. Peter has to yell across the table, asking what he's talking or asking what he means.

Nijay: But the image is one of intimacy and prayer, intimacy and fellowship and communion. That's not something you want in the Roman world because the gods are demanding, sometimes vicious overlords. So the last thing you want is over-familiarity because then you might be accused of crossing a line, talking back, becoming too familiar.

Think about like, you know, I have teenagers, you know, and with their teachers, they want to be polite, but you don't want an over-familiarity, right? If you're a teacher, you don't want over-familiarity. You don't want to be buddy-buddy. We look at suspiciously if you have them over to your house, you know, things like that. You got to be careful. There's got to be boundaries.

It's like that with the gods. But these Christians said, no, we want love. We want intimacy. Now there's purity. They don't use Eros, which is the word of love for sexuality, but they want that intimacy. And I've had a lot of conversations, Annie, recently about this, that maybe American Christianity has lost that spirit of intimacy and we've fallen into the formality of Roman religion, just showing up, paying our respects, and going home.

[00:50:51] <music>

Annie: And now back to finish up our conversation with Nijay.

[00:51:04] <music>

Annie: You did this to me in *Tell Her Story* too, where I got to the end of the book and you made me cry in one of the last pages with that sentence of what men said they couldn't do the Bible says they already did. Still, I mean, I quote you all the time to people. But you did it in here too. I don't know why this struck me so much. You said, "It's difficult for modern readers of the Bible to grasp how out of place fruitfulness language would be in view of traditional Roman religion. State religion was not concerned with personal formation, maturity, or fruitfulness. The goal was to placate the gods and secure their blessing. The gods didn't care much about human maturity, certainly not on an individual level." And I thought, that makes our Jesus different because He cares so much about the fruitfulness of our lives and our personal growth.

Nijay: And this is kind of human nature. Ideally, you want the leader of your nation, whether human or divine, to be someone worthy of emulation. Haven't we gotten

away from that in the last period of American history? But in the Roman world, all that mattered was power, all that mattered was glory.

Annie: Wow.

Nijay: It wasn't ethics, it wasn't mercy. When Nero came to power in the Roman world, one of his teachers, Seneca, who was a philosopher and kind of a statesman... Nero was a teenager when he came into power. And Cicero wrote... sorry, Seneca wrote a famous letter to Nero on the eve of his coronation called *On the Importance of Mercy*, *On Clemency* is what it's called.

And he basically says, you will actually show a greater form of your power if you show mercy or clemency. Nero did not. He was one of the most vicious of Roman leaders. And yet Christ Himself calls forth, be like me. I remember Michael Jordan back in the day, I just watched that documentary, *The Last Dance*, and it just reminded me-

Annie: It's so good.

Nijay: It's so good. It just reminded me that Michael Jordan was the first athlete where people were obsessed with being like him, be like Mike. Remember the Be Like Mike campaign?

Annie: Yeah. Be Like Mike, yeah.

Nijay: And he actually brushed people off, because remember he had that gambling spout, and he had all this stuff. And he actually said, "I just sell shoes." You know, people wanted him to weigh in on some political stuff and he says, "I just sell shoes," you know, that sort of thing. "Just buy my shoes."

And that really same thing happened with Dennis Rodman. He's like, "I don't want people to emulate me." And that's how the Romans were. They're like, "We don't emulate our gods. They're powerful and we're not, and the only thing we should emulate is power." But Christians said our job is to conform to the image of Christ. How much easier that Christ became human so we can have someone like us to emulate.

Now, Christians did find similarities with certain strands of Roman philosophy that were into this. But Christians really focused on humility, compassion, generosity, which was not going to get you anywhere in the Roman world.

This is really powerful. In the Roman world, you weren't meant to be godlike. You would be crucified if you pretended to be godlike, if you said, My goal is to be

godly. No, your goal is stability, to move up in the world, to protect your family, to protect your people. But Christ says, "Be crucified like me, follow My way, follow the people of the way." And it was a whole different way.

Annie: I love it. The end of the book you do a chapter on things they didn't get right too. Because I think that's really important to be like, they didn't always get along. They didn't stand up against slavery. They didn't speak well of each other all the time. I just thought that chapter was really interesting to me because it was just such a good reminder of like, here's all the ways they were weird and dangerous and compelling, and also they were not Jesus, they were not perfect, they did not do all this well. I thought that was a chapter you could have left out, and I'm grateful you didn't because it felt as if you had it.

Nijay: One of my concerns today is sometimes Christians feel like as long as they're Christian they're doing everything right, and they're kind of... they'll use Christianity to justify their misbehavior. One of my friends often says, our weaknesses are often our strengths overplayed.

Annie: Oh, wow. Right.

Nijay: And I think this is one of them, that Christians... because the idea of perfection, be perfect as I am perfect, because the idea of holiness and forgiveness, we sometimes have a blind spot to our own failings. So as much as we revere the early Christians, we need to be self-critical as a movement and say, how can we do it better? How can we improve on that?

And we have. I mean, we have with, for example, democracy. There are things that we do that they would have not understood, like marrying for love. That's something they wouldn't have understood. Capitalism. And there's questions about capitalism, but capitalism I think is better than the alternatives. But we've done things to improve society.

So even though scripture is inspired, there's still a place for us to keep moving towards the perfect vision of what it means to be like Christ. I know you come to that chapter and be like... some of my readers have said, it's a little deflating. I appreciate that you liked it. I needed to put that warning label on the book because sometimes Christians are accused of what's called biblical exceptionalism. I do think Christianity is exceptional, but I think a way to prevent us from going off the rails is to make sure we're self-critical too.

Annie: My last question is, when we're done reading the book, like me, when we have finished reading *Strange Religion*, give me a nugget of the next thing I should do. What can I do in my life to look more like...? I mean, I can't totally revamp my life

and I can't do an extreme life makeover and move that bus and suddenly I look like a first-century Christian. But what would you encourage us to do? Like, what's a step we can take where this becomes our real life, not just like, that was a great book that I read? Though it is a great book that I read.

Nijay: Thanks. I think that's a good question. You know, we're both children of the 80s and 90s, Annie. I know that. And there's a great episode of *Friends* where... I can't remember which characters there are, but one character says the other character is going to make all their choices for them. Do you remember this episode? I can't remember. It was something to do with Rachel, but I can't remember which one was which. Phoebe and Rachel, maybe, or Monica and Rachel.

And we're kind of called to do that with Jesus, where we say, I'm going to let Jesus make all my choices. But it's not just for a week or a month, but always. Because I think what often happens is we clothe ourselves in the accessories of Christianity, but we haven't actually transformed our lives from the inside out.

And that's really what made the Christians weird, is they just didn't slap a bumper sticker on it. They didn't just say, you know, I'm going to go to church or I'm going to tithe. They made this a whole life transformation to be like Jesus. So I'm going to give a couple of scriptural things and then thinking about this idea of letting Jesus dictate your life.

I would say one of the things that really is jarring for me is looking at Christians today who don't actually live like Jesus, but really talk the talk of Christianity. I keep thinking to myself, have they ever actually studied the Sermon on the Mount, the really hard teachings of Jesus? I think the hardest thing taught in the whole Bible is love your enemies. Because it's so counterintuitive.

Annie: Yes, love them.

Nijay: We want to say-

Annie: And we don't ever think about it. Because I don't ever label people as my enemies. Who am I going to call my enemy? It's so rude. So we get out of that because we don't call anybody our enemy.

Nijay: I mean, you're a person in the spotlight, so you probably get trolled and criticisms and this and that. Well, that's the closest thing, the people that stay on the other side. And what does it mean to love them? Because we want to say, ignore them. We want to say, correct them. That's fine. But love.

So I'd say, number one, if you want to follow up, study Sermon on the Mount. I know the Bible Project is going through Sermon on the Mount this year.

Annie: For the whole year.

Nijay: And be troubled by it. Be troubled by it. You shouldn't read scripture where at the end you're like, that felt really good. That's fine if you're reading a really nice psalm or... But often you should be reading scripture and be frustrated. Just like if I'm working out and my muscles hurt because I'm stretching them and even ripping them by working out. And when you have a good workout and you're in pain, but you know it's good for you, that's how it should be when you read the Bible. It should be painful sometimes. It should be painful because you're saying, God, I don't know if I can do this. I don't have the strength to love my enemies. So restarting them out.

Another thing, read the book of Acts and really try to imagine it. I think we read it as like fairy tales, you know, *Lord of the Rings* or whatever. Like, you know, oh, there goes a wizard or there goes a dwarf. But if you just read it thinking these are real people in real-time, these are people like you and me. And what courage it takes to say, The Holy Spirit sent me in a vision across the Aegean Sea to Philippi in order to preach to the first people in Europe. Really imagine it.

And then I would say, you know, this is a long-term thing. But you've got to get inside your own internal... we would use the language and philosophy of epistemology. Epistemology is how we see reality. And try to get what filters you use for how you see reality. Who's important, what's important, where you're directing your life, how you make decisions, who you talk to, who you give money to, how you spend your money, and really take a comparison.

We did this thing when I was in youth group way back in the day where you wrote a list of your top 10 values. You know, God, my family, dah dah dah. And then you wrote these things. You felt good. Like I got my priority straight. And then you did this thing was like, how much time do you actually spend? Where do you put your time? Or for adults, take out your checkbook or look at your bank account, where's your money going?

Now that doesn't mean you gotta give all your money to the church. That'd be great. But the point is, are you living consistently? What made the Christians weird, the best Christians, is they were living consistently with their proclaimed value system. They were living in tune with that. And society's not all bad, but society's like a big magnet. It's always trying to pull, to pull you in. To narcissism, to greed, to trolling, to gossiping. It's always trying to pull you. It's human nature. So you have to counteract that.

And so the spirit is like a counter magnet. But it takes work on a constant basis to make sure that you're leaning in the direction of the spirit so you get pulled in that direction and not lean in that direction. It's not a one-day thing. It's not go to this conference. It's not read this book. It's like I have to make a decision every morning when I look in the mirror and say, I'm going to do it the Jesus way today.

There's a great Phil Wickham song, The Jesus Way. He gets it spot on with the Sermon on the Mount with living the Jesus way. Listen to that song and look in the mirror and start making those choices.

Annie: Okay, we will. Thank you so much for doing this today, Nijay. I'm so honored. It's so fun. I can't believe we just did an hour. I mean, we got through half of my notes that I took when I was reading the book.

Nijay: We need like a whole conference.

Annie: Unfortunately for you... I know. I know. That's right. I want you to take us to Rome. Will you one of these days host a trip to Rome?

Nijay: Let's go. That sounds fun.

Annie: Oh my gosh, how rad would that be? That sounds fun. That sounds fun.

[01:03:47] <music>

Outro: You guys, isn't he brilliant? I know. I know. He's one of all of our favorite guests on the show. How do we get him to take us to Rome, you guys? If we could get Charles Martin to take us to Israel and Dr. Nijay Gupta to take us to Rome, I think we are set. I think that sounds like travel of a lifetime to do those. Maybe we get them to go together. Okay, we gotta quit dreaming.

But oh, I just am so thankful for Dr. Nijay Gupta and all he offers and how generous he is with his thoughts. Listen, make sure you get your copy of *Strange Religion*. It is such a fun read. I love talking about what's put in an Easter basket. This is a fun one. It's put in an Easter basket for your friends, your kids, your spouse, whichever person in your life loves learning, kind of geeks out about stuff. This is that book for that person. But also like this normal Annie loved it.

So make sure you follow him on social media as well, tell him thanks so much for being on the show and how much you enjoyed it as well.

If you've got any questions from this episode, especially if you're listening on Spotify, you can just drop them in a Spotify Q&A. That's where I listen as well. Or you can send them to us on Instagram @thatsoundsfunpodcast. And make sure you are following over there.

We love answering your questions and we got lots more content over there. If you wanted to see some more videos, if you're not watching on YouTube, here's some more thoughts from Dr. Nijay.

If you need anything else from me, you know I'm embarrassingly easy to find. Annie F. Downs on Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, New York City. All the places you need me, that is how you can find me.

And I think that's it for me today, friends. Go out or stay home and do what sounds fun to you, and I will do the same. Today what sounds fun to me is celebrating our friend Mary Kate Morrissey as she debuts tomorrow night as the principal Elphaba in *Wicked* on Broadway. If you want to today go blow up her Instagram, tell her break a leg, wish her well on her first night tomorrow on Tuesday getting to be the principal Elphaba. It is a fun week in New York because tonight.

I also get to hear Travis Cottrell at Carnegie Hall. I've never been to Carnegie Hall and our CAO, our Chief Annie Officer, Lillian, is also playing her violin tonight at Carnegie Hall. It is a very fun week in New York City. So y'all follow along on social media. Make sure you run, run, run to Mary Kate, tell her how proud we are of her, and that you're praying for her as she enters into this next season as a Broadway principal actress. Oh, it's too much. It's so good.

All right. Y'all have a great week. I'm going to too. We'll see you back here on Thursday with a woman that I love and you're going to love too, Amanda Jenkins from *The Chosen*. We'll see y'all on Thursday.