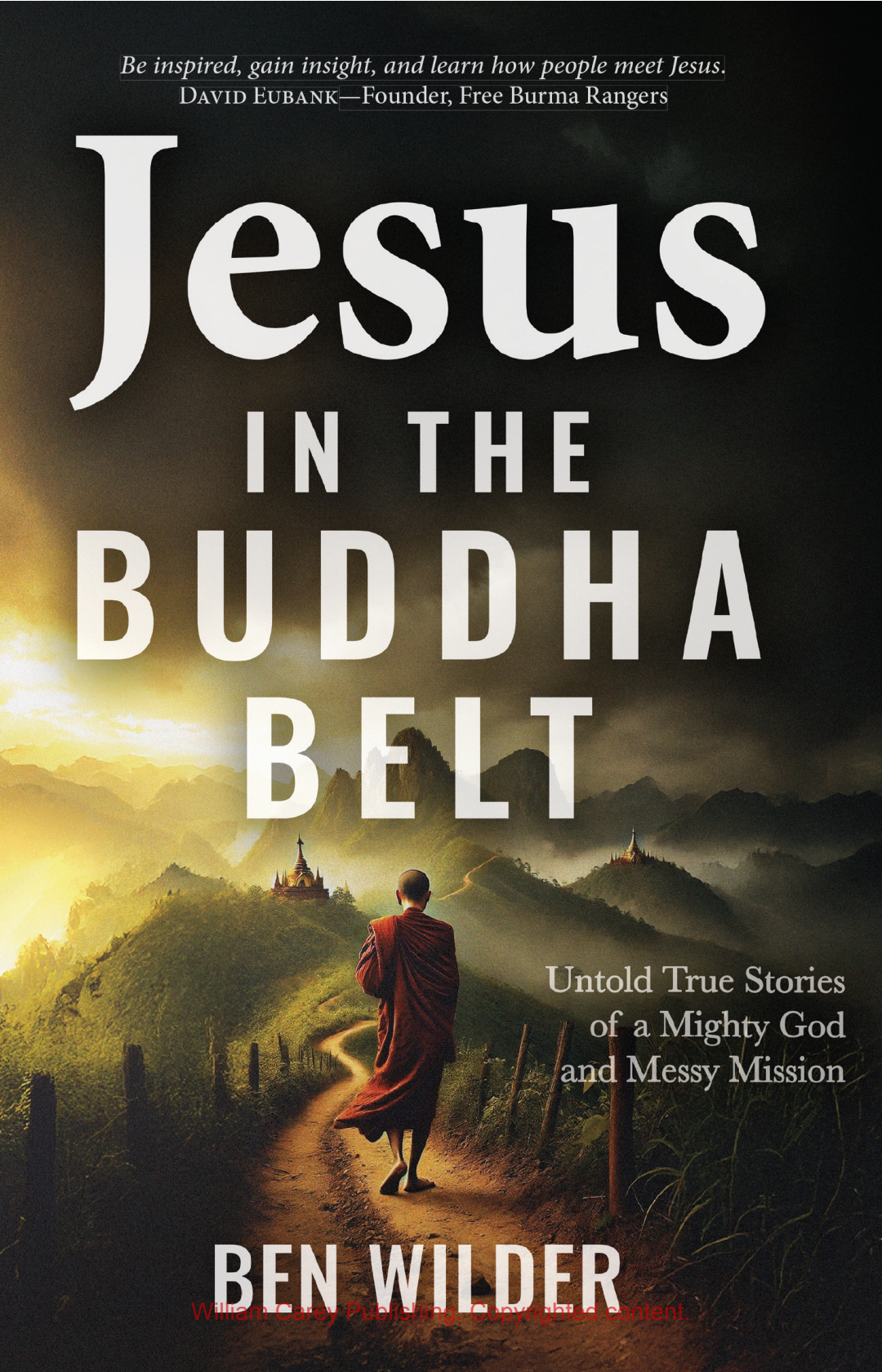
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DAVID EUBANK—Founder, Free Burma Rangers

Jesus IN THE BUDDHA BELT



Untold True Stories of a Mighty God and Messy Mission

BEN WILDER

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Jesus in the Buddha Belt: Untold True Stories of a Mighty God and Messy Mission

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Part 1

Aung's Story

A BUDDHIST MONK'S LIFE TAKES A SUPERNATURAL TURN



Aung contemplating life as a Buddhist monk

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1
Unexpected Answer

He pressed the tip of the cold black barrel against my clammy forehead. "Do it, fool. Or else." I swallowed hard, leaned against the plaster wall, and looked to the stars for courage. I would be shamed and beaten if caught. But chickening out would be even worse. I slowly reached up to the rough wooden windowsill. It was open. My sideways head craned just high enough to peer inside with one eye. There he was, still sleeping. *Get yourself together, Aung. Nothing bad is going to happen.* I gathered my nerve, inched to my feet, and climbed through the window in slow motion. Halfway across the room toward the stack of cookie tins—bang! My fellow novice monk stood up, fired the toy gun, and dashed away. The elder monk startled and rolled over. *"Ama-lay Paya!"* I whisper-cursed and bounded out the window, scared-dog style.

A few nerve-racking seconds later, my trigger-happy colleague shook with silent laughter under the blanket next to me. The other novices were already in deep, rhythmic sleep. I tried to slow my breath to match theirs. But I couldn't. My heart was racing. My mind was racing. And my lungs were still trying to catch up. Would an angry senior monk burst through the door any moment? Or had he even woken up? Why on earth did I do that? These were the first deep questions I pondered growing up in the Buddhist monastery. Okay, maybe the actual deep questions came later, but these sure felt deep to a ten-year-old boy who had just attempted midnight cookie theft. All that, and I didn't even get to enjoy a cookie.

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A LONG DIRT TRAIL

My parents called me Aung at birth. That's the name I've gone by all my life, except for the years I wore a monk's robe. My tiny mountain village is farther up a winding dirt trail than you've probably ever wanted to go. It's a trail with no maps, no street signs, no smartphones to show the way; a trail my ancestors blazed with blisters, water buffalo widened with wagons, and Chinese tractors ruined with ruts. Even today, it's only passable on foot in the rainy season—you have to climb it step by step just like my ancestors did. You'll never find it without a guide, and don't bother asking Google. Few human beings even know my people exist, much less where we live. They don't know and don't care—I didn't think anyone did. Then, one day, the most unexpected visitor made it all the way to my cloistered little village in the Buddha Belt. That surprising Jewish carpenter turned everything on its head. He showed me and my belittled people that we matter. He also showed me how to run from an angry mob with sticks. Good thing I already had practice running for attempted cookie theft!

You know why my people wanted to hit me after Jesus visited? I guess it's time to introduce them. Burmese speakers call us Palaung, but we call ourselves Ta'ang. At least a million of us are tucked away in the mountain peaks of Myanmar, China, and Thailand. In many ways, we're no different from you. We scratch out a living, fall in love, and seek a better life for our children. In other ways, we're half a world apart—east and west, rice and bread, poverty and riches, Buddha and Jesus.

I don't know how it is where you live, but family, village, and religion are important to my people. Families live together in small houses with parents, grandparents, and siblings. The family fire burns almost continuously in the middle of the living room, where stories and rules are passed down through generations. Outside our homes—and often *inside* them too—is the village. Each home's front door remains open until dark, turning every village living room into communal property. There's no such thing as privacy, and the group is always more important than the individual.

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We have many Ta'ang dialects and traditional clothing variations, but we do not make much of the differences. That would divide us. Most of us cannot name all our Ta'ang subtribes, but we know we are brothers and sisters—all one Ta'ang. That is the message passed down by the elders in every village. Our Ta'ang must stick together. We must work together. We must swim *with* the collective stream of our people—not *against* it. For us, the whole people is more important than any particular village. The whole village is more important than any particular family. And the whole family is more important than any particular individual. We value conformity, not deviation. We have to if we want to survive. But I did the opposite. That's the first thing that got me into trouble after the Jewish carpenter's visit.

My people also value the village. The village knows every generation of your family (past and present), where you go in the morning, and when you come home in the evening. There's no hiding anything—don't even try! And young people's opinions don't mean much. Wisdom comes from the elders. The elders rule the village. And the village tells you what to think. Only fools disagree, which I did. That was the second thing that got me in trouble.

Last but not least, hovering above and woven through every part of my people's family and village fabric, is our traditional religion. Ta'ang people are Buddhist—every one of us. It's not a choice. We're born that way: Ta'ang-Buddhist. You can't change how you're born. That was my third problem, and it got me surrounded by an angry mob with sticks. *Yikes!* But wait, we're not to that part of the story just yet.

CLIMBING THE LADDER

I joined the monastery before my upper lip sprouted hair. I didn't join it from a sense of religious conviction though. True, the monastery is a center of religion, but it also feeds, clothes, and educates young boys for free. My parents weren't the golden umbrella type; they struggled to make ends meet. At the very

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least, my basic childhood needs would be met at the monastery, and I could choose to leave as an adult if I wanted. On the other hand, if I stuck with it and climbed the ranks, I could become one of the most revered people in society and attain god status.

"Aw-ka-tha, aw-ka-tha, aw-ka-tha ..." Laypeople greet monks by kneeling at their feet, bowing to the ground three times, and chanting this request for protection and forgiveness. The prayer ends by calling the monk *"A-Shin Paya,"* which means god. Laypeople hang on the monk's every word and offer donations as if their present and future lives depend on it—and in their minds, they do. Donations are important for laypeople. It's how they get rid of bad *karma* (sin) and accumulate good *karma* (merit). Since people keep on sinning, they have to keep on giving; that means the monastery keeps on getting. Of course, all monks take a vow of poverty, but it's not easy for higher-level monks to keep this vow since the system never stops pouring money into their alms bowls. This puts many monks in a Judas Iscariot predicament: They are constantly tempted to betray their master for financial gain.

By middle age, after lots of study, practice, and tests, my credentials and reputation made me the top monk in the village. I was as mighty as god and king. The whole village worshipped, revered, and generously donated to me. What more could I ask for? Don't get me wrong, there was a long list of strict rules and regulations to follow—227 plus a few (if you're counting)—but the monk life definitely had its perks. Overall, things were good for me at the top.

Then one day, after a long trip to another town, I rested my tired bones in the living room of a new acquaintance. For a few short minutes, I sat alone while the host went into the kitchen to get refreshments. I'll never forget that fateful moment. My eyes wandered from the pictures on the wall to the furniture, the TV, and, finally, the coffee table. There, right in front of me, sat a small pamphlet written by a fellow Buddhist monk.

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