

A Skeptics Quest

Josh McDowell

You'll take heart in Josh McDowell's own story.

I KNEW WHAT I WANTED

One day I was in Newport Beach, California riding on a motorscooter with a friend. We were zipping along having a great time, laughing, when two women pulled up beside us in a brand new Continental (that's a Newport Beach Chevy). After staring at us for about three blocks the woman on the passenger side rolled down her window and yelled, "What right do you have to be so happy?" Well, I couldn't see anything wrong with being happy. I love to laugh. What's wrong with wanting to be one of the happiest individuals in the whole world?

Not only did I want to be happy and have meaning and purpose in life, but I also wanted to be free. See, most people know what they ought to do, but they don't have the capacity, the strength, to do it. They're not free. They're in bondage. To me, freedom is having the capacity to do what you know you ought to do.

THE SEARCH BEGINS

So I started looking for answers. Now, where I was brought up, a lot of people had religion. So I took off on religion. I was involved in it morning, afternoon, and night. But I must have gone to the wrong church because I actually felt worse.

Next I thought, "Well, maybe education is the answer." So I enrolled in the university. I was probably the most unpopular student with the professors in the first university I went to in Michigan. I wanted answers. My economic theory professor could tell me how to make a better living, but he couldn't tell me how to live better. It didn't take me long to realize that a lot of faculty members, and students too, had more problems, less meaning to life, and more frustration than I did.

Then I thought, "Maybe prestige is the answer." Find a "calling" and give your life to it. So I ran for various student body offices and got elected. It was neat - knowing everyone on campus, making decisions, spending other people's money to do what I wanted. I enjoyed it.

But every Monday morning I woke up the same individual, usually with a headache because of the night before, with the same attitude, "Well, here we go again for another five days." Monday through Friday I sort of endured. Happiness revolved around three nights a week: Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. Then I'd start the whole cycle again.

Eventually I became frustrated. I doubt if too many students in the universities of our country have been more sincere in trying to find meaning and truth and power and purpose in life than I was ñ yet I hadn't found it.

WHAT'S WITH THESE PEOPLE?

About that time, around the campus I noticed a small group of people ñ eight students and two faculty. There was something different about their lives. They seemed to have direction. They seemed to know where they were going, and that was very unusual.

Further, they seemed to have a type of love that was manifested in the way they treated people. I had observed that most people talked a lot about love, but these people demonstrated something special in their relationships with others. They had something I didn't have, so I made friends with them.

After a couple of weeks, we were sitting around a table in the student union. I recall that six of the students were there and both of the faculty and one of their wives. The conversation started to get to God.

GOD AND THE BIG FRONT

Let's face it: if you're an insecure student or professor or businessperson, or an insecure anything, and the conversation gets to God, you have to put on a big front. You know what I've found to be true? The bigger the front an individual puts on, the greater the emptiness inside. Well, I was putting on that kind of front.

Their talk irritated me. I wanted what they had, but I didn't want them to know it. I leaned back on my chair and tried to act nonchalant. I looked over at one young woman and said, "Why are you so different from the other students on campus?" She said two words I never thought I'd hear in the university as part of the "solution." She said, "Jesus Christ."

"Oh, come on," I fired back at her. "Don't give me that garbage about religion." She must have had a lot of courage and convictions.

"Look," she said, "I didn't tell you religion; I told you Jesus Christ." Well, I apologized to her because I'd been very rude - "Please forgive my attitude, but to tell you the truth, I'm sick and tired of that kind of thing. I just don't want anything to do with it."

Then you know what happened? These students and faculty challenged me to examine intellectually who Jesus Christ was. At first I thought it was a joke. How ridiculous! It was my opinion that most Christians had two brains. I thought one was lost, and the other was out looking for it!

But these people kept challenging me over and over and over again, until finally I accepted their challenge.

THE SEARCH CONTINUES

I spent a lot of money to completely discredit Christianity, but it backfired. I concluded that Christ had to be who He claimed to be. "You came to that conclusion intellectually?" you say.

That's right. Let me show you how. I concluded that if I could show that either one of two basic areas was not historically trustworthy or true I had won my case against Christianity.

WHAT ABOUT THE BIBLE...

The first area: to demonstrate that the New Testament was not historically reliable. It was written years later, I thought, and all those myths and legends had crept in, along with errors and discrepancies. That's all I had to do, but as I said, it backfired.

When I speak in a literature or a history class now I state that there's more evidence for the historical reliability of the New Testament than for any 10 pieces of classical literature put together. For example, when you study history you need to develop a historiography, a proper approach to evaluating historical documents. There are three basic tests ñ the bibliographic test, the internal evidence test, and the external evidence test.

Let me just touch on the bibliographic test, which asks questions about the manuscripts. A manuscript is a handwritten copy rather than a printed one. One question this test asks is how many manuscripts you have. The more manuscripts you have the easier it is to reconstruct the original (referred to as the autograph) and check for errors or discrepancies..

Let me tell you what I found in relation to the New Testament. When I wrote the book *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* in 1974, I was able to document 14,000 manuscripts of just the New Testament (that's not counting the Old Testament). In the revised edition I've been able to document 24,633 manuscripts of just the New Testament. The Number Two book in manuscript authority in all history is the *Iliad* by Homer, which has 643 manuscripts.

...AND THE RESURRECTION?

I felt the second area would be even simpler to discount. Everything that Jesus Christ taught, lived, and died for was based on His resurrection. All I had to do was prove that it never took place. But that, too, backfired on me, and in fact led to my writing *The Resurrection Factor* because of the evidence.

Have you heard of Dr. Simon Greenleaf, who held the Royal Professorship of Law at Harvard? He was a skeptic, often mocking the Christians in his classes. One day they challenged him to take the three volumes he had written on the laws of legal evidence and apply them to the resurrection. After much persuasion he did that. In the process he became a Christian and went on to write a book about his search. Greenleaf came to the conclusion that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is one of the best established events in history according to the laws of legal evidence.

THE PROBLEM OF WILL

So I had a problem. I found out that becoming a Christian (or I prefer the term a believer) was rather ego-shattering.

My intellect was convinced, but a struggle began in my life. Jesus Christ directly challenged me to trust Him as Savior, as the One who died on the cross for my sins. "To all who received Him, to those who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God" (John 1:12). But I didn't want a "party pooper" invading my life. I couldn't think of a faster way to ruin a good time or destroy intellectual pursuits or impede scholarly acceptability with my peers.

My mind told me that Christianity was true; but my will said, "Don't admit it."

It came to the point where I'd go to bed at ten at night but I couldn't fall asleep until four in the morning. I knew I had to get Jesus off my mind or go out of my mind!

NEW LIFE BEGINS

On December 19, 1959, at 8:30 p.m., during my second year at the university, I became a Christian.

That night I prayed. I prayed four things in order to establish a relationship with God ñ a personal relationship with His Son, the personal, resurrected, living Christ. Over a period of time that relationship has turned my life around.

First, I prayed, "Lord Jesus, thank You for dying on the cross for me." Second, I said, "I confess those things in my life that aren't pleasing to You and ask You to forgive me and cleanse me." The Bible says, "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow" (Isaiah 1:18). Third, I said, "Right now, in the best way I know how, I open the door of my heart and life and trust You as my Savior and Lord. Take control of my life. Change me from the inside out. Make me the type of person You created me to be."

The last thing I prayed was, "Thank You for coming into my life by faith." It was a faith produced by the Holy Spirit, based on God's Word and supported by evidence and the facts of history.

I'm sure you've heard religious people talk about their "bolt of lightning." Well, after I prayed nothing happened. In fact, after I made that decision, I felt sick to my stomach.

"Oh no, McDowell, what'd you get sucked into now?" I wondered. I really felt I'd gone off the deep end ñ and some of my friends agreed.

CHANGES

But I can tell you one thing: In six months to a year and a half, I found I hadn't gone off the deep end. My life was changed.

A few years ago I was in a debate with the head of the history department at a mid-western university, and I said, "My life has been changed." He interrupted me rather sarcastically. "McDowell, are you trying to tell us that God really changed your life in the 20th century? What areas?"

After 45 minutes of my describing changes, he said, "Okay, that's enough."

Mental Peace. I told him about my restlessness. I was a person who always had to be occupied. I had to be over at my girlfriend's place or somewhere in a rap session. My mind was a whirlwind of conflicts. I'd sit down and try to study or think, and I couldn't.

But a few months after I made that decision to trust Christ, a kind of mental peace began to develop. Don't misunderstand. I'm not talking about the absence of conflict. What I found in this relationship with Jesus wasn't so much the absence of conflict as it was the ability to cope with it. I have come to experience in a very real way Christ's promise when He said, "Peace I leave with you; My peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives" (John 14:27).

Control of Temper. Another area that changed was my bad temper. I used to "blow my stack" if somebody just looked at me cross-eyed. I still have the scars from almost killing a man my first year at the university. My temper was such an integral part of me that I didn't consciously seek to change it.

One day after my decision to put my faith in Christ, I arrived at a crisis, only to find that my temper was gone! And only once in the many years since 1959 have I lost it.

A MAN I HATED

There's another area that I'm not proud of. Hatred. It wasn't something outwardly manifested, but a kind of inner grinding. The one person I hated more than anyone else in the world was my father. I despised him. To me he was the town alcoholic.

If friends were coming over, I would take my father, tie him up in the barn, and park the car up around the silo. To avoid embarrassment, we would tell our friends he had to go somewhere. I don't think any person could hate someone more than I hated my father.

HATRED BECOMES LOVE

Maybe five months after I made that decision for Christ, love for my father ñ a love from God through Jesus Christ ñ inundated my life. It turned my hatred upside down. It enabled me to look my father squarely in the eyes and say, "Dad, I love you." After some of the things I'd done, that really shook him up.

When I transferred to a private university, I was in a serious car accident. With my neck in traction, I was taken home. I'll never forget my father coming into my room and asking, "Son, how can you love a father

like me?" I said, "Dad, six months ago I despised you." Then I shared with him my conclusions about Jesus Christ.

"Dad, I let Jesus come into my life. I can't explain it completely, but as a result of this relationship, I've found the capacity to love and accept not only you, but other people ñ just the way they are."

Forty-five minutes later one of the greatest thrills of my life occurred. Somebody in my own family, someone who knew me so well I couldn't pull the wool over his eyes, my own father, said to me, "Son, if God can do in my life what I've seen Him do in yours, then I want to give Him the opportunity." Right there my father prayed with me and trusted Christ.

Usually changes take place over several days, weeks, monthsÖeven years. The life of my father was changed right before my eyes. It was as though somebody reached in and turned on a light bulb. I've never seen such a rapid change before or since. My father touched alcohol only once after that. He got it as far as his lips and that was it. He didn't need it anymore.

IT WORKS

I've come to one conclusion. A relationship with Jesus Christ changes lives. You can ignorantly laugh at Christianity; you can mock and ridicule it. But it works. If you trust Christ, watch your attitudes and actions ñ because Jesus Christ specializes in changing lives, forgiving sin, and removing guilt.

IT'S PERSONAL

I've shared how I personally responded to the claims of Christ. You, too, need to ask the logical question: "What difference does all this evidence make to me? What difference does it make whether or not I believe Christ died on the cross for my sins and rose again?"

The answer is put best by something Jesus said to a man named Thomas who doubted. He told him, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father, except through Me" (John 14:6).

You can trust God right now by faith through prayer. Prayer is talking with God. God knows your heart and is not as much concerned with your words as He is with the attitude of your heart. If you have never trusted Christ, you can do that right now.

The prayer I prayed was this: "Lord Jesus, I need You. Thank You for dying on the cross for my sins. I open the door of my life and trust You as my Savior. Thank You for forgiving my sins and giving me eternal life. Make me the kind of person You want me to be. Thank You that I can trust You."

AN OFFER TO YOU

If you have just trusted Christ, or believe you are going to do so, write me. You will have a lot of questions, as I had. A professor once shared with me some principles about how my life could be changed through this new relationship with God through Jesus Christ. I'd like to send them to you. Thanks for letting me share my story with you.

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Books by Josh McDowell

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