


# How ‘The Chosen’ Creator Turned the Bible Into Binge TV: “This Is Such a Dangerous Show”

 [hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-features/the-chosen-dallas-jenkins-interview-season-4-1235909988](https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-features/the-chosen-dallas-jenkins-interview-season-4-1235909988)

James Hibberd

May 29, 2024



Jonathan Roumie as Jesus in *The Chosen*, which has drawn a huge fan base — but also some blowback — for giving its characters a more contemporary ethos. *Mike Kubeisy/Courtesy*

Dallas Jenkins went from flailing Hollywood director to creating a global sensation. Inside his plan to stage the most devastating crucifixion in Hollywood history and create the first biblical cinematic universe.

“It was, by every objective measure, one of the most devastating days of my life,” Dallas Jenkins recalls.

The Midwest-born director and son of a best-selling author of Christian novels had for years struggled to build a Hollywood career and had finally landed his big break: directing a movie for *Get Out* producer Jason Blum, who shared Jenkins’ belief that there was an untapped market for elevated religious fare. Their film — 2017’s rom-com *The Resurrection of Gavin Stone* — scored “insanely” well at a test screening and their hopes were high.



[TV](#)

[How to Stream 'The Chosen' Season 5 Online for Free](#)

---



[TV](#)

['The Chosen' Reveals Intense Season 5 Trailer and Streaming Premiere Date](#)

---

Then came opening weekend.

“I was at home with my wife and shell-shocked,” Jenkins recalls. *Gavin Stone* ranked 18th at the box office and opened to just \$1.2 million. “I mean, we were crying. I thought this was my chance. I had finally got in the door. I was working with one of the most prolific and influential producers in Hollywood, who liked me. And it just completely failed. I thought, ‘Maybe this is the wrong business for me.’ “

But within weeks, Jenkins had another idea. This one was for a TV series, which would go on to gather a flock of more than 200 million viewers worldwide who have watched at least one episode, largely driven by word-of-mouth. The show has also sold an incredible \$63 million in theatrical ticket sales after becoming the first series to screen an entire season in theaters. It even has its own annual fan convention. All this, and you’ve probably barely heard of [The Chosen](#), which tells the story of Jesus and his disciples across a planned seven seasons (the long-awaited fourth season [will begin streaming](#) June 2).

Yet to hear Jenkins tell it, the fact that *The Chosen* is still obscure to many is a very good thing. The 48-year-old producer is convinced his addictive, character-driven, serialized drama has the potential to reach new heights of mainstream popularity now that he’s made a global distribution deal with Lionsgate and the show is edging toward its most dramatic story beats yet (including a devastating, multi-episode crucifixion sequence).

His new studio partnership is a major step toward producing a slew of other modern takes on biblical stories that he’s developing. How about a Moses show? “Moses was like a reluctant Tony Soprano,” Jenkins pitches. “He was the head of the largest family and didn’t want to be.” Or Noah’s Ark? “The story of Noah is basically *Parenthood* on a boat,” he says. And, of course, he’s got plans for a *Chosen* sequel and prequels galore.

“I bet on the right guy, but the wrong project!” Blum adds. “I was one too early.”

## “JESUS IS A BAD MAIN CHARACTER”

---

Like a protagonist in one of those faith-based movies that he finds so cheesy, Jenkins did what a despairing, down-on-his-luck Christian is supposed to do: turn himself over to a higher power. “I truly surrendered,” Jenkins says. “Instead of trying to make another big movie, I figured I’m going to do what I feel is best, what is most honoring to God and to my wife and people I care about. I’ll make anything.”

Jenkins shot a humble follow-up: a short film for his Harvest Bible Chapel megachurch’s Christmas Eve service (well, not *that* humble — he had a \$100,000 budget). The short, written with Tyler Thompson, was about the birth of Christ, but told from the perspective of a shepherd. Jenkins had played with this idea before, having made another short about Jesus on the cross that focused on the two thieves being crucified alongside him. He discovered that following the lesser-known supporting characters in a classic divinity story gave his films a grounded and relatable feel.

During filming, Jenkins was struck by The Big Idea. He was jogging on a treadmill and bingeing HBO's *The Wire* when he thought: What if somebody told the story of Christ in an ensemble drama series that jumps between different sociopolitical points of view like in *The Wire*, while focusing mainly on supporting players? This was two decades into the Peak TV boom, when streamers and cable networks had scrubbed their vaults for every piece of familiar rebootable content they could find, yet somehow nobody had tried updating the so-called greatest story ever told. "I thought, 'Man, this could be so cool. Whoever does this is going to look really smart.'"



Jenkins directing Mike Kubeisy/Courtesy

Also, potentially, massively controversial: The last filmmaker who dared to upend biblical storytelling conventions on a large canvas was Martin Scorsese with his widely boycotted 1988 film *The Last Temptation of Christ*. Jenkins didn't want to become a pariah in his own community, yet also believed he couldn't tell this story right for modern audiences unless he moved past Christian storytelling tropes.

"I know this sounds bad, but Jesus doesn't actually make for a good main character," he says. "He doesn't learn anything. He doesn't grow. He doesn't struggle."

Jenkins partnered with Angel Studios, which at the time was called VidAngel and mainly known for selling sanitized versions of popular movies for Christian home viewing. The company proposed a crowdfunding model like the Kickstarter campaign that revived

*Veronica Mars* — why pay for something yourself if you don't have to? Jenkins thought the crowdfunding idea was “ridiculous” and was stunned when they raised \$11 million in their first round — a record for a TV or film project.

The first season of *The Chosen* is ultra-low-budget and uneven, yet still effective, with rural Texas doubling for Judaea and Galilee. (Jenkins' production facility is in the tiny town of Midlothian.) The cast is full of ethnically diverse actors doing Middle Eastern accents. The story opens with Jesus as an adult, just as he's starting to gather his disciples.

Right out of the gate, Jenkins and his co-writers made creative moves they knew were risky: Mary Magdalene (Elizabeth Tabish) is an alcoholic and sex abuse survivor. Matthew (Paras Patel) is a tax collector on the autism spectrum. Some of the oppressive Romans are rather likable. The show's early protagonist is Simon (Shahar Isaac), who's introduced having a fistfight in the street. “Simon has the biggest and most temperamental arc, and we thought, ‘He's the James Kirk of the story,’” Jenkins says.

The pilot drew inspiration from *The West Wing*, with Jesus showing up in the last five minutes just like President Bartlet did on the NBC hit. (The show is like *The West Wing* in another respect, as it rivals Aaron Sorkin's drama for its sheer amount of walking-and-talking — much of the show is likable bearded guys wandering around chatting.)

To cast his messiah, Jenkins hired Jonathan Roumie, an unknown actor who so effortlessly looks the part that he'd been teasingly called Jesus by friends for years. Roumie's got the sad eyes down, and his Christ comes across like a warm and affable therapist with a desert-dry sense of humor. “Dallas tried to temper my expectations, like, ‘Look, this probably won't go anywhere, but at least it'll be a couple of episodes of work,’” recalls Roumie.

In some ways, the show's lack of money for effects made it better. For scenes where Jesus performs a miracle, Jenkins considered several options. “Are we going to change his voice?” Jenkins recalls. “Are clouds going to come in? Are we going to have his eyes roll back in his head like Bran on *Game of Thrones*?” He decided to stage miracles in ways that were as non-flashy as possible. When Jesus fills Simon's nets with fish, his boat abruptly luges to the side with a loud thud and Simon looks stunned. It's the simplest filmmaking trick (a jump scare, actually — Jason Blum would approve), and it works.

Angel Studios debuted *The Chosen* on its app in 2019 in a bid to launch a new streaming service. It opened with a disclaimer warning viewers that creative changes were made to the Gospels and some character backstories and dialogue had been invented. “People just needed to know that I know that this is different and difficult,” Jenkins says. “I'm not apologizing — this is such a dangerous show that if I cared at all about what people think, it'd cripple me.”

## CONTROVERSIES: BACKPACKS AND PRIDE FLAGS

---

*The Chosen's* viewership took off during the pandemic. Seasons have since sprung up on Netflix, Peacock, Hulu, Prime Video and The CW. The crowdfunding model has continued, with Jenkins as the face of the show, posting frequent production updates on social media.

Amid the growth, Jenkins has navigated tricky issues. Some evangelicals have slammed the show for its deviations from Scripture, its contemporary dialogue and the characters' laid-back demeanor (Jesus dropped a wink!).

"I don't think it's modern at all," Jenkins pushes back. "I think 2,000 years ago, people laughed and rolled their eyes and said casual things and had metaphors and colloquialisms. The very things that some people feel a little uncomfortable with are the things that have caused the show to be seen by millions of people. It feels modern because we have always seen these characters portrayed like they're stained glass windows or statues."

Some gripes can be incredibly specific, such as skepticism that Jesus ever wore a backpack. "They couldn't have thought of a backpack back then?" Jenkins counters. "Two straps on a container is just so modern?"

There was a larger uproar over Mary Magdalene having a relapse in season two after she was saved. Yet that departure from Scripture led to one of the most affecting moments in the show, particularly among those in the recovery community, when Jesus welcomed her back ("You redeemed me and I threw it away," Mary said, and Jesus drolly replied, "It's not much of a redemption if it can be lost in a day, is it?").

Yet the show's biggest controversy was sparked by behind-the-scenes footage released last year. An online video included a brief glimpse of a pride flag on a *Chosen* crewmember's equipment. That might sound inconsequential, but for a significant segment of *The Chosen's* viewership, it was a scandal that incited, as Jenkins dubbed it, an "intra-Christian culture war."



Elizabeth Tabish as Mary Magdalene *Mike Kubeisy/Courtesy*

The conservative press accused the show of hypocritically endorsing “sin” and going woke (“*The Chosen* Can’t Serve Both God and LGBT Activists,” fumed a *Federalist* headline). Many threatened a boycott if Jenkins didn’t apologize and make changes to his employment practices (“Christians, just like we boycotted Target and Bud Light, we need to boycott *The Chosen*,” declared right-wing sports writer Jon Root).

Jenkins says he was filming an episode when the news broke, and he could see the affected crewmember staring at his phone. “People had figured out who he was and were calling for him to be fired,” Jenkins says. “He was like, ‘I didn’t want to bring this attention to the show.’ And I told him, ‘I love you. Do your job. Don’t worry about it. Let me take care of this.’”

Jenkins, who politically describes himself as a libertarian, posted a 19-minute response on YouTube. In an age of hypersensitivity to online outrage, and of studio controversies typically being addressed with brief, lawyer-approved PR statements, Jenkins’ message was refreshing in its thoughtful detail and polite-yet-firm refusal to kowtow.

“Everybody loves our cast and crew members ... and they have widely different beliefs that go across the entire spectrum,” he says in the video. “We don’t have a political or religious litmus test for who we hire. We don’t police individual workspaces or social media. If this issue bothers you, that’s fine. But that’s not something for us to be concerned with or try to change. We are not a church.”

That last line, however, is a bit debatable.

## “I TITHE A PORTION OF MY PAYCHECK TO HELP THE SERIES”

---

*The Chosen* is now a big deal, with some famous fans starting to emerge (“Just finished season 3 of *The Chosen* and I absolutely love it,” country star Blake Shelton posted on X last week, with Gwen Stefani chiming in, “Obsessed!”). Its fan convention, ChosenCon, is going into its second year in September and expected to bring in 5,000 fans. There’s an online merch business (their “Binge Jesus” T-shirt says it all). Earlier this year, Fathom Events screened the show’s upcoming fourth season in theaters. It’s a relationship that began with screening a single *Chosen* special coming out of the pandemic.

“That was the first time we really got confirmation that we had a tiger by the tail here,” says Fathom CEO Ray Nutt. “The audience reaction was spectacular.”

When fans approach Jesus actor Roumie, they don’t just want a photo. Couples want him to marry them, others want to *touch* him. They call him Jesus and suspect he might have some kind of healing power.

“It’s not the ordinary kind of celebrity encounters,” Roumie says. “It’s like people have things deep within their heart that they want to share with you, or they say the show has changed their lives — they haven’t been to church in 20 years and now they have a relationship with God. I’m a bit of an introvert, so I start to get a little anxiety.”



Roumie as Jesus *Lionsgate*

The show has creatively evolved, as has Jenkins' strength as a director (he's helmed every episode). In season two, there's an impressive 13-minute continuous shot showing the disciples busily working a crowd that is waiting to be healed by Jesus. Jenkins' team worked all day to get the ambitious take and nailed it during the final minutes of daylight. "You can actually see the sun going down during the shot," Jenkins says. "At the end of the take, we ran out of light, and I burst into tears because there had been so much pressure."

One of his proudest moments, Jenkins likes to say, was when he turned on Prime Video and saw *The Chosen* on the streamer's most popular list along with *Cocaine Bear*. If that's not getting Christ into the cultural mainstream, what is?

Yet as the show receives more media attention, there's a term that makes Jenkins bristle: "faith-based."

"I'm not ashamed that I'm an evangelical," he says. "I'm not ashamed that it's a show about Jesus. But we really do believe that the show can be watched by anybody, and we just don't want people turning it off before they watch it because of a label. I'm not trying to, through the art, convert anybody or preach anything. It's a historical drama." The show's internal surveys found that only about half its viewers are practicing Christians.

Religion is arguably mixed with the show's business side, however. It's hard to imagine a secular show being able to draw 12,000 fans to a Salvation Army camp to appear as extras over three days of filming, making their own costumes, and even paying \$1,000 each for the privilege (it's a savvy TV business model when your extras pay you).

Funds for the show's first three seasons were raised by Angel Studios' Pay It Forward service — the same crowdfunded method employed to make the polarizing sex trafficking movie *Sound of Freedom* a hit. In addition to taking a percentage cut off the top ("less than half of the contributions came to us," Jenkins has said). Angel initially distributed the show exclusively on its app, which, as The Chosen LLC's president, Brad Pelo, puts it, was "very, very confining."

In 2022, *The Chosen* severed part of its Angel Studios relationship, claiming breach of contract, and replaced Pay It Forward with a nonprofit ministry called Come & See. Jenkins posts messages urging fans to make tax-deductible donations to Come & See, and there's an implicit missionary angle to the pitch: By supporting *The Chosen*, you're helping spread Jesus' message to new audiences around the globe. The ministry also helps to arrange screenings of *The Chosen* in places such as prisons and churches, and has translated the show into 50 languages (toward an eventual goal of 600).

Wrote one viewer on *The Chosen's* subreddit, where fans sometimes worry that the show doesn't have enough money to continue: "I tithe a portion of my paycheck to help fund the series. I get little thank you notes from all over the globe. It's honestly incredible."

One starts to wonder if Jenkins is the guy who's not only figured out how to revive biblical epics for the streaming era, but also how to do so for televangelism in the YouTube age. When I press Jenkins as to why he still needs fan money four seasons into a production that's being heavily consumed across so many platforms, he insists that fan support is essential to the show's survival and that the streaming deals and merch sales haven't come close to paying for production. Season four cost \$40 million, and season five is only partly funded even as they're currently filming. The ministry also helped pay for a \$50 million production backlot, which includes two full-size soundstages.

*The Chosen* has been in arbitration with Angel, seeking a release from a crucial part of its original deal which gives Angel the show's first distribution window on its app. The show being available on so many streamers at once, Jenkins says, has been a double-edged sword.

"All of the funding for the production currently comes from Come & See; the license agreements we have with the streamers are not big," Jenkins says. "It's not a lot of money because they didn't have exclusive rights to it. Until there's an exclusive arrangement, or until somebody gets the first window, we absolutely still have to rely on donations." (The same day this story was posted, the arbitrator ruled in *The Chosen's* favor; Angel Studios is appealing the decision).

Jenkins contrasts his situation to that of the other disruptive showrunner building a TV empire outside Fort Worth, Texas. "Taylor Sheridan has [MTV Entertainment Studios and 101 Studios] financing his stuff and probably doesn't have his own company of 65 employees," he says. "We have to generate our own profits. We are one of the most watched shows in the world, and yet even successful TV shows aren't profitable for the first few years. Normally, a studio will say, 'Let's pump money into this show that we have made from our other projects.' We don't have that."

Surprisingly, Jenkins and Sheridan haven't met, though Jenkins would love to have a chat. He has questions about how to successfully grow one show into many. In addition to those Noah and Moses ideas, Jenkins envisions a *Chosen* sequel about the Book of Acts and the rise of the early church, a Ruth and Boaz movie, and an animated series for kids set in the world of *The Chosen*.

Like *Young Jesus*?

"Not that," he says. "But we're talking about a lot of Old Testament shows and spinoffs; we've already laid some Easter eggs for them — no pun intended. I don't think the Old Testament is any trickier to do than *The Crown* or *Rome* or *Vikings*. We think we're close to another tipping point."

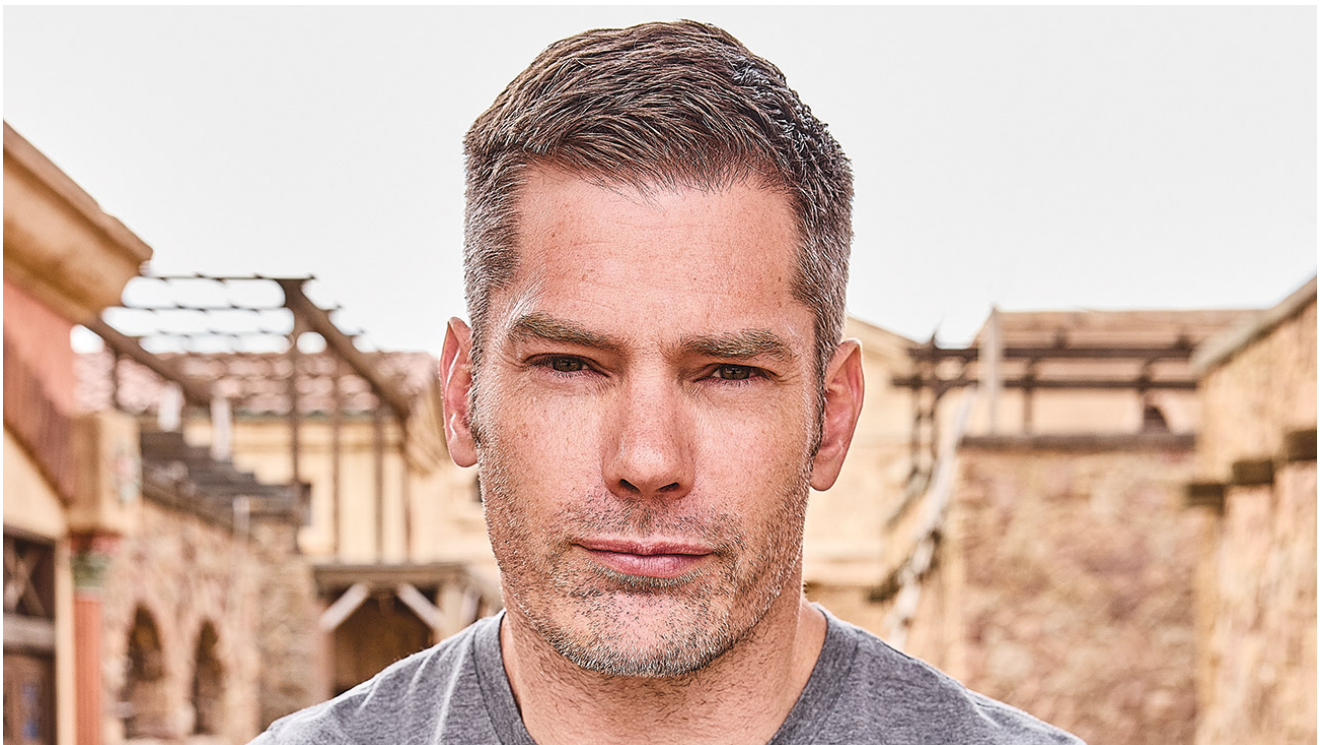
## THE MOST DEVASTATING CRUCIFIXION EVER?

---

*The Chosen*'s entire sixth season will cover just one day, Jenkins reveals, with the crucifixion itself taking hours of screen time. The plan isn't to indulge in Mel Gibson-style torture à la *The Passion of the Christ*, but rather emotional devastation, taking advantage of how viewers will have already spent dozens of hours with Roumie's yoga-studio-friendly messiah.

"In most portrayals, Jesus is on the cross, and you just see a bunch of people weeping and he's being tortured and mocked," Jenkins says. "We want to stress Jesus' desire for comfort and connection with his friends and family. And that period of time lasted several hours, which hasn't been portrayed before. We have the time and I have more tools in my tool belt for the crucifixion than other filmmakers had."

Jenkins likens the season's potential impact to, of all things, *The Walking Dead* gorily killing off fan favorite Glenn in season seven. "That was abnormally upsetting for audiences not just because of what happened, but because by then you cared so much about the person," he says.



Dallas Jenkins photographed March 20 in Midlothian, Texas. *Photographed by Steven Visneau*

A rollout in theaters for seasons five and six is certain (though not yet planned), and in the meantime *The Chosen* won't be Jenkins' only work landing on the big screen. He recently completed filming Lionsgate's *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*, based on Barbara Robinson's children's novel about a group of impoverished kids staging a holiday play. The movie will test whether Jenkins can make a believer-nonbeliever crossover hit that's set in

modern times like the other films he tried before *The Chosen* came along. “It’s total chaos, and then, because of their poverty and outsider, tossed-aside, disadvantaged status, then end up closer to the story of Jesus than the regular people are,” Jenkins says

Jenkins’ father, unsurprisingly, is awfully proud of all this. “Somebody asked me recently when I thought *The Chosen* would surpass *Left Behind* in its impact,” Jerry B. Jenkins says. “That ship sailed a long time ago. The funny thing is Dallas used to be known as ‘Jerry Jenkins son.’ I’m now known as ‘Dallas Jenkins father.’ May it ever be so.”

Dallas, however, has some concerns. He doesn’t want to be seen as selling out to Hollywood, even though, to some degree, that’s precisely what needs to happen for his company to grow. He worries about screwing up — specifically, getting canceled. It’s one of the reasons he posts so many candid videos. He wants to put his own failings online so nobody else does it first (and, perhaps, build an army of supporters who will stand by him).

“I’m a flawed guy and I don’t want my own flaws to get in the way,” he says. “I used to struggle with pornography. I make inappropriate jokes on the set. My wife always says, ‘Your mouth’s going to bring you down at some point.’ I don’t want to trip on a land mine.”

Especially now, when he’s getting the Hollywood success and status that eluded him for so long. “I used to dream of being in meetings with the people who work for the people I’m meeting with now,” he says. “It’s fun to sit in a room with some of the most powerful people in Hollywood, who say, ‘We’d love to work with you.’ “

Do power players actually watch *The Chosen*, though?

“There’s always someone else in the room and they’ll say, ‘For two years, this person has been telling us we need to meet with you because *they’re* obsessed with it.’ “

Yet Jenkins long ago stopped giving those awards speeches to his bathroom mirror. “This show will never get an Emmy,” he says. He likewise used to make ambitious five-year plans, and swears he doesn’t anymore.

“I was always trying to please people,” Jenkins says. “I needed affirmation. I needed to be taken seriously. Now I genuinely — and I’m not just saying this — my only goal and hope and dream is to make season five, which I’m making now, as good as it can be, and to be a good husband and father. Some of the things that are happening now are things I used to greatly care about. And I think they’re happening because I don’t care about them anymore.”

*A version of this story appeared in the May 29 issue of The Hollywood Reporter magazine.*  
[Click here to subscribe.](#)