What Does God Have To Do With Netflix?

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[0:00]   Alright, so last time we were together we said three things.

We said that God created technology and God created humans to be technological. So that comes right from Genesis 1.

Secondly, we said God is not ever threatened by human innovation. So we saw that God, when humans use technology for evil, God topples it when he wants to, like the Tower of Babel, or he uses it to save the world, like the cross.

So God is never deterred by sinful uses of technology. And then the third thing we said is that no matter how poorly we do misuse tech, we as Christians can be and should be, I think, tech optimists, noctec pessimists, because God is using human innovation to bring about his purposes.

And God has authorized us to apply our skill and technique to the sciences so that we do create things so we can ultimately be tech optimists even when we know that there's all sorts of bad uses of tech.

[1:11]   Alright, that means that last time we did a theology of tech, a look at the Bible, what it says in the most broad strokes about God's relationship to technology.

It wasn't so practical. It was more of the theory, the theology, if you will, behind it. Now we're going to come back to that next time. But for this time, I wanted to do an interlude that is entirely practical.

So move from theology in terms of the system across the Bible to practice. And then we'll do it in reverse next time. And so let's be more practical today by asking, what does God have to do with Netflix?

That most important piece of technology that is extremely central to what it means to be a modern person. What does God have to do with Netflix? So that's really to think tonight about God, film, and TV.

I'm going to try to move quickly because I think there might, I'm going to leave time hopefully for discussion. If people want to discuss, I think on this topic, people will want to talk about it and say something in comment and ask a question.

[2:23]   So we'll leave time for that. Hopefully, I don't have a watch because my phone just died. So and that, I don't know if that clocks eight. No, that clock is definitely not right.

Huh? Okay, it's wrong by now. So it is, it is 637. Sorry. Okay, cool. Perfect. All right. That helps. Let's read two passages as we get started.

Back to Genesis one, 26 to 28. This is God's authorization of us to be technological people.

God said, let us make man in our image after our likeness and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the heavens, over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.

So God created man in his image and the image of God, he created him male and female. He created them. And God blessed them and God said to them, be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.

[3:30] And then secondly, Romans chapter six, verses one to four. It says this.

Paul says, what shall we say? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound by no means? How can we who died to sin still live in it?

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death. In order that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

All right. The screen, the screen is the probably the most dominant piece of technology in the current era in terms of the time that we spend in relationship to it.

And on the screen, the thing we do most probably is watch TV and movies. And so it's incredibly important for the church actually for Christians to be corporately talking about this subject because it consumes so much of our time.

[4:45] And let me give you a few reasons in particular, very detailed why it's so important to talk about this. The first is that there are movies and there are TV shows today that are much more powerful at creating cultural cohesion and informing our cultural concepts than any other force in all of society.

So an example in 2014, the top 500 names for girls, baby girls worldwide.

There was one name that jumped 248 spots within 30 days to reach the top 50 and eventually the top five. And that name was Elsa.

And that's because frozen came out on December 6, 2013. And by the end of January 2014, Elsa was one of the most common names worldwide for all the baby girls.

Now whatever you think about that, it's just a simple cheeky illustration to say that film is incredibly powerful. TV is incredibly powerful. And Jody Foster, who's a famous American actress, taxi driver at the beginning of her career contact, probably her most famous movie, she says this, she says movie character ideals become our ideals.

[6:02] Their thoughts become the standards of popular thinking and language. Their style of dress, their movement are seen on the streets of our nation and their moments of triumph and defeat become our successes and failures.

And that's very true, I think. The second reason is time. How many of you watch, let's see if we can get anybody to raise their hand. How many of you watch at least one TV show or movie per week?

Surely nearly everyone. How many of you, let's see if anybody will do this. How many of you watch at least one TV show or movie per day?

Yeah, at least half of us. The 2021 stats on TV viewing, that is streaming content, live television or recorded TV.

In the UK, 2021, average is 179 minutes a day. That was the 2021 average. So that's one minute less than three hours as the average consumption of film and TV per day for the average person in the United Kingdom in 2021.

[7:09] Anybody know who the highest, what age group, what two age groups had the highest level of TV viewing in 2021? Broad strokes.

Youngest in the oldest, 16 to 24, 16 to 24 and 75 plus. So that means that 99% of all people in the Western world and really probably the whole world spend much more time watching than reading.

So we're much more shaped by film and TV than books now. And that doesn't need a defense at all. Everybody knows that's true. That's common knowledge. So movies, film was invented 125 years ago.

It's very young. Books are much older. And yet it's by far and away the most powerful art form in the modern world. So that's another reason for thinking about it. The third and final reason is what I might call digestion or personal formation.

So much personal formation happens through the medium of television film. The story on the screen can often without us knowing it be the most powerful force in the formation of our own identity.

[8:23] And we might not even be aware of it. How do you know if a film, TV show, movie experience has been incredibly powerful for you? Maybe you cried during it. That's one indication.

You think about the story, the character in particular long after it's over with. It keeps coming back to you. It keeps, you keep thinking about it. You quote it, you find yourself quoting from it regularly.

You adopt its language into your speech patterns. How many people can give me 50 office quotes perhaps right now? And you say, the culture does this, of course, may the force be with you.

This is the broadest strokes. The entire culture does this regularly. Or, and this is very important, you say in some real life experience that you have, you find yourself saying something like this looks like a scene from the movies.

Now when that happens, something really interesting has happened. And that's that perhaps it's a landscape in front of you or an event or a beautiful part of a city or whatever it may be.

[9:30] What's happened there is that a fictional story on the screen has become such a reality shaping force for you that you actually interpret reality by means of the movie.

So this was regularly commented on after 9-11, the people that actually were present and saw the Twin Towers fall on 9-11. It was a normal quote. This was made much of in the literature afterwards where people said watching the Twin Towers fall was like a scene in a movie.

So reality was fictionalized and fiction became reality. Movies became the interpretive framework for actually viewing what's real.

And all of those things are happening to us all the time in ways that we don't know. Carl Sandberg is an American poet who was a three-time Pulitzer Prize winner and he died in the 60s. So he was very early born in the 1890s.

So he saw the rise of film and kind of the movement from the first film all the way to the birth of the cinema, 10,000 cinemas across the United States by like the 1955 or something like that.

[10:36] 10,000 in the 1950s, only about 6,000 today, very interesting. He said this, I meet people occasionally who think the product of that Hollywood makes is mere entertainment, that it has nothing to do with education.

That's one of the darknessful fallacies that is current. Anything that brings you to tears by way of drama does something to the deepest roots of the personality. All movies, good or bad, are educational and Hollywood is the foremost educational institution on planet Earth.

A legitimate question to ask is Hollywood more important than Harvard? The answer, of course, is absolutely it is. Without question, Hollywood is more important than Harvard in terms of cultural formation, worldwide cultural formation.

All right, so are you a film optimist or a film pessimist as a Christian? We said, are you tech optimist? God created us.

We see in Genesis one to be sub creators, that's Tolkien's language, to be technicians, to be artists and engineers, to be farmers, to be technologists, we might say.

[11:45] In every dimension of creation. That includes all manner of technology. God has given us, through common grace in the 20th century, this pinnacle art form, a pinnacle art form, which is film.

He gave us the power, both of narrative, of story creation, which is in the most strict definition, a form of tech. Also the engineering that we need to be able to make movies and the many sub developments within that field.

And God, as the author of history, he has done this. He has gifted this, just like he gifted the Mason to us, Isaiah 5417, that we quoted last time.

He gifted the blacksmith and the Mason, and he has gifted to us the ability in all sorts of manners to create things all the way to the point of movies and film.

And so at the same time, we can say that he's given us tech, and we recognize Noah's arc saves the world by tech, the tower of Babel, God squashes evil uses of technology, so that God gives it to us, but it can be used for incredible evil.

[12:55] And that's very true for film and TV, right? God gives us the gift, the common graces to develop this medium, and it can be used for incredible evil simultaneously, right?

And so the biblical logic, I think, here is not that the church, that Christians, that the Bible ever says to us to film, to television, that the answer is stop it.

I don't think we can ever say that. Instead, I think it's what does faithful viewing look like? What is it? What is faithful viewing? All right, so we'll think about that for the rest, just a few minutes, the rest of our time.

The Roman Catholic Church, in 1933, this was one way that they tried to deal with this Christian question, and this was actually supported by many Protestants.

They created, the Roman Catholic Church created a group of cardinals and laymen that was called the Legion of Decency. And the Legion of Decency was, quote unquote, called by God for the purification of cinema.

[14:00] It was its strap line, and a man named Cardinal Daughtery who led this said to the faithful, through the Magisterium, stay away from the movies.

To be faithful, Christian, you can't consume TV or movies. That was the termination. But then the Legion of Decency realized that it wasn't winning, and so that gave way to the earliest form of the rating system.

Who developed the rating systems? The Roman Catholics really were the ones that pushed for a rating system, and then some Protestants in America supported that extensively. The first rating system, you could get one of two ratings, A or C, approved or condemned through the Roman Catholic Legion of Decency.

Now what happened? What happened? The more movies that got a C, what happened? People went more. People saw more, not less.

The faithful, the Catholic faithful went more to the C's, not the A's. And actually, there's a real Protestant principle in that, and that's that what we do to operate with relationship to this is we say we pursue the way of wisdom on this.

[15:14] And that means that the Bible does not tell us as a rulebook a way for interacting with every medium, art form, any cultural artifact in the world. It doesn't tell you outright how to approach it, how to deal with it, what to consume, what not to consume in every detailed way.

We don't have a rulebook. The Bible isn't just not a rulebook in that way. And so what movies to watch, what TV shows are acceptable, which are not, the way of wisdom instead says this conform to the image of Christ.

And then use wisdom and your conscience to determine what is good and right. And that means that we believe in the freedom of the individual conscience before God as that conscience is being shaped by Jesus in relationship to Christ.

So watching some TV shows is a sin, absolutely. But not always. And so we've got to ask, what do we do?

How do we think about this? Now, I'd like to come back around later and do a full series on this issue. And all I'm going to do tonight is give you five, very quickly, five principles I think are biblically informed wisdom principles on approaching television, Netflix, whatever it may be.

[16:34] Okay. And I'm just going to rattle through these so that we can have time if anybody wants to say anything. Number one, we must understand that content does not equal corruption.

Corrupted content cannot, does not necessarily equal corruption. Now what does that mean? That means that when we view, when we read, when we see, when we listen to something that contains evil content, it does not necessitate that we engage in sin.

That those have to be separated, actually. You don't merely sin in the act of seeing something evil. Not at all. Or hearing something evil.

Or reading something that's evil. And so one of my friends from the States is a guy named John Parrot and he wrote a book about film and he says this content does not equal corruption. And this is what he means.

The presence of corrupted content does not make something necessarily bad. What do we mean? A film, a book, a piece of art can be true and helpful even while it contains corrupt evil content.

[17:42] How so? Where's the proof? Where's the proof? Really informed wisdom. The cross, yeah, what else?

broader, yeah. The Bible, right? The Bible, okay? Judges 19 to 21. Go read Judges 19 to 21 later. And you quickly realize that corruption, evil content does not necessitate a corrupted self, right?

Judges 19 to 21 might be the most horrific sequence of events, arguably in human history in some way with respect to a particular individual. The Bible contains many, many, many horrible sins and evils, right?

Corrupt content. But of course it is God's word. The question is not does it contain evil action? The question is what is the meaning? What is the meaning of the content?

That's the more significant question. Now that doesn't mean that we treat all cultural artifacts like we treat the Bible. No, not at all. Not saying that.

[18:44] That doesn't mean that we at least have to say that it's not necessarily sinful to see or hear or read evil, evil content.

Okay, so instead, what, where is the line? What's the question? I think that the wise question isn't, is there anything corrupt here?

But here's the question. Does it call second principle? Does it cause sinful desire in me? Does it cause corruption to advance in my heart?

That's the principle. So the flip side of that might be that something that does portray evil in some way is actually helping me to see corruption in this world more clearly.

And that can be positive. That can be something that is true, right? Something that in that light is good for me. So for example, I remember when I was very young, not very young, but early teenager, and my dad decided to let me see a couple different war films that were explicit in all sorts of ways, mainly violence wise.

[19:52] And I came from a fairly strict home in regards to film and TV and all that. But my dad's logic was actually seeing this kind of evil helps you to understand the history of the 20th century and what people that came before you went through to stop Nazism, for example.

And so I saw immense evil, absolute horror, and it helped me to understand the cost of justice. So that would be an example, for instance, of how this works.

We read Romans 6. We could also think of Matthew 5. Here's the Matthew 5 principle. Jesus says, if it causes you to sin, pluck your eye out. And so there's the principle for viewing, is it does it cause you to sin, then pluck your eye out?

In other words, don't turn it off. Don't watch it, right? So where is the line, sin is the line? That's the answer. Your conscience tells you as it conforms to Jesus.

So the classic things are of course, sex, violence, and language, the three things that the early writing system is looking for. And that's a fairly good metric.

[21:02] Although there's much more and there's much more complication in how these things are portrayed. But a helpful question might just be, does this cause me sins of lust, sins of speech?

So is my, does this force me to develop a more crude personality? Like does the humor create crudeness in me? Or sins of anger, perhaps?

Does this violence cause me to desire violence, to be harsh, to be, to have a disposition towards it? All right, so here's the way of wisdom.

The way of wisdom means that actually this, the answer, the line is going to be different for different people. It's actually going to, it's going to be different for different people. There's not a clear line in the sand on this.

Last thing I'll say before we move on to number three is that probably, probably for most of us, our struggle is not that we avoid too much. It's that we consume too much.

[22:05] So the fundamentalist might be avoiding too much and that person needs to hear that film is actually a gift of God. But for most of us, that's probably not our problem.

It's probably that our avoidance rate, our needs to be higher. All right, third, never be a mere consumer. So number three, mere consumption equals mere entertainment.

Okay, in other words, a, treating film TV in those mediums as objects of mere entertainment is when you allow those things to become a liturgy of desire, as we might put it, meaning that it almost becomes religious.

Usually when there are mere comfort for you, merely entertainment, they are doing work on you that you don't know. When you don't have a critical disposition toward it, a dialogue disposition, that it's doing work in your heart that you might not be aware of.

We call this a liturgy of desire in the same way that the way you perform the liturgy of pulling your phone out of your pocket all day, every day reshapes your entire emotional life and imagination and what you hope and dream and all of it.

[23:20] Watching movies to merely be entertained is a liturgy of desire. It's being conformed in ways that you're not aware of. And there's, we could spend an entire time talking about that.

So let me just say and move on that probably, probably if you are at the level of TV and movie consumption, that is the average UK three hours a day, probably you're in a state of mere consumption, mere entertainment, probably, unless you're like a professional film critic.

So it's probably not a good place to be that level of consumption. All right, number four, now let's turn it and get to the positives here. I said five, I really can just do it in four.

Instead, put on this posture with respect to TV and film, the posture of critical dialogue, critical dialogue. I think that's the way of wisdom here.

Okay, here's what I mean. Critical dialogue with film and TV asks, what is the meaning of what I'm watching?

[24:32] So that's kind of a basic way of saying it. In other words, it evaluates what you're watching, it discusses the dialogues with whatever it is that you're watching.

It thinks about the show, the TV, the film on its own terms and its own context and ask questions like, what is this trying to communicate within the context that it was created?

And then you can enter into all manner of questions. Now, I'm not saying that you write these down and try to jot down answers, but I think this is more of a posture, a critical posture of having a little bit of a barrier up, but also a different type of interest in film and TV.

And here's some questions, theological dialogue with film. You can appreciate the beauty of the film's aesthetic or judge the film's aesthetic.

You can assess the characters' responses to the ethical circumstances that they're in based on their context. You can ask them what can be learned from them, what must be rejected, what does this say to me, what does this say about me?

[25:42] How does this portray God? Does it portray God at all? Religion? Does it affirm? Does it reject? And why? After considering the story, you can say, you can have a two-way conversation with it and ask other things like, can I learn from this?

Did it shape me? How am I aware? Which I ought to be aware of. What is the vision of the good life that this movie is portraying? Is there a Christ figure?

Is there a Christ figure in this film? And if we had a whole series on this, we'd spend an entire time talking about Christ figures in movies and how important that actually has been. Here's another set of questions.

What does the film assume about the way the world is? What does the film assume about the way the world is? What are the key features of the world that it tries to deal with?

Does it say anything true? Does it say anything good? Is it beautiful? What vision of the future inspired its creators? What does it offer the world? Was it teach me about the good life and on and on and on and on?

[26:42] So this is critical dialogue. And critical dialogue protects your heart from biosmosis entering into the story and becoming in ways shaped towards it in ways that aren't good and healthy.

But it also actually opens it up and gives you access to meaning that you might not have ever seen. And so this posture, critical dialogue, I think is the critical way to assess film and be in relationship to it.

Let me close with this. There are all sorts of stories I think everybody in this room could tell if they thought for just a few minutes about a way a TV show, a series or a movie has indeed shaped them in an immense way.

And that can be for good. That can be for bad. I know that in my own life, it's definitely been both. That there are characters that I still think about in good ways and bad ways that I know have bent me in a wrong direction or pushed me towards a good direction.

That's happening to us all the time. And there's a story of an author, a man named Robert K. Johnston who's written three or four books about theology and film.

[27:55]   And he talks about how his wife watched a movie when she was just a teenager, a movie about an injustice in East Asia.

And she says that it was the day that she believes God called her to the mission field through the film in the movie theater. And God can do that sometimes. He can use mediums, all sorts of mediums like that to inspire and move a heart towards something.

And he can also do it, sorry, we can also do it towards an entire lifestyle that is not God honoring and not God glorifying.

It can happen both ways. And so critical dialogue helps us protect ourselves but also engage in meaning at the same time and look for the true, the good and the beautiful in any medium that we engage with.