

[Theme Music: upbeat smooth jazz bassline.]

Katie Axelson: Welcome to Have Hope; Will Travel. I'm your host Katie Axelson and today I'm here with my guest Stephanie Rousselle. Stephanie is the founder and director of Gospel Spice Ministries, a non-profit that equips people all over the world with Bible literacy and in-depth teaching. She's lived in five cities, in four countries, in three continents. So when we talk about engaging with people who are a little bit different than we are, Stephanie's got some experience. So Stephanie, welcome to the show.

Stephanie Rousselle: [Stephanie speaks with a French accent.] Hi Katie, It is so good to be here with you today. I'm really excited, I've been really looking forward to our conversation.

KA: I have too. I was so glad when we connected on the Christian Podcast Association, a group we're both part of, just to get to hear your story and a little bit about what it looks like to interpret the Bible and understand God in a cultural context.

SR: Woah, that's a big agenda, isn't it?! [Katie and Stephanie laugh.] Let's see how much we can actually do!

KA: I think we'll do great. So let's start a little bit with your story: how you came to know the Lord, and what brought you to the United States.

SR: So as you can hear, I am not American, I'm French. I am like, fully French. Born and raised in France. I grew up atheist and I came to the US as a foreign exchange student when I was seventeen. My goal was to learn English because I wanted to have a prestigious career in business. You need to understand that this did not happen [Stephanie laughs.] but that was my goal, and so in order to do that I needed English. I wanted to run the world. But the world was English-speaking and so it required that. And again, I don't take myself very seriously anymore but the time, boy did I. So I came to the US and with it I brought my culture which was very typical first-world, middle-class French family. Grew up believing that God does not exist, convinced of it in fact, so being raised in an atheist family I had not just embraced the culture I was swimming in, I had truly accepted it as my own. And so like, Stephen Hawking was my hero for example, and I would, I would really focus on why as humans we are truly able to accomplish anything we want. I was a very strong self-sufficient person. I call that now "the curse of the capable woman," when you happened to be good at what you do, it can trigger just a smidge of arrogance. Let's just put it that way. Plus when you're sixteen or seventeen years old, I mean what teenager doesn't think they can conquer the world? Which is a beautiful thing! I currently have a sixteen year old at home and she thinks she can conquer the world so I came to the US and having communicated with the people who would be my American mom and dad for the year, I knew they were Christians. Okay you need to understand that I had never truly met a Christian. I knew a lot about what Christians believed, but through the lens of my atheist authors. In other words, it was a skewed perspective but I didn't know it. I thought I had a good grasp of what Christianity taught, but again because the grasp I had was through the lens of atheism, it was very skewed, I discovered later on. So anyway I come to this American family and I think that their Christianity is just part of their culture right? Because you may not know this, but in France -- at least twenty years ago, twenty-five years ago -- Americans equaled Christians by and large, at least nominally, nominal Christians. So I wasn't surprised when they

told me they were going to church, that their faith was important to them. I just thought, "Okay it's just part of the American culture, and I am here to learn about the American culture so that's fine." What I had never imagined is that I would meet people whose faith was the very root of their identity. That was a completely foreign concept to me and as I developed my relationship with them, I realized that Christianity wasn't some kind a little bit of a sprinkle of superstitious fairy dust that they were adding on to their daily lives to make themselves feel better, but it was truly the very root of who they were. That was very puzzling to me, especially because it didn't make sense to me. I thought it was, at best -- at best! -- misguided. At best. But the thing is, these people also proved to be very generous, smart, kind, loving, and again these don't go well with outdated myth and superstitions, which is what I thought Christianity was. How can you be well-educated, and kind, and loving, and a Christian? That doesn't go together! At least in my atheist mind it didn't. So that's how the intrigue started, the curiosity that was born in my spirit was because of this discrepancy that I believed there was between their walk and their talk. And actually in the sense that I did not think you could be a Christian and smart and loving - isn't that weird? That was my perspective.

KA: Sure. That's a great perspective - er, a good acknowledgement of your perspective.

SR: Yeah. Well it's very humbling because now I'm completely, you know, on the other side of it. I guess so I really thought that you could not be a Christian and not having checked your brains at the door. There was no way you could have a reasonable faith, so I was really after an intellectual understanding of culture and Christianity really faith, the Christian faith, met me head-on intellectually because my American Dad in particular was able to meet me intellectually toe-to-toe, which again was a new experience for me. I had never debated faith with an actual Christian. Again, I had only debated faith through the atheist lens of my atheist authors, which again is not trustworthy. So what that taught me is if you want to know what Christians believe, read Christian books. Don't read atheist books about Christianity. But see now that I'm on the other side of this, I would tell you if you want to understand atheism -- or any worldview: Muslim, Hindu, whatever -- do not read what Christians have to say about atheism, and Hinduism, and Islam. I mean, do! But not only that. Also read what most Muslims have to say about Islam, what atheists have to say about atheism. Because only then will you get a different perspective. Maybe still skewed, but not skewed by the perspective of the camp you're in, if that makes sense. [Katie murmurs in acknowledgement.] Because you will be much more objective, you will gain a lot of credibility when you discuss these issues with people who do not agree with your belief if you'll be able to say you read their books, you've listened to their podcasts, and their authors, not just yours on there topic. Because then how can you expect them to listen to you if you have not taken the time to actually listen to them?

KA: Wow that's good.

SR: So my American dad really debated with me intellectually and then my American mom was so loving and caring. She was, she just so winsome, and so approachable, so vulnerable. That the combination of the two was pretty irresistible, and I love how God woos by his spirit from the place that we are. I think each one of us is different and He meets us where we are. He doesn't expect us to reach a certain level before He pulls us out of the miry clay. He really does meet us where we are. And in my case it was in this very arrogant, intellectual perspective that atheism

was obviously the only perspective that was valid because everyone “knew” of course that religion is the opiate of the people, and you can't possibly believe in any kind of faith system without having checked your brains at the door, and that religion is a crutch for the weak, and when you're strong it's a dog-eat-dog how world and you're just going to have to make it on top. So fast forward about twenty-five years, and here I am leading a Christian ministry. I have not become the world leader that I anticipated but I did learn English.

KA: You did!

SR: Which is good. And more than that I have faith in Christ and He has become the most precious reality of my life. And the fact that God would do this - I know we are all saved by grace through faith, and it has nothing to do with us, but some people will tell you that they have sought God their entire lives and they found Him. Other people would say I wasn't even seeking Him and He met me, and that's my case. I don't even have the brownie points of being able to say, “Oh, I really was looking for God.” Girl, I wasn't. [Katie laughs.] I was very content and happy in my atheism and my ignorance, and that makes His gift of grace even more glorious to Him. It's really totally His glory. My motto in life is “God's glory is our delight” and that's because it's been my case. The fact that He would reveal Himself to me, who was not even seeking Him, that He would teach me to embrace such delight in Him. ow, what a God we serve!

KA: Wow. That's beautiful, thank you so much for sharing your story with us. I love that, and I especially love that He was pursuing you before you wanted to pursue Him.

SR: Absolutely. So never give up praying for your unbelieving friends and family members, because you never know when God is going to turn on the switch.

KA: That's so good.

SR: Just keep praying, keep praying. Because He wants to turn on the switch more than you want him to. He is Just waiting. His wooing is in perfect timing.

KA: Yeah. So did you become a Christian while you were here in America?

SR: Yes, yes, sorry. So that was at the end of my year. I did my senior year of high school in the States, and at the end of my year I gave my life to Christ after a long battle of the wills. I can very much relate to Jacob wrestling and having a bit of a hip injury as a result because, you see it was one thing for me to embrace faith from an intellectual perspective. I came quickly convinced of the truth of the resurrection, for example. For me the linchpin is the resurrection. If Christ truly rose from the dead, I mean people don't rise from the dead. Period. It doesn't happen. Therefore Christ could not possibly have risen from the dead. But if He did, then the least I can give him is five minutes of my attention. Right? And that would be my challenge. That has been my challenge to lots of people, and if you're been listening and you're not completely sure on how to present Christ to non-believers, I would say rest your case on the resurrection. This is unimpeachable. You will raise curiosity or rejection and both are fine. They're both in the hands of God. But you will not leave anyone untouched if you focus on the resurrection. But it's one thing intellectually to believe it, and I can go into what made me believe intellectually that the resurrection was true, but once I had reached that point I was not yet saved because I had not accepted it for myself. You have to embrace Christ's gift to you personally. It's not just

head-knowledge it has to be an experiential knowledge. Actually in French we have two words for your English word "to know." We have head-knowledge, and we have experiential knowledge and those are two different words. And that's what faith is. It's this intersection between intellectual knowledge, knowing the facts of the Resurrection, knowing it's true. And the experiential knowledge of embracing the death of Christ and His resurrection as your own in Him. And for me the challenge of that is surrender. Because you cannot die and resurrect with Christ unless you surrender to Him as your Lord. So it's one thing to make Him your savior, it's another to make Him your Lord. And again I was very content with my life, very self-sufficient, very strong and capable which is such a joke. We are, it's just an illusion right? Control is an illusion. I was very happy in that illusion. So how do I surrender to a God who has proven He can literally raise people from the dead, including Christ but that actually did not prove His trustworthiness to me. So how could I know I could trust Him more than I can trust myself for my own future?

KA: Wow, yeah.

SR: The way I like to say is like, God was telling me the only way you can know is if you take a bite. It's like chocolate. I love chocolate.

KA: French have good chocolate.

SR: Yes, we do! And yes but if you've never tasted really high quality chocolate, then you really don't know what chocolate is. With all due respect, if all you've ever had is -- I live in Pennsylvania, so I don't want to be too critical of chocolate makers in Pennsylvania -- but that's not chocolate, I'm sorry. You got to taste the good stuff. And if all you've ever tasted are those little drop-shaped things, they're not chocolate. [Katie laughs.] They're just not, I'm sorry, again I love Pennsylvania but I have -

KA: I have traveled enough to know enough that I agree with you.

SR: Okay thank you! And I say this with all humility but my point is you cannot know you've not tasted the good stuff until you actually taste it. I can describe chocolate to you all day but until you take a bite, you will not actually have the experiential knowledge of chocolate. You will have all the head knowledge, you can have a Ph.D on chocolate, gosh that's something I should do one day that sounds amazing! [Katie and Stephanie laugh.]

KA: I love the idea!

SR: Does that exist? We should check this out. There's something there. But you need to taste it. And so God was like, "Girl you're gonna have to take a bite out of this thing. You cannot reject something you have not actually tasted." But so the problem with that is that I wasn't ready to "drink the Kool-Aid," to use an expression I don't actually like, because it reeks of deception and this is the opposite of deception, but how would I taste the chocolate without committing to it? Well I have the most pathetic conversion story I've ever heard, truly. [Katie laughs.] I don't think it's arrogance speaking, but here's what I told God I was like, "Okay I get to a point where You're right, I can't reject chocolate until I tasted it. But tasting it, taking one bite out doesn't mean I'm committing to the Chocolate Factory here."

KA: Sure.

SR: There's a difference. "So for one week God, I'm going to taste the chocolate. I'm going to believe that this is true. I'm going to stop fighting everything I know to be true intellectually, I'm going to live as if I truly believed to the best of my ability and with Your help that You are the better, more trustworthy Lord of my life than I am for myself. "But God," here's the arrogant part, "if I don't like it I will not continue. I will take my life back. So I'm going to taste the chocolate, but I reserve the right to not like it." I hope you can hear the arrogance of those words, but and again I think the reason I'm saying this is because it shows God's grace that He really meets us where we are and if all we can give Him is a week, He will take a week. If all we can give Him is a commitment to have one bite of chocolate, His glory is shown so brightly in His meekness and His grace in accepting those kinds of terms from this arrogant little dust being that I was. And I didn't know it. So anyway, what happened when I finally was able to embrace the truth of the resurrection specifically, but also of faith in general, was - I literally, Katie, I literally felt this weight off my shoulders and I know it sounds so cliché but it is so true. Because you have no idea -- or maybe you do -- how stressful it is to carry a burden that you have to fight every day to convince your heart of something you actually know in your head, that your head actually knows is true. so I had, I was finally able to rest from my labor of having a fight between my heart and my head. For a week it felt like I took a break. And so I was finally able to see, to taste the chocolate from the inside. About five years later I was sharing the story with a friend, like you and I are doing right now, and she told me "Oh my goodness, what happened at the end of the week?" And I looked at her and I said, "I never thought about that." I had never realized that the week was up. And this was five, I don't know, three, four, five years later.

KA: Wow.

SR: The lingering taste of chocolate once you've taken a bite, you don't need to keep biting into it, right? It lingers for a long time. So that lingering taste was enough to keep me wanting more. And so here we are twenty-five years later and my Ministry is called Gospel Spice, kind of the same idea. Maybe I should have called it Gospel Chocolate, I don't know. [Katie laughs.] I don't know it just didn't sound quite the same.

KA: It doesn't have quite the same ring, no.

SR: But Gospel Spice is that idea that I want to bring the spice back in your relationship with God because I want to challenge you to taste it. You cannot tell me you don't like cumin until you've actually tasted it. Some people say they love cilantro or they hate cilantro, but you only know that because you've tasted it, and so it is with the gospel. You have to taste it, experientially in order to decide whether you love it or not. And I have yet to meet someone who's tasted it and has not liked it, because that's God, right? But to me that's how it all comes together, is when you realize the beauty and the goodness of God, and the manifold spices that He envelops us, and mixing spices - you can get so many different recipes when you grow in your relationship with Him and with one another. So my passion interest in me has moved a lot because initially I thought that my goal, because of my story, would be to share Christ with unbelievers. That would make sense right? So I went back to France, I became a believer at the end of my year in the States, I got baptized, was back in France within a month. So it really was on the tail end of my journey here. And I thought, this is what I'm going to do. I will have a

regular job and I will tell people about Jesus because there's not a lot of people in France who are Christ followers. More and more, but still very few. And instead, I find myself today in this very unexpected situation where I actually spend most of my days coming alongside believers who have forgotten the first spices, people who have maybe been satisfied with stale spices. There's nothing worse than looking in the back of your pantry and finding a little bottle of spice and putting it in your chicken hoping it's going to flavor it, and then you turn the spice jar around and it says expired in 2005. And you're like, "Shoot, that's probably not going to add a whole lot of flavor," because it's completely stale. And yet, isn't that what many Christians do? We go back to the same old stories in scripture, we read them with the same stale eyes and then we wonder why it doesn't nourish us. The way I like to describe it is that I have seen time and time again how Christians take stale leftovers. Let's say you went to last night to dinner last night for your birthday and you ordered way more food than you can eat so you took home a big doggy bag, right? You put it in your fridge and the next day you're getting ready to pull it out for lunch. Well, you really have two possibilities. Either you're going to put it in the microwave for about thirty seconds and it's going to be chewy, and gummy, and it's going to taste a little weird, and it's not going to be anything like what you had last night. Or you go the extra mile of turning on the oven putting it in a fresh pan, adding some fresh spices on top of it. It's going to take longer, it's going to smell amazing in your kitchen, and then when you eat it it might even taste better than it did last night. Because you have taken the step, the time to add fresh spices to something familiar. And so it is with scripture. There is an infinite bottomless to scripture and yet when we approach it thinking, "Alright today my daily reading is The Sermon on the Mount. Oh my goodness, I have been reading this about fifty times and I have read thirty-five sermons about this. What can I possibly learn? I can't wait to tick the box." All you're doing is like you're nuking the Sermon on the Mount, and you're wondering why it's so stale. Whereas, if you take your time, you would discover such fresh spices, you're going to become enthralled in the word of God when the Holy Spirit guides you. So that's what we do at Gospel Spice, because it saddens me to see especially American Christians maybe sometimes be content with microwave leftovers. Maybe that's the Frenchness that's in me, I like slow cooked meals that take a long time and smell amazing. But it's a privilege to be able to serve people to embrace the fresh spices of scripture.

KA: That's beautiful. Thank you so much for sharing your story, that encouraged me so much. I want to know: what advice do you have for someone who may feel like they're in that point where the gospel feels stale? Taking your time to read it as one option, what other suggestions do you have?

SR: Well first I would say realize that's where you are. That's almost half the battle. Once you realize that you're stuck in this rut in staleness in scripture, and not being ashamed of it. Once you've acknowledged it, I would say go to the only person that can help you, which is God. So half of your battle is gonna be won when you pray about it. I have yet to see the Holy Spirit deny His help when we ask Him. He doesn't. So go to God, and say something as simple as, "You know what God? Yeah maybe I'm missing out. Maybe there's more to my relationship with You than I've ever experienced. And if that's the case, can you show me please? I don't know what it looks like, I don't know what it tastes like, maybe I've been content with Kisses when there's yummy French chocolate ahead, I don't know." Ask Him and see what He does. And okay it's

not probably - I mean, there may be an angel that appears in front of you to be right at that moment, it is highly unlikely. Don't expect something instant, but persevere. Persevere asking Him this and then take the jump. Actually do something about it! Open your Bible and then approach it differently. You can, there's two ways I believe, two primarily ways to approach scripture. Either you're going to rake for leaves, or you're going to dig for diamonds. Raking for leaves means you're going to read a large chunk of scripture, you're going to read two, three, four chapters maybe. You're raking for leaves, you're staying on the surface, you're getting the context, you're looking at what's happening and that's beautiful. When you're raking for leaves, do not expect to find a diamond. They may occasionally be on the surface, but what are the chances that you're going to rake your leaves in your backyard and find something truly valuable? It may happen. It's unlikely. But you still accomplished a lot. But within those chapters that you're reading, once in a while find a little plot and dig deep. Find a passage, a parable, a little piece in the Sermon on the Mount, anything at all and there you dig deep. So what you do is that, you will take up your shovel and you will start digging. It's backbreaking work. It's not easy. Doesn't feel like you're making a lot of progress because you really are digging on one square foot of hard ground, but it's going to bear fruit. There's this very famous exercise at Dallas Theological Seminary by professors who have you study a passage of scripture in the classroom for twenty minutes. They have you write as many things as you can on this passage which is usually three to five verses, so a short passage. You're supposed to find twenty things. When you're done with that, as many things as you can in twenty minutes, once you're done with that your homework for the next day is to go home and find ten more things that you haven't thought of in twenty minutes. And then when you come back to class the next day they literally have you spend the entire class digging for more. By then you probably found thirty, forty, fifty insights about the three to five verses that you have never thought about before. The next day they have you share them with one another in the class. When that's done, they usually end up with a collective five to six hundred insights on those three to five verses. That gives me goosebumps. I want that. I want to dig for diamonds like that. The problem is you do not find diamonds when you rake for leaves. And leftovers stay, leftovers are more often than not are found in the raking than in the digging. So I'm not telling you to do necessarily what I described, that's pretty intense, I'm just trying to challenge you to see that you will find more. The other thing: but this isn't something you do only on your own too, you want to surround yourself by people who are half a step, maybe one step ahead of you in this process. So if you're listening to this, awesome! Keep listening to what Katie shares because she is inspiring you to do exactly what I'm describing. So keep listening to high-quality podcasts, come and check out the Gospel Spice podcast, because that's what we do every week. Listen to people who will inspire you to taste the flavors of the gospel.

KA: Yeah.

SR: And then because it's a community thing, right? First: ask God and expect Him to show up and ask Him with perseverance. Two: start doing it. Pull out your Bible, dig into it, dig in to it by yourself, dig into it by listening to podcast and sermons, when you're going to church, dig into it with other believers, with Katie and Gospel Spice and others who are taking scripture seriously. And then, and then, dare to tell someone about what you're doing. The way I like to say it is the only way you can become the spice of the gospel to someone else is when you yourself have

soaked in the spice so much that you exude its flavors. [Katie murmurs in acknowledgement.] So once you've been soaking in scripture, you turn around and find someone who's half a step behind you and you teach them what you've learned. Because when that happens, when you are being mentored and you are mentoring someone else at the same time -- and I'm using a very lofty word "mentoring" but it's not in a structured way, it's more of a coming alongside one another as believers -- when you do that, you're suddenly mixing spices. I love cumin. One thing I love more than cumin is cumin and garlic together. And one thing I like even more is if I add a dash of salt. And then how about a few sprigs of thyme. You do this and it's amazing. We need one another. You cannot do this on your own. God has not called us to do this spice of the gospel quest on our own. We're meant to do this one of one another. So just some tips, if you're experiencing some staleness and not giving up. It's a seasonal thing.

KA: Yeah. As you were talking I was thinking about mentoring and how lofty of a word that is, but then in the context of food I was also thinking how natural it is. So I have a day job and I work with a fair number of college students, and so I'm always like asking them you know, "What did you cook today? What are we eating today?" And one says, "Oh I brought pasta again today." I make my own pasta from scratch, if you Google Katie Axelson - not my pasta, not my pasta! My alfredo sauce. If you Google "Katie Axelson alfredo sauce" my recipe pops up. And so I was teaching them -

SR: Oh, I'm going to have to leave you, I need to stop this interview right now and Google that. [Katie laughs.]

KA: Right? So I was like, "Hey coworker, you should make your own homemade Alfredo. It's so easy!" and he's like, "What? I just open a jar." and I'm like, "No, no! You got to make it from scratch." And so we were talking about that, and then I've got another college student who's like, "It's really hard to cook for one," and I was like, "Yep, single adult, thirty-one. Been doing that for a couple of years. Here are my tips," and it's just so natural for me to share these tips as we're having these conversations. And so what does it look like to normalize having conversations about scripture, that what we read, with our friends of faith and say, "Hey this is what I was reading, are you familiar with this passage? Have you ever read this before? This is what God showed me when I read it this time," and just like, demystifying mentorship and just investing people and letting them invest in you. So good.

SR: Absolutely. And it's not only sharing passages of scripture, it's saying, "You know, this is what happened to me today, I can see God's hand all over it. Let me tell you about what happened," and you're putting God under the spotlight and that's awesome. Because you're making God bigger in the eyes of the people you're talking with and nothing is more addicting than to watch God be God. It's totally true. I totally agree with you, share scripture, how God spoke to you, but if He hasn't spoken to you through scripture -- and that's okay -- if He has spoken and you haven't listened to well enough, or maybe somehow He does mute His voice a little bit, and that's okay. But then your experiences can still speak to what He's doing in your life. Or actually the other way around. "You know, it's been feeling a little stale lately. Do you have any tips? How are you maintaining? And then turning the tables a little bit, going from the one providing the inspiration to the one receiving it. I have the blessing of my team here at Gospel Spice Ministries that I might be the one that's more the visible face of the ministry, but

I'm telling you, like I'm not the one actually making things happen, at least not by myself. And I learned from these ladies -- there's seven of us -- I learn from them every day. They're my heroes. And get to sit with them over lunch and to learn how their lives are doing, how God is moving is just so inspiring.

KA: Yeah, no that's so true. I was talking to one of the members of my ministry team last night and she just straight-up prayed over me and was like, "I demand that block leave." Here I am, the one hosting that podcast, and she's ministering to me.

SR: Yes, that's how God works!

KA: Absolutely!

SR: So it's never - that's I think that's one of the most dangerous places to be in ministry, is putting yourself on a pedestal or allowing others to put you on a pedestal. Unfortunately there's enough news all the time in the Christian world about people who have allowed others to put them on a pedestal, the only place you can go when you are on a pedestal is downward. And that is never good for you and never good for those who you've allowed to place you there. And so is staying humble and always looking for people who can teach you something, like keeping a teachable spirit. That is the only way to taste flavors of chocolate that you didn't even know were out there. Because if you stick with sixty percent dark and that's it, that's all you ever know, it's good. It is good. I mean, I love it. But there's just so much more.

KA: Let's go here: you told your story is coming to the Lord in the US, I want to know first of all: how did you intellectually embrace the resurrection?

SR: All right, how long do you have? [Katie laughs.] So the short answer is, I'm going to give you a few things, but the short answer is I literally just published a podcast episode on the top ten facts of the Resurrection.

KA: Oh awesome.

SR: So if you want to hear the top ten reasons, go to Gospel Spice Podcast, it's episode seventy-seven if I'm not mistaken. It's the top ten facts on the resurrection, so just a shameless plug in case you really want to hear the whole thing; it's about forty-five minutes. Quickly just very quickly, I would say off the top of my head, again when I say ten I had to narrow it down to an easier number. But the fact that first of all, people aren't raised from the dead so from the get-go you have this massive apparent contradiction, yet a few things. First of all, the rumors started in Jerusalem. If you want to invent a fairytale, you go to a land far, far away. "Once upon a time, in a land far, far away," that's how every fairytale begins. You do not ever start a historical report with "Once upon a time in a land far, far away." You start with a historical report with dates and times and places, which is what the gospels do. Which is why, when Luke seems so boring, with all, "In the third year when Quirinius was governor of," I forget where, you know, Luke 2. And it's like seriously who cares? Well maybe you don't care, but what it tells you is it is grounded in history. It's not once upon a time in a galaxy far far away, or on the other side of the wardrobe or any of that fairytale gorgeousness, you know upon the plains of Middle Earth a lot of things happened, but none of them are true but they're highly symbolic of other things. I love the Lord of the Rings by the way, I'm a huge fan. But it happened in Jerusalem, it's grounded in

time and space. It happened in Jerusalem which is exactly where all of the witnesses that could have denied the truth of the resurrection were. Again you do not ground your fairytale in a place, in the exact geographically accurate location where people, where hundreds of people, could prove that it's not true. You ground it in a place that no one has ever been to, that no one can ever check facts from, in a land far away. The fact that the resurrection is historically described by the proponents of the Christian faith to have taken place in the very center of where the opposition would have been easiest, proves at least partly that there might be some truth to it. Another thing is the disciples. Okay, I love Peter maybe because I am very impulsive and a little bit on the control side and arrogant side like he is, so I can relate to Peter a whole lot. But Peter witnessed the Transfiguration. You would think someone who witnesses the Transfiguration would be convinced that Jesus is God. But no, because then --- oh and he walked on water by the way! -- and a bunch of other things, and he fed the five thousand, and he saw all of that stuff and yet he denies Jesus. My point is, having spent three years with Jesus was not enough to convince him that He was God. It took the death and the resurrection of Jesus for Peter at Pentecost to boldly proclaim. And he had hidden in the other room, right? Between Friday and Sunday, he was a complete coward because nothing had been enough until he saw Christ resurrected, until the Holy Spirit convinced him of the truth of all of this and gave him the power to preach the message that he preached on Pentecost. So Peter then dies for his faith. So again the switch on Peter is interesting on several counts. One, because, if I'm Peter and I'm inventing this whole thing, first I'm going to make myself look good. So I'm going to sweep over the denials, I'm going to say that from the get-go I understood Jesus was Messiah. Yes I'm quoted Matthew 16 saying He is the Messiah, but there's so many other places where it doesn't make me look really good. Again, like I want people to like me, I like people to think well of me, and Peter is not doing that and none of the gospel authors are doing that. They are so weak, and flimsy, and unreliable, that it's got to be true because no one makes up that kind of hero. And then if you look at Peter, he died a martyr's death because he would not deny Christ. If he was part of the conspiracy that made up the Christian faith, he would not have died for a lie that he helped create. A lot of people die for lies because they believe they're true. They're deluded. And that's okay. That's sad, but it's okay. To die for something that is not true, but you think it's true, you genuinely believe it's true, but you don't die for a lie that you know is a lie. No one's ever done that. Unless you're completely crazy, but Peter was not and I think that's pretty obvious. The other thing that is interesting about Peter and actually all of the other disciples, is that they died alone. They died alone, which means there was no peer pressure. Let's say that Peter and Paul, imagine a scene where Peter and Paul died together. You can imagine these two, assuming they were together in Rome, and a lot of scholars will tell you they were together in Rome in 62 to 64. We don't know if they actually were in Rome together, but assume they were, assume they were actually killed together. You could picture the two of them egging each other on, "Yeah let's do this, you know? We're men. We can do this," even if it's a lie. I can imagine, "Yeah we made this up, but let's go to the end," and testosterone bulging through. But the thing is, that's not how it happened. They died alone when a simple recanting would have been enough to make them live. And because they were alone with no witnesses except for their executioners, no one would have ever known that they had recanted. They could have made up any story if they were liars, right? They could have made one more lie and saved their lives, but they did not when they were alone because they believed to their core. And they were

so radically changed that they believed the core and died a martyr's death alone, because they believed it.

KA: So good.

So that is enough to warrant about five minutes of my time to investigate a little bit more. I'm not saying anyone should become a Christian on the basis of what I just said, I just said, maybe that deserves five minutes of your time if what I'm describing is true. Just dig a little deeper. What if there was more to this? Others: because you and I are women, obviously I love the fact that the women were the first witnesses to the resurrection, which makes no sense because in the Jewish culture of the day not only was a woman not a legal witness, but her word was thoroughly untrustworthy. Which irks me to no end, but that was the culture at the time. And that meant someone who made up those stories would never have made up the witnesses to be women because again, you lose your credibility. Why would you, if you're making this stuff up, why would you invent a story where the women are the primary witnesses? Unless it's the way it happened and you are so committed to the truth that you are committed to the truth even when the truth is really not very attractive from their culture perspective. The goal is not to be culturally attractive, the goal is to tell the truth. And that makes God shine as the hero of this narrative that is true. So that's just a few of the reasons and I could take a lot more but...

KA: This is awesome, we'll have to listen to that episode. You said Gospel Spice, episode seventy-seven?

SR: It's actually seventy-eight!

KA: Alright, Gospel Spice episode seventy-eight!

SR: Yeah, seventy-seven is, so it's my two Easter episodes this year. Seventy-seven is called "From the cross to your heart: seven statements to change your life," and we go through the seven statements that Jesus made on the cross and what they actually mean and I have actually received a lot of comments on this and people are telling me that they just really have loved how the Holy Spirit has guided that particular conversation. I'm not taking any credit Katie, I have way too much mileage with Christ to know that none of this is me so no credit here. And seventy-eight is "How do we know that the resurrection actually happened?" and it's those ten facts that I mentioned.

KA: That's awesome, those are gonna be episodes I listen to this afternoon.

SR: Oh, sweet. Let me know!

KA: Yeah, absolutely! So how have you been able to taste the flavors of scripture and to understand the culture it was written in and the culture we're living in today? Because first century Jewish culture is very different than our modern culture.

SR: Yes it is. Really, very much so and I had never realized how much we are so influenced by our own culture until we are taken out of it. I hadn't realized how French I was until I was taken out of France, again, in the US. But then after that I moved back to France, and then I married my husband who is from North Africa so that was a cross-cultural marriage that's about twenty-three years in the making, and then we moved to North Africa. So I lived for almost a

decade in the Middle Eastern culture, extremely close to Jesus' in the first century, which taught me how Western I was. So living in the States taught me how French I was, then living in the Middle East taught me how Western I was, and then we moved to the UK after that, and by then I had realized that I'm not really French anymore, I'm not American, I'm not Middle Eastern, but I definitely have some of the tones and some leftovers spices from the Middle East that I brought with me that are still scenting my clothes, and in the UK I realized, girl I'm definitely not British! [Katie and Stephanie laugh.] I love the Brits to pieces, but that's not my culture. And now that we live in the States I'm not exactly sure what I am anymore but -

KA: I know the feeling so well!

SR: But God transcends culture and all that to say, I realized all of those things because I've lived in all of those places for all those years, and navigating cultures and languages and foods and, foods gosh! The foods I've had to eat, the good and the bad, girl. Like sheep brain in tomato sauce probably ranked top of the worst things ever, but it's a delicacy so I had to go through with it. But it has taught me, why do we not do this when we approach scripture? Why as twenty-first century Western Christians, why do we think the word of scripture isn't culture? Why do we assume, like when we go on a plane -- not that anyone does that any days -- but in the good old days when we would actually go places on planes, remember? These days will come back. But let's say you are flying to a very exotic different culture. I don't know - India. Let's say you're flying to India and you're coming from New York and you're landing in New Delhi or wherever. Don't you think you're going to notice the moment you step off the plane that you're not in the US anymore? Don't you think the flavors, the smells of the spices around you and the sights and sounds are going to be so different that you are will instinctively know you are not in New York City anymore. You will know that. Why don't we know that about scripture? And why don't we realize that every time we open our Bible we are stepping through the Wardrobe, we are taking a plane that is taking us back in time into a culture that is not our own, with the scents and flavor and smells and sights and clothing and culture and idioms that are not our own. The moment we start realizing that, we realize: wait, I need to understand the culture in order to immerse myself, to have a deeper experience in scripture. The best -- well maybe not the best -- but my favorite examples is when I discovered what I believe is a hidden gem in the gospel narrative of the story that the gospel authors relate that starts on Palm Sunday and ends on Friday. And that story in the passion week is the story of the first century Jewish betrothal ceremony. But we don't know that. Because you see, those authors Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and Paul later on, they are master storytellers. You and I are writers, we know one of the cardinal rules of writing is show, don't tell. And that's what they do. They show us things but they don't tell us what they're showing us, which means they are relying on the cultural grid of their first century Jewish audience in order to relate concepts that they very subtly tell us about, without making it obvious because that would be bad writing.

KA: Right.

SR: So two thousand years later, we have lost the cultural nuances of the first century Jewish environment, we have lost the cultural grid to decipher those inklings that they're giving us but not telling us. Example: when Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday he's riding on a donkey which is one of the many steps that a Jewish bridegroom would take in order to go to his

bride's house. He would ride on a donkey if he was very wealthy. Most of them would walk to the bride's parents home but if they were super wealthy they would ride on a donkey. But no one is wealthier than Christ. Maybe not in worldly possessions, but He is the creator of the universe. Of course He will ride on a donkey to fetch His bride. And that starts on Palm Sunday and there's so much more every step, everything that happened in passion week is symbolic of a Jewish covenantal ceremony. Passover, one of the things that gives me goosebumps every time I think about it is, traditionally the parting words of a Jewish bridegroom when he would have sealed the covenant marriage relationship by drinking from the same cup and sharing the same piece of bread as the bride-to-be. We get that right? Hello anyone? The parents would be there watching and then he would leave the house, he would leave the bride-to-be in her house with her parents, for a waiting season during which she would beautify herself, while his primary task is to build a house for her. It would usually be an addition to his father's house, he would still live with his family, and the parting words, the traditional Jewish parting words of the bridegroom to the bride-to-be is, "I am going to prepare a place for you, and I will come back to take you to be with me, so that you may be where I am." Why don't we know this?! Do we see how that flavors Thursday night? When He is clearly telling his disciples, "I'm about to leave you for a season, your job as the bride is to prepare yourself, to beautify yourself, I'm going to send you the Holy Spirit," and there's so much that He teaches on that and the gifts He brings to the bride, and the crown as the first fruit of salvation there so much they are, but He leaves her and says, "But I'm not really leaving you. I'm going to prepare a place for you. And it's going to be perfect." And then He will come back. So there's just again, I mean I have entire, actually episodes on that, but once you taste and this is just one example once you taste the Jewish culture, you realize the beauty of it and what I love, the privilege that I have is I'm not Jewish. Okay? Which means everything I know I've had to learn, which means you can too. Because it's really difficult I found it difficult to describe sometimes my French culture to a non-French because I'm French from the inside. That means I'm not necessarily always aware of what it means to be French because I do it without much of an effort, the good and the bad. And so it is with being Jewish, sometimes Jewish people I mean I learned from them so much all the time, but sometimes it's hard to have an outsider's perspective because they don't know what it's like not to be Jewish, right? It's beautiful, oh gosh I so wish I was, but I'm not. Which means I approached the Jewish culture from the outside in, and therefore we can do it together because if I've done it you can do it too.

KA: That's so good, that's so good. So I have learned so much, and I'm running some errands this afternoon and you better believe Gospel Spice will be playing in my car. Where can we connect with you?

SR: Sure. So the easiest is to find the Gospel Spice podcast wherever you are currently listening on this amazing podcast right here, right now. Just type Gospel Spice Podcast in the search bar and you will find us. Otherwise you'll find us at GospelSpice.com which will tell you a lot more than just the podcast, because the podcast really is just the tip of the iceberg. We do a lot more. But yeah GospelSpice.com. We do Bible studies, we partner with organizations that partner with organizations that fight human trafficking, we do mentoring, so all sorts of things, u you'll find all of that there. So GospelSpice.com for all the things, and Gospel Spice Podcast for the podcast on your favorite listening app.

KA: Wonderful. So we have two final questions for you. The second one we'll end with obviously, but the first one: would you be willing to pray for us?

SR: Absolutely!

KA: Would you be interested in playing in French?

SR: Oh sure! [Stephanie prays in French, ending with "Amen."]

KA: Amen. Thank you. I love getting to hear people talk to God and their native language. Because I don't understand much of what you just said, I do speak Spanish so I can pick up some words here and there because they're similar but God does, and that's always beautiful to me, to recognize like I don't need to understand it because God does.

SR: Amen, yes He does. So it is with the murmurs of our own hearts, we don't even have to bring it in words that we understand for Him to know what's happening deep down inside our hearts.

KA: Yeah, exactly, exactly. So then our final question and you can interpret in the context of the conversation we just had or you can take it a totally different direction, there's space for that: what do you wish everyone knew?

SR: I wish they knew -- and that includes me! -- the depth of delight that we can take in God when we believe Him at His word.

KA: That's good.

SR: There's no greater joy than to know God as He is. My life verse -- it's not really a life verse, I don't really have a life verse -- but Philippians 3:10, "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection in the fellowship in his sufferings." And that word, "to know," Ginosko in the Greek is that experiential knowledge. It's not head knowledge, it's experiential knowledge so Paul is saying, "I want to experientially know Christ in the depth of my being." And that happens through power of the resurrection, and the fellowship in his sufferings, both. Which is not something we want, none of us want the suffering, but if that is part and parcel of knowing Christ, oh Lord then so be it.

KA: Yeah. Oh this is beautiful. Thank you so much Stephanie for sharing your story, for escorting us into the presence of the Lord. I say this probably every episode, is that I consider contact good when I have to go sit with Jesus afterwards and I am ready to sit with Jesus and pull out some French chocolate. Thank you so much!

SR: Yes, amen sister!

[Transitional music interlude plays, an off-beat electric riff.]

KA: As always, big thanks for listening. I hope you learn something. I know that I did! Isn't Stephanie awesome? Be sure to connect with Gospel Spice Ministries, Gospel Spice podcast, and on all the socials as well. While you're there, I'm Katie Axelson, you can find me on Instagram, Facebook, KatieAxelson.com and of course you already know Have Hope; Will

Travel podcast. We'll see you again in two weeks, we got some more traveling coming up: a new friend is going to talk to us a little bit about what it's like to encounter God for ourselves. Know that you are loved, know that you are cared for, and that the Lord wants to meet with you. Be blessed my friends, and we'll see you soon.

[Theme Music: upbeat smooth jazz bassline.]