

## PREFACE TO THE 2<sup>ND</sup> EDITION

In a world where change occurs so rapidly that we often stand shaken and in disbelief, it is refreshing and encouraging to find a message that has stability and certainty. It has been eleven years since *Surprised by Faith* was first published. It is astonishing to me that nearly 300,000 copies have been distributed with a likely readership of two to three times that many.

The repeated theme of reader comments is first and often one of surprise to discover the overwhelming body of scientific and historical evidence supporting the truth of the Christian faith. Indeed, during the last ten years the flow of confirming evidence from archaeology for the New Testament text has actually accelerated. Confidence in the New Testament text and the history of Jesus is far greater than when I first wrote *Surprised by Faith*. I have included some of these new discoveries in this second edition.

Another frequent reader response is joyful gratitude upon experiencing the certainty and reality of God in their lives. For many readers, faith had been an illusive and vague concept. God was about religion, they thought, not a personal relationship. *Surprised by Faith* made the familiar yet often overlooked message of God's love, forgiveness of sin and salvation by grace—manifested through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ—to be real. Faith, then, became for them the path to a life-changing relationship with God.

The need for a book such as *Surprised by Faith* has also increased dramatically in the past decade. The flight from confidence in absolutes and a growing biblical illiteracy has left many floundering for any sense of purpose and meaning in their lives. Fear has filled others' hearts as they contemplate the future. I have personally listened to hundreds of people tell their stories of uncertainty and sometimes despair. In *Surprised by Faith* they have found answers that resulted in a God-caused spiritual transformation, and a new life of peace and hope.

The new surprise for me in the past decade has been the acceptance of *Surprised by Faith* across geographical, language and cultural boundaries. The book has been received with enthusiasm among pastors and people in India. Countries around the world have expressed interest as a result of my workshop about it at Amsterdam 2000. Hispanic people have responded positively. *Surprised by Faith* has been translated into Russian, Hindi and Tamil. Several more translations are forthcoming. It is my sense that God has only begun His work of using *Surprised by Faith*—for His glory!

It is my prayer that this second edition will similarly be used by God in the years ahead, to be an oasis for an often disillusioned and spiritually thirsty society—this time on a global scale. But for this to be, I realize more than ever how important it is to embrace the conviction of the apostle Paul: “My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, so that your faith might not rest on men’s wisdom, but on God’s power” (1 Corinthians 2:4-5).

## PREFACE

It seems I have always been in school. Twenty-three years of my life have been spent in formal education from the elementary level through two master’s degrees and my doctorate. Now, for 30 years and counting, I have been on the other side of the classroom desk as an academic dean and professor. The intellectual stimulation of the academic environment has undoubtedly shaped the development of my thinking. I have always viewed books as wonderfully positive, as treasures to explore. Even in the one-room, rural school I attended for grades one through eight, I read nearly every book our teacher could check out of the town library. Even today I have little sales resistance to the delectable fare served up by publishers’ flyers and catalogs that cross my desk.

It also seems I have always thought about God. Growing up in a family that took seriously its Christian heritage, I had considerable exposure to religious instruction. But beyond that, in my private thoughts, I recall often walking along the creek that went through our farm, and wondering “why” about everything from droughts to the death of my pet dog. A hunger for ultimate answers goes back as far as I can remember. My quest for meaning was evident even to the old German minister of our church, and prompted his special visit when I was 14 to encourage my parents to have me prepare for the Christian ministry. At the time, and during the subsequent few years, I did not see “the church” as a source for answers. The field of science had caught my fascination. It satisfied, for a time and to some degree, my inquisitiveness about the world and life.

When you add the attribute of competitiveness to the two ingredients of extensive education and hunger for ultimate answers, you have the formula for an intense search for purpose. This is the background for much of the autobiographical material included in this book. Most of my struggles came during my college and early graduate education. At that time I turned away from what I perceived as the restrictive intellectual climate

of traditional religion as I understood it. In its place I found the liberating attitudes of science which I thought held out promise for the fulfillment I was seeking. During this time I mentally either discarded or challenged much of traditional Christian teaching about the Bible, creation, Jesus Christ and salvation. I was asking “why,” and could not find the answers. At times I felt there must be something wrong with me since so many people said they “believed” without needing answers.

I now realize there was nothing wrong with my need for answers, and that I was not alone. I was also fortunate. At the height of my search I became acquainted with people who had both asked questions and found answers. For them, intellect was not the enemy of faith. My encounter with them established a reasonable foundation for faith that has reset the direction of my life. Fulfillment had at last come to me.

Many years have passed since then. My understanding of the evidence and reasons in support of the Christian faith has increased significantly. Beginning in the mid-1970s I began to present what I had learned to groups of interested people meeting in private homes. Since then, hundreds of thousands have attended *FaithSearch* events, many who have been quite skeptical, including agnostics and atheists. My goal has been to create a respectful and non-threatening intellectual environment to investigate faith, including the use of logic and scientific evidence. The most frequent comment that I continue to hear from believer and skeptic alike is, “I have never heard of this before! I didn’t know there were reasons.”

I am writing this book for those who, up to now, have not been as fortunate as I was to find answers. My heart goes out to everyone who cares for truth and the meaning of life but thinks that the Christian faith is intellectually unacceptable. I am also concerned for those who have felt frustrated with the inability to communicate the reasons for their faith in terms that make sense to outsiders. In either case, I believe there is help here.

In the writing of the book I have attempted to integrate two distinct elements: (1) a recounting of my personal intellectual struggles and experiences, and (2) subsequent developments in my understanding through research and mature reflection.

I have tried to make the distinction clear throughout. For example, most of the diagrams in the text were added to clarify some aspect of my earlier struggle. Likewise, the insight gained from some of the biblical stories and illustrations came only after later study and reflection. My purpose in adding both to the book is to give the reader a more complete perspective about faith.

The apostle Peter commanded that believers should “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect....” (1 Peter 3:15, NIV). That’s what I have tried to do. I hope it will help some to find the path to faith.

*“I used my wisdom to test all of this. I was determined to be wise, but it was beyond me. How can anyone discover what life means? It is too deep for us, too hard to understand. But I devoted myself to knowledge and study; I was determined to find wisdom and the answers to my questions....”*

Ecclesiastes 7:23-25 (paraphrase)

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book has been in preparation for many years. Not the manuscript, per se, but the substance has been tested in thousands of lives for over three decades. I am grateful to the students in my college classes whose feedback has been insightful. But it is to the hundreds of thousands who have attended *FaithSearch* events and classes in homes, churches and auditoriums that I dedicate this book. They have questioned, encouraged, dialogued, stimulated, rejoiced, rejected, wept, debated, inspired and otherwise kept my feet on the ground. They are the “flesh and blood” of this book, and my joy.

I want to express deep appreciation to John Eagen for his key role in the development of *FaithSearch* in the early years. Without his initiative at that time, Faith Studies International would not likely have been founded.

Special thanks go to Joel Allen, David Lundstrom and Jake Barnett for reading the manuscript and giving many helpful suggestions. To Jake, especially, I am grateful for his toughness, and for keeping me honest and consistent. I also thank my friend, Nathan Unseth, for his expertise in seeing the manuscript through to publication.

I particularly appreciate the time and encouragement to write that have been given me by the Board of Directors of Faith Studies International. They are always there when I need them, my faithful friends.

Finally, I owe much to God’s special gift to me, my wife Vernee. She was an early catalyst in my faith journey, and continues to give unselfishly as we share life and ministry together. In a real sense, she is the unsung coauthor of this book.