

# firsthand

## Ryan & Josh Shook

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Ditching Secondhand Religion  
for a Faith of Your Own

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for a Faith of Your Own



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**Ryan...**

*To Sarah, for all your love, support,  
and encouragement*

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**Josh...**

*To Megan and Steven, for inspiring  
me more than you will ever know*

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# Why Firsthand Matters

## A Faith Straight from the Source

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There comes a time when you can no longer cling to your parents' coattails and you have to choose to make it your faith.

—Robert Griffin III

I admit I once lived by rumors of you;  
now I have it all firsthand.

—Job 42:5 (MSG)

**H**i, we're Ryan and Josh Shook, two brothers in our twenties.

We've met before, actually. You see, even though you've probably never met us personally, you know people just like us. You've known them at every church you've attended. We've been on your football team, gone to the same parties, been in your group of friends.

You took one look at us and thought, *They're such good Christians*. But you saw us when we were at our best. We were the leaders of the youth group, and you thought we probably had it all together.

So how could we possibly relate to you?

The truth is, we've both come back from the brink of spiritual death. Really. Only a short time ago we were so done with the whole Christian thing. Whatever we looked like on the outside, inside we were desperate for something more. Nothing at church satisfied the inner hunger gnawing at us. Being a Christian seemed to be only about going through the motions, following rules, keeping up appearances.



So we tried something else. We lived as if God didn't exist. We went to parties, played video games till late at night, and searched for pornography. That worked for a while. And then it eventually stopped working. Actually, we ended up feeling even more desperate and unfulfilled than before.

Maybe you know what we're talking about. Maybe you've given up on church and its promise of contentment. Maybe you've not only given up on church but given up on God as well. Or maybe you're just now starting to suspect that something is wrong but you can't put your finger on it.

If any of these scenarios apply to you, you're not alone.

The truth is, between the ages of sixteen and twenty-six, most young people experience a crisis of faith. Suddenly the beliefs that made sense yesterday are no longer relevant today. Our faith feels flimsy and fake.

For us it felt something like this: We had traveled halfway across a bridge and couldn't get any further. The bridge just ended. On the riverbank behind us, we could see the Christianity that worked when we were younger. Ahead of us, on the opposite bank, we could see, well, not much really. Mostly fog.

That didn't feel good.

As it turns out, our experience is common for kids who grew up in church. David Kinnaman, president of the Barna Group, a research and resource organization, investigated our generation's dissatisfaction with traditional Christianity for his book *You Lost Me*. "The problem," Kinnaman tells us, "is not that this

generation has been less churched than children and teens before them; the problem is that much spiritual energy fades away during a crucial decade of life—the twenties.”<sup>1</sup>

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**We had traveled halfway across a bridge and couldn't get any further. The bridge just ended.**

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*Spiritual energy fades away.* That description resonates deeply with us. After years of going to church, following the rules, and trying to replicate the faith of our parents, we had to admit that something was fading fast in our souls.

But there's good news.

Right in the middle of our personal crises, we made a discovery that changed everything.

## NO POINT PRETENDING

What we discovered was that what we *thought* was our faith wasn't ours after all. Not completely. Mostly it belonged to our parents. Some of it belonged to the youth pastor or our friends. Sure, some of it was real for us too. But a lot of it wasn't. If you had closely inspected our personal beliefs, you might have noticed some flimsy plastic labels hanging on them.

On them would have been scribbled “Secondhand.”

Or maybe “Belongs to Dad.”

Or “Just trying to fit in.”

Our faith was something we had inherited, and it felt like it was not originally intended for us. That wasn’t our parents’ fault. Or the youth pastor’s. Or the church’s.

Our parents taught us that Christianity wasn’t about religion and rules but about a relationship with the God who made us. Yes, they made mistakes. But we saw them live out a genuine faith in front of us—two imperfect parents seeking to trust a perfect God. We truly feel blessed to have parents who have a real and authentic faith. But it’s *theirs*.

It doesn’t matter how real your parents’ faith is, or anyone else’s for that matter, if you don’t develop a faith of your own. A handed-down faith that you’ve never owned for yourself doesn’t give meaning to your life. You might sort of wear it, but it doesn’t say much about who you are. In fact, hand-me-down beliefs can start to weigh on you. They become a source of shame and guilt, a bar set too high that reminds you of your failures. Or they just seem outdated and irrelevant.

Hand-me-down faith may work when things are going well, but when pressures and problems hit, what you thought you believed will crumble.

“I hate to say this, but so many of the so-called Christian kids on this campus really turn me off,” Taylor, a university sophomore on the West Coast, told us. “The guys from church party just like the rest. At the frat parties they just want to get the girls drunk so that they can get their clothes off. They say

they're Christians—but come on!” That kind of faith is more like a shirt you wear when you're with a certain group of friends. In reality, that kind of faith is not faith at all! It's secondhand religion, and it doesn't get inside your life or change anything about you.

Mike, a university senior we read about, was at least more honest than those frat guys. He told an interviewer he had grown up going to church and learning about God, but in college he wasn't so sure anymore that God even existed. Mike was looking for solid evidence that God is real. He said that during his search he felt like he was an “adopted child wanting to know the truth about [my] birth parents.”<sup>2</sup>

We think Mike is right not to rely completely on the faith of his parents just because they are his parents. If you don't believe in God because of your own convictions, there is no point in pretending that you believe at all.

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**If you don't believe in God because of your own convictions, there is no point in pretending that you believe at all.**

---

Firsthand faith *is not* something you wear on the outside. Firsthand faith, in our experience, is centered deep in your own mind and heart. Sure, it's still a work in progress, but it's *yours*. It's *you*. When hard times hit, you have a lot to draw on to

weather the storm. In fact, firsthand faith is so real and personal that it just gets stronger when it is challenged.

Who wouldn't want that kind of living, breathing faith?

That is why our goal in writing this book is to help you replace secondhand religion with a faith—and most important, a relationship—that is meaningful. We want to help you get from a religion that you wear on the outside when it's convenient to a faith of your own—one that's authentically yours all the way through.

## YOU CAN BEAT THE ODDS

We have spent the past few years talking with friends and doing research, trying to get to the heart of what it means to seek and experience a genuine Christian faith for ourselves. We even conducted a survey with about three hundred strangers of different ages to get their views. Some of the people we got in touch with have traded in their secondhand faith for a firsthand faith. Others are still in the midst of the struggle, and who knows where they're going to come out in the end? You'll hear some of their voices, along with ours, in the course of this book.

Frankly, it wasn't hard at all to find people who have been through a crisis in their faith, just as we have.

One research study showed that about 60 percent of young people who were active in church as teenagers failed to translate that into an active spiritual commitment during their early adulthood.<sup>3</sup> That's a whole lot of people who discovered that a

secondhand faith didn't get them very far. When adult life with all its possibilities called out to them, they found that following God didn't really matter much to them anymore.

As we were writing this book, another study came out showing that while 89 percent of high schoolers claim to be affiliated with some religion in some way, the number drops to 75 percent once they get into their twenties.<sup>4</sup> Even among those people who still consider themselves Christians, nearly two-thirds of college students and three-quarters of those who don't attend college cut way back on their church involvement after they cross the threshold of high school graduation.<sup>5</sup>

The statistics about younger Christians who don't make it over the bridge to a flourishing, genuine faith are pretty bleak. But we know it doesn't have to be that way. You can beat the odds. That's why we wrote *Firsthand*. We believe this book can make a big difference to a lot of people—including you—starting today. Our hope is that this book will be an honest source of strength and discussion if you're cynical about the church, new to Christianity, or just trying to strengthen your faith.

In the chapters ahead, we lay out key truths that have helped us in our pursuit of a firsthand faith, and it is our hope and prayer that they will change the way you view your own spiritual journey. We tackle the problem areas and challenges that most young people face when they decide to really experience firsthand faith.

We have heard so many in our generation ask the same agonizing questions that we were asking—questions that we believe must be asked and answered in order to break away from dead religion. Maybe you've asked some of these questions too:

- If God is real, then why do I feel so empty on the inside? (chapter 2)
- Why should I even try to follow God when I feel like such a spiritual failure all the time? (chapter 3)
- I can't stand people who are fakes on the outside, but how do I experience real change that's more than skin deep? (chapter 4)
- Can anyone show me how to enjoy a close relationship with God instead of just checking off a spiritual to-do list every day? (chapter 5)
- How can I develop a strong faith when I'm filled with doubts and questions about God? (chapter 6)
- Can I break free from my comfortable existence and do something *huge* with my life? (chapter 7)
- If I joined a community of others who take firsthand faith seriously, could I really experience lasting change? (chapter 8)

Each chapter is really a description of our journey into seeking answers to those questions and understanding more of who God is and how He wants to relate to us. We have tried to turn theology into authentic experience.

And then we want to share with you some practical ideas

that are helping us grow closer to Christ in ways that are honest and relevant to our generation. At the end of each chapter, you will find a section called “Making It Real,” which has three parts:

- “Other Voices”—compelling quotes and stories from people we interviewed for this book
- “Think About It”—reflection questions to help you process and apply what you read in the chapter
- “Might Try This”—a menu of action steps you can take, alone or in a group, to live out what you’ve learned

All of this is deeply rooted in our own spiritual journeys. We’ve discovered that before we can get where we want to go, we have to start where we are.

## DECONSTRUCTION

We’ve noticed that personal faith always starts on the inside. And at least for us, that meant taking a step back to examine our faith and really decide what belonged and what didn’t. It meant going back to the start of our relationship with Christ. We had to go back to the simplicity of a relationship with Christ and brick by brick start building something new and fresh with Him. It was as if God had to deconstruct the nice and tidy religion we had pieced together over the years so we could start from scratch to find what was real.



We began this deconstruction by examining the life of Christ. From attending Sunday school, we knew every Bible story about Jesus, but for the first time we began digging into the Bible and studying the books of the New Testament for ourselves. We no longer bought the “because the Bible tells me so” answers. So we studied other historical texts, watched as many documentaries as we could get our hands on, and tried to expose ourselves to as many different viewpoints as possible. After reading countless books written by atheists, agnostics, Christians, Jews, and people with other beliefs, we were able to rediscover the foundation of our faith.

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**God had to deconstruct the nice and tidy religion we had pieced together over the years so we could start from scratch to find what was real.**

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We were primarily dissecting the life of Christ and looking for reasons either to doubt or accept what the Gospels say about who He is and what He did for us. One of the best resources in our research was the book *More Than a Carpenter* by Josh McDowell. (We recommend it to you if you're where we were at this stage.) After looking at all the evidence, we decided for ourselves that Jesus Christ was who He claimed to be.

Today we believe more boldly than ever that Jesus was the

Son of God. That He lived a perfect life. That He died for the entire world's sin and was resurrected three days later and ascended to heaven. That only through faith in Him can we be rescued from our brokenness and find new, everlasting life.

But if you don't agree with this view of Jesus or aren't sure what you believe about Him, we want you to do what we did.

Question what we just said about Jesus.

Seriously.

Clear your thoughts of all your preconceived notions. Look past shallow, judgmental Christians and superficial religion. Look past your bad experiences with church. Start with the life of Christ. Dig into what He said and did. Tell God you want to find the truth, and ask Him to help you find your way through your doubts and confusion.

He's eager to do it. And the experience will turn your life upside down, changing your future forever.

As Paul put it, "It is by your own faith that you stand firm" (2 Corinthians 1:24, NLT).

We have no problem encouraging you to question the Lord. Why? Because He invites us to do that. "Taste and see that the LORD is good," He says (Psalm 34:8). Also, we truly believe in a God who is active and alive in our lives. So if there is any truth to what we believe, a loving God will reveal Himself to those who search for answers.

## SAYING NO TO SECONDHAND RELIGION

Turning your life over to God and asking Jesus Christ to save you from your sins is the most important step toward firsthand living. That's where your spiritual journey with God starts.

Unfortunately, for so many young people who grew up in church, that's about as far as they go. They get saved, then they sort of sleepwalk through everything else.

That's kind of what we did. We experienced firsthand faith when we placed our faith in the hands of Jesus Christ. But then, as the years went by, we kept falling back into a religion of second-hand knowledge rather than firsthand relationship.

A lot of people we talked to attested to the same kind of problem.

A guy from Georgia named Joey, looking back on his teenage years, told us, "I had a strong case of what I call 'piggyback religion,' meaning I had confused being in a close relationship with my parents, who had a close relationship with God, with actually being close to God myself."

Heather from Huntsville, Alabama, went through the same thing. "Because you respect your parents, Sunday school teachers, and preachers, you believe what they say," she explained. "They study the Bible and know it, so therefore they must know what they're talking about. It makes it too easy to say, 'I believe because it's what I learned at church.' But what we really need to do is read the Bible and see for ourselves what the pastor is talking about."

The lifestyle of unexamined, secondhand faith doesn't work—and that's what we want to help free you of!

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## The lifestyle of unexamined, secondhand faith doesn't work.

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You won't believe the difference it makes. Right now we're both experiencing an incredible, awe-inspiring, frightening, fulfilling, overwhelming, uncomfortable, and exhilarating journey of firsthand faith. We are still figuring things out and making mistakes along the way, but instead of getting us down, these moments inspire us to grow closer to a God of love and promise.

Most important, we know it's the kind of personally owned faith that no one but God can give you. You can't get it from your parents or friends. You also can't get it from us. But we are going to do everything we can to help you find a firsthand faith that is authentic and unique to you.

So we challenge you to join us on this journey into firsthand Christian faith that matters—and that's all yours. What's so amazing about genuine Christianity (compared to other religions) is that it leads us step by step toward a God who is so much more than an idea or a force. He is a God we can actually know for ourselves, a Person we can have a firsthand relationship with.

Let us tell you what we mean.

## YOUR NAME ON GOD'S HANDS

The most important thing to know about a more personal faith is just how personal God is. We like to put it this way: a firsthand faith starts with realizing what is written on God's hands. Look at what God says in Isaiah 49:15–16: “I will not forget you. I have engraved you on the palms of my hands” (God's Word).

In the original context God was talking to the people of Judah who were going to come back to Him from their exile in Babylon. But it's also true for all prodigal sons and daughters, anyone who is feeling exiled or separated from Him. Even you.

Just think about it for a moment. The God who created the galaxies and the infinite universe has written your name on the palm of His hands! God knows your name. God knows every detail of your life. He knows the deepest longings of your heart. He knows your darkest secrets, your greatest fears, and your unspoken dreams. And He's crazy about you! He cares deeply about every personal detail of your life.

He didn't just doodle your name on a heavenly scratch pad—He engraved your name on His skin. God has a permanent tattoo of your name on His hands.

The God who has your name tattooed on His hands wants you to experience a firsthand faith so much that He came to this earth and stretched out His hands to willingly take the nails of our selfishness and sin.

Our whole aim in writing this book is to show you that

there's so much more to Christianity than living by someone else's faith. More, too, than being good, going to church, or following the rules. It's about a relationship with the One who fed five thousand hungry people—people just like you and me. It's about quenching your thirst at the Source.

Jesus is the Living Water.

However, if you're looking for six easy steps to happiness, you won't find them in these pages. Life is way more complex than any of us will ever be able to comprehend. So we don't claim to have all the answers. We do, however, invite you to journey with us across the bridge of faith—from a childhood faith to a grown-up, real, firsthand faith.

We spent years living with a faith that was partly our own but mostly someone else's. You don't have to.

Starting now, you can begin to make your life with God a very real, very personal, and absolutely motivating experience. After all, according to the dictionary definition, the word *first-hand* means “direct from the original source.”

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**You can begin to make your life with God  
a very real, very personal, and absolutely  
motivating experience.**

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That's the kind of life you were created for, the only kind that lasts, and the only kind Jesus came to give.

## Making It Real

### Other Voices

*Read the following quotes from people just like you who have struggled with what it means to follow God, and see how their experiences relate to your own.*

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I was at church every time the doors opened. I led prayers for my sports teams. I even started a petition so that we could have student-led prayer at my high school graduation. I did that because that was what was expected of the pastor's grandson. The breakthrough for me didn't come until I was twenty-four years old and my mother had a heart attack. I realized then, *When she dies, my faith will die too if I don't develop my own faith.* —Anthony, Lexington, Kentucky

---

Growing up, I viewed my church as a people who went through the motions but did not live out their faith. Even though this turned me off for a while, it helped me recognize the real thing—authentic and passionate faith—later in life. —Jeanette, Loudonville, Ohio

Nothing is “owned” unless you’ve struggled to own it in some way. A car that is given is a great gift, but the car I worked for is *mine*. It’s the same with faith—if it’s given to me, I don’t value it much. When I’ve fought through the crap of this world to discover Jesus, it means so much more. —*Luke, Kenosha, Wisconsin*

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Firsthand faith is what gets you through the mess. Secondhand faith is what gets you into a lot of messes in the first place. First-hand faith is solid—you can grab it and hang on to it. Second-hand faith is about as solid as Jell-O. When you really have to hold it tight, it gushes away. —*Jeremiah, Waterford, Michigan*

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When you see God moving in your actions, and not your parents’ actions, your faith becomes more real. When you recognize truth from discovering what you truly believe instead of just what your grandparents believe, it is like seeing the sky for the first time. It’s fun to actually be a part of something rather than just a card-carrying member. —*Ethan, Cardington, Ohio*



## Think About It

Use these reflection questions to think about how to apply what you've read in the chapter.

1. On a scale from one to ten, how real and vital would you say your faith is right now? (One means "I'm not sure I even have a personal faith in Christ," while ten means "My faith is really changing me and bringing fulfillment to my life.") Why did you choose that number?
2. Who have been the strongest influences on your faith so far in your life (your parents, friends, youth pastor...)? To what extent is your faith based on what *they* believe, and to what extent is it based on what *you* believe?
3. Have you felt a need to make your faith more your own? Where are you in that process?
4. What kind of faith would you like to have five years from now? How would that faith add meaning and fulfillment to your life?

## Might Try This

*The ideas that follow are a menu of action steps you might want to take to put the principles of this chapter into practice.*

### ● **Join the online Firsthand community.**

Go to [FirsthandBook.com](http://FirsthandBook.com) and join the community talking honestly about their “firsthand experiences.” You will find practical tools and hear other people’s stories as you discover your own firsthand faith.

### ● **Start a Firsthand group of your own.**

We’ve found that it’s incredibly helpful to discover firsthand faith with friends who share your longing for honesty and encouragement on your journey. So we recommend you read this book and decide on a few trusted friends you’d like in your group and give them a call.

If you want an engaging way to study *Firsthand* with others, we recommend you use the video curriculum we have created. The weekly sessions enhance your firsthand experience by using short films designed to spark discussion. Available in Christian bookstores and at [FirsthandBook.com](http://FirsthandBook.com), it’s perfect for small groups and youth groups.

### ● **Start a journal.**

Going from secondhand faith to a firsthand relationship is a journey. So get yourself a notebook, or use a computer, and start taking notes about where you are on that journey. Include questions, verses, doubts, insights, frustrations, prayers, observations, or whatever else you want to record about what’s happening in your life through this transition.

● **Get to know Jesus all over again.**

Read one of the Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John—from start to finish. Afterward, write down what you learned about who Jesus is. How does this picture challenge your beliefs and show you areas where you need to change?



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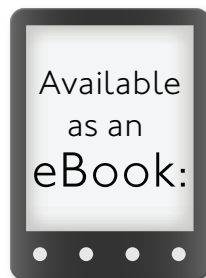
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