

STUDY GUIDE

# More Than a Carpenter

FOUR LESSONS ON WHO JESUS IS



JOSH McDOWELL  
SEAN McDOWELL

WITH CAROL TRAVER

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*More Than a Carpenter Study Guide: Four Lessons on Who Jesus Is*

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# Your Search for Answers Begins Here

*A Note from Sean McDowell*

Some things never change. For example, virtually everywhere I go, somebody mentions *More Than a Carpenter* as one of the primary tools God used to either *solidify* them in their faith or to *bring* them to faith. In fact, since it was first published, *More Than a Carpenter* has found its way into millions of hands and has been translated into more than 115 languages. And while I'm sure my father never would have predicted that so many people would be drawn to his story, I'm not entirely surprised by its impact.

I used to joke with my dad that he helped put modern-day apologetics on the map in that most apologists writing or speaking today would say they were shaped in some way by his books or lectures. But *More Than a Carpenter* is more than just a defense of the Christian faith—it's a quest for meaning, and in many respects, it's the story of my dad's personal search for happiness.

That's what makes it so timeless.

Everyone wants to be happy. Yet in recent years, we've seen a massive increase in mental health issues—especially anxiety, depression, and suicidality. And despite advancements in technology making us better connected than ever before, many people still struggle with feelings of loneliness and isolation. Simply put, we feel lost.

So did my father. To use his own words, he felt “like a boat out in the ocean, tossed back and forth by the waves. I had no rudder—no direction or control. But I couldn’t find anyone living any other way. I couldn’t find anyone who could tell me how to live differently.” Then he met some people who challenged him to thoroughly examine the claims of Jesus Christ, and decades later, his findings are still having an impact.

In *More Than a Carpenter*, my father tackles questions like Who is Jesus? Is the so-called “Good News” of the Bible true? Is salvation really possible, and if so, how can we attain it? And because Dad was a skeptic, he didn’t settle for pat answers. He spent years researching the Bible and the claims of Christianity. He considered every angle, walked every argument out to its full conclusion, and left no stone unturned. And what he discovered was nothing short of life-changing.

Now it’s your turn.

If you are a Christian, I hope reading and discussing *More Than a Carpenter* will help you feel more confident in your faith and better equipped to engage others in spiritual conversations.

If you haven’t yet made up your mind about Jesus, I encourage you to approach this study with an open mind. Weigh the evidence presented about who Jesus was and is. Give careful consideration to the facts presented about his life, ministry, death, and resurrection. And ask yourself why he has had more influence on politics, law, ethics, social justice, and culture than any other figure in history.

And no matter where you are on your journey, please bear in mind that this book merely scratches the surface. Volumes have been written on every topic covered in *More Than a Carpenter*, so I encourage you to keep studying. Keep asking questions. Keep wrestling. Keep learning. And remember, the most important

YOUR SEARCH FOR ANSWERS BEGINS HERE

question any of us can consider is the one Jesus asked about himself: “Who do you say I am?” (Matthew 16:15).

Your journey is just beginning.

I pray you’ll find the answers you’re looking for.

*Sean McDowell, PhD*



# What Do You Believe?

*Christianity is not something you can shove down anyone's throat. You can't force Christ on anyone. . . . All of us are free to make our own decisions. All I can do is tell you what I've learned. After that, what you do is up to you.*

*More Than a Carpenter*

## **Debrief**

*Chapters 1 and 12: My Story and He Changed My Life*

Josh McDowell says that when he was in college, he felt lost—although life had no meaning. He wondered, “*What is my identity? What is my purpose? What is my destiny?*” Then he met a small group of students on campus who seemed different. He says,

They seemed to know who they were and where they were going. And they had convictions. . . .

It was clear to me that these people had something I didn't have. They were disgustingly happy. And their happiness didn't ride up and down with the circumstances of university life; it was constant. They appeared to possess an inner source of joy, and I wondered where it came from.

Something else about these people caught my attention—their attitudes and actions toward each other. They genuinely loved each other—and not only each other but the people outside their group as well. And I don't mean they just talked about love; they got involved in people's lives, helping them with their needs and problems. It was totally foreign to me, yet I was strongly attracted to it.

### **Discuss**

In what ways can you relate to Josh's story? What drew you to be part of this study group?

One of the things Josh says he admired about this unusual group of students was their convictions—that they believed in and stood for something. What are some of your convictions? What kinds of things do you believe are worth fighting (and maybe even dying) for?

## SESSION 1: WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE?

When Josh asked one of the students what made her so different—what *changed her life*—and she replied, “Jesus Christ,” Josh scoffed and said, “I’m fed up with religion. I’m fed up with the church. I’m fed up with the Bible.” How would you describe your past experiences with religion, church, and the Bible?

The student then went on to explain how Christianity is different from other religions: “Christianity is uniquely about a relationship with God. Other religions focus on humans trying to work their way to God through good works. Christianity is God coming to us through Jesus Christ.” What is your reaction to this explanation? How does the idea of God seeking you out change the way you think about religion in general or the Christian faith in particular?

Josh writes that he was “sick and tired of religion and religious people” and that he didn’t “want anything to do with them.” What comes to mind when you think about the “religious” people you know? What draws you to them or pushes you away?

At one point prior to his conversion, Josh described Christians as “unthinking weaklings, not intellectuals.” What is your reaction to this statement? Why do you think so many people believe this to be true? What truth (if any) is there in this observation?



I admire people who believe in something and take a stand for it, even if I don’t agree with their beliefs.

*More Than a Carpenter*, PAGE 3

In chapter 12, Josh admits that he was reluctant to become a Christian because he was afraid it meant he wouldn't be able to have fun anymore and that all the people he had once written off as "unthinking weaklings" had actually been right all along. What fears or concerns have you wrestled with in your faith journey?

Much like the young woman he met in college, Josh says that Jesus Christ "changed my life." Within months of accepting Christ as his Savior, he experienced a sense of mental peace, a newfound ability to cope with conflict, a much-improved temper, and most notably, a changed perspective about his father. He says,

I hated one man more than anyone else in the world—my father. I hated his guts. I was mortified because he was the town alcoholic. . . . My high school friends would make jokes about my father's drinking. They didn't think it bothered me because I fell in with the joking and laughed with them. I was laughing on the outside, but let me tell you, I was crying on the inside. I would go to the barn and find my mother beaten so badly she couldn't get up, lying in the manure behind the cows. When we had friends over, because he was drunk, I would take my father out to the barn, tie him up, and park his car

behind the silo. We would tell our guests he'd had to go somewhere. I don't think anyone could hate a person more than I hated my father.

About five months after I made that decision for Christ, a love from God entered my life so powerfully that it took that hatred, turned it upside down, and emptied it out. I was able to look my father squarely in the eyes and say, "Dad, I love you." And I really meant it.

What kinds of changes would you most like to experience in your life?

If you are already a believer in Jesus, what changes did you notice in your own life after you accepted Christ?

*Leaders, if time permits, you might ask one or two people to share their responses.*

In addition to his father, Josh says that upon accepting Christ, he also felt the need to forgive Wayne. Wayne worked on his parents' farm when Josh was growing up and had sexually abused him for years. Josh writes,

I wanted Wayne to burn in hell, and I was willing to escort him there. . . . But after coming to Christ, I knew I needed to forgive Wayne, just as I had forgiven my father. I confronted Wayne once again and said, "Wayne, what you did to me was evil. But I've trusted Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord and have become a Christian. I've come to tell you that Jesus died as much for you as he did for me. I forgive you."

Josh says that forgiving Wayne "was one of the most difficult things I've ever had to do" and that he never could have done it without God's help.

Who in your life do you need to forgive? Or, conversely, who in your life do you need to ask for forgiveness? What's standing in your way?

Chapter 1 ends with Josh accepting the challenge to thoroughly examine the claims of Jesus Christ. What questions about Jesus, Christianity, and the Bible are you hoping to find answers to?

If you are already a Christian, what questions about Jesus and the Bible are you most often asked that you struggle to answer?

## DIG DEEPER

### *Map Your Own Faith Journey*

*More Than a Carpenter* documents Josh McDowell's faith journey from a skeptic who was burnt out on church and religion to an on-fire believer whose life completely changed as a result of accepting Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior. Early influences on his life and faith included a difficult relationship with his alcoholic father, traumatizing sexual abuse as a child, and disappointment with the church. Of course, later his encounter with some Christians on his college campus caused him to reexamine what he knew—or thought he knew—about Jesus, and the rest, as they say, is history. So . . . what's *your* story?

Using the time line below, look back over your life and plot the key people and events that have influenced your faith journey thus far. Write the positive influences above the line and the negative influences below the line. Then, on a separate page, write about the impact (positive or negative) that each experience, relationship, or encounter has had on you and the way you think about Jesus, God, the church, and faith.

Leaders, if time allows, you might ask one or two participants to share their faith journey.

BIRTH ————— NOW

## **Debrief**

### *Chapter 2: What Makes Jesus So Different?*

Josh opens chapter 2 by telling a story about a cab ride he took in London. Having just spent several months examining the claims of Christ, he casually mentioned Jesus, at which point the cab driver spat out, “I don’t like to discuss religion, especially Jesus.”

Josh notes, “The very name *Jesus* seems to bother people. It embarrasses them, angers them, or makes them want to change the subject. You can talk about God, and people don’t necessarily get upset, but mention Jesus, and people want to stop the conversation.”

## **Discuss**

What is it about Jesus that makes him more controversial than other religious figures like the Buddha, Muhammad, or Krishna?

SESSION 1: WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE?

Make a list of words/characteristics that you typically associate with Jesus. Then do the same for how you tend to view God.

Jesus	God
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

Put a check next to the words or traits you consider to be positive, circle the ones that have a negative connotation, and draw a line connecting any words that appear in both columns.

In what ways do you consider Jesus and God to be similar or different?

On page 11 of *More Than a Carpenter*, Josh lists several attributes that apply to both Jesus and God. What are they?

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What is unique about these traits?



Anyone who reads the New Testament and does not conclude that Jesus claimed to be divine would have to be as blind as a man standing outdoors on a clear day and saying he can't see the sun.

QUOTED IN *More Than a Carpenter*, PAGE 14

## DIG DEEPER

### *Read It*

Chapter 2 explores what makes Jesus so different from other religious teachers: the claims he made about his identity. While some might try to separate Jesus' teaching from his claims, it is impossible to do so (something we will look at in greater detail in chapter 3). Read John 5:1-47 and John 10:22-42. What are some of the claims Jesus makes about himself in these passages?

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

Read John 1:1-18, 29-34. What claims do the disciple John (the Gospel's author) and John the Baptist make about Jesus?

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

If you *really* want to dig deep, read the rest of the book of John. The entire Gospel was written with the purpose of proving that Jesus Christ is the Son of God (see John 20:30-31).

**Discuss**

Josh explains that

the words *Jesus Christ* are not a first and last name; they are actually a name and a title. The name *Jesus* is derived from the Greek form of the name *Jeshua* or *Joshua*, meaning “Jehovah-Savior” or “the Lord saves.” The title *Christ* is derived from the Greek word for Messiah (or the Hebrew *Mashiach*, see Daniel 9:26) and means “anointed one.” The concept of Christ/Messiah in the Old Testament includes the offices of prophet, priest, and king. Before Jesus was born, Old Testament prophecies pointed to a coming deliverer who would fulfill all three roles.

He also explains that many of the names and titles ascribed to Jesus Christ by his followers are “such that they could properly be applied only to one who was God.” What are some of the names Jesus’ followers used to describe him? (You can look at Colossians 1:15-20 or pages 11–13 of *More Than a Carpenter* for ideas.)

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The Jewish leaders took issue not only with Jesus' claim to be equal with God but also with his claim that he could forgive sins (both of which they considered blasphemy). The example Josh gives is Jesus healing the paralyzed man in Mark:

When Jesus returned to Capernaum several days later, the news spread quickly that he was back home. Soon the house where he was staying was so packed with visitors that there was no more room, even outside the door. While he was preaching God's word to them, four men arrived carrying a paralyzed man on a mat. They couldn't bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, so they dug a hole through the roof above his head. Then they lowered the man on his mat, right down in front of Jesus. Seeing their faith, Jesus said to the paralyzed man, "My child, your sins are forgiven."

But some of the teachers of religious law who were sitting there thought to themselves, "What is he saying? This is blasphemy! Only God can forgive sins!"

Jesus knew immediately what they were thinking, so he asked them, "Why do you question this in your hearts? Is it easier to say to the paralyzed man 'Your sins are forgiven,' or 'Stand up, pick up your mat, and walk'? So I will prove to you that the Son of Man has the authority on earth to forgive sins." Then Jesus turned to the paralyzed man and said, "Stand up, pick up your mat, and go home!"

And the man jumped up, grabbed his mat, and walked out through the stunned onlookers. They were all amazed and praised God, exclaiming, "We've never seen anything like this before!"

**MARK 2:1-12**

How is Jesus' forgiving the paralyzed man's sins different from, say, you or I forgiving someone who hurt us? Why did this infuriate the religious leaders?

Many of Christ's followers believed in his divinity before the Resurrection:

He asked them, "But who do you say I am?"

Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

**MATTHEW 16:15-16**

[Jesus said,] "Everyone who lives in me and believes in me will never ever die. Do you believe this, Martha?"

"Yes, Lord," she told him. "I have always believed you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one who has come into the world from God."

**JOHN 11:26-27**

Nathanael exclaimed, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God—the King of Israel!"

**JOHN 1:49**

But Jesus' disciple Thomas remained a skeptic, even after Jesus' resurrection. Despite hearing eyewitness reports that Jesus had risen from the dead and appeared to his disciples, Thomas (who was absent at the time of Christ's visit) said, "I won't believe it unless I see the nail wounds in his hands, put my fingers into them, and place my hand into the wound in his side" (John 20:25).

Had you been alive in the early part of the first century and heard reports of—or possibly even seen—a simple carpenter performing miracles and claiming to be the Messiah, would you have believed him? What might have given you pause? What would it have taken to convince you?

## Decide

Chapter 2 closes with a description of Jesus' trial before the Sanhedrin as recounted in the Gospel of Mark:

The high priest stood up before the others and asked Jesus, "Well, aren't you going to answer these charges? What do you have to say for yourself?" But Jesus was silent and made no reply. Then the high priest asked him, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?"

Jesus said, "I AM. And you will see the Son of Man seated in the place of power at God's right hand and coming on the clouds of heaven."

Then the high priest tore his clothing to show his horror and said, "Why do we need other witnesses? You have all heard his blasphemy. What is your verdict?"

MARK 14:60-64

Based on what you have read so far about Jesus, how would you respond to the high priest and why?

**Next Week:** In preparation for session 2, please read and be prepared to discuss chapters 3, 4, and 5 of *More Than a Carpenter*.