

Why Alpha?

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This week our church will begin a class called Alpha. The letter “alpha” is the first letter in the Greek alphabet. It represents the beginning. Alpha is a place to begin or renew your experience of God.

As you listen to the message this morning and hear more about Alpha, I hope you will consider if Alpha may be something that might be beneficial to you at this point in your life. I also encourage you to think about someone who might benefit from Alpha.

I want to encourage you to come to the first session or bring someone with you to the first session. We will share the Wednesday evening meal together between 5:30 and 6:00 pm in the Activity Center. Then at 6:30 we will move to room 40 in the educational building. I will speak at the first meeting about the important life questions for which Jesus is the answer. The person you bring can decide to return for the remaining classes. You may participate with them in all the classes or just bring them to the first one. To help them feel comfortable about coming the first time, it is important for you to bring them or meet them here.

If you are coming or bringing someone with you, please complete the insert in your bulletin and take it to the Alpha table in the foyer.

As we begin to explore what Alpha is all about, let's focus on one of the most familiar verses of the Bible. It all begins with God's love.

John 3:16-17

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him."

Is there more to life than this?

Is it really possible for me to personally know the Creator God of the universe?

Can Jesus Christ really make a difference in my life?

If you are asking some of these questions, Alpha would be a good place to search for answers. Each week a talk will wrestle with basic questions about Jesus and Christian beliefs. Then in a safe place, you can ask your questions and discuss them with others.

Here are some of the questions Alpha will explore:

- Who is Jesus? Is Jesus just a great teacher or is he God in the flesh? What does the Bible tell us that Jesus claimed about himself?

- Why did Jesus die? What is the purpose of Jesus' death? What difference does his death two thousand years ago make for me today?
- Who is the Holy Spirit? The Holy Spirit is probably the least understood member of the Trinity—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. What does it mean to be filled with the Spirit? How can the presence of the Holy Spirit make a difference in my life?
- How can I be sure of my faith? Do you wonder if you will go to heaven when you die? Can you know that you have eternal life?
- Why and how should I read my Bible? What is unique about this book? Is it a collection of ideas about God? Or is it where God reveals himself to us?
- Why and how do I pray? Do you feel like your prayers bounce off the ceiling? Does God really answer prayers? Is there a certain way I should pray?
- How does God guide us? How do I know what God wants me to do each day? How can I know it is God's voice speaking to me?
- How can I resist evil? I want to do the right thing, but I keep making bad decisions. Is there a way out?
- Why and how should we tell others? Isn't religion a personal thing? Is there a way to talk with people about Jesus without offending them or starting an argument?
- How does God heal today? Does God still perform miracles? How should I pray for healing for myself and others?
- What about the church? What is the purpose of the church? How can the church benefit my spiritual growth?

If you are asking some of these questions, then Alpha is for you. If you know someone who is asking these questions, invite that person to Alpha. I will also preach on these themes each week. If you are inviting someone to attend Alpha, also encourage them to come on

Sunday morning and hear the message on the same theme. I will be coming at the same topic from a different direction than the Wednesday evening talk. The two messages will complement each other. And of course, the great thing about Wednesday is you get to discuss both messages. Alpha is a place where we will learn to experience God's presence in our lives every day. I want to give you just a sample of some of things we will explore together in Alpha.

One of the favorite old hymns is "In the Garden." The lyrics proclaim: "He walks with me and talks with me and he tells me I am his own." Many people ask, how does God talk to us? How do we experience God walking with us through every day life? Many people, who have attended church all their lives, tell me they do not feel the presence of God and they have never heard his voice. For many persons it is a lack of awareness about how God speaks and how we experience his presence. Alpha will help you discover an awareness of God. God is always with us. He is constantly speaking to us. How do we tune in?

As a way of introduction, let's explore the question, "How does God work in our world?" There are two totally opposite views of how God works in the world. The first view is called deism. According to this view, God created the universe and the laws of nature. After putting life in motion, God stepped back to watch how things would play out. He is not engaged or active with his creation. He does not intervene. He just watches. The Bible does not support the view of deism. The Bible describes a Creator God who loves his creation and his creatures and is very actively involved. The Bible is the story of God acting in history to accomplish his purposes. God speaks to persons. God becomes a man and lives among us. You don't get much more engaged than that!

That opposite view of God from deism is a philosophy called determinism. Many Christians have this view of God without knowing what it is or its full implications. Determinism says that God is responsible for everything that happens in our lives and the

world. People who believe this say that everything happens for a reason. There are no coincidences or accidents. Everything is predetermined by God. There is also a view called dualistic determinism. This view says there are two forces at work in the world that determine everything. One is God. The other is Satan. They determine everything. So when something happens we have to decide: did God make me do that or did Satan make me do that? We are absolved from any responsibility. There is no free will. We are pawns in a chess game between God and Satan. When something bad happens we say: God is punishing me or he is trying to teach me something. Or Satan did this. Everything happens for a reason—either God’s reason or Satan’s reason.

The biblical view of God is between the extremes of deism and determinism—God is totally uninvolved in one view and totally responsible for everything in the other view. We believe that God created the world and the laws of nature. He does not frequently intervene in these laws. He normally works through the laws he has created. But God is also active and engaged in this world. Occasionally he suspends the laws of nature—we call those miracles and they are by definition something rare. God influences things in this world. We also believe there are coincidences and accidents in this world. As the bumper sticker says “stuff happens.” Sometimes things just happen.

For example, let’s say you and I run into each other in the grocery store. Now it is interesting to see people’s reactions when they run into me at the grocery store. If it is on a Sunday after church and they were not in church, they sometimes pretend not to see me and turn down an aisle to disappear quickly. If they are a determinist, they believe God brought me to the grocery store to punish them for not being in church. And I oblige by chasing them around the grocery store so I can make them feel as guilty as I can for not being in church! God brought us together for a reason, and I need to deliver the message. There are no accidents, that meeting was ordained by God to heap guilt upon your head!

The deists would say God had nothing to do with that—we both just needed groceries to fill the natural law of hunger. Our seeing each other at the grocery store was totally random and accidental.

The Biblical view of God is somewhere in between. We may have gone to the grocery store because we needed food. You were in a hurry and so I said, “How are you doing?” You responded, “I’m in a hurry to get these snacks to a soccer game. See you next Sunday, preacher.” On the other hand, I may have asked you “How are you doing?” I could tell by the look in your eyes something is going on. We pause to talk awhile about a loss or a struggle in your life. I think that was a divine moment. God knew that you needed some encouragement, a listening ear and a prayer. That moment was arranged by God. But not everything that happens is arranged by God. We have to be listening and open to those encounters. They probably happen much more often than we know. Some of them we miss. I may be in a hurry and not sensitive to your need at that moment. The devil didn’t make me do that. I just missed an opportunity to be used by God because I was in a hurry. If we pray each day and make ourselves available to God, then we have to look at each encounter and ask is this a God-incidence or a co-incidence?

Everything is neat and tidy if you are a determinist because everything is a God-incidence or a Satan-incidence. Everything is neat and tidy if you are a deist because everything is a co-incidence or the result of a law of nature. I think the Biblical view of life is that there are some God incidences, some attacks of Satan and there are some coincidences in life. We have to be discerning in each incident. Life is messy and we don’t always know what kind of moment we are experiencing.

If you received a phone call that a loved one was killed in a car accident. Would you say that it was a pointless accident? Would you ask why is God punishing you? Would you wonder if Satan is after you? Tragic accidents happen in a fallen world. No one may be at

fault—intentionally. The question is how will we experience God in the midst of this tragedy? Will we rest in his arms and let him comfort us? Will we walk through the valley of the shadow of death with him? Will we trust that God's power is great enough to work all things together for good in our lives?

There are times when God disciplines us. There are times when God teaches us valuable life lessons. We have to be open and listening—we can't just jump to conclusions about why things happen. Sometimes I think we can invest way too much time in trying to determine why things happen and we may never know. The important thing is to accept that it happened and begin to pray and seek God to talk with us and walk with us through the experience. "God how will you use this experience to help me know you, experience you and love you in my life?" There are God-incidences and co-incidences, and even in the co-incidences God can work in our lives if we open ourselves to him.

God is always with you in the God-incidences as well as the co-incidences. He wants to meet you in them and use them to shape and form you into the person he created you to be. He is involved and engaged in your life. He is constantly whispering his love to you. "For God so loved the world, that he sent his only son..."

Where is God? How does he work in our world and our lives? How can I hear his voice? If you want to explore these questions, come join us in Alpha this Wednesday night.