**Explore God – Week 1 – Does Life Have a Purpose?**

**Message Big Idea**: We were created to live in a relationship with God. Life is meaningless without God, but God gives everything meaning.

**Scripture:** Ecclesiastes 1:1-2, Ecclesiastes 1:16-18, Ecclesiastes 12:13-14, Matthew 6:25–34

**Prop:** Spray bottle that sprays water like a mist.

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**Introduction: Google Questions***(Series Graphic)* Some questions are really pressing, right? I’m talking about the really important questions that demand speedy answers. And where do we go when we need an answer right away? Of course, our dear trusted friend *(logo)* **Google**. Just type your 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. I came across an article entitled **“23 of the Weirdest Google Searches”** and… of course, I have to share some of them with you! Here are a few of my favorites:

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

Don’t you want to meet the guy who is pondering that question? Or how about this one…

**“Where to get talent?”**

I mean, who among us hasn’t at least thought of Googling that? This one made me laugh:

**What if I hired two private investigators to follow each other?**

We’re getting existential here on a Sunday morning! But my favorite has to be:

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

Of course I got curious about that one so I typed that question into Google myself and, lo and behold, (picture) Nick Cage *is* on the cover of Serbian biology textbook!

We all have 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 that weigh on our hearts and minds. Questions that Google can’t answer. So where do we go to find answers to those questions?

**Series Introduction**

*(Series Graphic)* Today we’re beginning a 7-week series in conjunction with hundreds of other churches in the Chicago area called **“Explore God.”** During this series, we’re digging into 7 big questions that a lot of us 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 or found us through marketing…

First, I’m so glad you’re here. I am encouraged that you decided to come today. As a church, we try to be a place where it is safe to wrestle through all of our questions. I hope you feel genuinely welcomed here.

Second, and more importantly, I want everyone to know that the goal of this series is not to convince anyone of anything. We simply want to invite everyone to explore these 7 big questions together. In fact, there are discussion groups starting this week where you can go deeper into these questions with a small group of people. Fill out a Communication Card or stop at our Next Steps table before you leave today if you’d like to learn more about these groups.

But this morning, let’s kick off this series off with a question that a lot of us have asked at one time or another: **“Does life have a purpose?”**

**The Search for Purpose**Pretty big question, huh? Go big or go home! This is one of the biggest questions we can possibly ask. It’s a question that involves a cosmic search…a search for the meaning of life. It’s a “30,000 foot” question. When you’re in an airplane 30,000 feet in the air, you see everything, but really only the big stuff. That far up you begin to understand that the world is a big place and you only occupy a small, little corner of it.

A question this big can be intimidating, and yet we ask it because the answer doesn’t just affect our cosmic view of the meaning of life, but it impacts everyday decisions. How we answer, “Does life have a purpose?” impacts how we answer all sorts of questions. Questions like:

* “What job should I take?”
* “How should I spend my money?”
* “What relationships should I invest in?”

How we wrestle with this question affects everything else in our life!

Do you feel the weight of it yet?

Well, it might comfort you to know that this is not a new question. In fact, it’s 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 discovered.

**Word: Ecclesiastes**

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

Solomon is associated with 3 books in the Old Testament of the Bible including the book we’re looking at today: Ecclesiastes. Some people think he wrote it himself, others believe it was written by others from Solomon’s school of thought. Either way, it is a compilation of reflections on the meaning of life. Good place to start for today’s topic, right? In the very first line of this book, Solomon says this:

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

Nothing like a little positivity to get us started, right? Doesn’t sound like Solomon would be a very successful motivational speaker. “Welcome to the seminar! First off, let me tell you that all of this is meaningless.”

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 this book. Now, before you cement your image of Solomon as an ancient “Debbie Downer,” let’s talk about what this word “meaningless” really means.

In the original Hebrew of the Old Testament, the word used more “meaningless” is **“hevel”**, which can also be translated *(“hevel” = “vapor”)* **“vapor”**. “Vapor” denotes something temporary or fleeting. It’s something that looks solid, but as soon as you try to grab hold of it, there’s no substance there.

To help us, I have this very sophisticated vapor-producing piece of equipment. Let’s try it out. *(Spray bottle a few times)* 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 initially it looked solid.

*(TP should get personal in one of these examples about one they’ve been tempted to chase)*

For example, first Solomon chased wisdom and knowledge. He writes:

**“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**

Looks solid, but… *(spray bottle)*

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

We, too, can attempt to find meaning in wisdom and knowledge.

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

Our heads are full, but our hearts still feel empty. So the search for purpose continues.

Next, Solomon tried to find meaning in **accomplishments**. *(spray bottle)*

*(Ecclesiastes. 2:4-6*) I’m sure there are some very talented people here, but has anyone built a house, vineyard, a reservoir, and a massive temple in Jerusalem? Solomon did all those things and still didn’t find the meaning of life.

Yet off we run trying to fill our resumes with all kinds of accomplishments. Yet in the end, *(spray bottle)* all of it is meaningless. Don’t believe me? I’ve been with people when they are facing their last days on earth. Just look up the top regrets of the dying and you will find that wishing they had more accomplishments is not on the list.

This one is particularly person for me. Many times I’ve bought the lie that I am the sum of my accomplishments, so I strive, and strive, and strive. It’s exhausting and it never delivers the type of meaning I think it will.

Ok, well surely, Solomon thought, **pleasure** is what it’s all about! *(spray bottle)*

(*Ecclesiastes 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.

Yet, we protest, maybe Solomon just didn’t do it right?! If *I* could get more of what *I* want, I’d be satisfied! But the problem with pleasure is that it’s never enough. C.S. Lewis describes this as “an ever increasing craving for an ever decreasing pleasure.” In the end, *(spray bottle)* meaningless.

Next, Solomon sought out **wealth**.

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

Yet, wealth, too, only left him feeling like he never had enough. *(spray bottle)* Another search that looks solid but proves fleeting.

*(Genius Idea: Song – It’s Not Enough)*

King Solomon had it all! By all accounts he should’ve been content. Yet he was not. Everything he grabbed hold of *(spray bottle)* didn’t end up having any 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.” –Jim Carey**

So what *is* the answer? Well, let me share Solomon’s conclusion:

**“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 saw and experienced, his conclusion is that we should “Fear God and keep his commandments.” That word “fear” 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.”

Every single one of us and every single person you’ll ever meet is created by a loving God for one primary purpose: 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.” -Augustine**

That is exactly why when we chase after 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 only one we can truly hold onto.

**Challenge: Explore God**

In light of all of this, I’d like to issue a couple of challenges:

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, again, I want to 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 continue to wrestle with these questions together, and I hope you will join us.

For anyone wrestling with what you believe about God, here is a challenge for you today.

The seventeenth-century mathematician Blaise Pascal 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 help others find their way back to God.

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: “Make a bet that there is a God who loves you. If you are right you have everything to gain, and if you are wrong you have nothing to lose. Make a bet that God is real.”

So if you are wrestling with what you believe, I want to challenge you today: Will you place a bet on God? It may seem 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—take Pascal’s wager. 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. Here is the prayer I want to challenge you to pray every day for the next seven days:

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

Pray that prayer, sincerely and wholeheartedly, and then look for God to make himself known to you in unexpected ways.

And, for those of you who already consider yourself a “Christ-follower” – here is your challenge… I want to invite you to pray the same prayer. *“God if you are real, make yourself real to me.”* Maybe you’re thinking to yourself, *“Why would I pray that? I already believe in God?”* Yet the truth is what we say we believe 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.

I think this morning we should ask ourselves:

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

You see, even those of us who profess belief in God often still caught up in the allure of grasping vapors. We chase things that won’t ever bring us true fulfillment.

Jesus saw that tendency in us. He recognized that we often scramble to try to find life and fulfillment outside of God. He came to wake us up, to make us aware of what truly matters so we don’t spend our whole life pursuing that which won’t bring us purpose. In the most famous sermon Jesus ever preached, he echoed what Solomon had learned about what really matters. Jesus says:

**"Here 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.” –Matthew 6:25 The Voice**

He’s saying, “Don’t chase after all this stuff that you think will fulfill you. Instead…”

**“Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and then all these things will be given to you *too*.” – Matthew 6:33 The Voice**

What does Jesus say to seek 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.

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

This week let’s all ask God to show us that true life, a life of purpose, comes from seeking our purpose in him.

**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 stuff which won’t bring us purpose…to not 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.