

Why We Exist (Colossians 1:24-2:5)

Big Idea: We exist to tell people about what Jesus has done.

I have a friend who became the pastor of a large church here in Toronto.

When he started, he went around and asked people, "Why do we exist?" People looked at him funny. The most common answer they gave was, "Because we're..." and then they gave the name of the church. In other words, we exist simply because we exist.

That wasn't a good enough answer, so he'd repeat the question. Why do we exist? He drove people crazy. But out of that question, he began to help people understand that it wasn't enough to exist as a church. You need to have a deeper reason to exist beyond your own existence.

So let me ask you: why do we exist? Why have we spent over nine years trying to get a church started in this community? Why have we spent so much time and energy and money on this? We need to be able to answer this question because it's not enough simply to exist for the sake of our existence.

To answer this question, it helps to look at the words of a man who was very clear about why he did what he did. I'm talking about the Apostle Paul.

There's never been anyone like him. He originally opposed Christianity before becoming its greatest messenger. He traveled across the Roman world to spread the gospel. They estimate that he traveled over 10,000 miles by foot. That would be like walking from here to Vancouver and back twice.

He's been called the greatest missionary who's ever lived. He started at least 14 churches as he traveled through Israel, Syria, Turkey, Greece, and Italy. He wrote 28% of the New Testament.

Why did Paul do all of this? Paul is going to answer today by telling us what his ministry was all about. And it's going to help us understand what we're all about too.

Why We Exist

So here, in one sentence, is why Paul existed, and why we exist too: "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church..." (Colossians 1:24).

Okay, that's it. Everyone clear? Let's go home.

This is one of those sentences that confuses us. If we didn't read it in the Bible, we wouldn't dare say it. And yet I think that it is one of the most profound ideas to understand, because it communicates so well why we exist as a church.

Let me put it in one sentence: **We exist to do what hasn't already been done by Jesus in his sufferings.**

Let me unpack that.

Through his sacrificial death, Jesus has done everything necessary to provide salvation for sinners. Everything. This is the good news that we proclaim every week: Jesus has died for our sins, and nothing more needs to be done.

When Jesus died on the cross, he bore all of our sins. He paid the entire price of our salvation. Like the hymn says:

My sin, oh, the bliss of this glorious thought!

My sin, not in part but the whole

Is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more

Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, o my soul!

Jesus has removed the wrath of God from his people. He has finished striking Satan with a death blow. He has established the new covenant for his people. It is finished. There is nothing more that needs to be done to save our people. Jesus has done it all. The work has been completed.

Okay. If, through his sacrificial death, Jesus has done everything necessary to provide salvation to sinners, what does Paul mean when he says that he's filling up what's lacking? That gets to the heart of the issue of why we exist, and here is the answer.

Although Jesus has done everything necessary to provide salvation for sinners, there's one thing left to do: to carry the news of what Jesus has done to people who've never heard it.

Paul explains that this is what he means in verses 24-29:

*Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church, of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, **to make the word of God fully known**, the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. **Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present***

everyone mature in Christ. *For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.*

There is nothing lacking in the work of Christ, except for one thing: people don't know about it. "Jesus' suffering was all that was necessary to *provide* salvation for sinners, but Paul's sufferings were necessary to *proclaim* salvation to sinners" (Charles Quarles, *The NIV Grace and Truth Study Bible*).

The news is amazing, by the way. Paul calls this message the "riches of the glory of this mystery." This message is valuable.

Paul says the message is "Christ in you the hope of glory." This message gives us hope for the future. Colossae had once been an important city, but it wasn't anymore. By the time Paul wrote this letter, it was a two-bit town. Around the time Paul wrote this letter, the city was devastated by an earthquake. So things were very uncertain for the church there. But they had a hope that couldn't be taken away. They had Jesus, the hope of glory, and nothing could threaten that hope.

This message was enough to "present everyone mature in Christ." The message of what Jesus has done is enough to transform the lives of anyone who receives it. It's a life-changing message.

Why do we exist as a church? Because Jesus has done everything necessary for people to be made right with God, to be forgiven, to be made new. Only one thing is missing: to tell people who would otherwise not know about this valuable, life-transforming message.

That's why we exist.

The Cost

But there's a cost.

Read what Paul wrote again:

Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions... (1:24)

For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me. (1:29)

For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face... (2:1)

Why do we exist? To do the one thing that's missing from Jesus' finished work: to tell people about it.

What does it involve? It involves suffering and hard work. That's why Paul traveled those 10,000 miles. It's why he was beaten, shipwrecked, on frequent journeys, in constant danger. It's why he worked so hard, and was "in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure" (2 Corinthians 11:27).

Paul understood what a lot of us have discovered too. It's not always easy to tell others about Jesus.

You and I are not in the same situation as Paul. We're probably not going to be beaten and shipwrecked, for instance. We may not go hungry for the sake of the gospel or suffer cold or exposure. But we're also called to pay the price for sharing the gospel.

What does that price look like? It means a couple of things.

It means hard work. Paul says in verse 29, “For this I toil...” The word talks about work to the point of exhaustion.

Back when we had a house, we had a giant backyard. It was huge. It was really wasted on us because we rarely gardened. Why? Because gardening is so much work. All of it – setting aside time, planting seeds, watering, weeding, troubleshooting – involved time we never seemed to have. So we never gardened. The land just sat there growing weeds.

Telling people about Jesus is like that. It takes intentionality and hard work. It involves praying, sharing the gospel, helping new believers grow, and dealing with false teaching.

But there’s no greater privilege. But it involves being intentional in doing things like cultivating relationships with our neighbors and looking for opportunities to share the gospel.

Here are three hard-work things we can all do:

- **Get to know people.** This is actually fun. Sam Chan writes, “We should always be hanging out with non-Christian friends. We go to their things—their birthday parties, kids’ concerts, fundraisers, sports games.” When we do this, it’s easier to invite them to our things. The hard part in all of this is making the time in our busy lives. Make non-Christian friends and get to know them.
- **Pray for them.** As you make non-Christian friends, pray for them. Pray regularly that they would get to know and love Jesus. Ask God to work in their lives. Pray for them and their needs.
- **Ask God every day to use you.** Every day, ask God to use your life to bring people closer to Jesus.

If you want a bonus hard-work thing you can do, it's to read books on evangelism that equip you to share your faith with others. It's fascinating and helpful, and well worth doing.

You don't have to do everything yourself. That's why God has given us the church, brothers and sisters who can help us. But you can get to know people, pray for them, and ask God to use you. All of us can do this hard work. It's worth it.

But there's one other price we must pay besides hard work.

It also means risking rejection. Paul said in verse 24, "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake..." A lot of Paul's suffering came because people rejected his message. And when they rejected his message, it felt like they rejected him.

Nobody likes rejection. I think that's why a lot of us are scared of sharing the gospel. But we don't need to be scared for a big reason that Paul hints at in this passage. "For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me" (1:29). We're not alone as we share the gospel. As we toil, God will help us. As Darrel Johnson says, "Evangelism is joining in a conversation the Holy Spirit is already having with another person."

Why do we exist as a church? Because Jesus has done everything necessary to provide salvation for sinners, except for one thing. Someone's got to tell the people in Liberty Village. And that's us. It's going to take some work and the risk of rejection, but we can learn to say with Paul, "I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake."

That's why we exist. So let's do it for the good of our neighbors, and most of all for God's glory.