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More Than a Carpenter



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SEAN McDOWELL



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*More Than a Carpenter*

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# Contents

Preface . . . . .	ix
1 My Story . . . . .	1
2 What Makes Jesus So Different? . . . . .	9
3 Lord, Liar, or Lunatic? . . . . .	25
4 What about Science? . . . . .	37
5 Is the New Testament Reliable? . . . . .	43
6 Who Would Die for a Lie? . . . . .	65
7 What Good Is a Dead Messiah? . . . . .	79
8 Did You Hear What Happened to Saul? . . . . .	85
9 Can You Keep a Good Man Down? . . . . .	97
10 Will the Real Messiah Please Stand Up? . . . . .	113
11 Isn't There Some Other Way? . . . . .	125
12 He Changed My Life . . . . .	133
Testimonials . . . . .	143
Notes . . . . .	145
About the Authors . . . . .	155



# Preface

When I first sat down in 1976 with twelve legal pads, forty-eight hours of free time, and a *lot* of coffee to write the book that would become *More Than a Carpenter*, I did so hoping it would help followers of Jesus to respond to questions about their faith and inspire spiritual seekers to honestly investigate the claims of Jesus. I never dreamed the story of my personal journey from skepticism to belief would ultimately sell more than seventeen million copies, be translated into over 120 languages, and inspire readers around the world to take a closer, deeper look at the possibility of faith. I continue to be honored and humbled each time someone tells me that my book made a difference in his or her life.

Yet I also continue to be struck by how much has happened in the world since *More Than a Carpenter* first released. Discoveries have been made (and continue to be made) that shed light on the historicity of Jesus Christ and the reliability of the Bible. New questions and challenges have emerged too. And while today's generation faces a whole host of new issues and choices, they also continue to confront the age-old questions: Who is Jesus? What proof is there that he was the Son of God? And even if it's true, what difference does it make to my life?

Based on all this, I decided it was time to give *More Than a Carpenter* another significant update. My son helped me with the last update (2009), so I invited him to join me again as a coauthor. Sean is a professor of apologetics at Talbot School of Theology, Biola University. He is a well-known speaker, writer, and YouTuber on various

apologetics issues, including Jesus and the Bible. He has strong academic credentials (a double master's degree in philosophy and theology and a PhD in apologetics and worldview studies). The two of us worked together to revise existing material, add some new content, respond to popular objections, and give this classic book a fresh look. The result is a new edition of *More Than a Carpenter* that nonetheless retains its original hard-hitting examination of the facts and unapologetic search for truth. While Sean has substantially helped in updating this book, since it unfolds around my journey from skeptic to faith, we chose to keep it in my first-person voice.

It is our profound desire that this book will have a transformational impact on a new generation of people on a quest for spiritual clarity.

—JM

## CHAPTER 1

# My Story

Thirteenth-century philosopher Thomas Aquinas understood a deep truth: there is within every soul a thirst for happiness and meaning.<sup>1</sup> I first began to feel this thirst when I was a teenager. I wanted to be happy. I wanted my life to have meaning. I became hounded by those three basic questions that haunt every human life: What is my identity? What is my purpose? What is my destiny? I wanted answers, so as a young student, I started searching for them.

Where I was brought up, everyone seemed to be into religion, so I thought I might find my answers in being religious. I got into church 150 percent. I went every time the doors opened—morning, afternoon, or evening. But I must have picked the wrong church, because I felt worse inside it than I did outside. From my upbringing on a farm in Michigan I inherited a rural practicality that says when something doesn't work, get rid of it. So I chucked religion.

Then I thought education might have the answers to my quest for meaning, so I enrolled in a university. I soon became the most unpopular student among the professors. I would buttonhole them in their offices and badger them for answers to my questions. When they saw me coming, they would turn out the lights, pull down the shades, and lock their doors. You can learn many things at a university, but I didn't find the answers I was seeking. Faculty members and my fellow students had just as many problems, frustrations, and unanswered questions as I did.

One day on campus I saw a student wearing a T-shirt that read, "Don't follow me, I'm lost." That's how everyone in the university seemed to me. Education, I decided, was not the answer.

**What do you think?**

*Do you agree with Thomas Aquinas that every soul thirsts for happiness and meaning?*

I began to think maybe I could find happiness and meaning in prestige. I would find a noble cause, dedicate myself to it, and in the pro-

cess, become well-known on campus. The people with the most prestige in the university were the student leaders, who also controlled the purse strings. So I got elected to various student offices. It was a heady experience to know everyone on campus, to make important decisions, to spend the university's money getting the speakers I wanted and the students' money for throwing parties.

But the thrill of prestige wore off like everything else I had tried. I would wake up on Monday morning, usually with a headache because of the night before, dreading to face another five miserable days. I endured Monday through Friday, living only for the partying nights of

Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. Then on Monday the meaningless cycle would begin all over again.

I didn't let on that my life was meaningless; I was too proud for that. Everyone thought I was the happiest man on campus. They never suspected that my happiness was a sham. It depended on my circumstances. If things were going great for me, I felt great. When things were going lousy, I felt lousy. I just didn't let it show.

I was 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. I was frustrated. No, it was worse than that. There's a strong term that describes the life I was living: *hell*.

About that time I noticed a small group of people—eight students and two faculty members—who seemed different from the others. They seemed to know who they were and where they were going. And they had convictions. It is refreshing to find people with convictions, and I like to be around them. I admire people who believe in something and take a stand for it, even if I don't agree with their beliefs.

It was clear to me that these people had something I didn't have. They were disgustingly happy. And their happiness

**Everyone thought I was the happiest man on campus. They never suspected that my happiness was a sham.**

#### What do you think?

*Do you like being around people with convictions? What makes it an invigorating experience? What makes it a frustrating one?*

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.

Like most people, when I see something I want but don't have, I start trying to figure out a way to get it. So I decided to make friends with these intriguing people.

A couple of weeks later I sat around a table in the student union talking to some of the members of this group. The conversation turned to the topic of God. I was pretty skeptical and insecure about this subject, so I put on a big front. I leaned back in my chair, acting as if I couldn't care less.

"Christianity, ha!" I blustered. "That's for unthinking weaklings, not intellectuals." Of course, under all the bluster

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I really wanted what these people had, but my pride didn't want them to know the aching urgency of my need. The subject bothered me, but I couldn't let go of it. So I turned to one of the students, a good-looking woman (I used to think all Christians were ugly), and said, "Tell me, why

are you so different from all the other students and faculty on this campus? What changed your life?"

Without hesitation, she looked me straight in the eyes, deadly serious, and uttered two words I never expected to hear in an intelligent discussion on a university campus: “Jesus Christ.”

“Jesus Christ?” I snapped. “Oh, for God’s sake, don’t give me that garbage. I’m fed up with religion. I’m fed up with the church. I’m fed up with the Bible.”

Immediately she shot back, “I didn’t say *religion*, I said Jesus Christ!” She pointed out something I had never known: 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.

**Other religions focus on humans trying to work their way to God through good works. Christianity is God coming to us through Jesus Christ.**

I wasn’t buying it. Not for a minute. Taken aback by the young woman’s courage and conviction, I apologized for my attitude. “But I’m sick and tired of religion and religious people,” I explained. “I don’t want anything to do with them.”

Then my new friends issued a challenge I couldn’t believe. They challenged me to make a rigorous, intellectual examination of the claims of Jesus Christ—that he is God’s Son; that he inhabited a human body and lived among real people; that he died on the cross for the sins of humanity; that he was buried and was resurrected three days later; and that he is still alive and can change a person’s life even today.

I thought this challenge was a joke. Didn’t everyone with any sense know that Christianity was based on a

myth? I thought only a walking idiot could believe the myth that Christ came back from the dead. I used to wait

**What do you think?**

*How would you  
define religion?*

for Christians to speak out in the classroom so I could tear them up one side and down the other. I thought that if a Christian had a brain cell, it would die of loneliness.

But I accepted my friends' challenge, mostly out of spite to prove them wrong. I was convinced the Christian story would not stand up to evidence. I was a prelaw student, and I knew something about evidence. I would investigate the claims of Christianity thoroughly and come back and knock the props out from under their sham religion.

I decided to start with the Bible. I knew that if I could uncover indisputable evidence that the Bible is not historically reliable, the whole of Christianity would crumble. Sure, Christians could show me that their own book said Christ was born of a virgin, performed miracles, and rose

**If I could uncover indisputable evidence that the Bible is not historically reliable, then I could show that Christianity was a fantasy made up by wishful religious dreamers.**

from the dead. But what good was that if the book was not a trustworthy account of these claims and events? If I could demonstrate *this*, then I could show that Christianity was a fantasy made up by wishful religious dreamers.

I took the challenge seriously. I spent months in research. I even dropped out of school for a time to study in the historically rich libraries of Europe. To fund the trip, I sold a painting company I

had started in college. And I found evidence. Evidence in abundance. Evidence I would not have believed had I not seen it with my own eyes. Finally I could come to only one conclusion: if I were to remain intellectually honest, I had to admit that the Old and New Testament documents were some of the most reliable writings in all of antiquity. And if they were reliable, what about this man Jesus, whom I had dismissed as a mere carpenter in an out-of-the-way town in a tiny, oppressed country, a man who had gotten caught up in his own visions of grandeur?

I had to admit that Jesus Christ was *more* than a carpenter. He was all he claimed to be.

Not only did my research turn me around intellectually, but it also answered the three questions that started me on my quest for happiness and meaning. But hang in there, as I will tell you the rest of the story at the end of this book. First, I want to share with you the core of what I learned in my months of research so that you, too, may see that Christianity is not a myth, nor the fantasy of wishful dreamers, nor a hoax played on the simple-minded. It is rock-solid truth. And I guarantee that when you come to terms with that truth, you will be on the threshold of finding the answers to those three questions: What is my identity? What is my purpose? What is my destiny?

**I found evidence. Evidence in abundance. I had to admit that the Old and New Testament documents were some of the most reliable writings in all of antiquity.**

**What do you think?**

*If God did become man, what would be the best way for him to communicate to his creation?*