

# Discover Christ

Developing a Personal  
Relationship with Jesus

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# Introduction

You have opened a book that invites you to discover Christ — a book that offers to help you enter into or renew more fully a personal relationship with Jesus.

Curiosity may have prompted you to pick it up. Or *Discover Christ* may connect with a longing that you have been feeling. Or maybe a relative or friend handed the book to you, saying something like, “This book has meant a lot to me. I think you may like it, too.”

Whatever occasioned your picking up *Discover Christ*, we encourage you to read it with an open mind and heart. Many of the chapters challenge you to respond to pivotal questions that you may (or may not) have already considered. Questions like “What is the meaning of life?” and “Why does Jesus matter?” We call

*Discover Christ* is based on *Discovering Christ*, a video-driven, interactive course developed and distributed by ChristLife, a ministry in the Archdiocese of Baltimore. Please turn to the back pages of the book for information about ChristLife and *Discovering Christ*.

them “pivotal” because they demand answers that can turn lives around or, perhaps, right-side up.

We tell you at the beginning of each chapter whether it was written by Bert or Dave. Throughout the book, we share how we came to discover Christ and to relate to him personally. We tell you about our experiences because both of us discovered Christ through conversations with friends. May our example be a source of encouragement for you to meet him in these pages.

## *Chapter One*

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# **What Is the Meaning of Life?**

*Dave*

### *Asking the Question*

When God was creating the different creatures, he first created the dog. He told the dog, “Look, I want you to sit at your house at the door, and I want you to bark like crazy when anybody goes by or when they walk in. I’m going to give you a life span of twenty years.” The dog said, “Lord, that’s pretty rough, twenty years of barking. Could you make it ten and I’ll give you back ten?” The Lord said, “Agreed.”

Next the Lord created a monkey. He said to the monkey, “I want you to entertain people. I want you to do tricks for them and make them laugh. For this, I will give you a life span of twenty years.” The monkey, like the dog, said, “Lord, you know, that’s quite a gig,

to have twenty years to make people laugh and do tricks for them. Could I ask you to give me a ten-year life span, and I'll give you ten back just like the dog did?" The Lord agreed.

Next the Lord created a cow. He said to the cow, "I want you to go out into the fields, into the pastures, with the farmer, under the hot sun and I want you to toil with him, eat grass. I want you to have calves, and I want you to provide milk for the farmer's family. And I want you to live a life span of sixty years." The cow said, "That's a long time, Lord. Could you cut that down? How about if I have twenty years and I give you back forty?" The Lord agreed.

Then the Lord created man, and he said to the man, "I want to give you a life where you eat, sleep, play, marry, and enjoy your life. For this, I'll give you twenty years." The man said, "Ah, Lord, only twenty years? Could you possibly give me my twenty, the forty years from the cow, the monkey's ten, and the ten the dog gave back? That makes eighty, okay?" The Lord agreed.

So that is why for our first twenty years we eat, sleep, play, and enjoy ourselves. For the next forty years, we slave to support our families. For the next ten years, we do monkey tricks for the grandchildren. And for the last ten years, we sit on the front porch and bark at everyone.

We laugh at this joke because it tells truths about us with a touch of humor. Our lives do go through the stages it describes. But when we are done laughing, we may begin to wonder about the dullness of lives that move along without any apparent sense of purpose. For

me the joke opened the question of the meaning of life, and I want to open it for you.

Imagine that I stop you walking on Main Street, put a microphone up to your face, and ask, “Would you mind taking a minute to answer an important question?” “Okay with me,” you say. And so I ask, “What is the meaning of life to you?” Off the top of your head, what would you say? You may have already thought about your life’s purpose and hit the nail on the head. But maybe like many of us you have never confronted the question of life’s meaning. Consider these wildly diverse responses to the same question my friend Pete put to people he met recently in downtown Baltimore, Maryland:

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**Pete, with roving microphone in hand:**  
**“What is the meaning of life to you?”**

“I kind of gauge it as finding peace within yourself and happiness. I mean, I think people have many different ideas of how to go about finding happiness but think it’s all these little trivial things. Ultimately it’s just finding what’s within because then you can be happy wherever you are. It’s internal. That’s my best guess.”

— *Twenty-something woman*

“Living these days being a responsible human being. You know, I raised my kids right.

They're in college now, and I'm tryin' to do right with the rest of my life."

— *Dad with grown children*

"Well, what Judaism says is the purpose of mankind is to get closer to God. And, so, things that people do that are positive help them get closer to God. And, so, from a religious spiritual point of view, that's what the meaning of life is. And there's multiple other meanings at a much lower level than that, but that's the spiritual answer to your question."

— *Middle-aged man*

"Having fun. Go do bad things, good things, [friend laughing in the background] but, uh, live your life. Try doing anything you want to do."

— *Late-teen youth*

"The meaning of life is doing what the Lord asks us to do. And fulfilling whatever He asks us to do."

— *Young man*

"That can be hard to answer because it's something you would have to think about. Maybe it's God's decision, it might be some other belief, but it really is not an easy question."

— *Elderly man*

Not an easy question, to be sure, but one that we must answer because how our life turns out depends upon it. People have wrestled with it for centuries. Philosophers, nurses, teachers, plumbers, flight attendants, lawyers, construction workers — all at some point have had to wonder, “Why am I here?” and “Where am I headed?”

I recently read an article by a professor who bemoaned the fact that colleges and universities are so committed to research that they no longer expose students to the important questions about life. But in the past even grade schools taught kids about life’s meaning. For example, I attended a Catholic elementary school. In the third grade I had to memorize a lesson about the purpose of life. My religion book posed the question, “Why did God create you?” And it gave the answer that I was expected to commit to memory. Today I can still repeat it. But not until my late teen years did I confront the important question of my life’s meaning as a real issue.

### ***Facing the Issue***

For most of us the issue of our purpose lurks beneath the surface of our super-busy lives. But then something happens that makes it pop up. For some of us, the example of a friend living a peaceful, purpose-driven life provokes curiosity about our own lack of direction. For others, a joyous event like the birth of a child or the marriage of a beloved daughter opens them to reflect all teary-eyed on life’s meaning.

But more often a crisis compels us to ask what's really going on in our lives. The question may arise while we are struggling with addiction, depression, loneliness, or thoughts of suicide. The weight of guilt or shame for some offensive behavior may force us to ask what life is about. Or serious disease or financial collapse may make us wonder about the meaning of life. In fact, you may be facing one of these crises right now.

Sometimes a broader crisis such as a natural disaster — maybe an earthquake, hurricane, or flood — does the job. Or a national catastrophe like an assassination or a terrorist attack may rouse us to look at reality. For example, the September 11, 2001, collapse of the World Trade Center awakened many Americans to consider life's purpose.

### *Anesthetizing the Pain*

Until we have a wake-up call, many of us plod along realizing that we haven't found what we're looking for. A longing gnaws at us, a pain even, a sense that there's got to be more to life than what we're experiencing. We

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**Until we have a wake-up call, many of us plod along realizing that we haven't found what we're looking for.**

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feel an emptiness deep inside like a gaping hole that must be filled.

So we look for ways to anesthetize our pain. We may seek comfort in relationships or dream that marriage and a family will do it. We may imagine that becoming successful and acquiring a lot of money will make us happy. We may look to physical fit-

ness, beauty, or achievement in sports for relief. We may try to fill the hole inside us by medicating ourselves with drugs or alcohol. Or we may just try to ignore it by having fun.

That's what I did in my teenage years. I thought that having fun, entertaining others, and relating to girls was my life's purpose. I played guitar in rock and roll groups that were fairly successful in Baltimore. But none of this satisfied me. For example, once, surrounded by friends at a really good party — good by my standards at the time — I found myself thinking that there's got to be a better party somewhere. I was just ignoring the hole. Nothing I was doing even began to cure the ache I felt in my heart.

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**I think everybody should get rich and famous and do everything they ever dreamed of so they can see that that's not the answer.**

— *Jim Carrey*<sup>1</sup>

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### ***The Inevitability of Death***

Screenwriter Woody Allen once quipped that he isn't afraid of dying. He then went on to say he just doesn't want to be there when it happens. We chuckle at the joke, but when we confront the inevitability of our own death, we take the matter seriously. Recognizing the inescapable fact that we will die may bring to the surface critical questions about life's meaning: Why am I here? Where did I come from? Where am I going?

For example, Leo Tolstoy, in *A Confession*, tells how he came close to committing suicide because a sense of purposelessness tormented him. "Is there any

## ***Death Scared the Hell Out of Me***

“I was just doing my own thing and thinking that life is just life and you have to make the best of it.

“Everything changed one day for me as I sat in my English class during my junior year in high school. We were reading the play *Our Town*, a three-act play by Thornton Wilder. It’s a pretty simple play, but it had a not-so-simple impact on my life at the time. At the end of the play one of the main characters, Emily Webb, dies. While in the graveyard with the other people who are dead there, she asks them if she could go back and relive a day in her life...

“The play encourages people to really live life and not to miss the little things. But what hit me as a seventeen-year-old kid was that I was going to die some day. And it scared the hell, literally, right out of me. I started to shake in the class and to sweat; I began thinking: “Oh my God, I’m going to die. So what is the meaning of life? Is there any meaning? Is there anything after death?”

— Fr. Larry Richards<sup>2</sup>

meaning in life,” he asked, “that will not be annihilated by the inevitability of death that awaits me?”<sup>3</sup> And having come to the verge of self-destruction, he began a quest for meaning. He searched in the sciences and in philosophy, but found that they had nothing to offer. Ultimately to his surprise he found the answer in the peasants who worked for him on his estate. These simple folks discovered their life’s meaning in their Christian faith. So Tolstoy gradually came to believe that he found his purpose in the person of Jesus Christ.

### ***Finding Our Purpose***

Like it did for Tolstoy, facing the inevitability of death should provoke us to explore the purpose of life. And as we think about the matter we must confront an “either/or” fact: everything in reality is *either* an accident *or* has been created for a purpose. “There are only two ways,” says author Frank Sheed, “in which anything can come to be. Either it’s intentional or accidental; that is, either someone intended it or it merely happened by chance. The thing that is intentional has a purpose; accidents have no purpose. Humanity, like other things, must either be an accident and so purposeless, or else have been made with intent.”<sup>4</sup>

If you are looking at something that was made and that is obviously not an accident, you must figure out what it was made for. You must understand its purpose.

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**Humanity, like other things, must either be an accident and so purposeless, or else have been made with intent.**

— *Frank Sheed*

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For example, in Daytona Beach, Florida, a toddler found a hand grenade in a field near his home. He apparently thought it was a toy. His dad found him playing with it, took it and gave it to the police. “Thank God he didn’t pull the plug,” the dad said.<sup>5</sup>

We will never use something correctly until we discover what it was made to do. This general principle applies to all created things. If we don’t know a thing’s purpose, we will misuse it with unhappy, even potentially disastrous results, as the example suggests. The principle also applies to human beings. If we do not come to understand our purpose, we will never satisfy our longings or find happiness. We must look beyond ourselves to discover what we are and why we were made. And for many of us this requires a revolution in how we look at our lives.

### *A Radical Shift in Worldview*

At some time or other, all of us behave as though everything revolves around us. We are convinced that we get to decide the meaning of life for ourselves. For example, some of the people on the street that Peter interviewed said that their purpose is enjoying life, having fun, and doing whatever they wanted. We all need to change the way we see reality. We must come to a genuine understanding of the meaning of our existence. We must finally recognize who and what we are, where we have come from, and where we are going.

To do this, we need an astronomical shift in our personal worldview like the astronomical shift — literally — that Copernicus brought about in the view of

the world. From the second century on everyone accepted the scientific opinion of Ptolemy, the Egyptian astronomer, who held that the sun revolved around the earth. But in the sixteenth century Copernicus, the great Polish astronomer, developed the theory, later proven, that the earth revolved around

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**We need an astronomical shift in our personal worldview like the astronomical shift — literally — that Copernicus brought about in the view of the world.**

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the sun. Similarly, we must stop seeing ourselves at the center of things. We must shed the notion that we are self-determined beings and accept the fact that we are creatures. And we must recognize that the intelligent being who created us has given us our purpose.

I said earlier that I still remember the answer I had to memorize for the question, “Why did God create you?” It goes like this: “He created me (and you, too) to know, love, and serve him in this life and to be with him forever in the next.” God intended to bring us into a relationship with himself. He designed us to share his own life so that we would enjoy peace and happiness now and forever. He revealed his purpose for us fully in his Son, Jesus Christ, whom he sent into the world to satisfy all our longings. And it is in Jesus that we come to know who God is, understand what he is like, and finally grasp the meaning of life. As one contemporary paraphrase of Scripture declares, “It’s in Christ that we find out who we are and what we are living for. Long before we first heard of Christ and got our hopes up, he had his eye on us, had designs on us for glorious living,

part of the overall purpose he is working out in everything and everyone” (Ephesians 1:11, *The Message*).

We can stop trying subjectively to figure out why we exist because we can learn it in Christ. As the New Testament says, “For everything, absolutely everything, above and below, visible and invisible . . . — *everything* got started in him and finds its purpose in him” (Colossians 1:16, *The Message*, emphasis added). And Jesus proclaimed his intention for us when he said, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10).

Here is what will bring our lives into proper focus:

- to see our lives as no longer revolving around us;
- to accept that a God who loves us created us;
- to recognize that he wants to reveal himself to us through Jesus Christ; and
- to make the astronomical change of putting him at the center of our lives.

### ***Turning to God***

Bert’s priest friend Fr. Ed Thompson says that our heaven is to be with God forever, but God’s heaven is to be with us forever. God desires to be with us so much, that he makes it easy for us to come into a relationship with him. Scripture says, “... I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you” (Jeremiah 29:11–12). If we make even a slight



move toward him, he will make a big move toward us. As James promises in his letter, “Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you” (James 4:8).

You don’t need to take my word for it. You can say to God, “If what Dave says is true, I ask you to reveal yourself to me.”

