

Why Are We Here? You Asked For It

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Welcome everyone! I am so excited today to be beginning a brand-new series called “You Asked For It.” This is a series I have been looking forward to for a long time. As a pastor, I have the privilege of talking with people in our church and in our community from all walks of life. And fairly often, when I’m talking to people they’ll say, “Pastor, I’ve got a question for you. This is a question that has been on my mind for a long time. And I want to know what God says about it, or what the Bible says about it.” What we are going to do over the next seven weeks is talk about seven of the most frequently asked questions that pertain to the Christian faith. This is a perfect series for anyone who is asking questions about God or religion, or the purpose of their life. This is a perfect series for anyone who is already a Christian but is wanting to better understand their faith or be better prepared to talk about faith with others. This is a series where we want to make it abundantly clear: church is not a place for people who think they have all the answers. Church is a place where we can come and ask our honest questions, where we can dialogue with one another about those questions, and where we can meet God together on the journey toward the truth.

The first question we are going to deal with in this series is perhaps the ultimate question that could ever be asked in life: Why am I here? We exist. You exist. You are sitting down right now listening to this. But why do you exist? What purpose are you here for? Your answer to these questions will determine how you live and what you live for. But it might be harder to come to the answer than we’d like to admit. I was reading a book this week about a professor at Northeastern University who asked 250 of the leading scholars in the world if they could identify the meaning and purpose of life, and almost none of them would even venture an answer. The brightest minds of our day can tell us about the furthest stretches of the galaxy, they can tell us about the smallest particles the microscope can see, they can do a heart transplant, they can create artificial intelligence and cars that drive themselves, but no one seems to be able to tell us why we are here. So, where can we turn to find the answer to the most important question of all?

To kick things off I want to tell you about a Greek myth, a 19th century Russian author, and an American surgeon and public health researcher. First, the Greek myth, Sisyphus. Sisyphus was believed to be the first king of Corinth, who tricked the gods into creating a freshwater spring in the center of the city, and who was also able to cheat death twice. Eventually, when he went to Hades, to the realm of the dead, to punish him for his pride and trickery, he was sentenced to pushing a large stone up a hill. And just when he almost got it to the very top, it would slip from his grip, crash to the bottom, and he would have to start again. Over and over and over. For all eternity. *The greatest possible punishment was a pointless and futile existence.* Clearly that is a fictional account, but that makes sense for us today. If we feel like our time on earth is pointless, if we don’t know why we are here and what we are doing, if all our efforts seem in vain, we will end up in disillusionment or despair.

In the Nazi concentration camps, they would often make the prisoners move large piles of rocks from one side of the camp to the other, only to make them move them back again the next day. The first few times was no big deal, but week after week, month after month of futility, it

became one of the most sinister forms of physiological warfare employed throughout the entire war.

Now consider our 19th century Russian author, Leo Tolstoy. In the early years of his life, he produced some of the greatest works in the history of literature, *Anna Karenina*, *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, *War and Peace*. Glorious novels. But later in his life he wrote a lesser-known book called *A Confession*, where he detailed a spiritual and existential crisis he encountered around the age of 50. Where he came face to face with the apparent futility of life. He realized that one day, everyone he loved would be dead. Every word he wrote would be forgotten. It led him to despair, he said there were only a few options: to pretend to be ignorant, to seek fleeting pleasure, to commit suicide (which he said made the most sense), but because he didn't have the courage to go through with it, he would embrace the fourth option, just holding on for dear life, despite the absurdity of it all. Interestingly, as soon as he came to this decision, the quality of his marriage fell off a cliff, he began to hate his wife, with whom he had 13 children. He began advocating for anarchy, and he never wrote another great work. Being overwhelmed by the pointlessness of life, he lost the love of his family, his country, and his gift to the world.

His inability to answer the question "Why am I here?" led him to despair. Which is the very place many philosophers tell you it should lead you. British philosopher Bertrand Russell said:
"That Man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labors of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of Man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins - leads nowhere but a firm foundation of unyielding despair."

If you don't know why you're here, if you think it's because of the accidental collision of atoms that took place billions and billions of years ago, and sooner or later all those atoms will close in on themselves and be lost and forgotten in a giant black hole of nothingness, there's no reason for anything besides despair. And like Tolstoy, that conviction will likely lead to the beauty and contribution of your life slowly beginning to fade away.

One more person to talk about: Atul Gawande. Gawande is an Oxford, Stanford, and Harvard educated surgeon who is now a professor at Harvard. He is on all sorts of lists as one of the most influential voices on healthcare in the world. In one of his books, he talks about an experiment by an administrator in a nursing home who began bringing dogs, cats, bunnies, and birds into the nursing center every day. The residents were asked to feed, water and groom the animals, walk the dogs, and provide general companionship for the furry critters. In the months following the introduction of animals, they observed a 62% *decrease* in the need for psychotic drug prescriptions and a 15% *decrease* in patient mortality. The quality of life and the length of life was significantly improved as soon as these patients were reminded that they had something to live for, even if it was just to care for an animal.

Everyone has to answer this question: “Why am I here?” Without an answer we devolve into despair. With an answer, we have hope and meaning and purpose. But here’s the thing: for there to be substance to the hope and meaning and purpose, the answer has to actually be right. We might psychologically have an answer that makes us feel better, like swallowing the blue pill and going back into the matrix, but if the answer is to have any real value, it *has* to be right.

So what does the Bible say about the question: “Why are we here?” Well, to begin, the Bible tells us that God designed us to ask that question. Ecclesiastes 3:11 says, “God has set eternity in the human heart.” When God created you, he designed you to think about things beyond your life. That is unique to the human experience. Goldfish aren’t contemplating eternity. The squirrel in the tree outside your house isn’t wondering what’s going to happen when he dies. The farmer’s cow from down the street isn’t wondering how the world we got here and if we are here for a reason. Only humans think about this. And it’s not merely because we have a more developed prefrontal cortex, it’s because *God has set eternity in our hearts*. When he created us, when he designed us, he formed and fashioned us to contemplate eternity, to think about our existence, and the existence of the world and the universe, to ask questions about why all of this is here and why we are here. God wants every one of us to ask those questions.

What is the answer? What does the Bible have to say? I want to look at two different passages that approach this question from different angles. The first is Acts 17, turn there with me. In Acts 17, the apostle Paul has arrived in the city of Athens, which was the intellectual capital of the world. This is the place where Socrates, Aristotle and Plato all lectured. All the greatest philosophical minds were in this city. And in the 1st century, there were basically two different camps. There were the epicureans, who said the purpose of life was to get the most amount of pleasure possible and the stoics, who said the purpose of life is to find satisfaction detached from the pleasures of the world. They debated each other day after day on the Areopagus. And when Paul came to town, these philosophers wanted to hear what Paul had to say:

“The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’” (Acts 17:24-28)

Now, entire books have been written analyzing what Paul said on that day. But the key thing I want us to take note of is that Paul is saying, God is the one who gave us life. God is the one who put us on this earth. And it wasn’t random. You have a creator who wanted you to be here. You were not an accident. You are not the eventual end result of the spontaneous collision of atoms. God chose the time you would live. God chose the location where you would live. And he did this all for a very clear and specific purpose. Look: “God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him.” Why are you here? Simple. Because God wants a relationship with you. Through creation, and through Jesus, and through Scripture, and through miracles, and through countless people he has put in our lives, he has been telling us about himself. And he has done it all so that we would seek him, reach out to him, and find him.

Paul even quotes the Greek poets who said, “We are his offspring.” God is called our father, we are his children, and your heavenly Father brought you into the world because he wants a relationship with you. When Keren and I got married, we were so excited to grow our family and bring children into the world. Bringing children into the world comes at great cost. Obviously the initial activity is just awesome. But from that point on, it’s costly. The physical toll on a mom’s body, the time, the planning, the medical expenses, the diaper changing, the feeding, the cleaning, the loss of sleep. There is no way to calculate the cost of bringing children into the world, and yet we do it. And we do it with joy! Because we delight in having a relationship with our children.

And thinking about it, nothing would possibly break my heart more than for my children to grow up and either passively ignore me, or intentionally reject me. I would be devastated! I am friends with a lot of people who have grown children. Typically, the thing that brings them the greatest joy in life (outside of grandkids), are when their grown kids are doing well, and they get to enjoy a deep relationship with them. Conversely, the thing that causes them the greatest pain is when their kids are hurting, or when their kids have closed the door on an ongoing relationship with them. It’s heart-wrenching.

How true is that for the heart of God?! He brought us into the world so that we could have a relationship with him. And not only does it break his heart when his children reject him, but we never live into the fullness of our purpose. We end up as orphans in the world by our own choice, rather than in the embrace of a Father and a family who love us.

So that’s the first answer we see from Scripture to answer the question, “Why are we here?” We are here to know God and have a relationship with him. But it’s more than just that. We were formed for relationship, but for more than just a relationship. God’s vision for humanity and his hope for you isn’t simply that we would sit around in a circle holding hands and singing kumbaya for all eternity. There’s more to it.

Turn with me to Ephesians 2:10. In this passage Paul has just described how God has saved us by the free gift of Jesus’ death on the cross. God saved us and restored our relationship with him without requiring a single thing from us, all we have to do is place our faith in the finished work of Jesus. And he concluded by saying this: “We are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”

We see this from the very beginning of the Bible. After God created the first human beings, what did he have them do? Sit down and watch Netflix and eat ice cream all day long? No. He had them name the animals, and tend the garden, and join in him his care over creation. When God called King David he didn’t say, sit here on this throne and be tended to by servants for the rest of your life. No. He said, “There’s a giant to slay, there is a city to build, there are people to lead.” When Jesus called Peter, Andrew, James and John he didn’t say, “Leave your fishing boats and your fishing nets...and enter into early retirement.” He said, “I’m going to teach you to fish for people.” When Jesus revealed himself to Saul the persecutor and transformed him into Paul the Christian, he didn’t rapture him right up to heaven. No. He went from town to town and region to region, telling countless others about the saving grace of God.

No matter who you are, God created you to do good work. Please hear me on this: *no matter who you are, God has work for you to do*. Whether you are 17-year-old high school student trying to figure out what you are supposed to do with your life, or a 23-year-old single college graduate looking for your first real job, or a housewife raising 2 children, or a 40-year-old professional having a mid-life crisis, or a person who just took a retirement package from your employer, or a 93-year-old widow... God has work for you to do! He has a family for you to love, people he wants you to serve, kids he wants you to mentor, friends he wants you to encourage, truth he wants you to speak, prayers he wants you to offer. As the old adage goes, if you are not dead yet, you are not done yet. *You are here for a purpose*.

The question we are kicking this series off with is, "Why are we here?" It's a question the scientists can't answer. It's a question philosophers can just speculate around. But the Bible not only gives us an answer, it gives us an answer that satisfies the deep need of the human soul. We are here to have an eternal relationship with God and to join him in his work. Again, it's not just a good answer, it's an answer that speaks to our great longings. The vast majority of human existence is spent in search of someone wonderful and worthy to love and something meaningful and significant to do. Why is that the universal human experience? Because that's why we are here. For relationship and for mission.