

Session One:

Is there more to life than this?

POWERPOINT OUTLINE:

Life's a deck-chair.

Is there more to life than this?

Is there something I'm meant to do with my life?

Is God real? If he is, what is he like?

Who is Jesus and does it matter anyway?

If I am a good person, why do I need faith?

Is there life after life?

Introduction.

Introduce myself a little.

I HEARD OF A LITTLE GIRL who went to church for the first time. The man who was just starting to give the message had the chord from the mic wrapped around his leg. As he tried to disentangle from it, the little girl leaned over to her grandmother: if he gets loose, will he hurt us?

I'm sure that for some of you, you may connect with a simple fear: what is going to happen in this place? If I listen to this guy will I get hurt in some way? Can we trust him? Although being a man, I do cherish the thought of being dangerous and feared, I think you'll find I'm pretty harmless really.

LET ME TELL YOU WHAT GOD SESSIONS IS BY QUOTING A PEANUTS

CARTOON. Lucy is standing at her Counselling box giving advice for 5 cents. Charlie pays five cents for some advice...

- *Lucy: Life, Charlie Brown, is like a deck chair.*
- *Charlie: Like a what?*
- *Lucy: Have you ever been on a cruise ship? Passengers open up these canvas deck chairs so they can sit in the sun. Some people place their chairs facing the rear of the ship so they can see where they've been. . . . Other people face their chairs forward. . . . They want to see where they are going. On the cruise ship of life, Charlie Brown, which way is your deck chair facing?*
- *Charlie: To be honest, I'm just trying to get my deck chair unfolded.*

SO WHAT IS GOD SESSIONS ALL ABOUT? 4 WEEK JOURNEY

It's an opportunity to unfold your deck chair. It's a 4 week journey for people that are not into church. Maybe you pray. Maybe you don't. Maybe you're a good person. Maybe you've tried to be a good person, but you've dropped your standards over the years. Maybe you're happy. Maybe you're not. Maybe you know what you do and don't believe. Maybe you aren't sure what you believe anymore. But somehow your journey this far has made you wonder if there is anything of real value for you in spiritual communities like this one. Well, we hope to serve you as a community – by creating the space for you to UNFOLD YOUR DECK-CHAIR and treat yourself to thinking through some questions that you've been dying to ask and think about...

There are so many questions that deserve your attention.

HERE ARE A FEW OF THEM – I'LL MENTION SIX OF THEM - that call you to unfold your deck-chair and think about life...

1) IS THERE MORE TO LIFE THAN THIS?

- Life is so full of amazing stuff.
 - Friends. Family. Birthday parties. Seeing people you haven't seen for a long time – and still the spark of friendship is there.
 - Emotions: Love. Laughter. Tears.
 - Pleasures: Food. Pizza. Relaxing. Playing sport. Watching sport. Sunsets. Beaches. Mountains. Travelling.
 - Activities: Career. Learning. Growing. Adventure. Buying new stuff. Getting a job. Getting a better job. Doing work that we love to do. Getting a raise. DVDs on rainy nights. You get the picture...
- My question is: ***'If our lives are so full, then why do they sometimes feel so empty?'***
- **Bono** of the legend-status rock band, U2 is on stage. Fans almost start worshipping him. He stops them, and says, 'We can't give you what you want.' And then he quotes the philosopher Pascal: *'There's a God-shaped hole inside of us. And only God can fill it.'*
- I certainly resonate with that description in my own life. And my life has been filled with the most amazing experiences! I have a wonderful marriage. I have a wonderful job. I live in a wonderful house. I have wonderful friends. I live in a wonderful city. I have done lots of travelling – and yet, despite all this: there is a God-shaped hole in me. These things just don't seem to fit nor fill this hole.

- **A famous UK-based journalist, Bernard Levine**, who is not a Christian or anything like that, wrote this in his column: *'Countries like ours are full of people who have all the comforts they desire, together with things like a happy family. Yet they lead lives of quiet desperation, understanding nothing but the fact that there is a hole inside of them and that however much food and drink they pour into it, however many cars and plasma television screens they stuff into it, however many well balanced children and loyal friends they parade around the edges of it, that hole still aches.'*
- **I remember hearing a highly successful person being interviewed on radio.** They were asked, 'What do you wish you were told earlier in life?' The person's answer was telling: ***'I wish someone had told me that when you get to the top there would be nothing there.'*** PAUSE
- Is there more to life than this? Is it true that inside of us is a God-shaped hole? And that only God can fill it?

NEXT DECK CHAIR:

2) IS THERE SOMETHING I'M MEANT TO DO WITH MY LIFE?

- **George Bernard Shaw**, the famous playwright, wrote, *'This is the true joy of life: being used up for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one; being a force of nature instead of a feverish, selfish little clot of ailments and grievances, complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy.'* Yet so often so many of us feel like we're not being used up for any substantial purpose in life.
- **That same journalist mentioned earlier, Bernard Levine**, wrote this: *'To put it bluntly, will I discover why I was born before I die? I have not managed to answer the question yet – despite twenty years of real career success – I fear I have wasted reality in the chase of a dream. I am in danger of leaving the question too late. Why is it that I have to know why I was born? Because, of course, I am unable to believe that I was an accident; and if I am not one, I must have a purpose.'*
- **Dr Hugh Moorhead**, a philosophy professor at Northeastern Illinois University once wrote to 250 of the best-known philosophers, scientists, writers and intellectuals in the world, asking them, **'What is the meaning of life, the reason for our existence?'** He published their answers in a book. Some offered their best guesses, some admitted that they just made up a purpose for life, and others were honest enough to

say they are clueless. In fact many of them asked Professor Moorhead to write back to them if he discovered the purpose of life.

- It seems that our culture has a way of keeping us busy, answering smaller questions, like, 'What's the weather doing?' 'How's your job going?' 'Where did you get that dress?' **but it fails to answer the big question: 'Why am I here?'** Perhaps we need to look elsewhere for an answer.
- There are two little verses in the Bible that have always intrigued me. They describe the life of king David. The one verse says this: **'David was close to God, and wanted for his life, more than anything else, what God wanted for his life.'** And the other verse said, **'Once David had fulfilled God's purpose for his life, he died.'** Wow. Think about the claims behind these verses:
 - 1) God has a **purpose** for your life. 2) But you can't **discover** it unless you also discover the God who holds that purpose. 3) And you **can't fulfil** that purpose, once you discover it, without the help of the God who gives it to you. Could that be true?

(WATCH CLIP OF HOW FAST THINGS ARE CHANGING)

Any more deck-chair questions: let's move on:

3) IS GOD REAL? IF HE IS, WHAT IS HE LIKE? (TWO VIEWS TO EXPLORE)

- ***Atheism versus theism.***

Five percent of the world are convinced atheists. Are they right? Why is it that one brilliant scientist – such as **Richard Dawkins** - is persuaded *from the facts* that there is almost certainly no God. And another scientist of equal credibility and genius – such as **Francis Collins**, who headed up the human genome project, is equally convinced *from the facts* that there is a God? In his book 'Language of God.'
- As for me, I go with Francis Collins. Maybe some of us don't have the time or capacity to survey the scientific data, and to analyze the assumptions with which that scientific data is approached. Perhaps some you just know there is a God. Maybe **Art Hoppe** has persuaded you with this knock-down argument: **'If there is no God, who pops up the next tissue from the Kleenex box?'**

- **Functional atheism.** The question, *'Is there a God?'* does not intrigue me as much as another question, *'Why is it that so many people claim to believe in God, yet if they're honest, are really functional atheists.* At the end of the day, God has almost no impact on the way they lived that day. Think about your day, your week. Has the presence or absence of a God affected the way you've lived, thought, acted?'
- And if there is a God, and this God really does want to impact the way we live our lives, **WHAT IS HE LIKE?**
- **SOMETIMES WHEN I MEET PEOPLE WHO DON'T BELIEVE IN GOD,** I ask them to describe the God they don't believe in. They then usually describe a **DISTANT, UNCARING, ABSTRACT, AND ANGRY GOD.** The thing is I don't believe in that God either.
- Let me share with you the God I do believe in: the God of the Bible...

A. HE IS NOT A DISTANT GOD, who wound up the universe like a clock and now observes from a distance, curious how things unwind. No, the God of the Bible created everything and remains involved in everything. He is a God who has feelings for everything he has made. So that everything in creation is his art-work: every square centimetre of space, every moment in time, every quark, muon, gluon and proton, every whale, sparrow and child, every anthill, every mountain peak, every planet, every galaxy. It's all God's art gallery. And the God of the Bible is profoundly interested in the details and the unfolding of his own universe. **Rev 5:13** "Every creator will worship God for who he is..."

B. HE IS NOT AN UNCARING GOD, whose heart is made of stone. He is a God who knows how many hairs are on your head, who knows the pains and scars you bear, who has counted your tears. In fact, he knows us better than we know ourselves, and yet amazingly, loves us more than anyone possibly could love us.

C. HE IS NOT AN ABSTRACT GOD. He is not some uptight God who is about black-and-white easy answers and rigid logic and law. He is not some conceptual God who is encountered through systems and terminology. No, the God of the Bible is about profound and multi-faceted truth, compassionate justice and self-sacrificing, tender relationship. The God of the Bible is alive, and chooses to reveal

himself in amazing story, intense poetry, the beauty of creation, and in deep whispers to the heart.

D. AND ALTHOUGH HE IS A JUST GOD WHO IS ANGERED BY OUR REBELLION AND HEARTLESSNESS, ULTIMATELY HE IS NOT A GOD WHO DEMANDS OUR BLOOD – in fact in Jesus he offers his own blood for our rebellion and heartlessness. He is a God of scandalous inclusion, unexpected mercy, and shocking acceptance. The very fact that someone like me – who has done the kind of things I have done – can be standing on this stage shows that, very possibly, God is a God who forgives.

E. You can hear that the God of the Bible has captured my imagination and heart. But the deck-chair question we all need to ask remains: so the *Bible describes God like this, but how do I know it is not just a made-up description?*

4) WHO IS JESUS AND DOES IT MATTER ANYWAY?

- And you can't get very far in your journey of spiritual curiosity without facing this question: *Who is Jesus, and does it even matter?*
- **Just over 2 billion** people claim that Jesus, as described in the Bible, is the key to uncovering spiritual reality. But are they right?
- Is it valid that this humble carpenter was made the centre-piece of human civilization – or *did we pay him a complement he never deserved?*
- **Certainly, some people feel he is worthy of the complement:**
- **1) NAPOLEON BONAPARTE** held a high view of Jesus. He said, *'I know men, and I tell you that Christ is no mere man. Between him and others there is no comparison. Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne and I have founded kingdoms, but on what genius are our kingdoms built? On force, and against the will of people. But Jesus founded his kingdom on love, and upon this hour there are millions that would willingly die for him.'*
- **2) Bono** shares Napoleon's esteemed view of Jesus. He was asked in an interview: *'Christ has his rank amongst the worlds greatest thinkers, but to call himself 'the Son of God' – wasn't that a bit far fetched?' This is how Bono answered: 'Christ is either who he said he was or else he is a complete nutcase. I'm not joking here. The idea that the fate of half of the entire globe could be changed by a complete nutcase, now that's far-fetched.'*

- ***Well, was Jesus just a man, or is there something ‘more than mere man’ about him?*** Was he really born of a virgin? Did he really fulfil hundreds of prophecies that were written centuries before his birth? Did he really do miracles? Did he really rise from the dead? Is he really still alive? Was he really, as ***the Bible claims, God visiting this world?***
- ***Even if Jesus is ‘more than man’ does that change anything about our lives? Not everyone thinks so...*** I once invited a friend to a talk entitled, ‘Did Jesus really rise from the dead?’ His answer: ‘I’m not interested. Even if he did, so what? It doesn’t apply to my life.’ His feelings about the significance of whether Jesus was more than mere man are different to that of a Jewish man, **Larry King of CNN, who was once asked**, ‘If you could ask anyone a question, who would be it?’ His answer: ‘I’d ask Jesus of Nazareth. I’d ask him. ‘Were you really born of a virgin?’ Because if I knew the truth about him, it would change everything about my life.’ What if Jesus is ‘more than man’ – what if Jesus has radical significance for our lives?

NEXT DECK CHAIR QUESTION:

5) IF I AM A GOOD PERSON, WHY DO I NEED FAITH?

- I remember talking to a man whom I had just met at a wedding reception. He found out what I do, and he quickly let me know where he stood on the matter of faith, ‘Praying to God, reading the Bible, and going to church – that’s all about trying to be a better person right? That’s what God is looking for anyway. Well, I feel I don’t need all that stuff to be a better person. I have my own principles and my own way of being a better person.’
- I didn’t have the chance to respond to him there. But if I had, I would have said, ‘Is that really all that God looks for – that you would be good?’ and secondly, ‘If it is true that God wants you to be good, can you be good enough in your own energies and efforts?’
- **Gandhi believed that being good was supremely important.** It was the only way to accomplish ‘mokha’ or as we call it in English, salvation. He said that it would require everything you have. *He said that accomplishing salvation was like filling an ocean with water, one teaspoonful at a time.* Get scooping. Keep at it. Your salvation depends on your tireless moral performance. And Gandhi gave it his best shot.
- **Bono (you can tell that I’m fond of him) has an interesting perspective on this**, one informed by his study of the New Testament: ‘You see, at the centre of all religions and all moral systems is the idea of Karma. You

know, what you put out comes back to you: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, or in physics – in physical laws – every action is met by an equal or opposite reaction. It's clear to me that Karma is at the very heart of the Universe. I'm absolutely sure of it. And yet, along comes this idea called Grace to bring an end to all that 'as you sow, so will you reap' stuff. Grace defies logic and reason. Love interrupts, if you like, the consequences of your actions, which in my case is very good news indeed, because I've done a lot of stupid stuff. I'd be in big trouble if Karma was going finally to be my judge. I'm holding out for Grace. I'm holding out that Jesus took my sins onto the cross, because I know what I have done and who I am – and I hope I don't have to depend on my own religiosity or moral performance to get to God.'

- Bono kind of gives us a different angle on the question, doesn't he? After all, if we're counting on our own goodness, how will we ever know that we're good enough? What if salvation isn't meant to be accomplished by ourselves at all? What if it's meant to be received?

6) IS THERE LIFE AFTER LIFE?

- **Shakespeare said:** *'There are 2 things that we are guaranteed: One: we will pay taxes. Two: we will all die.'*
- Yes, modern technology and medicine means we can probably extend our lives a few years – but then we will die.
- Our lives are remarkably short – **on average about 700 000 hours** – of which one third of it we are asleep. Then we die.
- Yet our society seems to live in denial of our mortality:
 - We see this in the billion-dollar beauty industry that seeks to keep people young forever, fearfully avoiding the simple fact that we all age and die.
 - We see it in the way people hungrily pursue material gain. There is a bumper sticker that says: 'He who gathers the most toys before he dies, wins.' **In the 1800s a boat in the Royal Navy** was frozen during a polar expedition. The crew tried to escape but died – much later many of them were found far from the boat frozen to death – they were dragging a life-boat full of chocolates and silver cutlery. That crazy approach to life continues as people devote their energies to temporary things like wealth.
 - But we are going to die!

- **The question is, ‘When we die, what will happen to us?’ There are some possibilities:**
 - We will simply non-exist, since we are only physical beings.
 - We will be re-incarnated.
 - We will become disembodied spirits.
 - We will all go to some kind of paradise.
 - We will face our Creator in a Judgment Day – and depending on how we responded to him in this life, he will respond to us in the next life.
- What if this last possibility is real? What if life on earth is just a dress rehearsal before the real production? A warm-up lap before the game? What if, instead of denying death and trying not to think about it, we’re meant to think about it – and prepare for it? What if, instead of asking ourselves the question, ‘Where will you be 1 year from now?’ we should ask ourselves, ‘Where will you be 1 million years from now?’ Deckchair questions like this, as uncomfortable as they are, helped me make some personal discoveries.

CONCLUSION...

These are the questions that call us to some time in the deck-chair:

1. *Is there more to life than this?*
2. *Is there something I’m meant to do with my life?*
3. *Is God real? If he is, what is he like?*
4. *Who is Jesus and does it matter anyway?*
5. *If I am a good person, why do I need faith?*
6. *Is there life after life?*

God Sessions is your chance to pull up a deck chair, and treat yourself to the space to think through questions like these – and many other questions too. **PULL UP A CHAIR AND JOIN US**

Let’s listen to a song... Letter from the sky by Civil Twilight.