

# The Alpha Course

## Introduction: Is There More to Life than This?

### Erich's Message

Welcome everyone to the Bilingual ALPHA Course! We're so glad you have decided to join the course. Tonight we want to talk about the question "Is There More to Life Than This?". Is there more to life than just eating, working, sleeping, and doing it all over again? To help me understand what different people think of this question, I have invited some of my friends to share their opinions with you.

*Have Rhys, Joanna, John S, and Ellie come to the front for quick interview.*

Erich: Rhys, what do you think? Is there more to life than this?

Rhys.: Yeah man, definitely! I believe in another world out there.

Erich: Really? What do you mean by that?

Rhys: Aliens man! They are all around us. They come to visit me sometimes and talk to me. Wait, there's one now! *Points and runs off waving his arms.*

Erich: Wait! ... Um, that was interesting... Joanna, how about you? Is there more to life than just what we can see?

Joanna: Well, I'm really not sure. I mean, I have friends who believe there is a god, but I've never heard from him. I would like to know more though. *Walks off deep in thought.*

Erich: Thanks. John S., what do you think of the question?

John S.: Well, I'm a geologist, and the more I have studied the earth, the more I have realized that something this amazing can only have been created by God. And I believe that we can know some things about God's character from His creation. *Walks off.*

Erich: Wow, thanks John, that sounds interesting. How about you, Ellie?

Ellie (*animated*): I really don't know anything about God, but I do know that life's short, and we should have fun while we have the time. So I really don't think too much about God and stuff, and just enjoy life, you know? (*more thoughtful*) Although sometimes I do feel really lonely, even with my friends around, and I'm not sure what to do with this feeling. (*animated again*) But then I go to a party and forget that I was lonely. *Walks off looking confused.*

----- Skit end -----

Thanks guys for sharing your opinions. I can see that different people have really different answers to this question. But whatever answers people give to this question, isn't it interesting that people all around the world are essentially asking the same question? People everywhere are searching for the true meaning of life. Where do we come from? Where are we heading? Who are we? Does our life have any ultimate meaning and purpose? What happens when we die? These are the really big questions of life we humans ask ourselves.

But why is it that so many people from all kinds of different countries and cultures around the world are asking the very same question? It seems to me like there is a hole in all of our hearts that is not easily filled; like we all are hungry and thirsty to know where we truly belong in this world.

Now people try to find the answer to this question through different ways: some search for it through intense studying, some in romantic relationships, some in physical challenges, some in fun, some in business achievement, some through worship at different temples, some through traveling the world. Although our answers are different, we all are asking the same question: "Is there more to life than this?" In the coming 10 weeks of this ALPHA course, this is a question we want to explore together, and I'm looking forward to that.

The British rock band "Queen" is one of the most famous bands in Western music history. Queen has been described as giving the greatest live performance ever, producing the greatest single in history, and being the best British band of all time. By 1991, Freddie Mercury, Queen's lead singer, had amassed a huge fortune and attracted millions of fans. But he admitted in an interview shortly before his death that he was desperately lonely. This is what he said:

'You can have everything in the world and still be the loneliest man. And that's the most bitter type of loneliness. Success has brought me world idolization and millions of pounds, but it's prevented me from having the one thing we all need: a loving, ongoing relationship.'

I think Freddy knew what he was talking about. We humans aren't capable of providing perfectly loving, stable relationships. But what Freddie might not have realized is that this kind of relationship does exist. Ultimately there is only one relationship that is completely loving and totally ongoing, and that is a relationship with God, because God is perfect in every way.

I would like to introduce you to an important person whom we are going to get to know during the next few weeks. His name is Jesus. He was born in modern-day Israel about 2000 years ago. He came from a working-class family, and growing up he learned the trade of making furniture. But when he became 30 years old, something strange happened. He left his parents' house and began walking around the villages, gathering followers, and teaching them. And what I found amazing is that he speaks to this question: "Is there more to life than this?" Let's listen for a moment to how he answers this question.

For one, Jesus said: "**I am the bread of life.** He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty." By this He means: 'I am the one person who can satisfy that kind of spiritual hunger that is in every human heart.' So that other things, however good they may be – relationships, work, hobbies, sports, whatever – somehow they always leave us with this feeling that something's missing.

One Japanese woman put it like this. She said, 'In Japan we need to eat rice. It's like we've got two stomachs: we've got one stomach for ordinary food and one stomach for rice. And however much ordinary food – meat, potatoes, fruit, vegetables – we eat, we don't feel full. We don't feel satisfied until we eat rice.' I think we could say the same thing here in Taiwan too!

And I think if Jesus had been speaking to her, he'd have said: 'I'm the rice of life. I'm the one person who can satisfy your true needs.'

Jesus also said: "I'm the way and the truth and the life." "I am the **way**" means that Jesus brings direction to a lost world. To somebody like Ellie who is trying to find the meaning of life in fun, Jesus says: "Ellie, you can only find true meaning in life if you are willing to live life in relationship with me."

Secondly, Jesus said: I'm the **truth**. Sometimes people say, 'Well, you know, it's great that he satisfies that inner hunger, but *I don't have a need*. Isn't it just a kind of crutch for weak people who need that kind of thing? And if you need that kind of thing, then it's great for you. But it's not for me.' But if we think about this logically, this argument does not make sense: because if what Jesus says is true, it's true for everyone. And if it's not true, it doesn't have one bit of importance for our lives.

The famous author C.S. Lewis put it like this. He said: 'Christianity is a statement which, if false, is of no importance and, if true, of infinite importance. The one thing it cannot be is moderately important.'

But when Jesus said, **I am the truth** he was talking about more than just a kind of intellectual truth. The Hebrew understanding of truth was ‘truth as experienced’. And there’s a big difference between a kind of intellectual knowledge and personal knowledge – between the head and the heart, if you like.

To give an analogy, I’ve been married to my wife Kelley now for a couple of years. But supposing, before we were married, before I’d even met her, I went into a bookstore and there was a book about her called “*Kelley: The Amazing Woman!*” And I thought, ‘Hmm, that looks interesting. I’ll pick it up and have a look.’

Chapter One: *Her Sparkling Personality*. Chapter Two: *Her Extraordinary Intelligence*. Chapter Three: *Her Infinite Patience*. Chapter Four: *Her Potential to be a Long-Suffering Wife*. Chapter Five: *Her Taiwanese Cooking Skills*. Chapter Six: *Her Facebooking Ability* – that one is a really long chapter!

And if I’d looked at this book and thought, ‘Wow, she sounds like an amazing person,’ that is intellectual knowledge – head knowledge. But after several years of marriage I can *tell* you she’s an amazing person from my everyday, personal experience – that’s personal knowledge, that’s the experience of living together in marriage.

And when someone says, ‘I *know* Jesus is the truth,’ they’re talking not just about being convinced of the evidence; they’re talking about experiencing a personal *relationship* with Jesus Christ. This is what Jesus means when he says: **I am the truth**.

Lastly, Jesus says “I am the **life**.” He came to this earth to set us free from the things that spoil our lives, the things that are wrong in our lives. Jesus could be saying to Joanna: “I realize that you are looking for the answers to life’s questions, and that some of your friends have already found me. Keep looking, don’t give up. Because when you find me, you find true life.”

Now there’s a big difference between doing something wrong, and just making mistakes. We all make lots of mistakes, and our mistakes can be relatively harmless or even funny.

As a foreigner in Taiwan, my wife Kelley and I have made lots of mistakes. For example, one day we went hiking with a group of friends. It was a really hot summer day and everyone was sweating. By that time we had been trying to learn some Chinese phrases, so Kelley decides to try out her new Chinese with a friend. She turns to the man walking next to her and says, very passionately “我很辣!” Of course she meant to say “我很熱”, but what came out was “我很辣”. So our friend, who is a very serious guy, didn’t know how to respond to this, so he just looks at her and says “hm...”. So Kelley thinks that maybe he didn’t hear her correctly, so she says again, this time louder, and with even more emphasis “我很辣!!”. But again our friend just looks at her without giving a reply. So finally Kelley turns to him again and says “你也很辣!”. At this point our friend just walks away. It wasn’t until Kelley told this story to another Taiwanese friend weeks later that she realized her mistake.

So we all make lots of mistakes, which is just human. But the things that we do wrong really matter. It matters to God when we hurt other people, or cheat or lie. There is such a thing as true guilt before a perfect God.

And here the Christian message is good news. That’s what the word ‘gospel’ means. And the good news is this: **God loves you**. He loves you and me so much that he came, in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ, to live and to die for all of us. And when he died, Jesus took the punishment for everything you and I have ever done wrong, said wrong, thought wrong. He died in our place so we wouldn’t have to answer for the things we do wrong; he died for you and he died for me. In fact, if you had been the only person alive, he would have done it for you. He loves each one of us *that* much.

And because of what Jesus did, it’s possible for our guilt to be taken away – he came to set us free from this guilt. He came to set us free from addictions – the things in our lives that have a negative hold over us. He came to set us free from fear – the fear of death and all the fears that go with it. Because Jesus not only died for us; after 3 days in the grave he rose again from the dead. After this he continued teaching many people for 40 days before he ascended back into heaven to be with God the Father. Because he conquered death for us, everyone who believes in Him can receive his blessing of full life here on earth.

So Jesus sets us free to know God, to have a relationship with God. He sets us free to change – to become the kind of loving person that deep down we're longing to be.

To help us change, he sends his Spirit to live within us, to begin to change us. When we open ourselves up to the Spirit's work in our lives, we will see the fruit of the Spirit beginning to grow: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, and many other good things begin to flow out of us into the lives of others.

Jesus set us free to love with a new dimension. Because when we've experienced God's love for us, being poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, that gives us a totally new love for everybody else – for God and for the world around us.

So it's not just about having some 'great feeling or experience'; it's about going out and making a real difference in a world that so desperately needs transformation.

Now I don't know all of you, and I assume that you are feeling different responses to this message today.

- Some of you may be thinking 'Absolutely. I know exactly what you're talking about. I have a relationship with God through Jesus Christ, and it's the most wonderful thing.' That's fantastic.
- Others might say, 'Well, I'm not so sure that I do have that relationship.'
- Yet other people might say: 'Hmm, not convinced. But I'd like to hear more, I'd like to know more.' And if you're in that category, I would really encourage you to investigate further. The ALPHA Course is a great place to start if you're feeling this way. During the next 10 weeks we will go on a journey of exploration together, and I'm looking forward to that.

However we feel about this message, the point is that, if what Jesus said about himself is true, it's of infinite importance and it must be worth spending ten Friday evenings investigating, to find out whether you think it is true.

Now we want to go into our small groups for some discussion. Before that, please feel free to go to the bathroom or grab a quick drink. Thank you so much for your attention.

-> Soft transition music into break time