

(ACOUSTIC GUITAR THEME MUSIC)

JONATHAN ROGERS, HOST: Hello, I'm Jonathan Rogers. Welcome to The Habit Podcast.

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JR: Nancy Guthrie is an exceedingly gifted Bible teacher and speaker. She puts on biblical theology workshops around the country, or in any case, she does when there's not a global pandemic afoot. Nancy has written I don't know how many books and Bible studies. Her most recent book is *Saints and Scoundrels in the Story of Jesus*. Rosaria Butterfield has said, "*Saints and Scoundrels in the Story of Jesus* is convicting and comforting at once..."

(THEME MUSIC FADES)

JR: "... reminding all true believers that God's family is rough around the edges and held together by grace." Also, Nancy Guthrie is just a sweetheart and a joy to be around, as you'll hear from this conversation.

Nancy Guthrie, thank you so much for being on The Habit Podcast!

NANCY GUTHRIE: Well, I'm so grateful you even wanna talk to me!

JR: (laughs) And not just on the podcast, but in the room!

NG: I know... face to face.

JR: Which is amazing... I was looking at your speaking schedule. I'm amazed that you're here on a Friday.

NG: (laughs) Uh, it's a rare Friday! I am at home, but I am speaking this weekend. It's just that it's local, so I get to sleep in my own bed tonight. So I'm thrilled about it.

JR: And um, thankfully you had to go to Trader Joe's this morning, and the studio is near Trader Joe's.

NG: Yeah, exactly... well, Trader Joe's has the best price on roses for Valentine's Day. Did you know?

JR: No, I didn't know that.

NG: Now you know.

JR: Yeah, now I have a new way of recruiting writers for my podcast.

NG: (laughs) Exactly...

JR: Hey, you're going to TJ's anyway. Studio's right there. Why don't you just come record an episode.

NG: Exactly.

JR: And uh, man... an intense speaking schedule, a trip to TJ's this morning...

NG: Yes.

JR: And then a party tonight for 22 people.

NG: Yes.

JR: You're a busy woman. Now, the main thing I gleaned from this is I'm not in your top 22 friends—

NG: Maybe you shouldn't mention the party, because maybe somebody will listen to this who didn't get invited, and now they know I had a party.

JR: Well, all but 22 of the people who are listening to this will have not been invited. At most 22 listeners will have been invited to this party.

NG: (laughs) Okay...

JR: Um... I'm liking to imagine that if you had invited 23, I would've been on the list.

NG: Yes... well, keep imagining.

JR: (laughs) Yeah, right... okay! So, let's start there. With this incredibly busy schedule, when do you write? You've got two books coming out this year.

NG: Yeah...

JR: When do you write these books?

NG: Well... I don't *always* travel this heavily. Um... so I, you know, I'm always looking out into the future in terms of blocks of time that I can focus on that and do that. But the truth is—

JR: When you say blocks of time, you mean days and weeks, not blocks of hours in the day.

NG: Correct. Well, a little bit of both. But when I'm working on a project, you know, I'm getting up in the morning and making some tea and going to my desk for a while, and then maybe having some breakfast. And then maybe 10 o'clock going for a walk in the park. And then the rest of the day, I'm like chained to my desk until David comes in and it's gotten dark outside, and my office is now dark, and he sees my face by the glow of the computer screen...

JR: (laughs) Yeah, right.

NG: ... and says, you know, “Hey, how ‘bout some dinner?” And um... but yeah, I’ve just never understood people who talk about going away to write. Because my writing life just has to fit into my daily life and my schedule. And actually that’s better, because I need ideas to marinate, and I need my big wall of bookshelves. And so writing for me has never been a go away to do it, focus only on that. But it does look like one or two full days, in this block of time, when I can really focus.

JR: And do you have, uh, rituals or liturgies that get you... you know...

NG: Maybe I should. I’m not sure if I do. In fact, I am realizing as I write that more than ever before, I’m a victim of our modern, uh... scrolling culture.

JR: Mmhmm.

NG: And I will find myself — I’ll be working on a project, and I just wanna jump to something that’s easier to think about.

JR: Yeah...

NG: Like, I get to a part where I kind of know what I want to say, but I’m struggling to find the words or the way to express it or the ideas, and so I’ve just developed this instinct, well, let’s just see what’s going on over there at Facebook! And that ability for long term focus... you know, we hear these people talk about how it’s changing our brains. And I *feel* that. Oftentimes.

JR: Yeah! I know.

NG: Do you?

JR: Oh, absolutely.

NG: As a writer, that just when it gets difficult, I just wanna jump to something— oh, I'll check my email, you know? And answer an email. That doesn't serve me very well. Or maybe it does. Maybe my brain needs a break to come back and make a fresh go at it. I'm not sure, but I certainly do feel that.

JR: I don't doubt that your brain sometimes needs a break, but I find it hard to believe that the break it needs is Facebook.

NG: You're probably right.

JR: Um, there are... probably what it needs is a walk outside or something like that. There's something about that — I don't know if the word is pseudo-stimulation of social media that's not refreshing to the brain. I think...

NG: I think that makes complete sense. I do find, like when I'm working on something and I just— I feel like maybe what I'm writing is something I got from a book and I'm not talking straight to people?

JR: Mmhmm.

NG: I go for a walk in the park, over at Edwin-Warner Park with one of my friends, and she'll say, "What are you working on?" And I'll say, okay, I'm writing this. And just that process of explaining to her apart from the books, apart from the words I already have on the page, *here's* the point. That enables me then to go back to my desk and just say it more clearly, more plainspokenly, uhh, whatever it was. Just by having the process of, in a relaxed environment, trying to verbally express to somebody else what I'm trying to say, m what the main point is.

JR: Yeah. Tom Wolfe when he wrote, uh... it was a, it was like the first big

article he wrote about car culture in Southern California in the 60s. And so his publisher, who I can't remember who it was — maybe *Esquire* magazine — sent him out, paid for hotel rooms... basically they invested a lot of money for him to go write this thing. And so he was just flattened by writer's block when he got out there. And he wrote to the— he wrote them and said, I can't write this. You know, you need to find somebody else to write it. And they said, well, we can't, because we already paid a photographer lots and lots of money to take these great pictures, so we can't cancel the thing. Um, and... what they ended up doing was Tom Wolfe said, well, I tell you what. I'll just send my notes to you, and somebody else can write the article.

And so, he wrote — I can't remember what the guy's name, the editor — but he said, "Dear Martin," or whatever it was. And then he starts writing these notes, and...

NG: There it was! (laughs)

JR: ... wrote through the night, and then sent it off to Martin, or whoever—

NG: What is that? Is that that it wasn't the pressure to perform?

JR: Yeah, it's what you said. I'm gonna express this to a person, not the American public. Cause the American public is hard to write for. But your friend in Edwin Warner park or this... this one editor... he didn't think he was writing the article. So basically the editor took the "Dear Martin" or whatever off the top, and published it the way he wrote it.

NG: (laughs) Wow.

JR: And he wrote it in one night after...

NG: Struggle.

JR: ...weeks of thinking he couldn't write it. Um... so I think that's such an

important insight. What you're saying there about talking to your friend. Because that's what you're doing when you're writing, is you're talking to somebody.

NG: Mmhm.

JR: Um... and I've told this story probably four times on this podcast, but I'm gonna tell it anyway, because it's a good story.

NG: I'll be the judge of that.

JR: When I was... (laughs) That's a good one. Okay. Would you tell me if this is a good story, Nancy?

NG: Okay. (laughs)

JR: Um, when I was writing my Flannery O'Connor book, um...

NG: Oh, let's just stop right there. That sounded a little... earlier you were accusing me of boasting...

JR: (laughs)

NG: And I'm just saying, starting a sentence with, "When I was writing my Flannery O'Connor book" just sounded a little lofty.

JR: (laughs) You'd be amazed at the lofty things I can say. The... so I was writing my Flannery O'Connor book, um...

NG: (quietly) Yeah, me too.

JR: And uh... and so, I was just struggling with— you know, I'd been like 20 months into it or something like that. And I was bowling with Andy Osenga, and he's like, "What are you working on?" And I said, "I'm

working on this book about Flannery O'Connor." And he said, "What's— tell me about it." And I said, "It's for the Christian person who knows they're supposed to like Flannery O'Connor, but just can't get there." And he goes, "Oh, that's me!" And I was like, "Really?"

And so then, every day, I just thought, "What does Andy Osenga need to know about Flannery O'Connor today?" And I wrote that book for one person.

NG: (chuckles)

JR: Actually, I don't think many more than one people have actually read it, so maybe that's...

NG: It worked out.

JR: I don't know that the guy I wrote it for read it! Who knows.

NG: But it helped you.

JR: What's that?

NG: It helped you.

JR: Incredibly.

NG: To just say, okay, I'm gonna explain this to this person.

JR: Yeah. And, um... yeah, and it made me feel like spending a few hours with Andy Osenga every day, which he didn't have any idea that this was going on, and so, I thought we were closer friends than we really were because I was thinking about him every day.

Anyway. Ummm... the... (pause) So... when you talk about... I so relate to

this idea that you get to a place where it gets hard and you wanna find something easier to do. Um, one of the — and your kind of writing, because you're doing these, uh, every thing you write is based on Scripture.

NG: Biblical teaching.

JR: Biblical teaching, okay. And so... research is a necessary part of what you do.

NG: It's most of what I do.

JR: Yeah.

NG: You know, people ask my husband all the time about my writing, and he's the one who pointed out to me, uh, I've heard him say, most of Nancy's writing looks like studying.

JR: Uh huh.

NG: And I suppose that's one reason why I can't "go away" to do it. I mean, because, writing for me... I think most people think the person who writes a book is someone — especially the kinds of books I write — is someone who becomes an expert at something, and so then they write about it. And I think most of my books have come about because I identify something that I think, "I want to learn that."

JR: Yeah.

NG: And my way of learning it is to commit to write a book about it, because you study something very differently that you're gonna have to communicate to someone else than you do just, you know, out of a little bit of curiosity, to kind of know about it. So what that means is I'm not generally writing out of a place of expertise, but I'm writing as a fellow

learner...

JR: Yeah...

NG: And so that means most of my writing process does look like study, figuring something out. And for me, figuring out a passage of Scripture — and when I say, “figuring out a passage of Scripture,” I’m trying— I’m reading it. And I’m trying to understand what was the divine and human author’s intended message for their original audience. Because that’s gotta be the first step for me. But then I don’t wanna go immediately from that to saying what’s it gonna mean for us today.

JR: Okay.

NG: Because I wanna take another trip first. I wanna go through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And say, okay, so what difference does the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ make on this passage. And *then* I’m prepared to say, okay, so what is the import, what is the application, what is the implication for me and for those that I know I’m writing to or speaking to.

JR: So... researching, for me at least — and you can tell me if this is true for you — is a lot easier than writing.

NG: (pause) Yeah. I suppose so. I guess... yeah, you’re not creating.

JR: For me, when I hit a hard patch in writing, one of my go-to things is—

NG: I’ll research more, yes!

JR: — just do some more research, yeah.

NG: Sometimes I do find that I’m like, researching, researching... when I’ve really already, like, I’ll realize howwww much time have I spent trying to

figure out this one little question that's really not that important? And I have to go, okay. Just let that one go.

JR: This is procrastination.

NG: And get back to— yeah! Exactly! (laughs) Research become procrastination.

JR: And because research is part of the job...

NG: Yeah.

JR: Um, it feels like an okay... you know, playing online dominoes, you know it's procrastination.

NG: (laughs) Yes.

JR: And, but... it's more respectable to do a little bit more research.

NG: But I'll realize I've kind of gone down a rabbit hole that really didn't require that much time.

JR: So, how do you — I'm always interested to know, um... how do you flip the switch from being a person who's taking in information, taking in stories, to okay, now I'm going to produce something, I'm going to generate something.

NG: I think for me it's when I realize that I have hit upon what's gonna be the main thrust of whatever chapter I'm writing. And for me a chapter is actually usually first a message. So I'm thinking—

JR: What do you mean a message?

NG: Umm, a Bible teaching message in a situation where I'm gonna be

teaching the Bible.

JR: Oh, okay.

NG: Because so many of my books are first that. Which actually, which a lot of times, it's usually like I don't wanna turn in a book until I've said it out loud in that speaking environment.

JR: That makes sense.

NG: Cause a lot of times, you know, being in front of a group of people makes me emphasize something that I didn't originally when I wrote it, or reveals to me a jump in assuming their understanding of something that I realize maybe I've gotta put some steps in there, but it's because faces are looking back at me like I'm... I'm not following you here. I think more though what it does... it adds more emotion to my writing. Because maybe I'm just stating something when I've originally written it, but in that moment I realize oh, here's where it's really connecting with people — with their hearts, with their lives, with their emotions. And I've got to do more with that, not just in the moment aching, but in writing too. |

JR: Yeah.

NG: So... I kind of got off course with your question, didn't I?

JR: No... well you're onto the question I want to talk about.

NG: But I think when you're teaching... a lot of Bible teaching, I find, can be a series of interesting ideas. And that's not how I wanna teach.

JR: Okay.

NG: I want you, when you've come, and then you walk out and your wife says, "What was that about today?" I want there to be a really clear

sentence that you can say, “It was about—” Mmm. And I want to be so clear in my teaching that you can articulate that.

JR: Mmmhmm.

NG: So what that demands of me is that I’ve got to get really clear on that.

JR: Okay.

NG: I’ve got to get *crystal* clear on that, maybe a written out sentence of this is my point. And then what’s gonna flow out of that is my outline, because I want my outline to all serve my main point. The saves me from going on a bunch of rabbit trails in my writing. It helps me with, you know, a lot of times because we’ve done all this great research, we have so much more material than we can ever put in. And so if it doesn’t serve my main point, if it doesn’t drive toward what I’m calling people to do, to think, to believe, to accept the way I’m calling them to respond, it’s easy for me to say — not necessarily easy, but clearer to me — okay, I’m just gonna have to set that aside. That’s not making it in. Because it’s not getting me where I wanna go. So I have to have this really clear sense of what my main message is in this chapter or this message. And so that’s where I really flip the switch. That’s when I move from the research to— because then I’ve got my main point, and then my subpoints are flowing out of that. And then I’m beginning to think to myself... sometimes I actually write the conclusion at the very beginning? Because once again, it’s setting a target for me?

JR: Yeah.

NG: I know where I’m headed.

JR: Uh huh.

NG: And then I have to figure out how am I gonna get into it. How am I gonna set it up for people that they care to learn or they care to take the

journey with me of the story or whatever it is. And I think it's gotta, it's gotta resonate with them in a way that it connects with a question they've had, with an experience they've had, with a need they have. So sometimes coming up with an introduction that does that takes a really long time.

JR: Yeah.

NG: Maybe a few walks in the park. Maybe a few conversations with husband.

JR: Yeah right. Yeah.

NG: And that... it can't just be, you know like, tell a joke at the beginning. I want *that* to be actually what drives people through my points to what I'm calling them to and where I'm landing in this main point that I'm having. I want all that to work together.

JR: And so this— one thing I may not have understood. The main point you're talking about...

NG: Yes.

JR: Does that develop as you're speaking? Or are you saying—

NG: Noooo....

JR: — before you speak?

NG: It develops at the very beginning before I even create that chapter or that talk!

JR: Right. Cause I'm trying to unders—

NG: Yeah, let me give you an example.

JR: Yeah. Let's hear it.

NG: Maybe that will help. Umm... so I'm thinking about... a talk on Paul.

JR: Okay.

NG: That is in my most recent book called Saints and Scoundrels. And so it's the final chapter, and... so here's Paul. And I don't think we tend to think of him as a scoundrel. We would think of him more as a Saint Paul.

JR: Yeah.

NG: But, you know my... so the way I started the chapter was if you asked people in the first century right after Jesus, "Who is the last person you think will ever become a Christian?" They would've said Saul of Tarsus. And then I walk people through why they would've thought that. You know, understanding Saul and his hatred. I wanted them to feel what I read about in Acts 8 and 9, that he was breathing threats and murder.

JR: (chuckles) Yeah.

NG: You know? I want them to feel that. But all of this is leading to my main point, which I had discovered that was really centered in this verse in 1 Timothy where he calls himself the worst — or in other translations, the chief, or another translation, "the foremost of sinners." Then he says why God saved him as that chief, foremost chief of sinners. That he would be made an example of — and the way I put it in normal terms was an example of the generosity of the grace of Jesus toward the worst of sinners. And this means that the last person you ever thought would become a Christian, whether it's someone in your family, or someone on the news, or even in the mirror... that is the very person that God's grace is enough to save, and that he loves to save.

JR: Mmhm.

NG: So it's not until I've got to that clarity of the point of the passage and gonna be the point of my talk — *then* I can go back and put the whole thing together.

JR: Yeah.

NG: Is that helpful?

JR: Sure! So let's talk about the difference between writing a talk and the difference between writing a chapter in a book.

NG: Okay! Well, um... I was in a conversation with someone just the week before last, a well known pastor that I was interviewing for my podcast, and he was making that point, that a talk is not writing. And I know that is what everybody says, and I think that is likely the case for a lot of writers and speakers...

JR: Uh huh.

NG: Maybe I have fooled myself into thinking that I am a little bit different from that? But honestly, my chapters, I am talking to someone, kind of like you said you were talking to Andrew Osenga. But... my talks and my writing is— you'd have a hard time finding much difference there. I think the good thing about that is I hear from a lot of people who say to me, "I felt like you were just talking to me."

JR: Uh huh.

NG: So... (pause) for me I— there *isn't* a huge difference.

JR: Well you know, I—

NG: Maybe until after my editors get a hold of it.

JR: Yeah, right.

NG: (chuckles)

JR: Well, I was gonna ask the question about editors, but I do think just from knowing you as a person and reading what you write, it does feel like you have a consistent voice. Right?

NG: Good! I think that's good.

JR: The written Nancy sounds like this Nancy. So that's good. Not everybody gets there. Have you ever had an editor come back to you and say, um... "This might work for a talk, but it's not working here?" Have they ever said that?

NG: No.

JR: Really? Mmkay. 'Cause I've helped pastors and sort of public speakers with books before, and sometimes there is a huge gap.

NG: Huge gap. I have done that too with other people's writings, and feel that huge gap too.

JR: Yeah. Because that—

NG: So... some of that has to do with humor especially. Like I can think of one particular person that I was maybe going to maybe help him write a book, and the big issue was how do you make his humor come across? And the uh... the project didn't end up happening, and maybe that was for the best, because that would have been a challenge.

JR: Yeah. I think— I do think that there is um... so as you said humor...

there are speakers who... they're effectiveness, um, derives in large part from a charisma that is not something that...

NG: Translates?

JR: Is not something that comes through onto a page. So if I were a charismatic speaker, and I'm telling you a story about something that happened to me, and you're eating out of my hand... when I put that on paper for somebody who doesn't know me... I just don't care. I mean, I remember helping somebody with a book once, like, I don't care about any of these stories, because I don't know you. And if we were in the same room and you had been my pastor, I might have found this fascinating.

NG: Or because I'm so... I'm on your team.

JR: Right. Yeah, yeah.

NG: I'm with you. So you know, I get a lot of — I'm sure you probably get a lot more than me, people who come and say, "I wanna write a book." You know... howwww do I get started writing a book? I don't know anything about writing, um... but I've got this story or whatever. Some of my first advice is always... try to write an article about it, or try writing a chapter about it, and see how it's received and welcomed by people who don't know you.

JR: Mmhm.

NG: Because I do think a lot of times people have an incredible experience, and people who know them, who see what they write on social media or whatever, they're saying, "You should write a book!"

JR: Yeah.

NG: What they mean is, your experiences are significant. And maybe they

mean, and the lens through which you're able to articulate some significant things about it in writing are helpful or meaningful. But really the big question in regards to publishing is... does anybody who doesn't know you... are they gonna be drawn to it? Are they helped by it? Are they interested in it? And so that's a major hurdle between somebody with an interesting story and somebody who that story can become a published book. Especially by a commercial publisher.

JR: Yeah. You should write this down for your grandkids...

NG: That's very different, isn't it?

JR: Yeah. And that's *very* legitimate! Right?

NG: Totally!

JR: I wish everybody would write down everything for their grandkids!

NG: Well, my first book — honestly, I was about something I didn't think anybody would ever publish. And I had to make the decision, Is this going to be a worthwhile effort for me if it's only for me and if nobody ever publishes it. And for that project I determined, yes it is. I need to get solid on these truths at this point in my life that the discipline of writing it out in such a way that is so clear I can explain it to somebody else, that's gonna prove beneficial to me even if it never gets published. But for many people, they might start out thinking that's the case, but once they put the work into it, the reality that nobody wants to publish it is crushing.

JR: Seth Godin talks about the Smallest Viable Audience, you know, when he says when you are making something... you know, try to come up with a number. What is the smallest number of people that would be worth it for me to do this. And he's talking about money.

NG: Right.

JR: Basically, if you've got an idea that you can sell, you know, what's the smallest number of people that you can sell to and still survive? Now, in writing, very few of us sell enough of anything to survive. And so, um, the — but I think it's a really helpful exercise to say what's the smallest number of people to read this for it to be worth it. And as you said, once you get into it, you might discover that number is larger than you thought. Cause it might be—

NG: (whispers) Or smaller.

JR: Well, I'm just saying that the number of people that you might put the effort into...

NG: (chuckles) Yeah.

JR: Well, anyway. Alright... so... are we done talking about public speaking? Is there any insight that you've gotten about public speaking that has influenced and impacted your writing? I mean, you already talked about this to a certain degree.

NG: Yeah, I think that sense of what connects is surprising. For example, I've got a book coming out this year called *God Does His Best Work with Empty*. And one of the reasons I'm writing a book on this is that I used that line in an earlier book or message. First of all, I had used it— my husband and I lead weekend retreats for couples who have lost children. And for the past ten years, I've used this in a message to them, talking about the empty place in their lives that they feel like will never be filled.

JR: Mmhm.

NG: And I've used the statement, God act— you think your emptiness is your greatest problem, but God looks at this empty place in your life, and he sees it as your greatest opportunity, because God does his best work with that. So I've it resonate there.

But then I used it in a book I wrote a couple years ago called *Even Better than Eden*, and when I gave that mess— that’s the line that most gets tweeted and pictures of it circled in Instagram...

JR: (chuckles) Yeah.

NG: And people telling me after— I mean, the first time I gave the message, I just saw it! The women, they were coming up to me afterwards saying, empty... that’s me. And this idea that God could work in my emptiness. Sooooo that’s what actually then led me to, okay, there’s something here, but I discovered it mostly from saying it, and seeing what happens in a room and amongst people. And so then that became the basis for a book.

JR: Yeah. I love it.

NG: That I wanted to explore that idea.

JR: Mmhm. Mmhm. Great. Okay, we’re about to run out of time, and I still haven’t gotten to something that I really wanted to talk to you about. And that is, as a Bible teacher, can you talk to me about a way that Scripture has fired your imagination or you know... let’s... there’s... if you need me to ask you a different way, I can do that.

NG: Well... I don’t think of myself as very imaginative. Although... maybe I am. (chuckles) When I think of that book *Even Better Than Eden*, each chapter I’m tracing the whole story of the Bible through the lens of a particular theme. And... so it’s very much based on Scripture, so when I think about “imagination” I think making up stuff?

JR: Right.

NG: And... so, imagination I think is more than that in the sense of I’m drawing a big picture...

JR: But the definition for imagination is it's...

NG: Yeah, let me hear it.

JR: It's it's... being able to see something that's truer than what's in front of your eyeballs.

NG: Yes.... well...

JR: So when you were talking about Saul "breathing threats and murder."

NG: (exhales) Yeah...

JR: So, we've got Paul in whichever letter saying "I am the chief of sinners"... is that Timothy?

NG: Yes.

JR: Um... that is, that's... an interesting image?

NG: But hard for us to imagine.

JR: Right.

NG: Do you really mean that, Paul? We don't think so. You're just exaggerating.

JR: And then, "breathing threats and murder..."

NG: (exhales) Feel that, don't we?

JR: Yeah, and you having the vision to see that... obviously, you're not the first person to see that.

NG: No! But very much what—

JR: That's an imaginative act.

NG: Well, and I was trying to imagine, okay, so what's this look like? He's got this letter — and I wrote it this way — he's got this letter in his pocket from the Jewish synagogue leaders. And he's on his way to Damascus, and he's gonna present it to the synagogue there...

JR: Mmhmm.

NG: And he's gonna say, okay, start giving me some names. Who are the people who show up at your synagogue who are talking about Jesus. And then he's gonna go to their homes and wake them up in the middle of the night and grab mom and dad, and he's gonna put them in chains, and in chains he's gonna march them back to Jerusalem, where *if* they make it through that trip, they're gonna be put to death. So... I suppose that required some imagination.

JR: It did.

NG: Did it not? Cause not all of that is in the text, and yet it's indicated in the text. But I do think my goal for readers — and my goal in that book so much was I feel like a lot of these biblical characters were stuck on the felt boards of people's minds, that we— they're stories we heard in Sunday school, characters we learned about in Sunday school, if you went to Sunday school, that just became very one-dimensional. So I suppose it required imagination to draw out, okay, well, what made Saul — who became Paul — what made him so hateful?

JR: Yeah.

NG: What was it that in his life, in his— and for Saul, it was actually his understanding of the Jewish Scriptures. You know? Yeah, it wasn't that he

didn't know the Scriptures. No. He knew them a whole lot better than you and I do. But it's the way he read and understood them, and so that means, okay, how is that gonna change— and I realized, okay, it's gotta be a revela— Jesus has to reveal himself. Which of course he did.

JR: Yeah. So you've gotta stop thinking of yourself as a person who's not imaginative, because that was a very imaginative...

NG: Okay, I appreciate it. Well se, I think of myself more, rather than imaginative, as curious. Are those two things related? Maybe?

JR: Maybe. Yeah.

NG: I mean, what really prompted this most recent book is there were people that I was just curious about! Like John the Baptist, eating locusts and honey.

JR: (chuckles)

NG: And he's out there in the wilderness where there are, you know... there's no Chick-fil-A and there's no bathrooms, and all these people from the cities are going out there in the wilderness to hear him speak. So is it because they love his message? Well, they couldn't have.

JR: (laughs) Yeah.

NG: Because his message is like “the axe is being laid to the root of the tree” and “the fire is getting kindled” and repent! You must repent! And so he's saying everything about your life has to change. That's what repentance means. That couldn't have been a welcome message. So, for me, I think okay this begins with curiosity. I want to understand what was so compelling about him and... what is this... why is it that here's John the Baptist, and when he's still in his mother's womb, he recognizes Jesus, who's in Mary's womb.

What is it with this John the Baptist when he sees Jesus walking toward him, he says, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.” He sees this in Jesus, but then he’s in prison, and he sends his disciples to Jesus asking, “Are you the one?”

JR: Yeah... wow.

NG: So it was my curiosity, how did those things transpire in terms of his confidence about who Jesus was, calling people to repentance because the king is coming, but then getting to this place wondering Jesus, are you who I thought you were? And so it was my own curiosity about that that becomes part of a book.

JR: I never thought about imagination and curiosity being tied, but the way you’re talking about it there... the only way you can answer those questions... it requires imagination. And I don’t mean you’re making stuff up. I mean to envision...

NG: You’ve got to think through what is being clearly revealed. Try not—try to stay faithful to it, seek to stay faithful to it. But yet fill in... maybe the imagination comes in just making them full-orbed people.

JR: Mmhm.

NG: People with... what shaped what their motives are. And their feelings, whether that’s solid confidence in who Christ is, skepticism about who he is... um... affirmed determination that he is not who he says he is. But what shapes that? I think that was really the case for me — I wrote about Zacchaeus — so I’m thinking about Zacchaeus. We know him as, you know...

JR: The wee little man.

NG: Wee little man.

JR: That was my favorite Bible story when I was little.

NG: Was it!

JR: I just *loved* it.

NG: But I wondered... why does he want to see Jesus?

JR: Yeah.

NG: And... so it's through Scriptural study to realize, oh, so there's another tax collector who left everything to follow him. Does Zachaeus say there must be something about Jesus that would make leaving this money-making behind interesting. But then I wondered did he also hear the story Jesus told? I mean, because in his day, tax collectors were always the butt of the joke, and Pharisees were always the heroes. But here's about this story Jesus told...

JR: (laughs)

NG: Where actually it's the Pharisee that goes away, you know. And the tax collector, this publican, is lifted up as the kind of person who can have fellowship with him. And he hears Jesus has parties with tax collectors. I don't know the answer to that! But I guess there's some imagination in asking the question, are these the things that shaped in him this desire, I wanna see Jesus?

JR: Yeah. Alright, I could talk to you all day, but... we're running out of time.

NG: You have more important people coming? Is that it?

JR: But I tell you what, if... what you can do is invite me to one of your parties, and then we can talk some more. We can finish the conversation.

NG: (laughs) The table is full! I'm sorry!

JR: So... next question. Last question. I always have to end with this. Who are the writers who make you want to write?

NG: Well, the truth is, when I come upon a writer who makes me want to write — I'm embarrassed to tell you this — but I think the reality is I get their book and it sits on the shelf, and I don't wanna read it because I've read some of their stuff before, and I know reading their book is going to make me feel less than. And I think I want to be that good of a writer. And — cause I don't actually think of myself as a writer. I know I'm on a podcast about writers only because I have written books. I think of myself as a Bible teacher, and that writing is a method through which. But when I read a beautifully crafted sentence and paragraph in a book, I think to myself, wow. That person's a writer. I'm not a writer. So, I tend to feel intimidated.

There would be certain... theological writers that don't necessarily write like that. But that I think more, I wanna understand the Scriptures that deeply to write like that.

JR: Gotcha. Who are they?

NG: And so... you know, someone like Greg Beale who understands Biblical theology, which I'm seeking to understand more and more of. Someone who has that kind of deep understanding. I want that.

JR: Yeah.

NG: But I can think of a book I did put off reading last summer. I was so glad when I finally opened it up! A book by my friend Jen Pollock Michel. And she wrote a book on paradox. And I just knew it would be brilliant and interesting, but also beautifully written. And I love that.

JR: Yep, she's....

NG: And I did end up thinking, wow, I wish I could put together some sentences and paragraphs like that. And ideas like that.

JR: You'll have to listen to The Habit Podcast next Monday.

NG: Are you gonna talk to her?

JR: It's her. Yeah.

NG: Awesome! I bet she wasn't sitting across from you though.

JR: She was not.

NG: Okay.

JR: Alright. Hey, thank you so much for being here.

NG: Thank you so much, this was so fun!

JR: And uh, I hope you have a great time at Trader Joes.

NG: Trader Joe's is the place to be, is it not?

(THEME MUSIC FADES UP)

JR: (laughs) Trader Joe's is great!

NG: But take your own bags... they're gonna look down on you if you don't...

JR: Well yeah. Have you been to the one over in... (inaudible)

NG: I haven't!

(conversation fades out)

(THEME MUSIC)

DREW MILLER: The Rabbit Room is partnered with Lipscomb University to make this podcast possible. Lipscomb has graciously given us access to their recording studio in the Center for Entertainment and Arts Building. We're so grateful for their sponsorship, their encouragement, and the good work they do in Nashville.

Special shout-out as well to Jess Ray for letting us use her song "Too Good" as part of this podcast. Visit jessraymusic.com to hear more of her beautiful songs.

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(THEME MUSIC OUT)