**Introduction**

Some questions just need and answer, right? Has this ever happened to you? I’m talking about the really important questions we ask and need an answer to, most often right away. And where do we go when we need an answer right away? That’s right, our dear trusted friend Google. Just type your important question into that search bar and away we go! Now, Google has received lots of questions over the years, and as you can imagine, plenty of them have been rather strange. Well, I came across an article entitled “23 of the weirdest Google searches we could find for you!” and… I think you know what’s coming next.

~~Do we need this part? First, a little Google search lesson. If you type in the first part of the question, such as “Where do I…”, Google will populate the most popular questions based on what you’ve typed. For example, when you type “Why do I…” in the search field, the first result that populates is “Why do I love you so?” Just for fun, here are some other popular searches:~~

**“Who would win in a fight between a grilled cheese and a taco?”**

**“Where do ninjas live?”**

And my favorite…

**“Why is Nicolas Cage on the cover of a Serbian biology textbook?”**

I realize some of you are doing a Google search on your phone right now. That’s ok – I won’t take it personally.

We have a lot of questions, and obviously some of them are not really that important. But we also have lots of important questions too. Life is hard, and with it come questions. Questions that go beyond a mere Google search to find an answer but fill our minds and hearts. It’s these questions that Google just can’t help with.

We’re beginning a 7-week series today in conjunction with hundreds of other churches in the Chicago area called “Explore God.” During this series, we’re going to dig into 7 big questions that most people have about God, faith, and purpose. Now let me just say right off the bat, especially to those of you who’ve been invited by a friend and are not a Christ-follower. Make this more concise…we try to do this every week…don’t create a we/you dichotomy. First, I’m glad you’re here. I am encouraged that you decided to come today. ~~I want you to be here, even if you don’t believe what we believe.~~ Secondly, and more importantly, we’re not trying to convince you of anything during this series. There’s no bait-and-switch, networking marketing scheme here. We’re not planning to corner you after the service and ask you if you agree. We simply want to invite everyone to explore these questions together.

Today’s question is about something all of us search for, and its “Does life have a purpose?”

**The Search for Purpose**

Pretty big question, huh? Go big or go home. This is perhaps the biggest question we can ask. And it’s a question that involves a cosmic search. A search for the meaning of life. It’s what I call the “30,000 foot view” question. When you’re in an airplane 30k feet in the air, you see everything, but really only the big stuff, and if we’re being technical only one big thing: the clouds! But that far up I have this feeling that the world is massive and I’m just living in a small little corner of it.

Sometimes we feel a little intimidated by a question like this that is so massive. And it is. But it’s important to ask because the answer will affect not just our cosmic view but our everyday life. The answer to “does life have a purpose” impacts our daily search for the answer to questions like, “what job should I take?” or “what relationships should I invest in?” and “how should I spend my money?” This is why this is the first question in this series: How you wrestle with this question… how we answer it affects everything else in our life.

Feeling the weight of this question yet?

Well it might comfort you to know that this is not a new question. Quick sigh of relief! It’s a question that is actually an ancient one. People have been asking this question for centuries, and I think it’s helpful for our conversation to look at what they said.

**Word: Ecclesiastes**

One of The first people to write about the search for meaning was a king who lived about 3,000 years ago in ancient Israel named Solomon. Solomon had it all. He was more rich, powerful, and wise than any living person. He had it all, tried it all, and discovered some profound things as a result.

Solomon is associated with ~~authored~~ 3 books, some people think he wrote it himself, some people believe it was written by people writing in his tradition and one of them, Ecclesiastes, is a compilation of ~~his~~ reflections on the meaning of life. Good place to start, right? In the very first line of this book, Solomon says

**“Meaningless! Meaningless!”
    says the Teacher.
“Utterly meaningless!
    Everything is meaningless.” - Ecclesiastes 1:2 NIV**

Wow, nothing like a little positivity to get us started! Doesn’t sound like Solomon would make a very successful motivational speaker. “Welcome to the seminar! First off, let me tell you that this is all pointless.” I would be asking for a refund.

You may be wondering if it gets any better. Everyone has a bad day, right? Surely it goes up from here. Well, not really. Turns out that “meaningless” is Solomon’s favorite word. So much so that he uses it 38 times in the book. Now, before you cement your image of Solomon as this ancient “Debbie Downer”, I want to talk about one of the ways this word can be translated. The Hebrew word used is “hevel”, and it can also be translated “vapor.” No, I didn’t say vape☺ I said vapor. Solomon was not obsessed with vaping in this book. But “vapor” is one way this word can be translated. It denotes something temporary or fleeting, which is why it can be translated as “vapor.” It’s something that looks solid, but as soon as you try to grab it, there’s no substance there.

To help us, I have this very sophisticated vapor-producing piece of equipment, a spray bottle Let’s try it out. (TP sprays bottle a few times). Now that’s a pretty good vapor right there. Solomon says that everything is just a vapor. Everything that he tried turned out to just be temporary and fleeting, even though it looked solid initially.

In one of these examples, we need TP to get personal about which one they have been tempted to chase.

Wisdom and knowledge? Solomon says,

**“Look, I have increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me; I have experienced much of wisdom and knowledge.” - Ecclesiastes 1:16 NIV**

(Spray bottle here)

Looks solid, but then its gone.

**“…but I learned that this, too, is a chasing after the wind.” - Ecclesiastes 1:17b NIV**

We attempt to find meaning in wisdom and knowledge too. If we can just fill our heads with knowledge, that’s the secret!

* We chase after another degree or certification
* We exhaust ourselves trying to become the smartest person in the room
* We measure our worth by how much we know

Then we find out that knowledge is not really power, and that knowledge by itself just puffs us up. What about accomplishments? (Spray bottle here)

*(On screen: Eccl. 2:4-6*) I’m sure there are some very talented people here, but has anyone built a house, vineyard, AND reservoir temple? Solomon did all those things and still didn’t find the meaning of life. But we run and run trying to fill our life’s resume with all kinds of accomplishments, but what do they add up to? If we’re lucky we might have a statue somewhere that people take a pic beside after we’re gone and post on Facebook. Don’t’ believe me? “I’ve been with people/I’ve done funerals…” Just look up the top regrets of the dying and you will find that wishing they had accomplished more is not one of them.

Ok, well surely pleasure is what it’s all about! (Spray bottle here)

(*On screen: Eccl 2:10a*) Solomon lived the “eat, drink, and be merry” kind of life. He never went without. If he saw it, it was his. And yet STILL he found it meaningless. Well maybe Solomon just didn’t do it right. Maybe he needed a little lesson in the value of “me” time, right? We just think if we can get more of what we want then we’ll really be satisfied. But the problem with pleasure is that it’s never enough. It’s an addiction. C.S. Lewis, in his fictional work The Screwtape Letters, describes the formula to take down man is “an ever increasing craving for an ever decreasing pleasure.” Do we need more there? So our search for meaning in pleasure is exhausting.

If all of this doesn’t have meaning, then it *has* to be wealth that does it. (Spray bottle here)

**“I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces.” - Ecclesiastes 2:8a NIV**

Later Solomon laments that finding meaning in wealth only left him feeling like he never had enough. Another search that looks solid but proves fleeting. Solomon had it all! By all accounts he should’ve been content. Yet he was not. All of these “vapors” certainly look like they answer the question “does life have a purpose?” but when we grab hold of them we find they don’t have substance.

It reminds me of something actor and comedian Jim Carey said.

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

So what *is* the answer? Solomon says this:

**Now all has been heard;
    here is the conclusion of the matter:
Fear God and keep his commandments,
    for this is the duty of all mankind.
For God will bring every deed into judgment,
    including every hidden thing,
    whether it is good or evil. – Ecclesiastes 12:13-14**

Did you catch that? In light of *everything* Solomon has seen and experienced, his conclusion is that we should “Fear God and keep his commandments.” That word “fear” there carries with it a sense of reverence, of awe. Essentially he’s saying, “Do you want to find meaning? Do you want to find true purpose in life? There is no meaning or purpose apart from God me.” Every single one of us and every single person you’ve ever met or will ever meet, is created by a loving God to live in relationship with him. We were and are created, not simply to know *about* God, but to know him *personally*.

Early Christian theologian Augustine of Hippo reached this same conclusion, writing:

**“You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they can find rest in thee.”**

That is exactly why, when we accomplish or accumulate all of the things Solomon chased after, there’s still a deep restlessness that nags at us. The point of that restlessness is and always has been, to lead us home. To lead us back to God, back to the relationship we are created for in the first place. In a world of vapors, God is the one true solid – the one we can rest in and on. The one thing we can truly grasp.

**Challenge: Explore God**

So, I’d like to issue a couple of challenges:

Make this more concise because of intro. First, if you’re here today and you don’t buy into any of this “God-stuff” or your still wrestling with what you *do* believe, I want to first commend you for joining us. Personally, I am so glad that you’re here and I want to invite you to keep doing what this series is called, “explore God.” For these next seven weeks, we’re going to do just that, and our goal is not to convince, but to invite; to invite you to explore with us. Our prayer is that we would continue to be a community that is a safe space to grapple with questions and doubt and I hope you’ll continue to lean in throughout this series. In fact, next week we’re going to wrestle with the question, “Is there a God?” and I can’t encourage you enough to join us for that.

Move Pascal Wager with this challenge.

And, for those of you who already consider yourself “a believer” or a “Christ-follower” – I want to invite you to lean in as well. I think we should all wrestle with this question:

**“Am I *truly* grabbing hold of God or am I still grasping at vapors?”**

This is a question I think we should ask ourselves and each other often. This is a question, not just about what we *say*, but how we *live*. It’s easy to think that, because I can check the right boxes or give the right answers that we’re not still caught up in the allure of grasping at things that won’t ever bring us true fulfillment. Neil Anderson put it best:

**“People may not always live what they profess, but they will always live what they believe.”**

What we say and how we live are not always the same thing. There is a big difference between believing in God and living our lives as if that were true. In fact, one of the fastest growing religions in the United States is “practical atheism” – proclaiming a belief in God but living as if he does not really exist. So what about you? Are you still chasing after things outside of God for meaning and purpose? Is it time to get off the treadmill and grab hold of the One who made you and loves you? I encourage you to take honest stock, not just of what you say here on a Sunday or around certain friends, but the true, honest pursuits of your heart. It won’t be easy, but it will be so very worth it.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus puts it pretty bluntly (Read from physical Bible, in its entirety, slowly):

Summarize part and quote what comes next…

**25Here is the bottom line: do not worry about your life. Don’t worry about what you will eat or what you will drink. Don’t worry about how you clothe your body. Living is about more than merely eating, and the body is about more than dressing up. 26Look at the birds in the sky. They do not store food for winter. *They don’t plant gardens.* They do not sow or reap—and yet, they are always fed because your heavenly Father feeds them. And you are even more precious to Him than a beautiful bird. *If He looks after them, of course He will look after you*. 27*Worrying does not do any good;* who here can claim to add even an hour to his life by worrying?**

**28Nor should you worry about clothes. Consider the lilies of the field and how they grow. They do not work or weave or sew*, and yet their garments are stunning*. 29Even King Solomon, dressed in his most regal garb, was not as lovely as these lilies. 30*And think about grassy fields*—the grasses are here now, but they will be dead by winter. And yet God adorns them so radiantly. How much more will He clothe you, you of little faith*, you who have no trust*?**

**31So do not consume yourselves with questions: What will we eat? What will we drink? What will we wear? 32Outsiders make themselves frantic over such questions; *they don’t realize that* your heavenly Father knows exactly what you need. 33Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and then all these things will be given to you *too*. 34So do not worry about tomorrow. Let tomorrow worry about itself. Living faithfully is a large enough task for today. – Matthew 6:25-34 Version? The Voice**

Jesus says to seek what first? His kingdom – not our own, and all of the things that we really need, the things we so often loose sleep trying to pursue or get more of, will be taken care of. He’s saying, bet on God – trust that he is good, and watch your life begin to radically transform.

The seventeenth-century mathematician Blaise Pascal is considered to have had one of the greatest intellects in the history of Western civilization. He grew up knowing about God, but not earnestly following him. Then, in a profound middle-of-the-night experience with God, he had a change of heart. That experience ignited Pascal’s passion to live for God and help others do the same.

Pascal began to challenge his fellow intellectuals to a wager on God. He would dare them to step into a belief about God and see if it didn’t change their lives. Pascal explained his wager this way:

**“Let us weigh the gain and the loss in wagering that God is. Let us estimate these two chances. If you gain, you gain all; if you lose, you lose nothing. Wager, then, without hesitation that He is.”**

So, this is my challenge for all of us – regardless of where you are on this journey: make Pascal’s wager. With this gamble you have everything to gain and nothing to lose. Consider the upside. If you find God, you may also find the source of meaning you have always longed for. Finding God might offer you a life-giving purpose and a genuine cause for your life. God is the one who can take your past and make sense out of it. That’s a big-time payoff! And the downside of seeking God, of doing good and loving others? Nothing!

So, how about you? Will you place a bet on God? To me, it seems weird to be talking about making bets in church, but a bet is simply the decision to risk something on a possible positive outcome. The risk I want you to take is this—pray to God. It may seem awkward at first, but I want you to try it. Talk to God and be open to the possibility that God is waiting, listening, and eager to respond. If you will risk praying to God and invite Him into your life, either for the first time or again, I promise, you will encounter Him. He will show up and begin to fulfill that longing that each of us have.

What if we all decided to place this bet together, right now? What if we all decided to pray this prayer together every single day for the next 7 days?

***“God if you are real, make yourself real to me.”***

Are we doing this? If you want to take this wager, here is what I want you to do. I want you to take out your phone, right now, and text the number on the screen. And the wager will come right to your phone every single day.

**Conclusion**

If each person here were truly to live not only as if God exists, but like he cares for us and has a plan for us, what would change in our lives? In our families? In our schools and workplaces? In our neighborhoods? In our city? Imagine if we lived as if God were with us always. Would that change our world?

Jesus came to wake us up, make us aware of what we already have so we don’t spend our whole life pursuing that which won’t bring us purpose. We often spend our lives on vapor management. Maybe C.S. Lewis put it best:

**“God cannot give us a happiness and peace apart from Himself, because it is not there. There is no such thing.” – C.S. Lewis (Mere Christianity)**

What a powerful truth that is. If you are seeking happiness, peace, meaning, or purpose, God says, “Seek me first. I am the source of life you were created for.”

Let’s pray.

**Communion Idea**

We’re going to celebrate communion together now, and every single word of that sentence is important. We celebrate communion, the body and blood of Jesus, because we know that that grace is empty, that Jesus rose from the dead so we can have peace with God and peace with others. But we also do it together, as a reminder that we are in this together. We were not creator to do life apart from God, and we were not created to do life apart from one another.

In a world that so often grasps, Jesus invites us to receive. As we eat this bread and drink this cup, we don’t merely remember something that happened thousands of years ago, but walk fully into the reality that it is God who gives us ultimate purpose and meaning in every aspect of our lives.