The Challenge and Dilemma of Being a Christian in the Arts

Part 5 of 5: Naima Lett Interview: Confessions of a Hollywood Christian
with Darrell L. Bock and Reg Grant
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Confessions are hard, especially when you're a Christian. And when you're a Christian in Hollywood, forget about it. It's still Tinseltown, baby. Glitz, glam. Nothing is what it really seems. I don't know about you but my natural tendency is to hide my skeletons, not parade them down the red carpet in a Versace gown, Jimmy Choo sandals and Cartier diamonds. Are you kidding me? Believe me, I would rather drink castor oil than put all my business in the streets. But there is freedom in frankness, and any freedom that we gain as a result of my openness, worth it to me.

You don't have to tell me. I know my life is crazy. My church folk don't understand why the preacher needs to act, and my industry folk don't understand why the actor needs to preach.


Bottom line - you want to know how can you navigate both worlds. How can you excel in your career without compromising? How can you follow your dreams without losing your faith? Welcome to the tightrope that is my life. [Laughter]. You ready for this? Come on.

OMG, it's one of the twins, Tia or Tamara.

No.

rist 2: No, it's Naima from American Idol.</dt>

No.

Oh, it's Naima from America's Next Top Model.

No. [Laughter].

Which Naima are you?

Naima Lett, Hollywood Christian, and these are my confessions.
Welcome to The Table, where we discuss issues of the relationship between God and culture. I'm Darrell Bock, Executive Director of Cultural Engagement for the Howard G. Hendricks Center for Christian Leadership and Cultural Engagement. And with me is Dr. Reg Grant, who runs the Media Arts program here at DTS. And our expert who we're interviewing today is Naima Lett, who is an actor in Hollywood, and she is with us by Skype. Naima, thank you for joining us today.

Thank you for having me. I love, love, love being back, even if it's via Skype. Love technology.

Well, it's amazing that we can do this. We couldn't even think about doing this years ago, so we're excited to have you with us. And we'll just dive right in. Let's talk a little bit about what you do out there in Hollywood. You've got your fingers in lots of pies, so let's talk about what you do in California.

Wonderful. Well, my husband and I, Kevin, we have a production company called Lett's Rise! Productions, and we produce and write and, at this point, are creating a series. And I am also a professional actor. So, while I am creating work on the production side, I am also still auditioning and getting work as an actor on the different Hollywood sets and television and film that's also here. And then the third thing that we do, of course, is the ministry that we have with Hollywood Christian ministries and Hope in The Hills. And that's here in Beverly Hills and we minister to artists and lead artists, and we're having a ball doing that as well.

Oh wow. That's great. Now, Reg, talk about how you met Naima. How did you come across Naima?

Naima and I met, I believe that – was Malachi Williams a transition between us, Naima?

Actually I think it was Max McLean.
<dd>Max McLean, okay. Max McLean runs the Fellowship for the Performing Arts out of Manhattan now, and Max is a wonderful actor in his own right. Naima worked with Max and was touring, and I heard about her. She contacted the school; we got together. And she's a wonderful dancer, she's an actor, she's a singer, she's got the whole package.

So I said, "Man, this would be a great lady to have in our program." She looked into the program and praise God, she came, and we have had a great relationship ever since. And I mean Naima's the kinda person that you say, "Here's the football; there's the goal line 105 yards down the field. Just your goal is to get there."

Darrell Bock: You must be playing Canadian football.

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Reg Grant: <dd>Yeah. [Laughter]. She receives the ball back in the end zone there. Just get out of the way because she's going to take it across. You don't mess with a good hitter in baseball. And, Naima, you just kinda say, "Okay, go," and just watch her take all of this great Bible and theology that we teach here at the seminary and apply it to her art, her craft, and then see how that transitions into her love for people.

Because you heard her say just a minute ago, she's got this great professional work ethic, but it's not divorced from life. How does her life and her work, how do they integrate in a way that's going to reveal Jesus Christ?

Darrell Bock: So now, our understanding is Naima's actually the first graduate of that program. Is that correct?

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Reg Grant: <dd>Yes, she is. She is the very first graduate of the program. I'm so happy to say that.

Darrell Bock: And she looks so young that the program itself must be pretty young.

Naima Lett: [Laughter].
Reg Grant: Yeah, well it is. It was 2005 was our very first year, our inaugural year. And Naima was the very first person to walk across that graduation stage with her diploma in hand.

Darrell Bock: Well, that's great. If you can't tell from both the introduction and just the walking through the background, our topic today is cultural engagement and the arts. And what we want to do is discuss some of what Naima's doing out in California. But we want to use it as a lens to talk about how Christians can engage in the arts and the way that works itself out.

So Naima, let's talk first about what you're getting ready to do. My understanding is you're getting ready to launch production into a series of shows. And the title is just so wonderful, I'm going to let you give it. And tell us about what's involved in getting started in that way.

Naima Lett: Wonderful. Well, the title is actually taken from the book in a series that I've been writing called *Confessions of a Hollywood Christian*. And I started on this, probably in 2009 I believe, so it's taken some time to get to this place where we're now ready to actually produce the series. And we've already produced the trailer, which I believe you'll see and/or have seen at this point.

And at this point, what we're doing is we are cleaning up the writing of at least three or four episodes that we're launching with and we want to be in pre-production with by the summer. So all of these pieces of the puzzle are coming together with my production team. And I was saying earlier that I'm so excited that my director and producer have moved from the East Coast and are now on LA soil. They're in La-La Land, so that's always a good thing.

And Kevin and I are just really thrilled to be pulling together this series. And we actually decided to do it in series format as opposed to just a piece of film. So this will literally keep us working – it's a project that will keep us working for a couple of years.

Darrell Bock: Now, just for people who don't know what's involved in producing something like this, you said you started writing the book in 2009. Is that right?
Naima Lett: Yes, that is correct. So I started the first book in 2009 and we will be releasing it this year. And I assumed that most people – I guess this is what I found out later. Like when I would talk to other authors that have gone through the process, they would ask me, "Okay, oh you're writing a book. Okay, great. Well who's writing it?" And I'm like, "I'm writing it."

Darrell Bock: That's right. Yeah, some people have ghostwriters, although I don't believe in ghosts when I write. But anyway, go ahead.

Naima Lett: That's right. I'm like, "I'm writing it. I'm a good writer. I'm writing it. These are my stories. This is the journey of, literally, becoming a Hollywood Christian. So I'll never forget it. My last semester at Dallas Seminary, I won't say who said this to me, but –

Darrell Bock: Someone did.

Naima Lett: Someone said, "What you're doing with the arts and the Bible is great. But what about the rest of the world? What about the artists that are not going to step foot in the church? What about the rest of our culture that really needs the truth? Like what do we do there?" And that was a seed that sprouted. Kevin and I talked about it. And I get this question all the time: "How did you go from seminary to Hollywood?"

Darrell Bock: Right. Most people do not connect those two things directly. And we don't offer a degree in, you know, so.

Naima Lett: "Well, how did you go from graduated from Dallas Seminary to Hollywood? What was that transition?" And I said, "Well, the seed that was planted literally sprouted, and the Lord watered it to the degree that we have a heart for artists. We love artists because we are artists. I'm an actor and producer and writer, but my husband is a music producer. So between the two of us, our very first production was our wedding. It wasn’t just like we were going to just walk down the aisle. We had a choreodrama. People were dancing. There were people reciting stuff. It was a huge production so to speak, and we loved it. So we love creating together. So the Lord has used that to a certain degree.
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But, yes, I started writing in 2009 and finished the book, and went through the thrilling process of getting different offers and whatnot from the traditional publishers. And then also that wonderful process of learning everything that there is about the publishing side of the business. And then we decided to just bring it in house because we really want to produce the series and keep the rights. Does that make sense?

Darrell Bock:  
Yup.

Naima Lett:  
So having to go the traditional route, we would have to literally give over the rights, and we really wanted to produce this series ourselves. So we're going to produce everything through our production company, Lett's Rise!

Darrell Bock:  
Well, where my question was going was most people don't realize how long it takes from the conceptualization of doing something to the point where you actually see it. They think, "Oh, you just get in a room and do it." And, really, you're talking about a process that's years. And, probably, when it's all said and done, if you get it done it's a half a decade.

Naima Lett:  
That is correct. That is correct.

Reg Grant:  
Yeah, Naima's an overnight success that took ten years to get there. I mean there are so many overnight successes in Hollywood that are a quarter century in the making. And part of what I want to get to, and I want you to think about this in your response here, Naima, is what do you tell a young person who, you know, grew up in the South, but has a gift? What would you tell them the best thing that they can do? I know you're going to say patience is one thing. But what can they do best to prepare them to make an impact for Christ and a living at the same time, in LA as an actor?

Naima Lett:  
Okay, so this is what I do tell young artists that are either getting ready to move to Los Angeles or have moved to Los Angeles and they find us. I say to them, "The first two years is building a solid foundation that you will work on for the rest of your life, if you decide to stay here. But it's going to take at least two years, right? So don't stress; don't get worried; don't start thinking, 'Oh, my goodness. Why am I not getting work?'"
Because what I found is that most artists get discouraged and leave within that two-year period because things haven't jumped off the way that they wanted them to. So if we can lay a foundation that the first two years is going to be just legwork … get a survival gig, right? So you get a survival job so you can pay the bills. Homelessness is not cute; starvation isn't cute.

**Darrell Bock:** Right, not recommended.

**Naima Lett:** No, it's not a lie. If you show up to an audition and you are starving, the people will know. You can't go in with desperation. So you have to have a survival gig in which you're able to pay the bills. And I always tell people, "Find something that you love. We're not just one-dimensional people."

All of us – yes, we're artists, but there are other things that we can love to do that we can make money at on the side to make a living while we're pursuing the dream. So just literally get the survival work. Let's find a place where you can keep the lights on, and preferably with other people as well, so you need community. Because that's another thing: a lot of people deal with lonesomeness here.

But after that, focus on the first two years building a solid foundation where you're, one, training the way that you need to to be able to get work in LA because it's a little different than other regions.

And then, two, building the network. People work here because people know you. So whenever people start asking me, "How do I get work? How do I get work as an actor?" I ask them, "How many people know you? How many casting directors trust you? How many directors trust you? How many producers know you by name?" Because those are the people who work.

**Reg Grant:** Okay, what do you do to earn that trust? Besides having just talent to act, what do you do to earn that trust so that they will ask you back again the next time?
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Naima Lett: To earn the trust, you've got to work. So you have to build a body of work. And it doesn't necessarily have to be already on television. Here's the great thing. In all of the regions of our country, there's production going on. With the incentives that have gone out, Louisiana 30 percent; Dallas is, I think, 30 percent; New York, I know at this point is like 25, 30 percent. You know North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia [are at] 35 percent, I believe, or something astronomical.

You can get work in some of the smaller markets to begin to build a solid resume. By the time you get to Los Angeles, every actor should already have at least three or four professional things on their reel, unless they're really, really young. Now, if you're 16 or 17, come on, you're fine because you can get your foot in the door and they realize you have time.

But if you're moving, say after college age, then you have to have some experience. You have to have a resume. And it doesn't have to be a long resume, it just needs to be able to show a casting director or a director or producer that when you get on the set and you're across from Will Smith or Tom Cruise, you're not going to faint, you know.

Reg Grant: <dd>Okay. Did you have an agent before you went, and how important is it for a beginning actor to have an agent either before they go out to LA or immediately after getting to LA?

Naima Lett: I actually did have representation when I moved. But that was because I had been going back and forth between LA and Texas before we moved to LA. So I had representation when I got here. That's not always the case, but that shouldn't hurt anybody. If you actually have a reel with two or three solid performances and resumes with some solid credits that can say, "Look. I have worked. I know what I'm doing on the set," because time is money and money is time.

That's the way our business works. Nobody is going to put you in their film or television show if you're going to waste their money or waste their time. So if you can prove to people that you have the work and you have some training and you have the charisma and you're likeable. I tell people all the time people get hired because other people like you.
I don't know where this bitterness thing comes from. I meet these bitter actors and I'm like, "Okay, chill. Go do something fun for a little while. Reconnect with life and the Lord, and find the beauty in life, because that's attractive." I mean we're on the set for 12 hours a day. So if you're going to be on a set for 12 hours, you want to be on the set with people that you like.

Reg Grant: <dd>Do you do nonunion shoots, Naima, or are you restricted pretty much to union work?

Naima Lett: So I'm union, so our show will be union. And I'm restricted to union, but LA is a union town. So you can do nonunion if you are in some of the smaller markets. But once you move to Los Angeles, you pretty much have to be in a union.

Reg Grant: <dd>You can build your work in nonunion shows, but you can build your reel with some nonunion work, right?

Naima Lett: Yeah. And I tell people all the time, "Do student films, do independent films." There are always filmmakers who are looking for good actors to use in their work. And then now, wow. We're living in a time where you can get your own producer and your own writer, and you can actually get something filmed yourself. I always say, "Make sure it's of great quality because you don't necessarily want something of poor quality to be the example of what you're giving to people." But it's a wonderfully creative time that we live in now where things have shifted. The studio system has basically changed. It's just changed. And with YouTube and Vimeo and all of these other tools that we have at our disposal, you can get your work done.

And I also ask people, "Would you do it if nobody was paying you to do it?" because that gets to motive. And I really encourage artists to know what their motive really is. Now, if you went to LA and you just want to be famous? Hmm, probably not the greatest motive in the world, because what happens when you don't get the job? What happens when you don't get the auditions? What happens when you don't become the next Julia Roberts, Halle Berry? What happens then? Your world is destroyed.
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The chase for fame can only sustain you for a small amount of time. And that kind of chasing is life-consuming, and I've seen artists just become hollows of themselves chasing after fame. It is as our wonderful Proverbs and Ecclesiastes would say, "Life is vanity," just complete vanity.

So I encourage people to really know. If you're a true artist and you've decided to do this and you can't do anything else, then come make a go at it and understand that our purpose is tied to something bigger. When I go on the set, I'm not just going on the set because – of course, I have to be good at what I do, and I am – but I'm also there to make relationships and to get to know people.

And, again, it's 12 hours. We're not shooting for all 12 hours. We probably shoot for about two. And the rest of the time is setup and hair and makeup, and they're shifting and resetting the lights and resetting – it's move this and drag that. So there's another ten hours to get to know people and that's the time that I find absolutely fascinating. I wouldn't trade it for the world.

Darrell Bock: Now, I'm kind of walking this through your production and then we'll talk about the art that's involved. So you're now at the point where everything's just about written; you're getting ready to tape your first show. That is going to take you about another year basically.

Naima Lett: Right. So we will – hopefully, we'll be in preproduction by the summer, and we want to be wrapped with those by the end of the year. So, yeah, between now and the wrapping of everything will be by the end of the year.

Darrell Bock: And then you have to turn around and get someone to say, "We want to show this," right? [Laughter] That's kinda the point.

Naima Lett: Yes. But I mean the great thing is we've been building relationships and we do have some really good relationships in place that we believe will factor into – we believe it won't be so hard. As long as we can prove our audience. Again, back to the underlying rule, so to speak, of what our industry is built on is, "How much money can we make off of you?" I'm not saying that's a godly thing. It ain't. But that is the value system. So if other people understand that they can profit from what you're doing, then it's a lot easier to make that go. So we're not worried in the least about just producing. We believe that we'll be able to.
Darrell Bock: So, realistically, from start to finish, if everything goes smoothly, we probably wouldn't see this until what, 2014, 2015.

Naima Lett: Right. The beginning of next year is what we're looking at.

Darrell Bock: Yeah.

Naima Lett: And things along the way. So the great thing about it being our production company and us producing it, is we have a wonderful online community that we've been building. And particularly through the daily blog that I do about Hollywood and faith on my site, we have a really robust online community. So we will drop things along the way in the same way that we did the trailer. So our constituents don't necessarily have to wait the entire year to be able to see what we're doing. But, at that point, at least we want to have the package together and ready so that we can roll them out [snapping fingers] boom, boom, boom, boom, boom. We don't want to release an episode and then you have to wait for two months to get the next episode.

Darrell Bock: That's right, yeah. So and then the point that I'm trying to make here is that to invest in a piece of art that people see takes an incredible amount of time and energy, not to mention the production. We haven't even talked about the back side of this, which is who does the filming, the stage and the –

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Reg Grant: <dd>Right, the crew, the cast—

Darrell Bock: – the crew, all that kinda thing. When I go to a movie, I have the habit of sitting and watching the credits at the end because I actually want to think through, "How many people did it take to do this?" And whether it's something like <i>Les Miserables</i>, which we just saw, where the credits go on forever and ever and ever because it was a stage adapted for the movie – or another one that's always interesting is when you do an animated feature and you see all the technicians that go into making what's happened happen. There's a huge effort to put that in front of people. That's why it's so expensive in part.
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*Naima Lett:* That's true. And I say that it's the best operation of teamwork that I've ever seen. So as the body of Christ you can learn a lot from the teamwork that takes place in a Hollywood production because there's no such thing as an island. “No man is an island” really is the saying. You can't do it alone. You really do have to have a team if you want to turn out a product that is exceptional.

And for all the pieces and people to come together, you are, on a daily basis, working with a team of people and it's life. You're doing life together. And the thing is, the key is, everybody is serving – so what they say is just serving the story, you know. And so everybody's invested in the story and everybody wants to do the best for the story. And so, at that point, you have this incredible team of people working.

And so we thank you so much for watching the credits. Please do that as well because it does take a lot of people just to do any one work. Even when we did the trailer – we shot the trailer in two days – we had a 30-person crew, 30 people involved in that, for a two-day shoot for something that turned out to be less than three minutes.

*Darrell Bock:* Yeah, it's amazing. I think most people have no idea what goes into that, just like they have very little idea what goes into a television news documentary and everything that's involved with that.

Let me transition. I'm going do this second half in kinda two parts. I'm going to talk about the art and what you hope to achieve by being involved in the arts. And then I want to talk about choices, what's the choices that you face as a Christian in the arts.

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*Reg Grant:* <dd>That are always so easy, aren't they? They're always so easy.

*Darrell Bock:* Exactly. So let's talk about the art side first. Why – the universal question. Why be an artist?

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*Reg Grant:* <dd>I'm so glad you asked her that because I've been wanting to know. So please go for it.

*Naima Lett:* You can ask that question too.
Reg Grant: <dd>No, no, no. He's already done it, so that's where – now, we're going to check your answer against his.</dd>

Naima Lett: Okay. So I'll answer that in two parts. I believe that artists are born artists. I believe that there's a creativity inside of us and we're born to express that creativity. I haven't met an artist yet who had that creativity in them that felt like they were fulfilling their purpose if they were not doing some part of that creativity. So I believe that God has gifted some of us with a sensitivity and a need to create, right. Now, the second part of that is, I believe that, as artists, we get to impact and influence and articulate to the world what it's like to live in this world. So I believe we're these kind of image-bearers, the icons of God, so to speak, who are the storytellers who get to bring truth into people's lives through our art and through our creativity. So I believe that we have an incredible responsibility as artists to articulate back to the world. We basically hold up a mirror to our world and say, "This is what it looks like to live." And by doing so we help people to sort through life.

Darrell Bock: How much of that – and I'm gonna engage on this because I think it's an interesting observation – how much of that is a mirror reflecting what life is, and how much is it a mirror of reflecting what life can or could be?

Naima Lett: I think it's both. I love that you asked this question. So here's the thing. Coming up to this award season, I watched 22 films in 30 days, okay, 22 screenings in 30 days of the 60 that are up for different awards this season. And after probably about day 18 or 19, I wrote a blog that was called “Hollywood needs more hope,” like our award films need more hope. And the reason I wrote that, Darrell, is because on the one hand, yes, we are mirrors and we're reflecting what life is. But there were at least half of the films that I saw – they were dark, they were about how terrible we are as human beings, how twisted we are, how messed up we are, and it was depressing. So I was looking for the <i>Les Mis</i>, I was looking for – where's the hope. So the other part of that is that I believe that those of us who are called to this area of media and the arts who are light-bearers of Christ, we believe that the Messiah is the answer; I believe that we understand that we can portray art and we can portray life as it should be, right.
So yes, show the truth. We can show how tough life is. But isn't it great when we show that sliver of hope, by the end, that it doesn't have to be this way? We have something that we're looking forward to. We have a hope; we have a future; we have a perspective that “this ain't it.” Yes, we are broken people who live in a broken world, and we can make films all day long about how broken we are. Yeah. But what's next?

So I came to the conclusion that I probably next year will not view 22 films in 30 days – going to have to stretch those out. Because I can do a good two or three dark ones – I can do two or three of those a month. It was just over half of them were really, really dark. And I was just like, "I'm not sure exactly what we're doing here." Great filmmaking nonetheless, but I wish for us and I wish for my community here in Los Angeles the understanding that we can portray what life can be also. And I think people get that. When we look back over the year and we look at the films that did the best in the box office, they were films where either good conquered evil or there was a hopeful love story or somebody won. The ones that did the absolute best were the films that had some sort of lifting of the heart, and I believe that's what people yearn for.

Reg Grant: <dd>You know Stanly Williams said that in The Moral Premise. He points out that the most successful films in Hollywood have a spine to them, have a moral premise at their core, and that those films that abandon that principle suffer financially. So it makes good financial sense to have a moral premise.

Naima Lett: It makes good financial sense. How about that?

Darrell Bock: Yeah, it does suggest that people go to the movies not merely to be entertained. But the movies that really work are the movies that make us reflect positively or negatively about life, and give us pause and make us think about issues that are important. I've been watching the ’net, all the reaction to <i>Les Mis</i>, which I've seen both on stage and in screen.
And it's a very different experience, by the way, to see it on the stage versus seeing it on screen, in part because of the choices that were made in the film production to do everything up close and almost in your face, as opposed to on the stage where you automatically have to deal with distance. Which is a whole interesting use of space that, if we were more philosophically oriented in this broadcast, we could spend a lot of time talking about. I don't want to go there.

But I just want to make the observation that watching people articulate how they react to the message within <i>Les Mis</i> and the reactions to the main characters who are so contrasted to one another, and the way they go about engaging in their lives. As great as the music is – and the music's fantastic in that movie – the words of the music are amazing. I marvel who can write music –

<Reg Grant:><dd>Did you find yourself finally understanding most of the words, because I've seen <i>Les Mis</i> four or five times. And in the film, I said, "That's what he's saying. Oh, that's great."

Darrell Bock: Yeah, exactly. No, that happened to me a lot. And this is one of our favorite plays, so we've seen this play, I think, three or four times. And so we finally went to the movie, and the experience was just so different. The place was so packed, we were in the first row, so you get crane neck.

But anyway, my whole point is that part of what makes <i>Les Mis</i> such an interesting film is that it's not just entertaining. It is a story that leads you to reflect on choices you make in your life and how you treat people. And to me the best art does those kinds of things for people. And so you walk out and you want to talk about not just is so-and-so such a great actor or can they sing, but what about the choices that were being made by the various characters anywhere, but such a range of characters.
Reg Grant: You know something that you can comment on here, Naima, too, and it's something that you and I have both experienced, is you and I have both seen *Les Mis* multiple times. And I think a movie like *Les Mis* that has hope and a redemption as such a strong current and theme invites repeated viewing. Like I don't go back to see the dark ones. As a matter of fact I shun – I say, "Okay."

Darrell Bock: Yeah, I was done with Friday the 13th when I saw the cover.

Reg Grant: Yeah, when it was still Friday the 12th, right? So is part of your conscious goal, your intentionality in choosing roles this element of hope, this element of a redemptive kind of a quality to the film, assuming you're given the privilege of even knowing what the full script is. I mean that's another challenge that you've got, right?

Naima Lett: Yeah, that's true. And that's what I was going to say about *Les Mis* as well, and then some of the other movies that have done the absolute best in terms of our Hollywood community, there's this message of redemption. And we find that message – the movie that did the best this year was The Avengers, right? But redemption was in The Avengers. Somebody was willing to give up their life for the people.

And when he did so – and at this point, I hope I'm not giving away – if you have not seen The Avengers at this point, hello. But whether it's The Avengers or *Les Mis* or Skyfall, you know, 007. It was all about what would you do. I'm into resurrection, you know what I mean? It's like somebody coming back, somebody dying for the people and coming back alive.

It's so core and resonates so deeply within us, and I believe it fills that God space, that God story that each of us yearns for, you know what I mean? So, yes, I think that, particularly in our work, we are very intentional about producing works that touch on that redemptive quality or at least give people hope. And actually, I actually believe that there is a space for entertainment too.

Darrell Bock: Right, absolutely.
There are some films that I've seen where we just went and laughed, you know what I mean. It was just laughter is good medicine. We just went and had a good time.

But even good comedy, even good comedy touches on life.

Yes, it's using reality.

That's right, yeah, yeah.

It's something that's based in truth that we can then kind of move forward with, you know what I mean. So, I asked this question on a post I did a couple of days ago, with the most-watched video in history being this “Gangnam Style,” of which none of us really know. I did look up the English translation. Nobody really knows what he was saying. It's a silly video. Well, I guess, in our day and time he said he made the video because he wanted people to laugh and have a good time and forget about how bad the economy was. And I guess it worked. But once I looked at the lyrics, I was like, "Yeah, what you're singing about is not necessarily something that I'd think I want to sing about."

But it just tells me that in terms of our culture, people are looking for a lifting. They're looking for hope. They're looking for something that's lighter because many people are dealing with things that are really hard in life. Does that make sense at all?

Yeah, absolutely.

And in terms of choosing roles, Reg, yeah. When I have had to choose different roles and make decisions about what will I choose and what won't I choose, actually I made those decisions in my quiet moments, writing in my journal, before I ever went back into the industry, right. So I had a quiet conversation with myself about what are my lines, what are my morals, what will I do and what won't I do for the sake of my craft?

And that came back to who I am as a person, Naima, and who God has created me to be. Because I am in full-time ministry, because I serve the Lord, there were some things that I knew would cause great confusion if I lent my image to them. Does that make sense?
So, for example, I told my very first agent when I went back into television and film, I told my agent, "I'm not gonna be sliding down a pole, you know what I mean." I can dance if there's something that has to do with ballet, modern, any type of dance that is classical or modern or anything like that is fine. But I'm not going to be able to do the pole stuff, you know what I mean, because there will be a disconnect.

Like people at that point will not be able to trust the Word of God coming out of my mouth if they then see my image attached to something where they can't understand. "Well, if you're keeping God's words, why are you sliding down a pole?" So there's a leap that some people will not make in terms of who we are and our faith.

And I tell you, there are a lot of Christians here in Hollywood who are facing that disconnect right now. They are publicly saying that they believe in Christ, that they follow him, that they love the Lord. But people do not believe them because of some of the choices that they’ve made on screen.

Now, I back that up to also say I do not believe this concept that, as Christians, we can only do Christian films. I don't believe that, right. I just don't believe that. I believe Rob Reiner was one of the first ones to really put forth this idea that there are those of us who are artists, we're called to be salt and light in the world, so let's go be salt and light in the world. We're not supposed to kind of take our ball and run off the playground.

**Darrell Bock:** Yeah, create an internal ghetto.

**Naima Lett:** That's not it, you know. He said something very strong in that book that changed my life. He was like, "If Hollywood is dark it's because the light left. So light, come on back.” And it was like a call for believers to literally not run from our art, but to embrace it and understand our place in it. Does that make sense?

**Darrell Bock:** Yeah. Now there are millions of questions that pop into my mind as you're talking about this. Because, obviously, if you're going to portray life and brokenness, you're going to portray sin. You're going to portray sinful relationships, you're going to portray distrust and adultery and unfaithfulness and all these kinds of things. That's part of what makes up the drama of many of the stories of life that end up being portrayed.
I think I saw in one of the clips, and if I got this wrong, let me know. But I think I saw in one of the clips that you did have a part as a madam in a particular piece, a short cameo, but there. How do you sort out, "Okay, I won't do this, but this is a part of the artistic portrayal of life that I am willing to engage in?"

Naima Lett: Right, so I'll answer that question by telling you just a brief story of the madam.

Darrell Bock: Okay.

Naima Lett: So that was for <i>The Curious Case of Benjamin Button</i>, which won several academy awards that starred Cate Blanchett and Brad Pitt. And that was my very first film role.

Darrell Bock: Oh, wow.

Naima Lett: Yeah, very first one that I did. And I was asked to audition for the prostitute that sleeps with Brad Pitt. That's what my agent wanted me to do, okay. And I kept saying to him, "Is there something else, because I'm still in ministry, man. Folks are not going to be okay with my image as a prostitute who sleeps with Brad Pitt on an IMAX stage at 70 feet. Folks are not going to be all right with that.

Darrell Bock: Yeah. You weren't thinking of it as a coming-out party.

Naima Lett: So I literally – and this never happens – I had two or three different auditions for different roles in the film, and the casting director just gave me a chance to try different stuff. And I literally came to the conclusion of – by the time they got to the madam, I said, "Does she keep her clothes on, man? Is there no nudity involved? Is there something in this?" And it was a couple of lines and she kept her clothes on. So, I'm like, "Okay, fine."

Now, the backstory of this is I really judged that character. I did. So when I stood up on the Paramount deck for my fitting, they had for me these broken wave sandals. And when I put on those broken sandals, my heart broke. God broke my heart. And, literally, the impression that I heard in my spirit was, "Why don't you have love for these women like I love them?"
So in that moment, what I realized was that in my sanctified, dignified Christian self, I was somehow looking down on and judging women who had lived this life. But nobody wakes up and decides – like nobody is born and decides, "What do I want to do? I want to be a madam when I grow up." That's not how it goes down.

When I actually did the research and found out the percentage of women who end up in this kind of lifestyle, what they've been through, the abuse, the drugs, all of those different things, it completely changed me. So the Lord used that experience. I'm not sure that if I had to do it all over again, it would be the same. But he did use that experience in helping me to understand the purpose of our art and the purpose of myself as an artist to bring truth to the camera and truth to the stage. And there is just something about that that he used in my life at that time.

So, yes, there's a line there for me. And, again, I made those decisions in my quiet time. I tell people all the time, "You don't make the decision about what you will and won't do when you're on the set."

> Reg Grant: <dd>It's too late then.

> Darrell Bock: Yeah, that's right.

> Naima Lett: Right. It's too late. You have to do it ahead of time. And, for me, it usually involves the question of, "Okay, if I do this, is my witness for the Lord – is it hampered in any way?" So if I do this role, will people still believe the Word of God coming out of my mouth? But that's my standard. That's how I make the choices that I make. I know other people that make different choices, but, for me, it's all about being able to continue this witness and this light that I'm called. Because at the end of the day, this is just work, guys. This is a way to work and make a living and meet people and build relationships. I'm accountable to Him and the legacy that we leave here, my husband and I, has everything to do with what He called us to do.
Reg Grant:  

<dd>I think one of the things that you pointed out is so important. And we haven't used the ”T” word very much here. It's bringing truth to the camera and truth to the screen. Somebody has to play Javert; somebody has to play Judas. And the question that you have to ask is – I was given the opportunity one time to play a great role in a very nice film, but I was given the opportunity to play a child molester.

And I decided to turn it down. And it was well written, I liked the director, I'd worked with him before. But I didn't want that confusion that you just talked about. So even though it was a good part and his sin was found out and he paid the consequences, I still didn't want that link. And that's part of the hard decision that you have to make. And that's a pocketbook decision, too, because it's money that your family could use when you've got kids in college.

Darrell Bock:  

And the trouble is, if you do a good job that link will be with you.

Naima Lett:  

That's true. That is absolutely true. Because I've played the spectrum. Every character that I've played hasn’t necessarily been a saint, you know what I mean. I've played detectives and lawyers and gangsters. I've played the spectrum. But, for me, again it goes back to what is the overall arc of the story? What are we presenting into society? Is this truth? Is there some sort of hope or something that lifts us as a people by the end of the story? And, of course, for me, again, is this going to mess with my witness in any way.

I'm candid. I think you guys know this. I don't know any other way to be. I have found that people are okay in the United States and are supportive as well. They are okay with me having a gun on screen and shooting guns. They are not okay with their minister in any type of sexual things that don't involve my husband. So it became real clear real quick where the lines were drawn, so to speak. So of course, we pray about everything.

But this is also the reason why we so look forward to producing our own and becoming a part of the dialogue. We are excited about being able to produce work and bring a quality and bring conversation to the dialogue that may not have been there already. So with this <i>Confessions of a Hollywood Christian</i>, it is literally being able to bring some more ideas to the dialogue that we're having about life.
And everything is based in reality and truth because a lot of it I've lived through. And a lot of the different scenarios actually address this very same thing that we're talking about today, which is how can you be a Christian in Hollywood. How can you be a person with faith and not compromise, and also be professional and do your work? And because we live it on a day-to-day basis, I think that it will also be able to bring those conversations to light that so many people are struggling with and having.

Reg Grant: Do you have a target month for releasing the book, and is it going to be available in e-pub, as well as hardback or traditional?

Naima Lett: Right. So at this point, we're on schedule to release by summer, just before we begin preproduction. And all of this we're praying works as smoothly as it looks on paper.

Darrell Bock: Which it won't.

Reg Grant: Yeah, which it won't.

Darrell Bock: I've done enough books. I can tell you it doesn't work that way. I do mine one at a time so that I'm editing this one piece at a time. It all shows up at the same time. It doesn't matter. I do four different ones. They all show up on my desk within a week of one another, all wanting a deadline within the next two weeks to get them back. I mean it won't happen. But that's okay. It sorts itself out in the end.

Let me ask one other question. You're not alone. There are other Christians. I know the last time I went out to Talbot, I met with a group of writers who meet together, and who talk about how they write what ends up getting on the screen. And then, of course, one of the issues in Hollywood is what the person writes and then there's what happens to it by the time it actually gets up on the screen, which we could probably do a whole show just on what happens there.

So there are a lot of other people who share the kinds of convictions and beliefs that you have, who are attempting to bring art in a edifying way – if I can say it that way – to Hollywood. Is that right?
Naima Lett: That is correct. Yes, that is absolutely correct, and we have a very strong network. And what I believe that our constituents and supporters would be thrilled to know, particularly with the Dallas Seminary family and all of those that are watching around the world, is that Hollywood is not a place where Christians are not. We are here. And we are being light and being salt and being used by God.

We're doing it in a way that is one relationship at a time. And being authentic and showing up, being excellent at what we do, being trustworthy, walking in integrity. And when you bring all of those things into relationships, then the Lord is able to do what he will do. And that's in any field, whether it's Hollywood or anywhere else in the world.

Because I meet some people and they're like, "Why would you be there? Why would you – out of all the places in the world?" And I'm like, "Because this is where my heart is. This is where the Lord has called us and we love it here." And if you don't love Hollywood, I would say, "Don't come."

Because I don't think that it's a scenario where God doesn't love the people. God loves the people. So, again, I ask the question all the time to those whom we have the privilege of leading, "Can we love people like God loves people?" because He doesn't just discard and throw them out and go, "Oh, well, they're not worthy. They're not worth it."

God chases. He chased after me. So I want to chase after those the way that He chases after them. And I want to love those like He loves them. And I want to love artists like He loves artists. He gave us this creativity, right? So it is our privilege to use it to impact our world. It’s His, isn't it, this gift? God, we didn't create this. We didn't create this stuff, this gift of expression.

What He's given, it is a God-given thing. All good gifts come from the Father above. So in that regard, we just have this wonderful privilege of being able to use it. So I tell people, "Pray for us.” Don't judge, don't throw stones. Pray for us, pray for our community, pray for our work. Pray for the Lord to use them to open up avenues to help us build relationships. Pray for our resources.

On every side we need prayer. And at any point, there's disagreement about projects or about different things that we're doing. Talk to us, but keep praying. Keep praying. We serve the same Lord. He is able to give us a really clear message in the same way that He is with everybody else.
So I invite people, "Pray for us.” When you look at the traits that you see in an artist that looks like they're spiraling out of control, hit your knees. Because that's what we're doing. We are literally on our knees fighting for people's lives and fighting for people's very souls. So it's not just, ha-ha, it's funny and they get what they deserve. No, we believe in seeing God turning things around in people's lives one life at a time, something I'm very, very passionate about, but I don't want to go on and on and on and on.

**Darrell Bock:** Glad you were able to share that. Well, I want to thank you for taking the time to be with us today and to share a little bit about your craft and you how you do it. And I do hope that it has been a mirror and a window for people on the arts and cultural engagement, and how to think about the arts.

And maybe, rather than sometimes what we do, which is just to complain about what comes out of Hollywood, maybe, hopefully, as a result, some people pause and think about what's going on there and reflect and pray for folks like you, who are seeking to entertain us, but entertain us in a way that means something. And we're very, very appreciative of that.

**Naima Lett:** Thank you. Thank you so much for having me. It's so good to see you guys again.

**Reg Grant:** <dd>Good to see you, Naima. My love to Kevin.

**Naima Lett:** Thank you.

**Darrell Bock:** We thank you again, and we thank you, as well, for joining us on this discussion of the arts and cultural engagement on The Table.