



Talk 1 – Is There More to Life Than This?

Duration 35 Minutes
HTB Transcripts

Key:

Personal Story / Testimony that Nicky Gumbel tells in the classic Alpha talk. These may be replaced with a live speaker's personal story or the speaker may tell the story about Nicky in the same way Nicky tells stories about others.

Story that Nicky tells about someone else (about a friend or a story he heard or read about).

Quotes are key to the talk to emphasise a point and to enable guests to engage and relate to a point made. There is now a way that people can seek permission to omit or replace quotes used in the original talks. A quote should be replaced with something equally effective to maintain the balance of teaching, story, and references to other information sources.

Key Quotes will need approval to change (these will be identified by a comment in the left column). Please email publications@alpha.org with your request.

Key Bible Passages are identified and you may wish to display these visually for your guests.

Red type identifies a part of the key teaching text that could be removed or altered for contextualisation.

Text left untouched is the standard key message content of the Alpha talk.

NOTE: Key elements of this script are: personal stories, humour and reference to media / popular culture to draw the guests in to engage with the talk.

Parts of the talk may need to be contextualised for other contexts or cultures but make sure you maintain the key elements of humour and personal testimony. Notice how quotes, and stories are used throughout to add emphasis to the main points of the talk (theology and testimony).

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[You may wish to personalise and contextualise this with similar facts about you and the church in your country/region]

I'm a clergyman in the Church of England. And I love the Church of England; I love the Anglican Church.

But while the worldwide church has been growing rapidly, the Church of England has been in steady decline. We've been losing so many people that some people have speculated that maybe even God has left the Church of England!

There was an article in *Private Eye*, which was headed: 'GOD TO LEAVE CHURCH OF ENGLAND'. What it said was this:

'Following the example set by leading former Anglicans, God has indicated that he too is to leave the Church of England. Friends of God believe the issue of women priests to have been behind the Almighty's sudden decision to convert to Rome. According to sources close to God, he's been unhappy for some time with the direction the Anglican Church has been taking and has now finally had enough. A Church of England spokesman said: 'Losing God is a bit of a blow, but it's just something we're going to have to learn to live with.'

For much of my life I've not been a Christian. I really, I think, had three objections to Christianity. First of all, I thought it was boring. I found everything about Christianity, religion, the church, so dull!

I had sympathy with something that Robert Louis Stevenson once entered in his diary as if he was recording the most extraordinary phenomenon. He wrote this: 'I have been to church today and am not depressed.' That was my reaction — I found it so dull.

Secondly, I thought it was untrue. I had what I called 'intellectual objections' to Christianity. I described myself as an atheist. I actually described myself, rather pretentiously, as a 'logical determinist'. And I actually wrote an essay at school disproving the existence of God. Such was the state of religious knowledge in my school that they put it forward for the school prize for religious knowledge!

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So I thought it was untrue. And I also thought it was irrelevant to my life. I couldn't think how someone who'd lived two thousand years ago, two thousand miles away, could have any relevance to my life today. At school we used to sing that hymn — rather wonderful hymn, actually — '*Jerusalem: And did those feet (meaning the feet of Jesus) in ancient time walk upon England's mountains green?*' And we all knew the answer was: no, they did not! Jesus never came anywhere near England. And it just seemed totally irrelevant to my life.

At the same time, I think I was actually quite ignorant. I didn't know very much about Christianity at all. And I think increasingly in our secularised society that's true for many. One of the roles I have here is that I'm an assistant chaplain to the Brompton Hospital. And one of the things that we do is on a Sunday morning we go around and we offer people Holy Communion. And sometimes when we say to people, 'Would you like Holy Communion?' we get some very odd replies!

One hospital chaplain wrote down some of the replies he'd had to that question. One man said, in answer to the question 'Would you like Holy Communion?' he said: 'No thanks, I'm Church of England.'

Another said: 'No thanks, I asked for cornflakes.' And a third said: 'No thanks, I've never been circumcised.'

So I was very ignorant about the Christian faith. But I think I can say now — I didn't feel this at the time — but now I can say, looking back, something was missing.

Fascinating to me that one thing that Princes Charles and Princess Diana were agreed about was this: Prince Charles spoke of his belief that 'for all the advantages of science, there remains deep in the soul a persistent and unconscious anxiety that something is missing.'

And Princess Diana, speaking at a charity event, spoke of an 'overwhelming sense of loss and isolation that undermines many people's efforts to survive and cope with the complexities of modern life. They know,' she said, 'something is missing.'

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And that was my experience. I say I didn't feel it at the time, but looking back I can say it was a reality because I was always looking forward to the next thing in life rather than living for the present, in a sense.

I remember in school thinking, 'Maybe when I'm a prefect, that will be what life's all about!' And eventually I was a very lowly prefect, and it was great ... for about three weeks. And then I thought, 'There must be more to life than this!'

And then I thought, 'Well, maybe when I've left school, that will be what it's all about!' And then I left school, and that was great ... but after about three weeks I started to think, 'There must be more to life than this.'

And I thought, 'Well, maybe if I could get a girlfriend!' And somehow or other (I don't know how I managed it) I managed to find a girlfriend! And after about three weeks ...!

And I think for many people, they go through life **like that**. **We're** always searching for the next thing—and when we get there, we find it doesn't satisfy.

And Jesus said: 'I am the bread of life.' '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, whatever, sport — somehow they always leave us with this feeling that something's missing.

[You may wish to adapt this to a local example that relates to the staple diet in your country.]

One Japanese woman put it like this. She said, 'In Japan they need to eat rice.' She said, '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.'

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 this "other stomach".'

Perhaps the greatest columnist of our generation, Bernard Levin, who often used to say he was not a Christian, one time he said, 'For the fourteen thousandth time, I'm telling you I'm

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not a Christian!' But he wrote this: *'Countries like ours are full of people who have all the material comforts they desire, together with such non-material blessings as a happy family, and yet lead lives of quiet and, at times, noisy desperation, understanding nothing but the fact that there is a hole inside them. And however much food and drink they pour into it, however many motorcars and television sets they stuff it with, however many well-balanced children and loyal friends they parade around the edges of it, it aches.'*

Jesus said: 'I am the bread of life', 'I am the one person who can satisfy that hunger.' Now, why is that? Jesus said: 'I'm the way and the truth and the life.' First of all, this: Jesus brings direction to a lost world. He said: 'I am the way.'

[You may use this story by adapting the way that it is introduced (text in red).]

Friends of mine, when their children were younger, they had an au pair girl. And this au pair girl was struggling to learn the English language, and she hadn't quite mastered all the English idioms. And one time there was an argument going on between the children up in a room upstairs, and this au pair girl rushed upstairs to sort it out. And what she meant to say was, 'What on earth are you doing?' but what she actually said was, 'What are you doing on earth?' Now, the question she asked was a very good question: what are we doing on earth?

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, if you like, are the really big questions — they're the first-order questions of life. And I guess many people are on a kind of search. They're trying to find some significance, some meaning, some purpose.

I was fascinated reading a book by Leo Tolstoy. **I'd read *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina* but I'd never read this book** called *A Confession*, in which he tells his life story — his search for meaning, for purpose.

He describes how he rejected Christianity as a child. And then, as he went on through life, he became very ambitious. First of all he thought, 'Well, maybe pleasure is the answer— just having a great time!' He entered the social whirl of Moscow and St Petersburg,

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drinking heavily, sleeping around, gambling — living a wild life. And he found it just didn't satisfy.

And he thought, 'Well, maybe money is the answer.' He'd inherited a large estate and started to make a lot of money out of his books. But he found however much money he had, it didn't satisfy.

And he thought, 'Well, maybe the answer is success, fame, importance.' He wrote what the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* described as 'one of the two or three greatest novels in world literature'. But still, he said, it didn't satisfy.

He thought, 'Well, maybe the answer is family life — to give my family the best possible life.' He'd married in 1862 and had a happy family and thirteen children — which, he says, distracted him from his search for the overall meaning of life!

He said he'd achieved all his ambitions and was surrounded by what is considered to be complete happiness; yet one question drove him to the verge of suicide. And the question was this: 'What meaning has my life that the inevitability of death does not destroy?'

And he was trying to search in every field of science and philosophy to try and come up with an answer to this, and the only answer he could come up with from philosophy or science was this to the question 'Why do I live?' — '*In the infinity of space and the infinity of time, infinitely small particles mutate with infinite complexity.*'

He didn't find that very satisfying. So he started to look around at his contemporaries, and he found that many of them were just avoiding the issue — they weren't really thinking about that. And eventually he found, in the peasant people of Russia, the answer he'd been looking for: in their faith in God through Jesus Christ.

A hundred years later, nothing's changed.

Freddie Mercury, the lead singer in the rock group Queen, had amassed a huge fortune, attracted thousands, probably millions, of fans. But he admitted in an interview shortly before his death that he was desperately lonely. He said this:

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'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 idolisation and millions of pounds, but it's prevented me from having the one thing we all need: a loving, ongoing relationship.'

And ultimately there is only one relationship that is completely loving and totally ongoing, and that is a relationship with God. And Jesus said: 'I'm the way to that relationship. I'm the way to find the purpose for which we're made.'

Sometimes people say, 'Well, what difference does that make in your life?' I sometimes use this analogy because in a way, before I was a Christian, I was perfectly happy with life as it was. I wasn't searching for anything.

When we were children we had a black-and-white television set. I don't think they have television sets that are as bad as this now, but we had one of those sets that it used to just go into lines like this, and you'd get — it was so hard watching it. **Because I remember — this really dates me, but we actually watched the 1966 World Cup on that television. And as England were about to score a goal, it went into lines like that!**

And we found that there were certain things that you could do to improve the quality of the picture. You could put your hand round the back at certain points. There were also certain floorboards that, if you stood on them, you could get a slightly better picture. And then we discovered this: what that television needed was an aerial.

And once someone has experienced a relationship with God through Jesus Christ, **it's like the aerial:** 'This is what life's all about!' Jesus said: 'I'm the way.'

Secondly, he brings reality to a confused world. He said: 'I'm the truth.' Sometimes people say, 'Well, you know, it's great that he satisfies that 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 lovely for you. But it's not for me.' Logically, that can't be the case: because if it's true, it's true for everyone. And if it's not true, then it's not actually 'lovely' for those who believe something that isn't true, because in a way they're deluded.

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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.'

So that's the question: is it true? Jesus said: 'I am the truth.'

I don't think I had realised how much evidence there is. One of the things that we do on Alpha is to look at the historical evidence for the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The resurrection is the lynchpin of Christianity.

It's fascinating to me how many people who are kind of used to looking at evidence who've come to the conclusion it's true.

One former Professor of History at Oxford University described the resurrection as `the best attested fact in history'.

I hadn't realised how many of the pioneers of modern science were believers: Descartes, Newton, Kepler, Galileo, Locke, Copernicus, Faraday, Boyle, Mendel, Kelvin, Pasteur, Lister, Maxwell, Simpson.

Professor James Simpson, the brilliant scientist whose discoveries paved the way for safe, painless surgery. Someone once asked him, `Professor Simpson, of all these discoveries you've made, which of them was the greatest?' He said, `Well, actually, the greatest discovery I ever made was the day I discovered Jesus Christ.'

Perhaps the greatest lawyer of the second half of the twentieth century was Lord Denning. Lord Denning towered, really, over the legal profession for fifty years. He was also the President of the Lawyers' Christian Fellowship. He'd looked at the evidence and come to the conclusion it's true.

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 a personal knowledge — between the head and the heart, if you like.

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[If you are married you may personalise this example, or use the example of someone close to you.]

Again, forgive me for using an analogy, but I've been married to my wife Pippa now for nearly twenty-five years. But supposing, before we were married, before I'd even met her, I went into a bookshop and there was a book about her called *Pippa: 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 Cordon Bleu Cooking Skills. Chapter Six: Her Sporting Ability — quite a short chapter! But not as short as if it was about my sporting ability, I hasten to add!

And if I'd looked at this book and thought, 'Wow, she sounds an amazing person,' that is intellectual knowledge — head knowledge. Now I can tell you she's an amazing person — that's personal knowledge, that's the experience of twenty-five years of 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 relationship with the risen Jesus Christ. Jesus said: 'I am the truth.'

Thirdly, he brings life in a dark world. He said: 'I'm the way, I'm the truth, and I'm the life.'

Jesus came to set us free from the things that spoil our lives, the things that are wrong in our lives. There's a big difference from the things that we do that are wrong and the mistakes that we make. We all make lots of mistakes, and our mistakes can be relatively harmless or even amusing.

You know they publish after the GCSE exams some of the mistakes that students have made. And I came across some of the ones that they published.

— One person wrote this: 'In the first book of the Bible, Guinnesses, Adam and Eve were created from an apple-tree. One of their children, Cain, asked, "Am I my brother's son?"'

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— Another wrote this: `Moses led the Hebrew slaves to the Red Sea, where they made unleavened bread, which is bread made without any ingredients at all. Moses went up on Mount Cyanide to get the Ten Commandments. He died before he ever reached Canada.’

— Another wrote this: `The Greeks were a highly sculptured people, and without them we wouldn’t have history. The Greeks also had myths. A myth is a female moth.’

— Another wrote: `Socrates was a famous Greek teacher who went around giving people advice. They killed him. Socrates died from an overdose of wedlock. After his death, his career suffered a dramatic decline.’

— Another wrote this: `Julius Caesar extinguished himself on the battlefields of Gaul. The Ides of March murdered him because they thought he was going to be made king. Dying, he gasped out: “Tee-hee, Brutus!”’

And finally this: `Johann Bach wrote a great many musical compositions and had a large number of children. In between, he practised on an old spinster, which he kept up in his attic. Bach died from 1750 to the present.

`Bach was the most famous composer in the world, and so was Handel. Handel was half-German and half-Italian and half-English. He was very large.’

So the mistakes that we make can be relatively harmless. But the things that we do wrong really matter. There is such a thing, **certainly in my case**, as true guilt.

The great Russian novelist and Nobel Prize-winner Alexander Solzhenitsyn said this: `The line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties; but right through every human heart and through all human hearts.’

The message, the Christian message, is good news. That’s what the word `gospel’ means. And the good news is this: God loves you. And he loves you and me so much that he came, in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ, to live and to die for us. And on the cross, Jesus took everything you and I have ever done wrong, said wrong, thought wrong. He

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died in our place; he died for you and he died for me. In fact, if you had been the only person, he would have done it for you or for me. He loves us that much.

And because of that, it's possible for our guilt to be taken away — he came to set us free from guilt. He came to set us free from addiction — the things in our lives that we hate that get a grip of 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; he rose again from the dead. He conquered death.

He set us free to know God, to have a relationship with God. He set us free to change — to be the kind of person that deep down we're longing to be.

He sends his Spirit to live within us, to begin to change us. The fruit of the Spirit beginning to grow — love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness.

He 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'; it's about going out and making a difference in a world that so desperately needs transformation.

Now, it's not easy, necessarily. **I don't think it's easy to be a Christian today. I think today, certainly living in this part of the world, I think it's much harder to be a true Christian than not to be a Christian.**

I was fascinated to see an interview in the *Sunday Times* with Alice Cooper, the rock musician. What it said is this: that `Alice Cooper has a dark secret: the 53-year-old rocker is a Christian.' And in this interview Alice Cooper describes his conversion to Christianity: `But it hasn't been easy combining religion and rock.' This is what he says: `It's the most rebellious thing I've ever done. Drinking beer is easy; trashing your hotel room is easy. But being a Christian, that's a tough call. That's real rebellion.

It's not easy. But nor is it boring. It's not untrue. It's not irrelevant to our lives. It's exciting,

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it's true, it's relevant: because Jesus said: 'I'm the way and the truth and the life.'

Now, I don't know how you respond to what we've been looking at this evening. I guess there are a number of different possible reactions. Some of you may say, 'Absolutely. I've never been in this place before, never heard of Alpha, but 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.

And it doesn't matter — **maybe you come from a Catholic church or a Methodist or a Baptist, Salvation Army** — it could be any part of the church. I don't think which part of the church is the most important thing. The most important thing is that you have that relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

Others might say, 'Well, I'm not so sure that I do have that relationship.' When Paul went to Athens and spoke about the good news about Jesus and the Resurrection, there were three different reactions. Some sneered. And if you're here tonight sneering, please don't think I'm standing here judging you, **because I went to talks about the Christian faith and I sneered at them**. So it may be not the right moment for you.

Other people when they heard him said, 'Hmm, not convinced. But I'd like to hear more, I'd like to investigate further.' And if you're in that category, I would really encourage you to investigate further. There are lots of ways you can do that. You could do it totally on your own. Just get hold of a New Testament, and read it for yourself.

You might say, 'Well, I need a bit of help.' Well, you could go along to any church in the country — **Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, Baptist** — and say, 'Could you help me? Is there a course that I could go on?'

Alpha is one course, which is a practical introduction to the Christian faith. But it's not the only one. We're not saying that it's the best one; it's just one way of doing it. It's running now in thousands of **churches** around the place, and you can probably find one, if you don't come from this area, in a **church** near you. Or if you'd like to come here, we'd love to have you here.

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But that's not the point. The point is that, if it's true, it's of infinite importance and it must be worth spending, say, **ten Wednesday evenings** investigating, to find out whether you think it is true.

Third category when Paul went to Athens is some believed. They only heard once, and they said, 'I'd love that!' And there may just be one person here tonight who says, 'I'd love that! I would really love to have a relationship with God through Jesus Christ.' The good news is you can experience that right now. It's a very simple thing:

Turning away from the things that we know are wrong, saying sorry. Thanking Jesus for dying for us; putting our faith in him. And then saying please: 'Please come and fill me with your Spirit.' *Sorry, thank you, please.*

And I want to make it possible for anyone who's here who'd like to pray that prayer to do so. And I'm going to ask you to be very kind — I'm not going to ask anyone to pray it out loud, but in the silence of your hearts. God can hear the prayers in our hearts. Jesus is here — he's risen from the dead.

But to make it possible for someone who would like to pray, to pray, would you be kind and just maybe for a moment just close your eyes or bow your head for a moment, just to give that person who would like to pray the opportunity to do so in a dignified way.

Jesus is here, he's alive; you can speak to him tonight. Just echo this silently in your heart:

Lord Jesus Christ, I'm sorry for the things in my life that have been wrong. And if anything comes to mind, ask his forgiveness.

I now turn away from everything that I know is wrong.

Thank you that you died for me on the cross. I now receive your forgiveness. I trust you with my life.

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And I ask you please to come and to fill me with your Spirit, to be with me forever. Thank you, Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.



Talk 1- Is There More to Life Than This?

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