

The Bible: Made for TV?

It's been called the television event of 2013. Yet behind the scenes of *The Bible*, a 10-hour History Channel series produced by reality TV king **Mark Burnett** and his wife, *Touched by an Angel* star **Roma Downey**, the Holy Spirit was already at work, proving that God's Word will not return void.

The scene is set. It's the end of a beautiful day in Jerusalem, and **Jesus** and His disciples have set up camp just outside town. As the sun sets, a mysterious figure makes his way into their midst. The man's name is Nicodemus, and his presence causes a stir. He is a member of the Jewish ruling council, a group of religious leaders that has grown contentious in its relationship with Jesus and His growing mass of followers.

But Nicodemus comes in peace.

Jesus gently leads the man away from the group, and the two engage in one of the most powerful conversations found in the Gospels.

"Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher who has come from God," Nicodemus tells Jesus. "For no one could perform the signs You are doing if God were not with him."

Jesus replies, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."

"How can someone be born when they are old?" a confused Nicodemus asks. "Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!"

Jesus explains that Nicodemus must be "born in the Spirit" and then uses another analogy to illustrate this divine truth. "The wind blows wherever it pleases," Jesus says.

At the very moment Jesus speaks the word "wind," a gust of air

blows through the village. It sways the tree branches side to side and gently tousles the Savior's hair.

After a brief pause, as if to allow Nicodemus to take in this moment, Jesus continues His thought. "You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

Supernatural FX

It's impossible to know exactly what happened when that scene unfolded some 2,000 years ago in Jerusalem. The passage found in the third chapter of John isn't nearly as descriptive in its account. So when Burnett and Downey worked with directors and set designers to create a dramatic retelling of the story, they had a measure of creative license available to them.

For instance, that scene, along with most of the project, was shot in Morocco rather than the Holy Land, and many special effects were used to create some of the more challenging visual moments in the biblical narrative, such as the unfolding of Creation, the parting of the Red Sea and the Day of Pentecost.

But on this particular day, when filming the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, there were no plans for such filmmaking magic. It was just an average day on the set. In fact, it had been still all day. There were no hints of movement within the atmosphere.

And then, just as actor Diogo Morgado spoke that word "wind" from the script, a palpable change filled the air.

"In that moment, God said, 'Here I am,'" Downey recounts. "The wind blew all through the village. And the actors, Diogo and Simon Kunz, had the presence of mind to stay in the moment. They didn't cut. They didn't break the scene. They just held the moment. It was extraordinary. And all of us who were watching, we could feel the hair stand up on our arms. It was clear that something supernatural and wonderful had just

arrived and shown up.”

Burnett has experienced countless surreal moments as the creator and executive producer of iconic shows such as *Survivor*, *Celebrity Apprentice* and *The Voice*. Nothing, however, could prepare him for that encounter with the **Holy Spirit** that day.

“The entire crew got chills,” Burnett says. “There was no way that the wind doesn’t blow without the Holy Spirit, especially on the word ‘wind.’ When he said the word ‘wind,’ it just blew. It was like, ‘Whoa!’”

Finding Jesus

When *The Bible* debuted on March 3, it marked the culmination of more than three years of development and production. And throughout the process of filming this five-part, 10-hour miniseries, **God** made His presence known.

According to Downey, one of the most powerful instances took place away from the cameras.

“Clearly, we had to cast the role of Jesus. He was the most important cast member. He’s our leading man. We had a few actors lined up that we thought would be possibilities, but we truthfully didn’t have the one actor that we thought would just provide all of the characteristics that we were looking for. We wanted a strong actor but one who could also give us qualities of humility—someone who could be the lion and the lamb.”

Downey, famous for her starring role in the television series *Touched by an Angel*, started praying and put out requests for church groups and other believers she knew to do the same.

Back in Morocco, a production team was scouting locations when one of the crew members heard about the search for an actor to play Jesus. He remembered an actor who had been in Morocco recently for a different role, whom he thought might be

suitable. So he employed some crafty investigative work to uncover the actor's identity and turned up Morgado, a Portuguese actor with mostly European film credits to his name.

After viewing Morgado's demo tape, Burnett and Downey requested a meeting. Though they loved what they saw on the demo reel, they knew they couldn't cast the most important role in the series without meeting the actor in person. After some initial confusion on each party's location, which led Downey and Burnett to believe they'd missed their opportunity, they learned Morgado was in Los Angeles. They scheduled an appointment at their home.

"We heard the garden gate open, and Mark and I looked out at the pathway, and walking toward us was Diogo Morgado," Downey remembers. "I turned to my husband and said, 'There he is.' And it was him. And he was wonderful."

Downey describes Morgado's performance as "extraordinary" and feels he was "perfect in this role." Others agree, including Christian businessman and filmmaker Mart Green.

"Jim Caviezel did an incredible job showing us the last hours of Jesus' life in *The Passion*," Green says. "But in *The Bible* series, we get a more complete look at the characteristics of Christ. I believe that this portrayal of Jesus is the one that the church will envision for the next 20 years."

For Downey, it was Morgado's ability to capture Jesus' strength and sensitivity that told her he was the one for the job. Even more importantly, it was his uncommon humility.

"He's a very good-looking actor, but he doesn't have any of that narcissism that usually comes with actors who know they're very handsome," she says. "He has a natural kindness and compassion and sensitivity, and yet he's strong and he's well built. He has all of the qualities that we hoped he would have and then some. I felt the hand of the divine in helping

us find him.”

Burnett recalls another instance of the miraculous during the filming process.

“After we shot the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist,” he shares, “somehow a piece of Jesus’ costume got lost in this massive lake. It’s really critical because you’re shooting for five months—you’ve got to keep control of everything you’ve got. Things are very irreplaceable. A couple of days later, a local found that piece of costume and brought it all the way back to us. He had found it miles downstream. How would anyone even know it was ours? We thought we were never going to see that part of the costume again—ever—and it came back.”

Burnett says he is convinced it was the Holy Spirit acting in all of these instances and still others left untold. He felt it within his spirit, and the physical occurrences that happened almost daily left no doubt God’s hand was on the project.

“But it’s not surprising when you think about it,” Burnett adds. “What were we doing 24 hours a day with hundreds of people? We were working on the Word of God. And we had hundreds of more people praying every day.”

The Big Picture

With production wrapped, the prayer efforts have shifted to the ultimate, twofold purpose behind the miniseries: make a statement to Hollywood and reach the most people possible with the gospel message.

With that first goal in mind, Burnett, who knows a few things about generating massive television audiences, sees a huge opportunity for the Christian community to send a powerful statement by supporting this mass media endeavor.

“What really matters is that the most number of people watch

on March 3 and stay with it every week,” he explains. “What that does is send a massive message to people who are involved in all forms of media. We want them to say, ‘Whoa! This is a tight community. It’s a big community. And they really care about this story!’”

To rally the proverbial troops, Burnett and Downey organized multiple events that gave influential Christian leaders a chance to preview clips from the series. Joel Osteen, senior pastor at Lakewood Church in Houston, spent time on the set and “witnessed firsthand the genius of Mark Burnett and Roma Downey” and “the deep and abiding passion they possess for God’s Word.”

Bishop T.D. Jakes describes *The Bible* as being “unlike any other film or miniseries” he has ever encountered and says it “draws us to the divine Author.”

It’s that last statement that excites Burnett and Downey. The couple hopes the series leads non-believers into a first-time relationship with God and brings back to God those who have become disenfranchised with the church.

“I talk to Mart Green a lot about why Jesus told stories,” Burnett says. “Mart told me that he feels like that’s what I was supposed to do—tell stories—and allow the churches to untie the knots.”

“It’s the most exciting part of this film,” Downey adds. “I believe that the faithful will find the show. We also want to have people who were churchied but have fallen away to return through this show. But I’m most excited about the possibility that this series can go out into the corners of the world and speak to people who we’ll never know their name, and their lives will be impacted and their hearts opened and their lives changed for eternity.”

Burnett and Downey are also intrigued to discover how their non-Christian friends will respond. That diverse group

includes Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Sikhs and atheists, among others.

“Within our circle, we have a lot of respect for each other despite our differing opinions of religion, politics and social issues,” Burnett says. “But we live in a creative world, and our job was to make the most compelling and visual storytelling of the Bible. That’s how our community in Hollywood and our close friends will judge the project and connect to the stories. That was our job. I feel like we’ve done that.”

Despite Burnett’s and Downey’s individual and collective name recognition, they unequivocally agree that *The Bible* miniseries is the most important project to which they will ever be attached.

“It’s way bigger than us,” Downey says. “We were just the people used to do it. We stepped up. We answered the call. We did it. We brought our talents and our strengths. We combined our love and our energy together, and we put together a great team of people, and then we had faith in the project. The Bible is a living book. We’ve been able to breathe fresh visual life into it and bring that to this generation.”

Chad Bonham is a journalist, author and broadcast producer who has worked in mass media for more than 20 years. He served as the contributing editor for *New Man* magazine for three years and recently released the book *Life in the Fairway*.

ONLINE EXCLUSIVE: Watch a moving preview of *The Bible* miniseries at