THINGS THAT MATTER

a guide to Christian faith
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A Guide to Christian Faith

Third Edition

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Christian Studies Press
Austin, Texas
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Preface to Third Edition

This book was originally written for Russian readers in 1991. It has since been translated into several other languages including French, Croatian, Serbian, Telugu, Hindi and Nepalese. The first American edition appeared in 1996. We are thankful for the reception the book has enjoyed. Readers report its usefulness in such varied settings as classes in churches, Christian schools, and colleges, in ministries to seekers and new members, in campus ministry, hospital visitation, and prison ministry.

As in previous editions, we have attempted to keep the vocabulary and style as simple and straightforward as the subject matter permits. We continue to hope that in addition to informing readers about Christianity, the volume will strengthen faith and even awaken faith.

The Editors
Austin, Texas
August 2000
The Mystery of Life

I know, O LORD, that a man’s life is not his own; it is not for man to direct his steps.
Jeremiah 10:23
Life presents us with many challenges. Every day we have schedules to meet, difficult people to deal with, our own anxieties to face. Sometimes, in quieter moments, we experience a fleeting sense of emptiness—a longing for something our words cannot fully describe; we face the mystery of life itself. We wonder, "What is the meaning of life? How should I live? What can I hope for?" We can avoid these questions for a while, but we must finally ask about things that matter.

Christian faith teaches that life is not an accident. We are made for relationship with our Creator. While the Creator does not force himself upon us, he places intuitions of goodness and truth in our hearts and minds. We are inescapably moral and spiritual beings. As the Bible says, the Creator has placed eternity in our hearts (Ecclesiastes 3:11).

We act above instinct and impulse; we have minds to know truth and wills to desire goodness. We build bridges and write poetry. More importantly, we make choices and commitments that define us as persons. Ultimately, we are created to seek and to know the One behind all created truths and goods—the One who is both Goodness and

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The Mystery of Life

Truth.

Too often we spend our time and our energies ordering our lives around limited goods and partial truths. Deep within us, however, there remains a longing for what the world cannot provide, a deep need that the world's goods cannot satisfy. As Augustine said, our restless hearts find rest only in God.

Our lives are defined by how we respond to the Creator's claim on our hearts and minds. Centuries before Christ, Greek thinkers saw that some goods offer immediate satisfaction; others, to be enjoyed, require time and effort. "Easy pleasures" are obviously more inviting and popular, but they are also "lower" or "lesser goods." The inescapable choice between lower pleasures and higher pleasures shapes our entire lives.

Pursuing the easy pleasures prevents us from developing habits of character necessary to enjoy life's higher pleasures. Pursuit of the greater goods and higher truths equips us with virtues like self-control, courage, and justice for living good and noble lives.

Playing the piano and watching TV both bring us enjoyment, but TV-watching involves no particular skill; playing the piano requires hours of practice and a number of
skills. A person who learns to play the piano also learns the importance of discipline, hard work, and patience. TV-watching, by contrast, may encourage expectations of instant gratification, foster impatience, and dull our critical faculties.

Tragically, modern culture distracts our attention from life's nobler pursuits. We are constantly offered an ever-changing menu of easy pleasures. Shallow and twisted models of the good life abound. Advertising invites us to acquire more things that meet artificial “needs.” The flickering images of movies and TV constantly distort and trivialize life's deeper meanings.

We live in a world that exchanges living nobly for living well. We are more concerned with comfort and calories than with moral corruption and character. Dissatisfaction and impatience drive us in endless pursuit of the new and the different. Many are anxious and confused, torn by conflicting desires and ambitions.

Some of us seek relief by finding meaning in a career, or in our families, or in civic activities. Many give their lives for noble causes. Patriotism, for example, draws on our sense of honor and duty in ways that golfing doesn't. Still, even noble pursuits may leave

the emptiness and longing in our hearts unsatisfied.

Some turn to religion or spirituality, perhaps for the same reasons that we join the Little League or PTA: “it's nice to belong to something,” “it's good for the children.” In such cases, religion simply fills a small space in otherwise full and busy lives. Here, “religion” is only one among several other goods; it is not a life-defining commitment that shapes and orders all our other commitments. In fact, religion may even be viewed as useful in gaining other goods to which we are really more committed—health, success, or even family.

All of these efforts only partially mask our longing for something deeper; they do not satisfy that longing. Our various causes, especially the more noble ones, dimly reflect a need for something else. They point to our need for a relationship with our Creator—a need that cannot be satisfied by any created thing. Our many truths and various goods find their intended meaning only in the One who is their source.

C. S. Lewis warns us that only if we put first things first can we truly enjoy “second things.” To ignore first things, or to pursue second things as if they were first things, is
ultimately to lose both. We must finally ask, "What really matters?"

This book is for those who wonder what really matters. It is for those seeking deeper meaning in life, who want a new beginning. It is also for those who have found new meaning in Christ and want fuller understanding. This book introduces the answers to our deepest longings offered by the Christian faith—what Lewis called "mere Christianity."

More specifically, the book introduces the reader to the Creator described in the opening pages of the Bible, to his covenant recounted in the Old and New Testaments, and to the community that lives in covenant with God through Christ today.

We begin in the next chapter, with the Christian conviction that God created the world and the importance of this conviction for understanding the meaning of our lives.

Chapter 3 traces the story of the Old Testament. Here we learn about God's choice of the nation Israel as his people and Israel's response to God.

Chapter 4 goes to the heart of the Christian faith, the story of the Son of God, Jesus Christ. The story of Jesus, recorded in the New Testament, is called the "gospel," or

"good news." It is in the life of Jesus that the purposes of God for us are fully revealed.

Chapter 5 describes the community that Jesus established through his life, death, and resurrection. It is in this community, Christ's church, that God continues to reveal his will for us, to restore us to himself, and to enable us to live according to his purposes.

Chapter 6 follows the history of the Christian church through the centuries. It explains why we find so many differences among churches today.

Chapter 7 shows how the biblical faith transforms our lives. Living in response to the Creator's revelation in Jesus Christ, Christians can live new and fully human lives.

Biblical faith answers the deep questions of life. Too often these "big" questions are crowded out by the many distractions of our busy age. This book is for those who are aware of life's problems and questions, who have not found lasting comfort in the diversions of modern society, who even suffer loneliness and despair. The final chapter commends the journey of Christian faith as the life that truly satisfies our minds and hearts.
FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What is the difference between “the many problems of life” and “the mystery of life itself”?

2. What does the Bible mean when it says that God has set eternity in our hearts?

3. What signs of restlessness do you see in the human heart? In your own heart?

4. What is the difference between the so-called “easy pleasures” and “life’s higher pleasures”?

5. How do the distractions of modern culture trivialize the meaning of life?

6. How is it possible for “religion” to mask our need for God?

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God the Creator

There is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came, and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live.

1 Corinthians 8:6
This book is for those who wonder what really matters.

Today many of us find ourselves discouraged, frustrated, and confused — “distracted from distraction by distraction,” in T.S. Eliot’s phrase. Not only do we experience disappointment and failure; even our accomplishments fail to bring lasting happiness.

What is the meaning of life? How should we live? What can we hope for? We can avoid these questions for a while, but we must finally ask about things that matter.

Things That Matter was written by the faculty of the Austin Graduate School of Theology, in Austin, Texas.