

The Bible (Unmuted) Transcript
Episode 2
Encountering Mystery – An Interview with Dale C. Allison
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Teacher: Matthew Halsted

Episode Summary:

In an age dominated by secularism and philosophical naturalism, the idea that people have supernatural experiences is often considered to be a relic of a bygone era. And yet, credible people still report such experiences. That's the subject of this episode, which features an interview with Dale C. Allison about his recent book, *Encountering Mystery: Religious Experience in a Secular Age*. In his book, Allison documents and discusses a range of religious experiences that people have reported -- including his own (which he shares in this interview). For students of the Bible, this topic is an important one to consider. The Bible is, after all, full of religious experiences. Allison's work on this subject will no doubt help modern people come to terms with a forgotten fact: There's more to reality than just physical reality.

About Dale C. Allison:

Dale C. Allison, Jr. is the Richard J. Dearborn Professor of New Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary. He earned his MA and PhD from Duke University. His academic research and publications include the historical Jesus, the Gospel of Matthew, Second Temple Judaism, and the history of the interpretation and application of biblical texts. Read more here: <https://www.ptsem.edu/people/dale-c-allison-jr>

Amazon page for *Encountering Mystery*: <https://www.amazon.com/Encountering-Mystery-Religious-Experience-Secular/dp/0802881882>

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Transcript:

0:35 Hey everybody. I am excited to share with you a conversation I had with Dr. Dale Allison. Dr. Allison is the Richard J Dearborn professor of New Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary. In this interview we chat about his recent book, *Encountering Mystery: Religious Experience in a Secular Age*. Now in his book, Dr. Allison documents a range of religious experiences that people report. In fact, he shares his experiences that he's had. In this conversation I ask him about all that. I ask him about a range of topics related to this subject. It's a fascinating conversation and at the end of the day I pray that it's encouraging to you and most of all I pray that builds up your faith.

1:20 **MH:** Well I am here with Dale Allison, a New Testament professor at Princeton Theological Seminary. Dale, welcome! How are you?

DA: I'm great today. Thank you. Happy to be here.

MH: Wonderful! Well, so I want to just dive right into my questions, if that's okay. So, just last year you published an exciting book called, *Encountering Mystery: Religious Experience in a Secular Age*. And in your book you document reports of the various experiences that people have from time to time and you even share personal stories of your own experiences. Before I get to those specifically, I want to start off by reading a quote that just hooked me. The quote goes this, "*Behind, beneath and beyond the mundane face of the world, and secreted within our daily lives, is some fundamental magical, mystical and affectionate reality.*" That comes from page 7 of your book, and it caught me. So I'm just curious, you mention the word mystical and magical there. And I like how you paired it with affectionate reality. I like that language too, but how can a statement like that be intelligible in an age of science? The age in which we live?

DA: Laughs. Well, okay so that's a big question....

MH: Sure

DA: So, what do you mean by age of science? You mean what scientists believe? Or what I was taught about science at school? I think that what I was taught as a student way back when, was quite limited and I was implicitly taught to be a reductionist. I was implicitly and sometimes explicitly taught to be a materialist. And that there was nothing beyond this world. I personally think that is an imperially falsified dogma, whose time, I hope, has gone. But in any case, I simply don't buy it. Okay, I don't buy it. So, my view is that science is wonderful, has much to teach us, but if you want to then want to turn science into the determination of everything that exists, I don't buy it. Science, especially laboratory science or empirical science, seems to me to be very limited to experimental procedures and things you could get hold of repeatedly. And a lot of life escapes that obviously.

MH: Right. Yeah. I would agree with that. I loved that quote and it hooked me. When I started reading your book, I couldn't put it down and it was on my radar for a little bit and so I finally picked it up. I think I read it over the Christmas break or something to that effect, and so it was wonderful. So, the words 'religious experience'. That might be difficult to define a little bit, but if you could take a stab at it, what would you say?

DA: So, so....I wouldn't even take a stab at it (chuckles). It's more than difficult to define. And so I was a philosophy major in college and I ran across Wittgenstein, and I remember his discussion of how we define nouns and we really can't do it most of the time, so we just talk about family resemblances. So, if you want to talk to me, I would just say religious experiences are the sorts of things that are in this book and they are the sorts of things that William James talked about in "*The Varieties of Religious Experience(s)*" The sort of experiences that many people attach religious meaning to. And that's going to vary from culture to culture and religion to religion. So, you know itself, that the word religion itself is the object of great debate and so on. So, I'm actually not that concerned with these debates. I think, maybe again, a little bit like Wittgenstein, we get along fine without being able to hammer out the details of our definitions. It just sort of, well, we sort of know close enough what this is; at least enough so that we can talk about it.

MH: Right. Yeah. No, I like that. I mean, I think that there's a certain sanctity to the whole experience itself that resist definition, pure description, and pure explanation. Yeah, I can get on board with that. I like that.

5:34 **DA:** I would also say that these experience that I'm talking about in this book typically carry great meaning. And once we get into the area of meaning, then you're into the area of subjectivity. And once you're into the area of subjectivity, then well, you've got all the issues that come with subjectivity. And you're out of the lab and you're out of nice, clean, clear definitions.

MH: Yeah. Yeah

DA: And also, if you're a Christian, then you're going to use the word God. And if you know anything about the tradition, then you know that God is mysterious, right? And you know that at the end of the day, we just say we can't quite figure that out, or we don't know that at all...I mean, how many sentences end with 'Well, it's a mystery'?

MH: (laughs) Yeah, that's good. I was just reading Thomas Aquinas yesterday and the day before...and just perusing through his musings on incarnation. And I think the best part is how he routinely says, "It's a mystery". You know, the mystery of the incarnation. Even as he tries to define it. So I appreciate that.

DA: Yeah, and also, he doesn't doesn't say it's a mystery because he's not smart... he's really smart! And he can't figure it out, right? So what's the hope for the rest of us poor shmucks.(chuckles)

MH: Right...exactly. That's good, that's really good. If I may, can I ask you if you don't mind sharing your own – some of your religious experiences that you've had? You don't have to tell all of the ones that are in your book, of course, but maybe some that stick out to you. I'm thinking there were a few at the beginning that you just jumped into which seemed to have a lot of meaning for you.

DA: Well, yeah. So...the first one which got me started down this road, and ultimately is why I do what I do today is what I start out with in the book. And before I share it with you, I do think it's important, apart from the details of this experience, to realize that these sorts of experiences can be overpowering and they can shape entire lives. And I really think, I honestly think, that my whole life grows out of this experience. I mean, my career grows out of it, what I chose to study grows out of it, the fact that I am incurably religious, or incurably Christian....these things grow out of it.

So the story is simply told, although I can't convey the reality of it. And in fact it actually sounds weird, but I was in my parent's backyard. I was sixteen years old. We were in Kansas and we could still see the stars at night. The city hadn't completely occluded them. I was just out there by myself, sitting on the back porch, maybe looking at the stars occasionally; probably planning what I was going to do that summer and then just out of nowhere, (which is pretty typical for these experiences – there's no preparation, there's no anticipation. I'm not trying to have an experience. I'm just all of a sudden interrupted by something from elsewhere. That's how it's experienced.), and as weird as this sounds, it seemed as though the stars left the firmament. They somehow descended and surrounded me. And they were somehow heralds of this something that was greater than they were. And while the stars – I have an image of the stars. I don't have any image of what they preceded or what they introduced, or what they were the forerunners of – but somehow, they are followed by this overwhelming affectionate, but very other transcendent, *something*. And of course, given my own education and where I was, I used the word G-O-D. And I thought, "Okay, this is God. This is what they mean...there really is something like this out here. People aren't just using a word." And so, it was overpowering and the main thought was just that this is reality, this is what really matters and everything else doesn't really matter, at least compared to this. All value is relatively compared to this which is the overwhelming reality. And it was almost like I was going through life sleeping and I finally woke up for this moment and this is the real thing. And you know, that's what got me started in what I do because I instantly wanted when it was done – and it didn't take long... twenty seconds maybe – I didn't know what to do. Because there was no commanding voice. It didn't say "Do A, then B, then C." It just was there and then it was gone. And I wanted to talk to people. And that means I wanted to talk to people about God. So I left my parent's church, much to their consternation (chuckles) and found people who had a place for this sort of experience.

10:52 Now the people I was with immediately interpreted it as a conversion experience which in retrospect I disagree with because that's not what it was. But it was intensification, a great intensification, of a faith that was already there. But as soon as I was in this other church, they were doing Bible this, and Bible that. Everything was the Bible. They were reading the Bible. So I just started into this and then connected my own experience quickly with the divinity in this text, and in the church. And so that's how I got started. Again, the details don't matter. And from one point of view, even if you're a skeptic, I would say it's still really important to recognize how overpowering these things can be. And even if the skeptic is right, they skeptic can't convince me because this was so real. It was so utterly real when I was inside it, that it was more real than me talking to you. I don't really know what to make of that. It sounds silly. But there must be some sort of reality button in your mind, or brain or spirit or something. And it got pushed and it said "Okay, normal perception." And it's almost platonic in retrospect. Like, I actually found the real things beyond, you know, material appearances. That's kind of how this was. And then....

MH: Just a quick question...I'm trying to picture what this must've seemed...you know like a visualization. You know, visually, where the stars coming near you? Or did it look like things were folding in or was it more realization?

DA: No almost like around me. Not in a circle, not in a form. It was just like they had sort of come down. Instead of being up there, they're down here. Now that makes no sense of course, because they are all gigantic balls of gas. And if one of them had come down, the planet would've been burned up. So that's not what's going on. My own view, which might be wrong, is that many of our visionary or mystical experiences are co-produced. By that I mean, that something comes to us and then we project or respond. Very much like some of the modern scientists tell us what vision is. This stuff comes into our eyes, and then it turns into chemicals, and then we magically have this theater in our mind that reproduces it somehow. And supposedly, in some sense, we are perceiving this thing in here which corresponds to stuff out there through some magical process I've never understood. But my point is, even normal perception seems to be, at least according to many these experts, a sort of projection that we project in response to, or we can, in response to things that are in coming from unordinary, non-ordinary sources, alright? So sometimes when people have visions, I think they are in contact with something beyond themselves, but the vision may...you know, you might see a dead person who is dressed in his bathrobe, you know, which is in the closet next to you. There is some kind of projection going on. You are participating in trying to make it intelligible to yourself. So that's the best I can do with that.

MH: Sure, no...that's super helpful. My background is in hermeneutics, and so there's always this war between a text centered approach, an author centered verses reader centered and I've just never bought the dichotomy, (laughs) you know? I feel like the readers do contribute something to the text and meaning. Not to say, we want to kill off the author necessarily. So anyway, I can definitely agree with you on that. And any philosopher – you know there has always been this realism, idealism, sort of thing. I have a background in philosophy too and so I totally get what you're saying on this front. There is this co-production, co-creation, of reality in a sense. And I can get on board with that.

And speaking of which, that was my follow-up question...you mention in your book that your experiences... that "you cannot but perceive and interpret the world but through them." I found that fascinating. What you're essentially saying it seems, is that they've become almost a hermeneutic for you. A hermeneutic for life, and how to interpret life...or your vocation, your career as a scholar... So just curious, from what you've seen and other reports, other people and their experiences, in what way do these experiences change a person's perspective about reality? Are there certain patterns that we can detect with respect to that?

16:20 **DA:** Okay, well...(laughs). For me, for example, let me give you two ways... and maybe I'm missing your question, so if I am please correct me. I'm not a mystic, but I've had some mystical experiences, right? And I've had two or three occasions in which I was overcome by this sense of transcendent love,

alright? And my sense was, this is reality. This is the ultimate. So, when I hear something like God is love, or read a text that says God is love, inevitably I read them through these experiences and I say, 'Oh yes! This isn't just wishful thinking. This actually incorporates some sort of conception of the way reality is.' So I feel it in a way that I don't think I would otherwise. Also, in this book, there's more than one place where I say certain impossible things happened to me, things that could not have happened according to many people. And that actually makes my life as an historian much more difficult because I was trained in a tradition where we dismissed all so-called miracles...all of them. We knew they didn't happen. The only question was how do you explain them away? Was this a hallucination? Was this a legend? Was this created on the basis of a text, or something like that? But I never bought it, in part because of my own experience, right? So I know that inexplicable things happen. I know that, whatever you want to call them, wonders, miracles, meta-normal events, they are part of the real world. So when I read them in the Bible when I read them, as an historian, I can't just say, 'I know that didn't happen'. I have to say, 'maybe so', just on the basis of empiricism. Not based on my theology, Christianity...just yeah! I know really strange things happen. Actually, I can see over your right shoulder and that you have Craig Keener's two-volume *Miracles*

MH Laughs – yeah

DA: So, that's an interesting collection. I think it's very helpful – it's a useful compilation. And when you have some of these things also in your own life, or you have them in the lives of people immediately around you, who tell you these things as they happen or immediately after they happen and you can quiz them and convince yourself that 'well, I think that really did happen', and that's not inexplicable...it certainly changes my mind as an historian, how I professionally do my work as an historian. So those are a couple of ways maybe, in which it this works like that. It also just means that if I read somebody who's trying to explain away all religious experience or all religious theology, in terms of their own reductionistic program, I just don't buy it, there's no chance I'm going to buy it. I might learn something from it, but I'm not going to buy it. I just don't know how to do that.

MH: Right. You know, I think of Paul. Of the Damascus Road experience, that served, in my opinion, as a hermeneutic of sorts. The way he... I think it helped him go back and look at Torah maybe a little differently than he had before...and of course the prophets and everybody too. So, I think that...it seems like these religious experiences that people have ...and I've had an experience that wasn't...I mean, you certainly can't reduce it down to a materialistic explanation by no means, either. And I agree with you, that that experience has opened up the door for me to believe other people in ways that I probably wouldn't have in the past. And so when I hear these stories, I think, 'yeah, I've had something similar.' I've only had one, I think only one experience, but it was enough. And it happened twenty-four years ago. I was very young. But it was very real. Just as real as you and me talking. Like you say. And it's allowed me to, I think, listen to other people better and their experiences....

20:55 **DA:** Well, actually I'll say this. It not only makes my work as an historian more difficult, because you know, the truth is that while I think incredible things happen, I also know that people do make up stories. And I do know that they misperceive. Right? So, it doesn't solve your problem historically. It just for me opens the possibilities that I can't dismiss certain things. But the problem is for me, the world...so people know who I am now. And they've known from my classes for a long time because I've lectured on these subjects. So, people come up and they've been telling me stories for years now. And my problem is, the world is so weird now to me, to the...that I don't know where to draw the line (laughs). It's just really strange. I have a completely different worldview than my college teachers did. And it's really interesting. More, I've been thinking some about David Hume recently and been reading some from the *Enquiries*. He looks around and he just sees natural law. That's what he sees. He claims that's what he see. And he doesn't see anything weird or unusual. And he then says that we'll judge everything by this world that I know that is around me. The problem is, that if I judge by the world I experience and all the testimony I've gotten, then I'm in a completely different place than David Hume. I'm trying to figure out, not whether

miracles happen, but how to distinguish between false miracles and true miracles, or worry about the problem of agency. Well, that happened but what the heck is the cause of that which is the biggest problem of all, right? So, ahhh...it radically changes things. Although, let me add something. This is a footnote. The person that I am in this book *Encountering Mystery*, is the person that I've always been, but it's not always been the public person I've been. So...ahh...I've been in academic circles where I wouldn't have said anything like what I'm saying today. It just would never have come up. And I didn't start saying most of these things publically until I passed my last promotion committee (MH laughs), until I was a full professor and nobody could do anything to me (MH laughs). That I've already written a number of books that have been well received, so I don't have to worry about people ignoring me. But it is intimidating in certain circles.

MH: Right. Yeah. No, I get that. It's interesting, just piggy backing on that because I was going to ask you, what do your friends, your colleagues say? Do you get push back at conferences? Like, 'yeah, I read your book and that was interesting....you never told me about that before.' You know....

DA I don't know what's going to happen in the long run, but in the short run, the answer is no. And what I've concluded is that people who don't like this part of me, just aren't saying anything. (MH laughs). But I've gotten more fan letters, more emails, from this book than anything else I've ever written.

MH Wow...yeah. That's indicative of something don't you think? Have you touched on something that....

DA: So I'm hopeful, but I'm also careful as an historian. You could look around the world now and you could say, maybe materialism has run its course and people are more open minded than they used to be, and I think you can make a case for that. But it's also true, that as an historian I know people were saying this in that last part of the 19th century and the first part of the 20th century and so on. That is that I can show you every decade where people were looking around and saying 'change is in the air', and the old German materialism, that's just going to be gone', and it never is. It's' just survives somehow. So I don't know. Maybe I'm just living with the remnant and it's just the remnant who read my book. And 'the non-materialists who read my book and respond to me. But, I don't know. And I hope you're right. I hope you're right. And my children think that people are more open minded than they used to be. So, we'll see. I sure know television, apparently, is full of weirdness (MH laughs). And, you know, I don't know that much about popular culture, but there was a show in the 90's called the *X-Files*. And it featured all sorts of weird stuff that led to more weird shows. And I think people are growing up with these shows. And since we all live on our screens these days, that's just reality. I think these things are influencing people. There are ghost shows, and shows about mediums and all of this. And so maybe the younger generation is going to grow up with all this stuff and it's going to be like the Greco-Roman world, where everybody believes in the supernatural. It's just a question of which of the supernatural do you want to throw in with, right? Because when Paul was going around the world, there were gods, and spirits, and prophecies, and all sorts of things, exorcisms everywhere, right? So, it's a religious world and then question becomes what do you do within this world. Who knows, maybe we're going back.

26:45 **MH:** Yeah, that's interesting. I've often thought that the future looks more like an Athens filled with temples everywhere. That's probably an overreaction on my part, but I tend to think that's where we're headed because of the cultural factor. And part of what motivates me to even have these conversations, to write about this stuff, to research this stuff is, that I don't want Hollywood to set the narrative, because they aren't always experts on say what a demon is, right? So I want to talk to historians like yourself. I want to talk to scholars, theologians...honestly I wish biblical scholars and theologians would chime in more. Because they have an expertise to lend toward these topics that would help offer some credentials. I mean obviously scholars don't agree with each other on everything, but there are certain parameters in which we operate that I think would weed out some of the crazy that we see on TV, for example.

DA: So I sure hope to God you're right. But you're not only dealing now with TV and movies, screens; you're also dealing with the internet. And you must know what the heck is out there, and it's just unbelievable. It's just unbelievable, what's out there and what people waste their time with. And how uninformed people are. I don't know how old you are and it's none of my business, but...

MH: I'm thirty-eight (laughs).

DA: A number of years ago there was a book... you would remember it, then. *The De Vinci Code*, right? *The De Vinci Code*, came out, it was a best seller. Well, the Presbyterian Church I was at, the pastor kept being asked by parishioners, 'Is it true...Was Jesus married to Mary Magdalen?, What if this book is true.' and so on...And these are people who have been going to church all their lives and they were completely, historically ignorant and wanted an explanation. So, they had to have Wednesday night meetings where they talked about *The De Vinci Code* and learned the true history. But the point is, that there really is a ton of ignorance and misunderstanding out there and really bad sources of information. So, you know, I encourage you to do what you're doing.

MH: Thank you. Well, it's funny – a couple of years ago... you mentioned the internet and rumors and a bunch of weird stuff, I had seen – my wife and I were watching social media about how everybody was talking how the Book of Revelation predicted the Covid vaccine as the mark of the beast. And so my wife... and of course, I'm having a fit, like 'Oh my goodness, what's...' And my wife said, 'You need to write on this.' and I was like, 'I don't know....I don't want to wade into this...' So I did! And I wrote a couple of articles for Faithlife Logos and they put them up on their website. And I got some hate mail. (AD laughs). And I was called...because what I was trying to say was 'Guys, scholars are in a completely...that's not what scholars are saying...not even conservative evangelicals scholars.' They're not. There's more 1st century aspects to Revelation than you realize. It has nothing to do with a syringe, right? And so, I wrote them. But I got...and somebody called me an agent of Satan (chuckles), I was misleading the masses, and I don't know... it was terrib...but I mean it didn't bother me. But this is indicative of how...these are views that change people's lives. People make decisions based on false ideas about, say Revelation or apocalyptic literature or whatever. So, again, my passion has always been take what scholars are saying and feed it into the people in the pew. Even if they don't go to church, they aren't religious, I still want them to see what scholars are saying. That's my passion.

30:35 Yeah, I think if I could prod you a little bit, too on some of your other experiences. You mentioned a lot of other experiences. Even some family members have had some experiences. And it was fascinating, some of the things that you mentioned there. When I started sharing with people about my experience, people began coming to me and were saying 'Well, let me tell you about my experience.' They would never have done that (at the time I was a pastor), unless their pastor had said anything. And in fact, I don't know if Craig remembers this, it was Keener who said "you know, you should tell people about your experience, if your school lets you.' And I was a teaching adjunct at the time and pastoring, so I thought I'm just going to tell my church. So I told my church and it was positive feedback. Nobody thought I was weird or anything. In fact, many of them had experiences. And so, I think there was one story, and I forget who it is... I think it's a family member, seeing shadow people.

DA: Oh Yes!

MH: Can you tell the listeners about that?

DA: Well, so two things here. The first thing is the general point that once people know that you are open to hearing their stories, you get tons of stories. And they frequently come with the remark, 'I've never told anyone before.', or 'I don't tell many people', or 'I've only told my wife', or that sort of thing. And that's one of the reasons I wrote the book. Because we have all these experiences out there, and everybody's hiding them. And if we knew them all at once, we would be overwhelmed. We would actually

have a different worldview because of all of the things that are going on all the time. So throughout the book, I keep quoting people who say, “and I never told anyone else before.” And I actually also quote, or refer to a couple of individuals who had experience that they kept for fifty years, both of them. One an atheist who never knew what to do with her mystical experience and waited fifty years before she wrote about it...came out of the closet, so to speak, in the New York Times.

But the story you’re referring to is a strange one and I don’t know what to make of it. My daughter, we were in our farmhouse – 18th century farmhouse in Maine - she came to me in the morning and she said that during the night these shadow people had come to her and they had surrounded her bed, and they simply exuded hatred, and they were laughing at her, and mocking her... And she said she was utterly petrified and it was totally real, whatever that means. And she actually told me, I don’t know if I learned this in time to put it in the book, but she told me not that long ago that she suffered post-traumatic stress syndrome for a decade because of this thing. And, this probably is why you mentioned this, she came to me and told me right after it happened, I was in the same house at the same time, and she said, ‘Daddy, don’t tell anyone, they’ll think I’m crazy.’ So, the point is, that she’s not crazy. She’s a perfectly normal, healthy, adjusted person who had this bizarre experience. And I think, myself, whatever your theology, or lack of theology, or whatever; you should recognize that healthy, sane people have these aberrant, meta-normal experiences. And you just need, if you are honest, have to say, that’s part of the world, that’s part of life. And we can then debate what it means, but we can’t debate that they happen, and that they go on everywhere, and that tons of people are inhibited from talking to others because they are afraid of the response they are going to get.

MH: Right. Yeah, that’s exactly right. There’s a fear that, ‘what will people think about me?’

34:50 **DA:** So I refer to this in the book, and I do this all the time because it’s my favorite example of all of this. But there were some sociologists, and I think it was one of the Scandinavian countries. So let’s just say it was Denmark. And these were social psychologists and they had heard that people in mourning would sometimes see, or hear, or feel the presence of a departed loved one. And so they wanted some statistics on this. So they went to a nursing home and they interviewed fifty people and said, have you ever heard from/seen departed spouse. And these people were all widows or widowers who had lost a spouse within the last year. So the question is, have you run into your dead partner? And when they first asked this question, one person said yes. One out of fifty. So they went back and they said, ‘you know, the antidotal evidence we have tells us that we must be doing wrong here because we think it’s more people than this.’ So they decided to go back again, and instead of just asking their questions, they prefaced their questions by saying, ‘we think this is a pretty common experience, lots of people have it, it doesn’t mean that there’s anything wrong with you, it’s a normal part of mourning’, and so on. And the number went from one to twenty-five. In other words, it went from 2% to 50%! Just because they asked the question in the right way and assured people that they weren’t nuts if this had happened to them. And so, that’s the sort of parable for me. I think things go on all the time, and most of us keep them hidden. We just do. For example, the experience that I start the book with and that I related under the Kansas night stars, it was the most overwhelming thing that ever happened to me. I walked in the house, I didn’t tell my brother, I didn’t tell my dad, I didn’t tell my mother. I never told them! I never told them! What happened was I discovered that I had some Christian friends who could interpret it as a conversion experience so I could talk about it. There was a context where they said, ‘Oh yeah, we understand this! We don’t think you’re making this up and you’re not crazy.’ So I found a group that was open to listening to what happened to me and they didn’t dismiss me. So it’s really important to have a social context that’s welcoming. And part of the reason I wrote this book is because when I teach my class on religious experience - the students who like it best are Pentecostals, and I’m a Presbyterian, and we just don’t have many space for these things. If these sorts of things happen they just die....

MH: It is interesting in that studies, they go from one to twenty-five and all because of the question they ask. And how much data are we missing by framing the question wrongly. Or giving off the

impression that...we want to talk about your para-normal experience. We want to talk about how you have abnormal, weird, crazy experience...Like nobody's going to be like 'oh, let me go first!' Nobody's going to do that. So I think there is a pastoral element here that I almost think that we need to have in terms of our research.

DA: Yes! Again, another illustration I really like is that, whatever you make of ghosts or apparitions, there was a way of interpreting them in medieval Catholicism because they tied it into purgatory so people would see dead people and they would plug it into this theology. Protestants came along and most of the early Protestants said, when you die you go to heaven or you go to hell ...okay, so then what do you do with ghosts? Well, the early Protestants began to be rationalists. They said if it's not a demonic vision then you are hallucinating, or misperceiving, or something. And we know from overwhelming antidotal reports that in Protestant countries people quit seeing ghosts. Well, I don't think they quit seeing ghosts, I think they quit reporting them! I think that's what happened. They quit reporting them because there was no way...either they were either mentally ill, or the devil was in their life – and who wants to say that? So, I think we can do better with apparitions than those alternatives there, either purgatory or nothing...but that's stands for me, again, as a representative fact how weird that people are having these experiences and they're just not going to report them anymore.

MH: That's fascinating. So thus far some of these experiences, all of them really, have some sort of religious or theological component to them. But towards the end of your book, and I was so fascinated by this, so fascinated that I took a screen shot and I sent it to my Dean, and said 'Hey, you should read this.'

DA: Uh oh

40:15 **MH:** No, no, it was great. Super cool! I'm always talking to my Dean about this because he was previously an engineer before he jumped into theological education. He went to Cal-Tech and he did a, I think he was in physics I guess...no he was...

DA: Oooh! A right cookie, huh?

MH: yeah...I think it was engineering. I don't think it was necessarily physics. But anyway, he's my science go-to guy sometimes. But, anyway it was the experience you had with the honey jar. (DA laughs). Now, I don't know...you kind of conceptualize this as a possible religious experience, but to me it seems like it's not classifiable. This is just so interesting. So tell me, actually tell the listeners about this experience. It's fascinating.

DA: Well, it starts out pretty boring because I'm just making some muffins. The jest of the story is that I'm putting together the wet ingredients for muffins and the last thing I pour in is honey- one of these big, giant, old, glass jars; which you probably can't buy anymore because they cost \$100 in price. But anyway, there's this big jar of honey and I poured some stuff in, and I got honey on the outside of the jar. So, I put the lid on it and ran it under the hot water to get all the honey off. Then put it down right here, and at that point it was time to go get the dry ingredients and I went over to a cabinet on the other side of the room. I open the cabinet and down about, I don't know, two and half feet off the ground was the shelf that had an aluminum tin with flour in it. And so I reach over, I pick up the flour tin and I get it out of the cabinet. And then I dropped it. I drop it. And it goes down on the floor, and then I look at it and I say, 'shoot'. Because I don't use cuss words, I say 'shoot' (MH laughs). And then as I looked at it, I notice that something is peeking out of the flour. So the jar is on its side, and the flour is running down like this, and there's something sticking up. So I reach in and I grab it, and I pull out with this giant jar of honey which is completely caked with flour because of obviously, it's been wet. And then I turn around and look at the sink and the honey jar isn't there. It's gone. So I then put it down and I really did just stare and think, and try to figure out what the heck just happened. Well, I'll make a long story short, I eventually decided this

happened as I narrated it, and I didn't go into a fugue state and pour all the flour of the flour out, put the jar in, put the flour on top, clean it up and so on and then wake up. I don't think that happened. And I have no explanation for it. And actually, I have written about this elsewhere too. And my conclusion wasn't that there is a God, my conclusion was materialism is false. That was my conclusion. But as far as the agent goes, I have no clue. My first thought was, 'Oh, some Middle Eastern cultures talk about Jinns, mysterious spirits', and that's as close as I could ever get because I thought it was funny. I thought it was funny.

MH: Yeah, that's interesting. And so, it's almost like the first question is what was the point of that? What's the motive behind whatever caused this, if you can even describe motive...

DA: First of all, I have to say, I don't have a clue! One of the things I said in the book was that, when I told the story later on to an open minded pastor, he said, 'Oh, I got it Allison! God knows you're a skeptical historian and God wants you to believe in the empty tomb, so God is showing you that God can do really funny things with matter.' What a cleaver, nice interpretation. And he's sort of right. It does open my mind to all sorts of weird possibilities. But at the end of the day, I just say, I think the world is a weird place and I think things just happen and I don't know the ancient...one of my pet peeves with our Christian tradition is that when it looks at the invisible realm, it tends to think God, angels, and demons. And I think the invisible realm has more in it than good and bad, demonic, angelic. I would guess it's like everything else in the cosmos. It's probably peopled or whatever the word is, with all sorts of things. And who knows, maybe somebody was just passing by and said this would be fun (both laugh).

45:26 **MH:** Maybe they read one of your books and they said, 'you know, I didn't like what he said in that book so I'm going to play a trick on him.' (Both laugh)

DA: But here's a problem, even if I'm wrong, even if somehow I hallucinated this which I don't believe for a second, again, what do you do as an historian now? When somebody says something weird happened, then all you can do is say 'well, maybe?' Which isn't helpful! That's not helpful! That's actually bad! You want to be able to eliminate options when you are trying to look at historical explanations. If there are actually things such as uncaused events or the agent is unknown to us... the world is confusing. Lets' put it that way. It's confusing.

MH: Right and you know, science has given us so much in past centuries in terms of humbling us to show us that cosmos is ginormous. It's just huge. And we are a really small spec in this giant thing. Scientists have given us a lot of great information, but it seems like science can't answer all the questions. And there's a limit to science. So I'm curious, where in your mind is a theologian or a biblical scholar come in and help supply perhaps, the rest of the story. Is it just by raising our hands and saying, 'look we've been talking about an unseen world for a long time and so maybe you should listen to us... ?' I don't know is that...?

DA: Here's my weird answer to that. We have been talking about an unseen world for a long time, and our tradition does have lots of experiences and experiencers in it. I think that we made the mistake, if we're Protestants, of ignoring Catholic testimonies. And if we're Catholic, we've been ignoring Protestants testimonies. I think we're at a time where we should be listening to everybody's testimonies. And also these things are now being studied by people who are not Protestants or Roman Catholics. They are being studied by psychologists and paranormal researcher and all sorts of things – comparative religionists who aren't closed to unusual experiences... So I think we're at an interesting time where if we want, we can look at a lot more data and its lot more organized than it's ever been. It's a lot more organized and we can make some generalization that we couldn't before. And I wish that theologians would participate. I'm not a theologian, I'm an historian. Maybe an amateur theologian. I sometimes say I'm a garage theologian. And what I mean by that is, I have in mind garage bands when I was growing up. And after school you'd go and play your instruments in the garage. And once in a while, somebody

would produce a good song and it would be a hit. But they are just playing around after school. So that's what I kind of am. But my experience is that most theologians aren't interested in this material. And they haven't done much with it. And I'm just disappointed in them. I think it would be nice to have them in the room. Talking to us, helping us, thinking with us. But in my experience, not so much.

MH: (inaudible)...Oh go ahead, sorry....

DA: Well, what I was just going to say – some of it I understand. If you're a traditional Bardeen, this stuff can sound like, are you headed for natural theology and are they going to freak out? No, no we can't do this... I just think we should go in with open minds and try to figure out...sort this stuff. And theologians have knowledge that the rest of us don't. You know, knowledge of the traditions and so on. I'd like them to help think with us, but...

MH: Yeah. Sure. And that brings me to, I've got a few more questions here. The one question I want to ask you... In your book you talk about near death experiences and you made a statement that, I've got it written down here. You lament how generally speaking how biblical scholars and theologians have been next to no help (laughs). I like the way you put that. Because by and large, it sounds very fringe and do we want to go there. Can you explain that further? And don't you find it odd that biblical scholars, many of them theologians, don't talk about this despite the fact that the object of their inquiry is the supernatural and the Bible which is full of weird experiences, right?

50:33 **DA:** So, my amateur, psychological tank, which may be completely bogus, but I my amateur, psychological tank is that theologians have had the realm of death and the afterlife to themselves for a long, long time. The discourse has been the Bible and tradition, and then when there's a bunch of new stuff coming in and they're not the experts on it, I think it's not so easy to say 'okay, we're going to open up our traditional discussions and we're going to look at this also.' I think there's a sort of inertia or a habit, or maybe this is too cynical – a desire to continue being the experts in this area...? And then you have to say, 'oh, we now need to think with some other things in mind, also. We need to take account of this data over here.' As I said, maybe that's cynical, but this is a realm that was traditionally just for the theologians. And if it involves more than theology, it's going to take effort to take in the new things. It just is.

MH: It would seem like, especially confessional scholars, they would want to chime in because they probably wouldn't want the narrative to be hijacked.

DA: But that's what's happening. If you go to most American churches. At least in my experience. And if you talk to people about life after death, most of them know about near death experiences now, and they've seen documentaries on the *History Channel*, or *HBO*, or whatever it is. And they are thinking primarily in terms that they've gotten from media. They are not thinking in terms of what they got from their pastor or their church, or the Bible anymore. There are really interesting statistics that more people believe in reincarnation than the resurrection, for example in our society, despite the large number of people who call themselves Christian. That's a really interesting fact, right? But I think it's in part also because theologians have been allergic to these subjects because in the modern world, or let's say North America, eschatology is dispensationalism. Eschatology is Hal Lindsey and the *Left Behind* series and these sorts of things. And finding the mark of the beast in the Covid shot, alright? And nobody wants to have anything to do with this stuff. And the problem is, is that the people in the pews then don't have any guidance from the theologians. They just ignore it. And pastors, at least a lot of them, ignore it. And so they've just got the bookstore or the TV, or whatever. And they do, I talk to them, they hobble together their own eschatology with a little bit and they read a book about reincarnation and then they read a book from the *Left Behind* series...they put this stuff together with no help from anybody else. And it just seems to me a dereliction of duty. And pastors, maybe not in a sermon, but at least at Sunday school classes

should be talking about these things and trying to figure out how they line up with the tradition or the scripture and so on. There is a huge discussion that is not being had.

MH: It makes me curious because I wonder just how much of our churches are far more closer in line to enlightenment principals than, say, biblical ones.

DA: Enlightenment is a huge big topic. In so far as enlightenment has no room for miracles, or the meta-normal, than I think it was a really bad, bad thing. I understand it historically, and think we can learn a lot from the writings of Hume and other deists, but that was a bad turn for the west.

MH: Yeah. I would agree. One last question. What do you hope readers take away from your book *Encountering Mystery*? if there was one or two things, what do you hope that book accomplishes?

DA: I hope that it opens people's minds that even if they don't have their own experiences they pay attention to and honestly, sincerely listen to what other people have to say. It can be really easy to be condescending. You know, 'Pastor, this happened to me.' and then you tell your story. And the pastor real picky, you know... 'how long is this going to take, how do I get it on to the next subject as quickly as possible because this is all bunk.' I don't like that. It's not only not pastoral, but I think it shows a lack in curiosity because my experience is that if you listen to people, there are lots of really interesting and puzzling things going on. We need to think about them, not ignore them because they are part of the world. As I say in the book. Why do people get up in the morning and pay attention to the news... however they get it. I don't know, I used to get a newspaper. I don't know how people get the news anymore, but a lot of people must get up and they want the news, the daily news. Why do they want the news? They want to know what's going on in the world. Okay, that's all I'm doing in this book! Hey, this is also going on in the world. You want to know what's going on in the world, look it here! There's a lot of stuff that's going on that you're not paying attention to. So it's just calling attention to stuff that goes on without any doubt and I think is a call for genuine listening. And genuine curiosity. So that is probably the summary of it.

MH: Wonderful!. Well, everybody the book is called, *Encountering Mystery, Religious Experience in a Secular Age*. You can buy it where ever books are sold and I highly recommend that you do get it and give it a read. Dale, thank you so very much for sharing your time with us today.

DA: Thanks, Matthew. I enjoyed it. Take care.

57:15 That's the end of today's episode. And thanks again for listening to The Bible Unmuted. If you like this podcast, consider rating it on your podcast platform, subscribing to it, and sharing with your friends. You can also support the podcast by becoming a patreon member. Go to: <https://www.patreon.com/TheBibleUnmuted> - or simply find the link in the description of this episode. Thanks for listening. Until next time, friends.