

# Episode 186 *Surprised by Oxford* with Carolyn Weber

*This transcript has been edited for clarity and space.*

## **Carolyn Weber**

Hello, I'm Carolyn Weber. I'm a professor, author, and lover of God and literature.

## **David Capes**

Dr. Carolyn Weber. Carolyn, welcome to the podcast.

## **Carolyn Weber**

Thank you so much for having me. It's a delight to be here.

## **David Capes**

You were here this past weekend at the Lanier Theological Library for lecture weekend, and a lot of people have been talking about your book, reading your book, recommending your book around here. And I wanted to have a chance to talk with you about it. Now joining me today is my sidekick. No, not really a sidekick. She's the Associate Director of the library. Her name is Jeannie Enright. Jennie, you're the one that told me about the book, originally, that you're reading it and how much you love it. That's one of the reasons that I snagged you and said, come on, let's do a podcast. So, for those who don't know, who is Carolyn Weber?

## **Carolyn Weber**

Well, it's so lovely to be with both of you. The Lanier Theological Library is a very special place. I am a literature professor and have been for many years. I currently teach at New College in Franklin, Tennessee, which is a small Christian classical school that I just adore. We moved here from Canada most recently, a couple years ago. And I'm also an author, and speaker on intersections, particularly of faith and literature. And I grew up in Canada in a midsize town. I grew up without a faith, without much of a faith at all. Agnostic, I would say defined my position. I did my graduate work at Oxford University. And that's where I was surprised by Oxford and became a Christian through my studies and friendships.

## **David Capes**

Now, we're talking today for the rest of our time about your book, *Surprised by Oxford*, which is published by Thomas Nelson Press. And it's fabulous. It's a memoir about your life. And it's a beautiful book. And it's a story about your life that has been made into a feature film. When did the film release?

## **Carolyn Weber**

The film came out last year and had a debut in theaters. And now it's streaming. I believe it's available on Apple and on Amazon. So that was last year. But the book itself came out about 2011. There's been multiple surprises in this. I never saw the film happening. That's very surreal. And I never anticipated writing a memoir, either David. That was a surprise too.

### **David Capes**

Well, you know nobody's ever asked to do a film of one of my books. I'm impressed to be able to talk to somebody whose book and story has caught the attention, the imagination of so many people. Tell us a little bit about your story. And what happens in the pages of *Surprised by Oxford*?

### **Carolyn Weber**

Well, as I said, I had never anticipated writing a memoir. I was an academic primarily. That was where my line of work was, in English Studies. And I grew up kind of loosely Catholic, as were my parents and grandparents. And I fell away from my faith. My parents were divorced. They fell on hard times, and I grew up having to provide a lot for myself, as a result of various hardships there. Like we all face, I guess. Then I won a Commonwealth Scholarship to study at Oxford University, which is comparable to something like a Rhodes Scholarship in the States. It was a huge opportunity. And I was of course excited and grateful but also really, really homesick. When I got there, I was studying world religions for my MPhil and was very cynical, skeptical towards God. I think on a very deeply personal level too. I wasn't going to trust an eternal father when my earthly father was not trustworthy. And I had a lot of academic and intellectual questions.

But as I started studying these other religions, and eventually meeting Christians and started reading the Bible for myself, it just opened this whole other world. And it probably became what I ended up studying and reading about even more so than my own studies. Over the course of my first year at Oxford, I eventually became a Christian. Much like Lewis describes sort of kicking and fighting, "the most reluctant convert". But that's what happened to me. I had unbelieving family, and unbelieving friends. Predominantly, I was in a profession that was antagonistic towards faith, particularly the Christian faith. Yet I had this experience, this story. Eventually, years later, it percolated for some time, I decided to write about it. And that's where the book came from.

### **Jennie Enright**

In your book you talk about so many meaningful relationships you developed, when you at Oxford with fellow students and professors that help impact your faith journey. Can you tell us about a couple of those?

### **Carolyn Weber**

Well, spoiler alert, one of the first people to articulate the gospel clearly to me was my husband. He wasn't my husband at the time, but eventually we ended up having a relationship. But at the time, we were not even friends. He was actually . . . irritating. I think we assume that people know the gospel, and they don't. They haven't heard it clearly, or certainly, if you hear it through the media, it's not a representation of who Jesus is. I had no concept of a personal relationship with God. I had never been asked, who is God to you? I had never been invited to ask questions about those big things. My life had always been busy and running like it is for so many people. But also, we tend to often lead with the

questions of why is there suffering. Or why would there be pain or where is God instead of actually thinking who he is to us. And then not thinking through when the gospel is presented to you what that line in the sand is.

I ended up just meeting people. What was interesting about the Commonwealth Scholarship is there's people from all over the world, many from wealthy countries, many from very poor countries. The Commonwealth is expansive. And I was there as a Canadian. And I met Christians from of all stripes, and all places that believed in the same God and the same Savior. That was mind blowing to know that people would have that relationship and define this person and this belief in similar terms from all over the globe. I was also moved by the fact that these people had a deep joy and a deep hope that I couldn't quite put my finger on. So, there was a global influence in the graduate community, because that's really quite cosmopolitan.

Within my college, I was blessed to have been shaped and challenged by a couple of professors that were Christians, some overt, some not. I had two masters of my colleges, both colleges I was at that were very influential in my faith. Seeing them live out their faith in a very real way, with kindness and compassion, and caring for their students. And I hadn't experienced that before either. That kind of hospitality, that kind of personal care.

Oftentimes, I think in larger universities, especially in North America, not only are we so incredibly busy but we're also so incredibly anonymous. It's like a juggernaut in a way, and you can just move along into your studies and not take any responsibility for your ideas. But also, not really even being invited into anyone's home. I was challenged in so many ways, by the care of college life and by thoughtful, intelligent Christians. They were people who had a faith that makes sense, who were widely read, who were thinking about questions. They were in all different types of fields. It challenged my stereotypes and presuppositions and opened up so many other things I had been reading. And it deepened them as well.

### **David Capes**

It sounds like there's just a number of people that were a part of and feeding into that time in your life.

### **Carolyn Weber**

Yes. There were a couple of key people for sure. A couple of the professors I identify in the book along with the graduate school community, and the C.S. Lewis Society. And there were just lots of very vibrant Christian thinkers. And St. Ebb's Church too, which is where I did start to explore things.

### **David Capes**

The title of your book *Surprised by Oxford* sounds a like Lewis's book *Surprised by Joy*, and obviously, C.S. Lewis plays a big part in your own faith journey.

### **Carolyn Weber**

Absolutely. Hands down. I would say without a doubt, he's my favorite author. And I don't say that lightly because I have so many that I adore. And I would have come to him kicking and screaming reluctant as well, because I knew him from the Narnia series. But when I was first introduced to reading

more of him, I had this presupposition of oh, really, what kind of theologian could he be. Or how interesting could this be? I knew him primarily from a literary standpoint, from my studies of Milton, and had great respect for him as an academic. When I began to read more of his thoughts, obviously in something like *Mere Christianity*, which laid out the faith and made so much sense. But also, there was such a wide range of genres that he had written. I was reading his sci-fi and reading him on grief and reading him on studying literature, which of course is my Achilles heel. And on allegory and myth and all these things. I mean, he was everywhere and so thoughtful about it, and I always felt like I was just having a cup have tea with him while I was reading.

Eventually, he really shaped my faith. I felt like he asks the questions that are in our own head. And he answers them and not in a heavy-handed way, but in this invitational way. So sometimes it's very logic based and very Socratic. And other times, it's very imaginative. It felt to me as though he was anticipating the arrows I was throwing myself. He would catch them and examine them and ask them as well. He came with this great personal ethos from what he had gone through in his own life, and from his love of literature. He didn't throw them back at me barred. And so, it was like a great inner conversation. And it resonates when he says one of the advantages to reading is, you can become like 1000 men but never lose your own identity. I felt like that when reading him. I don't have to lose a sense of who he is as the main author, but I get exposed to so many other thinkers. And so many of the other thinkers I had read already, poets like Herbert Dunn, and that sort of thing. I had read as a student, but I had not understood how they clicked into the overall larger story of Christianity. And so he was very, very instrumental in putting those pieces together for me, and helping me see that those questions had a place, and that I was invited to the table of this great story.

### **David Capes**

So you've got this radical hospitality taking place in the college. You're now being exposed to ideas and questions that you felt at some level but had never articulated before.

### **Jennie Enright**

One thing that struck me in the book is when you say, you can't unhear the gospel. I was going to ask you to expand on that.

### **Carolyn Weber**

You can't unhear it. Because you do hear what Jesus did for us, who he is, and how God came as him, to create a righteous relationship with us. He restored that through his death, and through his life, and we're forced to answer who Jesus is to us. You can't unhear it, you can't unthink it. Even though it tremendously bothers you, it's highly inconvenient. Because it would just be simpler if we were all pantheists. And God was just everywhere. And it was easygoing and didn't really have to draw a line in the sand. But to think: is he a liar, lunatic, or Lord? Because if he isn't crazy, and if he isn't lying, then now what?

### **David Capes**

What do we do?

### **Carolyn Weber**

What do we do with this, and it has a way of “tendrilling” — I give a lot of credit to people who see it right away. But I think there's also a time in which it just tendrils up. His name has a power like no one else's name. You say the name of Jesus, and it gets people's knickers in a knot like no one else. And there's some other power happening there. Because I think it forces us to define who and what we serve. And we all serve something which I wrote about in my book. Even when we say we don't, we do. Even declaring we don't serve something is a form of servitude. Who and what are we serving? And when we start to really think about those questions, who is God to you? Who do you say I am? Who is Jesus then? If he was here, historically. And if his claims are credible. How do you answer those things? Because the way that we answer them has eternal repercussions and they change everything. And they did like no other question did. No other question has that power.

**David Capes**

Your book is a spiritual journey, but it's also a love story as well.

**Carolyn Weber**

Yes, it is.

**David Capes**

It starts with Kent and his irritating, aggravating pursuit of you. And then along the way, he just wore you down!

**Carolyn Weber**

Well probably the other way around. I probably wore him down with all my words. He would joke and say I was asking questions about questions he'd never even thought of. He was studying the church fathers. And so, he was probably well girded and had all these answers. I think what I was most moved by and struck by was when he didn't have the answers. He was honest about that, that my God couldn't fit in a box. What he embodied and what he was extending. He's not perfect. No one is.

But to see the difference between friendship and fellowship really struck me. Tolkien calls it the fellowship of the ring, not the friendship of the ring. And there's a reason. Friendship is great. You can get to know folks. But I do feel like Vanauken when he says there's the shining barrier. As soon as you are connected in Christ, it's something that runs deeper immediately. Even if you're strangers and you've just met, you can see this fellowship. It's where the real happens, the really real. And I wanted that. We all want that. We all long for what Jesus offers us. And also the relationship that allows us to be real, because the truth does set us free. And again, it's not perfect on this side of heaven, but it's freedom.

And I saw that modeled in these friendships that were fellowships among Christians, and how it was being extended to me to do this life together. I had been longing for that. I just resonated so deeply with so much in the Bible, but especially with how people respond to Jesus. How he meets them where they are, and how he can meet them at the well or at the top of a tree or they can come from his hometown. The town that's good for nothing like I did, and it's immediately real with him. And it can be like that with each other in him, as well.

**David Capes**

We're talking to Carolyn Weber about her book, *Surprised by Oxford*. It's a memoir. A beautiful story well told. It's also in cinema, and beautifully represented by some great visuals of Oxford. I want to thank you for being with us today on *The Stone Chapel Podcast*. I wish we had about another hour to talk because there's so much more.

**Jennie Enright**

You just have to read the book!

**David Capes**

Read the book! And you can find it here at the Lanier Theological Library. Or you can go to Amazon or other sellers like Thomas Nelson and get your own copy. Carolyn, we look forward to another time to chat.

**Carolyn Weber**

Thank you. Me too. God bless both of you.

**Jennie Enright**

Thank you, you too.