

'The Chosen' Series Provides a Rushing River in the Middle of a Media Desert

Even though we have thousands of television channels today, and even more streaming options online, many Christians are perplexed by today's lack of wholesome entertainment options. Families are avoiding platforms like Netflix, Showtime or HBO because of explicit content—and current TV programs seem to be pushing an agenda that's hostile to Christian values.

Maybe that's one reason *The Chosen* seemed like water in a media desert when it began airing in 2020. No one expected an obscure, crowd-funded TV series about Jesus Christ to be the sleeper hit of the pandemic era. But God is using a creative team of producers, actors and screenwriters to re-introduce the message of the gospel to a new audience that has never heard the greatest story ever told.

As the COVID-19 pandemic stalled Hollywood productions and closed theaters last year, viewers migrated to the small screen to watch a fascinating retelling of the gospel. Some see this hit drama as a bona fide miracle, not unlike the miracles of Jesus that are depicted in each episode.

Pentecostal leader Samuel Rodriguez is one of many Christian leaders who have given *The Chosen* five stars and two thumbs up. “[*The Chosen*] offers viewers a glimpse into what the daily and extraordinary life of Jesus Christ and His disciples might have looked like 2,000 years ago and invites the viewer into His story,” Rodriguez told Charisma. “As a producer myself, I’ve seen the power film can have to promote the Lamb’s agenda of love, truth and justice. *The Chosen* does that in an incredibly compelling way.”

Dallas Jenkins, son of bestselling author Jerry B. Jenkins

(*Left Behind*) and director of the faith-based comedy *The Resurrection of Gavin Stone*, is the creator, director and co-writer of the multiseason drama. Raising \$10 million, season one, available to watch on its own *Chosen mobile app*, is the highest crowdfunded TV or film project of all time. The series also earned a 100 score on the Rotten Tomatoes entertainment review site and the highest-rated faith film project on the Internet Movie Database.

Viewed by nearly 50 million people, the show's success has been attributed to its unique way of highlighting lives impacted by Christ. In the first eight episodes, viewers meet the supporting characters of Jesus' ministry before they encounter Him, creating dramatic tension and highlighting the transformation their encounters provoke. Matthew is collecting taxes. Mary Magdalene is vexed by demons. Those familiar with the biblical account will know what might happen next, but *The Chosen* paints a well-crafted prologue grounded in realism while delivering intrigue.

"Jesus doesn't make for a great main character of a drama," says Jenkins, who spoke with *Charisma* while working on season two. "With any good drama, the protagonist has to learn something and has to overcome some challenges to become a better person. Jesus is perfect. He starts perfect. So one of the things that has made it difficult for Jesus movies and miniseries is that Jesus is the main character. But if you can see Jesus in the eyes of those who actually met Him, you can be changed and impacted in the same way they were."

Like a traditional television show, *The Chosen* presents an ensemble of characters that viewers get to know across several episodes and seasons, making the show "much more impactful," according to the director.

Messianic Rabbi Jason Sobel (*Mysteries of the Messiah; The Rock, the Road, and the Rabbi*) who serves alongside a Catholic priest and evangelical scholar as a consultant on the series,

assists in providing what Jenkins calls “guardrails” to ensure the stories—some of which occur outside of scriptural accounts—authentically reflect the culture and time period. Sobel, who declares “the Holy Spirit’s on it,” credits a renewed personal zeal for spiritual authority to his involvement with the show.

“Seeing some of the powerful encounters that occur, whether it’s casting the demon out of Mary, whether it’s the turning the water into wine, the great catch of fish, the healing of the leper, those things are just powerful,” he says. “It’s powerful to see on the screen, to really understand the power and authority that Jesus carried and the power and authority that we’re still called to carry today to do the ‘greater things than these’ than He did that He said we could do.”

Sobel also believes the “richness of the Jewish context” is critical, specifically focusing on the Jewish wedding, the sacredness of the Sabbath and “what that world would have looked like.”

“I think people like the Jewishness, the authenticity of it, the creativity of it as well, that it’s quality faith-based entertainment that’s impactful,” he says.

Miracles On and Off Camera

The show highlights the miracles that accompanied the life of Christ, but those miracles also extend off camera. The pivotal moment of the first four episodes, the “miracle of the fish,” was plagued by a variety of challenges. A few days out from filming, the boat was still being built, the lake wasn’t at the proper levels, and there were no fish.

“I was powerless, and it’s a scary place to be where you’re powerless,” Jenkins says.

The morning of filming, while the paint on the boat was still wet and every possible avenue to provide the fish had fallen

through, the crew relied on a last-minute attempt. The visual effects team worked with a “green burrito,” a large green tarp where they would render computer-generated imagery fish. After several less than desirable and unrealistic results, one of the artists had a middle of the night epiphany that pulled all the efforts together and created the epic visual moment.

“It turned out that a scene about the miracle of the fish became its own miracle of the fish,” Jenkins says. “God again provided a solution that was better than the plans that we had.”

It’s one of multiple times where God has intervened in the project, providing miracle moments for the crew. Jenkins documents many of them in a dedicated YouTube channel for the project, where he shares behind-the-scenes stories for more than 700,000 subscribers with more than 44 million views.

“One of the more beautiful things about this project is how God has just consistently put us in this spot where we’re at the edge of the Red Sea, and the only way forward is if God opens the waters, and He has done so over and over and over again,” Jenkins said.

Expanding upon the impact of *The Chosen* and applying principles to the lives of those watching, Sobel is also doing a companion teaching series (see sidebar) airing on TBN, using clips from the project. The rabbi and bestselling author, a former hip-hop DJ from Brooklyn led to the Lord by *The Harbinger II* author Jonathan Cahn, says for him, the commanding performance of lead actor Jonathan Roumie is transformative.

“I love Jonathan’s portrayal, how He really reveals the Father’s heart,” he says. “I think that’s really powerful to show His compassion, His care, His concern.”

Roumie deflects those accolades, insisting that anything good from his portrayal is driven by divine intervention and

keeping his ego in check. In an interview with the *Rick and Bubba* radio show this summer, he explained the process behind portraying the Son of God, which includes getting out of the way as much as possible and being directed by the Holy Spirit.

“It’s not about me; it’s about serving God; it’s about emptying the role, emptying myself of all the things that would get in the way of allowing the Spirit to reach people,” he says. “The way I prepare is I do a lot of praying. I do a lot of reading and meditating on the Scriptures. I try to listen to what it is that God’s telling me as I’m looking at these scripts.”

Jenkins and Roumie met seven years ago on a smaller film about Jesus, and the director was blown away by his performance, considering it the finest portrayal of Christ he’d ever seen. The two became close friends through a series of other projects, culminating in *The Chosen*.

“I think we both feel a tremendous weight of trying to portray Jesus, and we both had to learn how to empty ourselves and surrender,” Jenkins says. “I think the reasons behind the impact *The Chosen* is having are Jonathan’s willingness to portray it in this manner and surrender to the process and to the Holy Spirit’s leading.”

Faithful in Small Things

Although Roumie deflects praise and attention based on his performance, Jenkins also has a grounded perspective on the series’ success. Leading into the 2016 release of *The Resurrection of Gavin Stone*, the future of the aspiring writer-director was being mapped out with long-range plans of releasing more faith-based films through Lionsgate Studios. When that film didn’t perform as expected, those offers dried up, and his future in entertainment hit a roadblock.

“In just a couple hours, I went from being a director with a very bright future to a director with no future,” he says. “I

got to a place where I was ready to not even be in the business anymore, if that's what God wanted; I just didn't want to be disappointed anymore. And I felt like God maybe was trying to tell me I just didn't belong in this business."

Instead, Jenkins directed a small film about Jesus for his local church, which went viral and provided the fuel that would become *The Chosen*.

"Even though it felt like a significant step down, I just wanted to do what God had for me," he says. "And I wasn't worried about the future and wasn't worried about the results or the size of it or anything like that."

Viewed in more than 180 countries, *The Chosen* has united believers and garnered praise from different faith traditions and denominations. Although it has been translated into more than 70 languages, Jenkins recounts a story of a family in China who viewed the entire first season and connected with it even without being able to understand the dialogue. He's also been encouraged by reports of parents who have been able to bond with their pre-teen and teen children through the show.

The ministry of Jesus, he believes, is a unifier, and many of the theological disagreements that divide denominations and scholars are based on "things that took place after Jesus was here." With that in mind, *The Chosen* has become a common ground for many.

Considering the positive feedback and millions of views, Jenkins is intent to keep a measured look on the show's success. He's careful not to let that distract him from his mission: making *The Chosen* the best series it can be while remaining faithful to the Scriptures.

"The success is extraordinarily gratifying and beautiful, but I can't think about it when I'm writing on the blank page for season two or for season three," he says. "I still have to come up with new stuff. But I think it's an affirmation that

when we're focused on Jesus, He removes the scales from the eyes of those who are watching and is able to make an 8-year-old understand it in the same way a 60-year-old does."

New Faces and Challenges

Although seven seasons are planned for *The Chosen*, the immediate focus is the highly anticipated second season. In season one, the production was based in Utah and the already built Jerusalem backdrop and then moved to Texas for a smaller one. Now the production is "starting to build its own things," and the crew created its own "bubble" to continue filming even after the COVID-19 pandemic had shuttered many other sets.

"If there's an outbreak, we have to shut down, and no one wants that," Jenkins says. "So we have to kind of just stick together, and so having the opportunity to have a job when not everyone does during a time like this makes us all more grateful and certainly increases the intimacy."

At the end of season one, Jesus had just proclaimed that He was the Messiah, and He had a group of seven disciples. The new season will continue the story, adding new characters to the group and continuing the biblical account. With new people, new relationships are formed; some relationships are strained, and divisions are possible. Jesus' increasing popularity will also land Him in the crosshairs of other newcomers.

"There are also enemies coming, and people who are threatened," Jenkins says. "That increases the danger quite a bit."

If the "miracle of the fish" was a pivotal moment in season two, another well-known event will soon follow that will no doubt require its own divine intervention.

"We're probably going to be gathering 4,000 people in Texas in February to film Jesus preaching the Sermon on the Mount," he

says. "So that's its own big matzo ball sitting out there."

Whatever challenges and whatever response, for his part, Jenkins is laser-focused on producing seven seasons that cover the life of Christ and all of the major events in His life. He sees himself in the story, offering his own talents and abilities to God, who, in turn, does all the heavy lifting.

"When that boy gave Jesus five loaves and two fish, for him, that's where the transaction ended," he says. "Jesus deemed his gift worthy of acceptance. What happens after I produce a short film for my church is really none of my business. The success of *The Chosen* has been extraordinary. It's beautiful, and I'm grateful for it. But my story would be the same. If *The Chosen* did not have the same success; I would still be content to be wherever, wherever God wants me." {eo}

DeWayne Hamby is a pastor and journalist who covers faith-based entertainment. His column, "Reel Faith," can be found at

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