



## Season 13: Episode 02 | Aaron Miller | Like Moses: Saying Yes When You Feel Unqualified

Hello and welcome to Scripture Untangled, a podcast by the Canadian Bible Society. My name is Joanna la Fleur. I'm a friend of the Canadian Bible Society and I'm going to be your guide for today's episode.

Today, Aaron Miller will be interviewed by CBS Ambassador, the Reverend Dr. Andrew Stirling. Reverend Aaron Miller is an ordained minister in the United Church of Canada. He serves University Hill United Church in Vancouver, BC and is the denominational campus minister at the University of British Columbia.

He's the author of two books. The first is called, *Witnesses of These Things, Faithfulness Here and Now*. And the second is called, *Weird in the World, Living Towards the World God Wants*.

He is currently pursuing a PhD in New Testament Studies at the Vancouver School of Theology in partnership with the University of Pretoria. Aaron lives in Vancouver with his wife, Kate, and their teenage sons. Enjoy this conversation.

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**Andrew Stirling:** Aaron, I am delighted that you are a guest on Scripture Untangled. And I have waited for quite a while to have this discussion with you.

And I know even when we met in Vancouver a few months ago, I mentioned that this was something I was really looking forward to. So, Aaron, welcome to Scripture Untangled.

**Aaron Miller:** Thanks so much. It's a real pleasure. I'm excited about this. It's good to be here.

**Andrew Stirling:** Aaron, if you can, tell us something briefly about your background in the faith. I mean, you are a child of two parents who both were clergy, but you also have a very strong faith of your own. Tell us what it's like to grow up in a family with both parents being clergy, for one thing, just briefly.

But then also tell us something about how you came to faith yourself.

**Aaron Miller:** Yeah, sure. I mean, growing up in a clergy household, I don't really have anything else to compare it to.

So, it was just kind of the way things were. Our lives kind of revolved around church seasons. It was a bit weird, I suppose, because in many cases, I was the only person in my friend group whose parents had anything to do with their church, let alone quite so vested in interest in the whole thing.

And yeah, I mean, I think all that being said, it was a great gift in many ways. Church is a place where we learned to interact with people who are older than us. It was a place where we learned to be upfront and comfortable.

It was a place where we were encouraged to ask questions and to engage. My first job was playing the piano for the Sunday school singalong at the beginning of that. So, it had all sorts of opportunities.

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I think, yeah, like everybody, well, maybe not everybody, but like many people, I certainly had a time during my undergrad where I was always kind of respectful of the church, of Christianity. I respected my parents. They were also paying my bills at the time often, so I wanted to keep them on side.

But my undergraduate degree is in English language and literature. And sometimes university humanities departments are not the most hospitable to faith or organized religion or however we want to define it. So, I certainly had opportunities to question, to wonder.

I often say I had a kind of short and rather unsuccessful rebellion in my early 20s. And how I kind of came to claim the faith for myself in a real way, the woman who became my wife, Kate, and I, when we became friends, one of the things that drew us to each other was the fact that we were each other's only friend whose parents were involved in the church. So that was a sort of strange, we had a language around what our parents might've done this weekend, you know.

And then when, after we started dating and before we were engaged, my dad asked us to do an Alpha Course at his church. And we went because there was free food and we were poor.

**Andrew Stirling:** A big draw for many, I'll tell you.

**Aaron Miller:** Indeed. Yeah. I mean, I certainly didn't walk in thinking this is going to change my life.

Like I thought, yeah, it would be fine. But as it turned out, I really got into it. I really enjoyed the conversations afterwards.

I think theological thinking, partly because I spent my entire life listening to pretty good sermons and going to summer camp and, you know, theological thinking came fairly naturally to me. And so, Kate and I would, we would talk about these things all the way home. We'd, you know, it would be part of the ongoing conversation.

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And one night she asked me if I'd ever thought about going into ministry. And as the eldest son of multiple clergy, I have been asked if I was going into ministry a lot in my life. But, you know, when your fiancé asks you, it sounds rather different than when the old ladies at church ask you or when your grandmother tells you, you're probably going into ministry, which she did.

So that began a real kind of deepening and increase. I don't know that I ever had a time when I didn't have some kind of faith. I don't think I ever really flirted with, you know, any sort of atheism.

But I think there were times certainly where I wasn't quite sure that the church was going to be the place that might be the most nourishing. So yeah, that process with Kate coming, we really sort of claimed faith for ourselves together. It was part of the beginning of our relationship.

But it's also been part of the way that we've grown together.

**Andrew Stirling:** What a lovely story that is, actually. And I mean, and to be, you have your life enveloped in faith and good preaching, good teaching from both your parents.

I mean, you had sort of the formation that was there. But it was interesting that really the deepening and the question of going into ministry came about from who would eventually be your spouse. That's actually quite unique, actually, and certainly in my experience, you know.

In terms of Biblical stories or peripheries or passages that grabbed you, maybe something that you saw in Alpha, maybe a story, maybe an image, was there something there Biblically that kind of drew you into this eventual sense of calling to the ministry?

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**Aaron Miller:** Yeah, I mean, I did have what I've called a kind of Moses time. After Kate asked me that question, my immediate response was no, even though it's not entirely true. I think I had always kind of thought in sermons, if you will.

I just had no inkling that this is where I was going. And so, I said no. But then again, having a person that you are falling in love with suggest something, maybe makes you a little more open to it.

So, I spent about a week really after that thinking, no, I mean, I'm a terrible procrastinator, or at least I was. I couldn't get an essay done on time with three months' notice. How was I going to write a sermon every week? You can't ask people to come back on Tuesday because you just didn't get it done.

I had all these anxieties about whether or not I knew enough to begin this journey, whether or not I was faithful enough to begin this journey, all these things. And I had one or two experiences where something close to an audible voice. I remember where I was, and I just got this word from the Lord, I suppose, said, you know, "why don't you trust me?" And that was it.

I went to Kate and I said, sweetheart, I'm sorry, but I think I have to go to seminary. I told my parents, my dad was driving at the time, nearly drove off the road. I don't think anybody saw this coming.

Certainly, Kate didn't plan to be a clergy spouse. We had much higher aspirations for ourselves, really. So yeah, that's kind of the journey.

And so, Moses, I guess, to answer your question.

**Andrew Stirling:** That's the journey. But in terms of the Biblical component to it, as I mentioned, is there anything sort of there that grabbed you in particular?

**Aaron Miller:** Yeah.

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So, if we think about the Moses story, this deep sense of that Moses really doesn't think he's the guy for this job. He comes up with every excuse he can think of. He, you know, he's completely unprepared for the work that he's going to be doing.

And yet there's this like God's persistence, God's refusal to let him say no. Basically, that really resonates with me.

**Andrew Stirling:** And I think central to any real sense of call is this sense of not being equipped, you know, actually, it's sort of send Aaron, right? I mean, please don't send me, send Aaron.

And I thought, as you mentioned the Moses thing, okay, this is very apt. Aaron has said yes. So now you are the Minister of University Hill Congregation of British Columbia.

It's a unique ministry in many ways. And what are your sort of challenges? What are your opportunities? What are the things that are really grabbing you now that you're in this important ministry really in BC?

**Aaron Miller:** Yeah, I mean, I often say about my church, like we don't have any interesting problems, we can use more people and more money. But lots of churches can have that.

One of the big challenges here is that we live in a really transient space. You know, there are lots of people who are only here for a short period of time, you know, the goal of coming to university for most people is to leave it. That's how you know you succeeded.

And so, you know, that kind of, it becomes very difficult sometimes to develop leaders to, or I mean, if we develop leaders, we're often developing them for someone else, which is fine and good enough work. But that can be a challenge. And yet, it's also a real opportunity to think of ourselves as a place of formation, a place where people can find a home for a stretch.

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Now, you've got to be pretty good at jumping into relationships, like, you only have a certain amount of time, if you want to get to know this person, you want to learn to get to know you. So yeah, there is a kind of pace to relationships that is an interesting possibility and challenge, right? I think a lot of one of the things we know about UBC is that it is perennially, the big challenge for students is loneliness. Partly because big campus, high density living is not really conducive to community building.

If there's no public space, if you're not really supposed to talk in the elevator, so it can also be a place where people choose not to do that work of getting into relationship because it's for such a limited time or yeah, and then people are just busy, chronically busy, chronically overworked. And so, getting engagement can be a challenge. And yet, I think it's also, you know, the church has an opportunity to witness in that context of busyness and overwork.

And striving to a different way of being in the world, a different sense of identity.

**Andrew Stirling:** I'm interested, Aaron, in your student body, and who comes, you know, to your church, to those who come essentially have already a faith of their own. So they go to church, because this is part of their custom and their faith.

Or are you finding that you're getting more people who are coming who are seeking and wanting to know more? And how do you handle those two sides of things?

**Aaron Miller:** Yeah, I mean, I think we as a congregation tend to attract more kind of grad students than undergrads, partly because we're more of a traditional kind of liturgical worship. There are a couple of evangelical, guitar driven congregations on campus. And that seems to draw the sort of undergraduate crowd.

We get some, but the people who tend to come tend to be a little older. And I would say it's a mix. I mean, we've certainly, you know, I did two adult baptisms this year, which, you know, is sort of unusual in my tradition, we tend to baptize infants or children, as you know.

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And both of those were new. Yeah, I mean, obviously, they're new converts, they've never been baptized. And then we also get people who really do want to find a church community that will kind of ground them and settle them during their time here.

So, you know, we're doing both. But I hope, I guess in my preaching, I always try to hope that there's somebody there who wants to go deeper, who might have a question, like I try to preach as though there might be a new person, even though some weeks there aren't. So, and I rest assured in the fact that we're all beginners, in a sense.

So, I don't worry too much about either speaking to simply or challenging folks who may be at the beginning of their journey. You know, I think we need both.

**Andrew Stirling:** You are not only the Minister of University Hill Congregation, but you're an author, and you write very well, I must say.

And your book, *Witnesses of These Things, Faithfulness Here and Now*, it's a fascinating read, Aaron. What are the key issues that you address in that book? And can you show us the cover of that, by the way, just so people know where to find it? Okay, there we go.

**Aaron Miller:** Thank you.

**Andrew Stirling:** That's all right. I'm pleased to do some promo for you. But how may it help our audience appreciate the Biblical commission from which it arises? And with so many people in churches uncertain today, I think about their witness.

How does one unlock their faith and see a path forward for that in being a witness that's positive?

**Aaron Miller:** I mean, the book itself is rooted in the tail end of Luke's gospel, where Jesus commissions His disciples as witnesses of repentance and the forgiveness of sins in His name. Repentance and forgiveness of sins is complicated language in our

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tradition in the United Church of Canada. I know there are certainly congregations that don't have a prayer of confession, lest we make anybody feel badly about themselves, which I think is problematic.

But the point is, Jesus commissions us to do this. And I think we're so often wondering, what should we do? What does mission look like? What's the shape of mission? I think Jesus gives us a mission here. We are to be witnesses of repentance and the forgiveness of sins.

And in the book, I kind of unpack those terms. I argue that repentance is effectively a political engagement with the will and way of Jesus or political commitment to the will and way of Jesus. I use N.T. Wright referencing Josephus to make that case.

So, you know, what does it look like for us to be committed to the Sermon on the Mount specifically, which I think is really Jesus' Kingdom of God manifesto. And then forgiveness of sins is the reconciliation of all relationships. And in the Genesis story, we see the breakdown of four key relationships for which were made with God, our true selves, each other, and creation.

God comes walking in the garden at the time of the evening breezes, which I just think is beautiful. Just to be with Adam and Eve and they're hiding in a bush. You know, the relationship between God and humanity breaks down.

They've covered themselves at the end of chapter two of Genesis. They're naked and unashamed. A few verses into chapter three, they've covered themselves because they're ashamed, which is, I think, the breakdown of our kind of internal relationship with our truest selves.

Adam says, you know, it wasn't me, it was this woman you gave me, which I've always liked to imagine Adam trying to live down for the rest of his life. And we see the breakdown of interpersonal relationships, and I think along, you know, in many ways, along gendered lines, but not restricted to that. And then Eve turns around and says, no, it wasn't me, it was a snake.

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And if we take that plus the tail end of chapter three, and we see that humans are no longer working within creation, but over it, they're toiling at it, the ground is hard and hostile. I think we see the breakdown of our relationship between humanity and the rest of creation. So, if that is what sin does, and I insist following Eugene Peterson that sin is a relationship word more than anything, then to proclaim the forgiveness of sins is to be a community that seeks to embody the restoration of those relationships. To help people come into fullness of relationship with God, to be freed from shame that distorts who we're meant to be, to repair our interpersonal relationships, both with our immediate neighbors and in the world, and then to do the creation care that we're meant to do, to live in wonder and awe at all that God has given us, and to seek its flourishing.

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**Aaron Miller:** So that's the gist of the book.

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**Andrew Stirling:** Yeah, and in terms of, I mean, forgiveness is a subject, as you said, that sometimes we're a bit reluctant to talk about. And it's very interesting. A colleague of mine in Nova Scotia who was at the Church of the Advent in Boston, Father David Curry, always said to me, you know, Andrew, when you really boil down our Christianity and our faith and we look at the cross of Christ and we look at redemption, we're talking about forgiveness.

It doesn't matter what else. I mean, we're talking about forgiveness, aren't we? That's very much at the core of our faith.

**Aaron Miller:** Yeah.

And, you know, I think at the root of forgiveness is the promise that I will be your God and you will be My people. And we're going to live out of that relationship together. You know, and in Christ, nothing will separate us from the love of God.

That's our declaration. So that's, to me, that's the root of forgiveness is that reconciliation.

**Andrew Stirling:** Yeah, absolutely.

Amen. You've also written a book, which I confess I have yet to read because it's fresh off the thing, *Weird in the World*. And I thought, what a topic this is.

Where is Aaron going with this one? But my brief reading of it tells me that, I mean, you're talking about the distinctive nature of being a Christian in the world and that it might seem weird by worldly standards, but, you know, it's that Pauline line, you know, we're fools for Christ. And so, in a world where it appears weird, but you address a number of topics in that.

But there's one that just initially stood out for me, and that is kind of the weirdness of worship, because here we are praising God. Here we are, you know, worshipping an unseen and yet very powerful being. And the tendency, because it might appear weird in a worldly term, to turn it into some kind of entertainment, which is something

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I've observed over the last few years. There's always been a component to it, don't misunderstand me, but, you know, the tendency for it to become entertainment has really been very prominent.

Can you just make a comment on that, Aaron? And what's your sort of assessment of worship and why it's both weird worldly, but also very, very important in terms of the life of faith?

**Aaron Miller:** Yeah, I mean, I think it's weird worldly, because there's so many other things we could be doing with our time and energy and money. And, you know, I generally think that the mark of a healthy church is to look out and not really know why these people are together, except that God has called them together, and they've been gathered here this day by the Holy Spirit. So yeah, I mean, and then we can go down the rabbit hole of all the questions that might arise for somebody who was unfamiliar with Christian faith and why we would do this.

And how do we, I think I say in the book, you know, how do we sing praise to the Lord, the Almighty, when the world seems to be falling apart? Right? Like, what does that what are we even doing here? So that's, you know, I think kind of the weirdness of it. But of course, I use four headings to talk about each of what I call the signposts on the way of strangeness, the way of weirdness in the world. And so, I suggest that each is weird, political, an act of presence, and a way of life.

So, worship is that space that both we come into out of the rest of our life and go out of the rest of our life from or go into the rest of our life from rather. It is a place of formation. It's a place where we learn the language of our faith. But it's also a place where we come together to say, hey, like, you actually aren't alone in this.

You know, we're going to say this together. And if you can't say it this week, then I'll say it for you. And next week, if I can't say it, then I'm going to count on you to say it for me.

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And of course, it turns our attention to the, you know, my favorite line, the book is based on Psalm 34. And my favorite line in there is, you know, *look to the Lord and be radiant*. You know, which is, I think that's part of what we're doing in worship is turning our attention to the One who's turning His attention to us, drawing near the One who's drawn near to us.

And yeah, like getting that consistent and regular reminder that this is how we're to be shaped. This is the God who's called and claimed us. This is the good news we have to share with the world.

And the good news out of which we live our lives. So yeah, I mean, I think it's indispensable. Of course, I'm right now I'm sort of talking about corporate worship.

But, you know, like, I think we need to worship in our whole lives. You know, Paul says to do everything you do in word or deed in the name of Jesus and the glory of God, which means that there isn't anything in our lives that isn't an act of worship, or that can't be an act of worship. If there is, we are perfectly free not to do that thing.

And I think the audacity of that, that line is that Paul seems to think we can do it. Right. You know, whatever you do, in word or deed, do it in the name of Jesus, the glory of God.

**Andrew Stirling:** I must say, Aaron, you know, as someone who, you know, led congregations in worship for over 40 years, I would get asked, you know, why aren't so-so and so-and-so in worship, and don't you see the people who are missing? And my comment always was, I'm just astounded and enthralled that there's anybody there who in this day and age in this world would come and get on their knees and sing praises to God and worship the Lord and take a few minutes out of their busy lives to even hear what I have to say, never mind anything else.

But not the human side, but just the fact that the Lord still calls people to worship and honor and praise Him is, I think, something that is, frankly, miraculous.

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**Aaron Miller:** Yeah, I mean, I've often said the miracle of the mainline church is that anybody shows up at all.

Yeah, like we may be lamenting that we're not quite what we used to be, but honestly, like every week people show up to do this thing again, tell the same story. And I think, you know, to come back to your question about entertainment, you know, like the world is full of entertainment. We don't need another opportunity to be entertained.

We need to be, we need an opportunity that's set aside together to turn to the Lord and be radiant. To, you know, so yeah, my conviction is that, you know, like people come to church and I don't know, they may articulate it differently, but because they believe that there's something there, they can't get anywhere else. Community is important, service is important, all the things that we sort of do as church is important.

But there's something about worship that we, it's the only place we can get what we really need. So, you know, so I think we should, I think we should give it to people.

**Andrew Stirling:** And I sense it, absolutely.

And I sense it too, honestly, in my travels around Canada, but also overseas, where there seems to be sort of a quiet revolution going on, particularly amongst young people who are sort of tired of the entertainment aspect and are wanting something of substance, something that's transcendent, a liturgy that has meaning, that has staying power, that actually has depth to it, you know.

And there was one student that I talked to not long ago, and they said they went to a church and they sang Kyrie Eleison. And this was something they'd never heard in their whole lives and having grown and formed up in it.

And when they started to dive into what Kyrie Eleison meant, and the depth of it, and the history of it, and the tradition of it, they googled it, of course. They were astonished at what a Biblical concept it is, and how meaningful it was. And why

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haven't I not heard this? Why have I not heard this for years? You're also, though, part of Becoming Church, which is a campus ministry component to it, sort of beyond the bounds of your own congregation.

So, this leads us really into sort of next gen, and their walk with God, and they're finding their way to follow Jesus today. Some of the things that you have as your priorities are spiritual formation, worship, community, hospitality, social justice. These are things that, you know, Becoming Church is focused on, and each of them within a Biblical category.

Tell us a little bit more about becoming church, because I think this is very relevant for our time, Aaron.

**Aaron Miller:** Yeah, I mean, it's been an interesting, anybody who's church planted knows that the challenges and blessings of it. One of the blessings is we get to kind of start from scratch.

I mean, we've never done anything before, so no one could say we've never done it that way before. And it was, I think, has allowed us a little bit of flexibility, a little bit of, you know, we still have a fairly recognizable liturgy. Like, it's not like we're, you know, doing anything wildly different.

But we certainly have opportunities to actually respond. We've sort of, after the sermon, there's five to 10 minutes of kind of response time where people use prayer walls and remember their baptism and burn their sins in a pot. And, you know, all sorts of sort visceral things.

We're trying to acknowledge that, you know, I love a good 45-minute sermon, a good one. Let me be clear with that. But that's not how everybody learns, right? That's not how everybody responds.

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It's not what actually lights people up. So that's one of the things that we've tried to do. The curious thing is that while we set out to have a campus church, or like a church geared towards young adults, that's not the only people who are coming.

And some weeks, that's not who's there at all. It's other seekers, many of whom have some relationship to church, but most of whom have either been estranged or have been away for a while. You know, so yeah, as I said, anybody who's planted a church, you can have a target audience.

And I think that's kind of important. But at the end of the day, like any church, you know, you got to serve who God brings you and be faithful to that group of gathered people. But I do think that those five sort of values are our attempt to insist that the way of Jesus is a reality in every aspect of our lives.

So, there aren't, you know, we're trying to do worship in such a way that it doesn't feel completely passive, that it requires something of us and equips us to kind of move out into the world and live the stuff we're talking about.

**Andrew Stirling:** That's very encouraging to hear. Somebody like yourself, though, is busy.

You're an academic, you write, you have family, you have Kate, you have many obligations pastorally. I mean, it's not like, you know, you have nothing else to do in life. How do you, Aaron, sustain yourself spiritually, though? Like, how does the Bible, prayer, faith, play a role in developing, you know, Aaron Miller, as a person with all the obligations that you have, and joys in life?

**Aaron Miller:** I mean, I was really blessed to be introduced to Eugene Peterson before I started seminary.

My dad gave me a copy of *Under the Unpredictable Plant* and his kind of, I mean, I think his book, *Working the Angles* should be required reading for anybody thinking about pastoral ministry. And, you know, through him, like, in terms of balance, in

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terms of not getting completely overwhelmed, I often think of his line that, you know, there's too much to be done to be in a hurry. What does it mean to be, you know, what's he called, unimportant pastors? Anyways, so I think part of that is just a perspective on who I am, like, discipleship is my first priority.

I think in terms of, like, spiritual practices, like Scripture and prayer, like, we can't develop a robust Christian imagination for how we should live in the world without Scripture. I just don't believe that's possible. And I don't think we should, not that you can't ever pray without reference to Scripture, but I don't think we should be praying without the witness of God's people surrounding us and guiding us.

It's very easy to get self-indulgent in our prayers. So yeah, so I mean, you know, regular morning devotions is really important to me, regular worship. I often attend a church where I'm not in charge of anything.

Or, you know, like, I like finding opportunities to worship where I don't care if the PowerPoint works, or the sermon falls flat, or the music isn't that good this week. It's not my problem. I'm just here to worship.

So that's been a real gift to me. And, you know, I think there's something about learning to love the Bible, learning to fall more in love with Jesus on our own time that sustains the sort of professional stuff, right? Like, I think all ministry needs to be an outworking of discipleship. And so, it's not that there's never, you know, weeks where I feel like I may have bitten off a little more than I can chew.

You know, trying to do a PhD off the side of my desk sounded like a good idea at the time. You know, getting involved in another church that isn't my own. I'm not even really leading it.

But I have this kind of obligation to be there. You know, it is all, sometimes it feels like a lot. But I will, when it comes to family, I feel like I'm really, really blessed to have a family that has an imagination for ministry as a family.

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You know, it's just kind of what we do. It helps. My wife has a degree from Regent College, so she's theologically educated.

**Andrew Stirling:** Oh, that's nice to hear.

**Aaron Miller:** Yeah, it's real handy. She was guest preaching yesterday for VST Sunday, the Vancouver School of Theology Sunday.

And the minister suggested that there must be, you know, a battle in our house over who's the better preacher. It doesn't happen because she's very kind to me. But yeah, so I think, you know, like we don't consider church a drain on our family life, I guess, which is a gift. I know not everybody has that. But I feel really blessed in that regard.

**Andrew Stirling:** Aaron, our time's coming to a close.

And I ask this of all my guests, because I think our people like to do this, actually. And that is, what do you want our audience to pray for you and your ministry?

**Aaron Miller:** I think kind of faithfulness and clarity are things that I'm always looking for. I'm excited about a Lenten series that's coming up in our church that I'm hoping will shift a few things in our life together.

And so, prayers for that, for diligence and preparation for it, but also in trusting God to do what God wants to do with that. That would be great.

**Andrew Stirling:** Well, Aaron, thank you so much for your time today.

And I have wanted, as I said, to have a conversation with you for some time. And I promise I will read, *Weird in the World*, a little more diligently next time. But thank you for what you're doing.

Thank you for your service. Thanks for your outreach, particularly to young people in Vancouver. I know it goes, and you're a very humble man, it goes beyond what you're just saying about your own ministry.

# Scripture Untangled

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I know that it extends to supporting others and encouraging others as well. And hopefully, with our prayers and our support of the Bible Society, we continue to encourage you as well. So, God bless you, Aaron.

And once again, thanks so much for your time today.

**Aaron Miller:** Thank you for all the work you're doing. It's a real gift to many of us. So, thanks for having me.