

# Does Life Have a Purpose?

Welcome to Week 1 of Explore God. Many churches around the Chicagoland area have been going through this series, exploring the big questions we all have about God in an open and authentic way. There are a couple of key ways that you can engage with us through this series. First, you can attend these weekly worship services. Through the music and the messages, we will address seven Big Questions that people have about God. It would also be great if you invited some friends and family to join us for these times.

However, I believe one of the greatest ways to have this series impact your life is to get involved in one of our Discussion Groups. It's there that you can get to know others on a deeper level and allow for interaction about these questions. (Monday, Thursday, Saturday, Sunday...) Talk to a leader about getting involved.

So now, on to the first big question: **Does life have a purpose?** Almost all of us have probably asked that at some point in our lives. And we've all probably bounced around different answers to that question.

## Me

Let me start with me...I was **born almost 46 years ago** and lived in **small town Indiana** most of my early life. When I think back upon it, I believe I really had a **happy early childhood**. But this happiness didn't last long.

When I was approaching 5 years old, my mom and dad got a **divorce**. Because I was so young, I don't think I really understood much about what was going on *mentally*. But the divorce definitely took its toll on me *emotionally*. My mom and I **moved to a new small town** in Indiana. My mom was great through this unstable time in my life, but the divorce did bring me **insecurity**. I was a shy kid. I can remember my mom constantly telling me to make sure to talk to people when they would talk to me. I never wanted to say anything—or I didn't have anything to say.

Because of my insecurity, my childhood **friends** became *extremely* important to me. I never had a lot of friends, but the friends I did have were very close. But after a while of having one friend, we would **move**, and I would have to find **new friends**. This happened a couple of times and just added to my insecurity. This pattern created an intense **need for acceptance**, and this need would continue to grow throughout my childhood and teenage years. I wanted to be liked by everybody, and if I felt like someone didn't like me, that would crush my world. So a big purpose in my life was to be liked by all.

Achieving this began in grade school. For me, doing well in school meant that I felt accepted by adults and peers, and that was great. So I did other things—like played sports, began to play piano, and learned the current lingo of my age group—all in the attempt to be accepted. This need for acceptance created a drive to always perform well in what I did. Good **performance** usually meant acceptance, so I drove myself hard.

When I went to high school, I was thrust into a new environment which brought a whole new wave of **insecurity**. I needed to be accepted, and I was going to do anything I needed to be

liked. I became a complete **people-pleaser**. If putting somebody down made me be liked, I put people down. Cursing every other word was the **IN** thing, so I swore with the best of them. My sophomore year was the first time I ever got drunk; that was the cool thing to do too. Having a girlfriend always brought some status, so my life was consumed with many girlfriends. My purpose was myself and my fulfillment. And you know what? It was never enough—I always needed more.

As I started college, it was a **similar scene** to my early high school days—always trying to please others in order to be accepted. As I entered college I again was thrust into a **performance-based mentality**. And it still was never enough no matter what I achieved.

It was an awful way to live. And it was a horrible purpose for life!

## We

The great novelist, Leo Tolstoy, also struggled with the question of life's purpose. He wrote this in his *Confession*:

***“My question—that which at the age of fifty brought me to the verge of suicide—was the simplest of questions, lying in the soul of every man...a question without an answer to which one cannot live, as I had found by experience. It was: ‘What will come of what I am doing today or shall do tomorrow? What will come of my whole life?...Is there any meaning in my life that the inevitable death awaiting me does not destroy?’”***

Tolstoy had it all: wealth, family, success, and fame. Most people would have thought that Tolstoy lived with a great sense of purpose. But he did not. One thing haunted everything he did: death. The fact that he was going to die someday made everything in his life seem meaningless.

Tolstoy isn't alone in this, is he? I'm sure many of you have also struggled at times with the same question: Is there any meaning or purpose in life that death does not erase?

So what's the answer? Well, the Bible wrestles with this question as well, and God does have something to say to us about this. So let's take a look...

## God

The place I want to take us is a wonderful little book in the Old Testament: Ecclesiastes. Many attribute this book to King Solomon, or least to someone who wants us to think of Solomon as we read it. And King Solomon had it all. He had riches and power. On top of that he had immense wisdom. Solomon tried *everything* to find purpose and fulfillment, and he discovered some profound truths as a result.

Right at the beginning of Ecclesiastes, he writes this:

***Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity (Ecclesiastes 1:2).***

Vanity here basically just means meaningless, or worthless. Wow! I don't think this is what we would expect from the Bible, but there it is. And the rest of Ecclesiastes continues this theme. Chapter 2 say this:

***And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil. Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun (Ecclesiastes 2:10-11).***

This writer had tried everything to bring meaning and purpose to his life, but it all ended with the same conclusion: vanity, meaninglessness! Even if he *did* sense some fulfillment from something he tried, he realized that death was still waiting at the end.

And let's be honest, we have all tried different things in order to find meaning and purpose for our lives. The Bible calls these different things "idols." We all have a huge problem with the idols of our hearts.

**I would define an idol as anything or anyone that begins to capture our hearts and minds and affections more than God.** It's living on substitutes. It's exchanging the one true, living God for a counterfeit.

And let me tell you, there is no end to the things that human beings will try to bring purpose and self-fulfillment. John Calvin wrote that, "The heart is a factory of idols."

So what are common idols that we tend to pursue?...

- For some it might be **Money**. When you're afraid—you look to the idol of money to give you security.
- For some it might be **Pleasure**...so you start clinging to the idol of sex, through immoral relationships or pornography (false intimacy).
- For others it might be **Food**.
- Or it might be **Sleep**...or **Shopping**...or **Entertainment**.
- **Marriage**—gift of God—but don't put all your eggs in that basket and try to get all your love and affection and security from that relationship.
- **Children**—also a gift of God—but don't put all your eggs in that basket either—you can't pour your life into them and live for them and build your whole world around them. Paul Tripp has a wonderful quote: "Children are a gift, but they make terrible trophies."

Our Old Testament reading today was from Jeremiah 2 which speaks to the insufficiency of our idols. Let me read verses 12 and 13 again:

***Be appalled, O heavens, at this; be shocked, be utterly desolate, declares the LORD, for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water (Jeremiah 2:12-13).***

God is heartbroken over the fact that He Himself provides fountains of living water, but they choose to dig their own cisterns, only to discover that they lead to emptiness and meaninglessness.

If you have ever been in the Middle East, you know that water is life. If a person is dehydrated and comes to a well hoping to find the life-giving water he desperately needs, he ends up disappointed, discouraged, and depressed if he finds the well dry. When a family dug a cistern

and filled it with water, they expect this water supply to get them through months of dry weather. If the cistern cracked and the water soaked into the ground, they could end up in dire straits.

Jeremiah moves us from this earthy illustration of broken cisterns to the spiritual condition of people who seek to find refreshment in wells of their own making—*without God*.

Our lives are spiritually parched, and we thirst for living water that will satisfy our hearts and bring lasting meaning to our lives.

Ecclesiastes teaches that no created thing can bring meaning and purpose to our lives. But Ecclesiastes doesn't end there. The huge detail that is vital to the statements made in Ecclesiastes: ***apart from God, life cannot have any purpose.***

Ecclesiastes teaches that to have purpose we must pursue a God-centered life—a Christ-centered life! All the pleasures of life that I mentioned earlier are not evil in themselves. In fact, Ecclesiastes 3:13 says,

***...that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil—this is God's gift to man (Ecclesiastes 3:13).***

The problem begins when we pursue these created things divorced from a relationship with God—the giver of all good things. Enjoy life! Eat, drink and be merry! But always recognize that these things come from the hand of God. In **Him** we find our purpose.

Life *without* God is meaningless, but life *with* God explodes with purpose. C. S. Lewis put it this way in *Mere Christianity*:

***All that we call human history—money, poverty, ambition, war, prostitution, classes, empires, slavery—is the long terrible story of man trying to find something other than God which will make him happy...The reason why it can never succeed is this. God made us: invented us as a man invents an engine. A car is made to run on petrol, and it would not run properly on anything else. Now God designed the human machine to run on Himself. He Himself is the fuel our spirits were designed to burn, or the food our spirits were designed to feed on. There is no other.***

Ecclesiastes 3 says that,

***"[God] has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart...whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it. God has done it, so that people fear before him" (Ecclesiastes 3:11, 14).***

And remember, even if you do find some fulfillment from something you try, death is still waiting at the end. There is nothing you can do that will not be gone tomorrow. Death will eventually end it all.

And if death is the end and there is nothing after—then there can never be any real purpose in life. Life is lived in vain because nothing you can do will prevent death's ultimate victory.

But that is the beauty and the power of the resurrection of Christ we looked at last week at the end of the Gospel of Mark. Jesus died to save us from our sins. He died to rescue us from the power of our idols. But then he rose again from the dead to defeat that ultimate enemy of death so that in Him life truly does have meaning.

So the first big question of this series is “Does life have a purpose?” And the basic answer that we have today is...

**Life is meaningless without God. But God gives everything meaning.**

But this answer assumes a belief in God. And that may be a problem for you. Well, stay tuned, because next week’s big question is “Is there a God?” Because if there is a personal God who created us, that changes everything, and can give life great purpose.

## You

A quick look at the world around you proves these truths. The most beautiful, wealthy, and successful people in the world are so often plagued by depression, drug addiction, eating disorders, and countless other destructive problems.

It’s been proven over and over again that created things don’t bring ultimate fulfillment. Ecclesiastes is right that these things offer vanity of vanities.

A life of purpose can only be found through a relationship with God through the person and work of Jesus Christ.

So—you all need to take a good hard look at what you may be placing your trust and fulfillment in. What are the idols of your heart? Talk with others about what you spend your time, money and affections on. Only when we honestly identify and deal with those things can we begin to allow God to change us, so that our delight and satisfaction lies more wholly on Him. And only then can we find purpose for this life.

## We

So again, I want to urge you to not let *this* time be the only time you engage with the Living Hope community this week on this question of life’s purpose. Our vision here at Living Hope Church is to see Disciples Making Disciples, and I believe that happens in a deep relational environment. And that environment is most effective in smaller groups. We’ve got to pour out our lives for one another.

Families—be sure to have dinners together this week and talk about the idols of your hearts. Parents discuss with your children the things that you struggle and how you can find strength to find a deeper purpose. Encourage one another. Pour out your lives!

And I pray that as we do that this week, we will gain a greater understanding of our purpose in light of God’s plan. Life is meaningless without God. But God gives everything meaning.