

**TUTORIAL**  
**7.17**

# The purpose for which we exist

This tutorial looks at the second and third questions under the area of *Life*: 'Are they gaining clarity about the true purpose for which they exist, and are they increasingly able to identify those things that hinder their life in Christ?' and 'Are they increasingly able to make good decisions based on their understanding of God's local and global purposes, and to use their time, money and other resources accordingly?'

## Last time

We asked ourselves just what a deepening relationship with Jesus looks like and noted some things that the New Testament says about this. We concluded that we'd see things like: a sense of purpose, inner strength, stability, authentic understanding of Truth, ability to help others know Jesus more, thankfulness and a sense of hope in eternity.

We also talked about how the ingrained habits of *self* and *other* dependence don't automatically stop when someone is born again. Believers need to learn and practice the reality that in Christ they have died and risen again, newly created, specially designed for a life of trusting Him.

Finally, we reminded ourselves that valid change in behaviour for believers doesn't come from their own effort, but as the Spirit uses Truth to change their thinking and values.

## The second question under "L" for *Life*

- Are they experiencing a deepening relationship with Jesus, learning to depend more completely on Him in different areas of their lives, and gradually seeing their values and behaviour change as a result?
- Are they gaining clarity about the true purpose for which they exist, and are they increasingly able to identify those things that hinder their life in Christ?
- Are they increasingly able to make good decisions based on their understanding of God's local and global purposes, and to use their time, money and other resources accordingly?

- Are they learning to shape the *form* of what they do to serve whatever *function* they are convinced will lead to the *fulfillment* of God's objectives?
- Are they growing in their commitment to reproducing the life they have in Christ, are they equipped with the resources and skills to do so, and are they prioritizing opportunities where there is real need and hunger?

Back in Tutorial 7.12, as we considered the second question under "I" for Identity, we noted how closely interwoven *identity* and *purpose* are. Who someone believes they are plays out in what they assume their lives are all about. We can state it another way: what people do, what is valuable to them, how they spend their time and energy...these things say a great deal about how they see themselves in their spiritual, physical and relational "world". Also whether they see themselves only as inhabitants of this finite, temporal universe or of something larger, transcendent, and continuing, even eternal.

To help us think this through, let's imagine the different responses we'd get if we asked people under various worldview labels the question, "Why do you exist?" (We should acknowledge that the labels might not be the ones some of the people themselves would use or be comfortable with.)

An *individualist* might say something like: "I exist to be successful - as I define 'success' - to express and to please myself."

A *Muslim*: "I exist by the will of Allah, to serve him."

A *relativist*: "To be free of intolerance and to celebrate diversity."

A *tantric Buddhist*: "The question is meaningless and unhelpful."

A *scientific naturalist*: "I exist as the result of chance and natural laws in a closed system."

An *animist*: "To maintain harmony between the living and dead, the physical and spiritual worlds."

A *consumerist*: "To get everything I want, to be comfortable and to be entertained."

A *New Ageist*: "To find the God within and to be fulfilled."

Someone who sees themselves as a *victim*: "To find healing and freedom from pain."

A *Vedic Hindu*: "I, if there is even an 'I', exist to find self-realisation through becoming one with Brahman, the Universal Being."

Admittedly this was not a real survey - we cheated by setting it up ourselves - but it should serve to point out that when someone is asked the question, "Why do you exist?" their pre-existing worldview forms the ground from which they reply. The fact that many people never consider the question at all might represent intellectual laziness, but it's often just as much the result of a subconscious worldview commitment *not* to wrestle with all the implications of existence. Also, it's worth noting that the worldview of most of our fictional respondents shaped not only how they answered, but also how they understood the question itself. Most, if not all, were actually responding to,

“What or who has caused you to exist?” or, “What do you do with your existence?” Those are obviously valid questions, but they are derivatives of the primary issue - the real reason we exist.

## Why do we exist?

We know that the true ground for answering the question of why we exist lies “outside” (i.e. in time, space and scope) of our finite lives, in the primary existence of the Three-In-One relational, communicating God. It’s our Creator’s glorious, gracious and righteous purposes flowing from who He is, that give meaning to human existence. And for us as re-born children of God, the “why” of our existence can only accurately be answered against the backdrop of Golgotha and Gethsemane. Christ’s sacrifice and victory, along with His Spirit’s presence, is also the basis for the Church’s existence.

Okay, so those are existential truths that no believer or church would argue with. But as a measure of how effectively Truth is impacting a context, our second question here under “L” for “*Life*” is meant to help us picture something more than just theoretical or doctrinal statements, the kind of points that are made in a sermon. They cannot remain as truths or beliefs held in some conceptual category but have to play out in real life. “Why do I exist?” or “Why do we exist as a church?” is a question that should be asked and answered in the normal course of events on a regular basis. And from there, spin-off questions, “So why in this particular place and time?” “Why particularly *us*?” and, “Are we actually fulfilling the purpose He has us here for?” Whether or not an individual or church wrestles with those kinds of questions on a regular basis is itself an indicator of maturity.

And how would we hope to see those questions being answered? Well, first of all, it would be enormously encouraging to hear the answers framed by God’s *Word*; by a sense of their place within His redemptive Narrative - past, present and future. “God has made it very clear to us through His Word why we’re here. He has a specific purpose for us, just as He did for the Israelite nation, just as He did for the early believers in Jerusalem, and then the churches in Ephesus, Rome and elsewhere. We’re here as a continuation of what Jesus initiated and then passed on to the apostles.” Secondly, it would be a very positive sign if responses to those questions also included mentions of *Identity*, “We’re ordinary, needy people through whom God chooses to demonstrate His grace. We exist here as worshippers of God. We understand that we’re here to reflect His light in the darkness.” Thirdly, we’d be heartened if there were references to the whole area of *Discipleship*, “We exist here because our Master placed us here at this time in history. We exist as His disciples to bring others into the same relationship with Him. Our purpose is to follow Him and represent Him in this community and out into the world that He loves.”

What would represent a further level of maturity is if they are (as our second question under “L” for *Life* puts it) “increasingly able to identify those things that hinder their life in Christ.” It’s certainly wonderful if an individual or group of believers can describe with real clarity the reasons they exist in the ways we’ve just imagined. But an equally vital next step is being able to self-evaluate - with the Holy Spirit’s help - and identify those areas that represent the greatest challenges and obstacles to them actually doing what God has made them for. Sometimes it might simply be more teaching and equipping that is needed. Or it might just be that more time, patience and growth is required. Of course it’s always accurate to say that more faith, greater dependence on God and deeper certainty about His promises is needed. Often, as we’ve discussed previously, the greatest challenges are represented by habits of life that have been brought over into the new life in Christ. And then there’s the whole range of obstacles presented by the values of the surrounding culture. Maybe the wrong people are having too much influence, or there’s a culture of gossip, rebellious attitudes, or personality conflicts on the leadership team. In truth, the list of things that can hinder an individual or group of believers’ life in Christ is endless. But the point is that the ability for an individual or group of believers to self-assess and identify where their greatest obstacles lie, what might be tripping them up, what areas need attention, what is distracting them...the willingness and ability to do this is a real hallmark of maturity.

## Some extra questions

To go along with the second question under *Life*, ‘Are they gaining clarity about the true purpose for which they exist, and are they increasingly able to identify those things that hinder their life in Christ?’, we can also ask:

- *Do they have a growing desire to understand why God has placed them in their particular place and time?*
- *Is their perspective of why they exist being shaped by God’s Word, His view of their Identity, and by the Discipleship relationship they have with Jesus Christ?*
- *Are they learning to evaluate, with God’s help, how well they are fitting into the purposes God has for them, the immediate challenges they face, and the areas that need to be adjusted to fulfill those purposes?*

## The third question under “L” for *Life*

- Are they experiencing a deepening relationship with Jesus, learning to depend more completely on Him in different areas of their lives, and gradually seeing their values and behaviour change as a result?
- Are they gaining clarity about the true purpose for which they exist, and are they increasingly able to identify those things that hinder their life in Christ?

- Are they increasingly able to make good decisions based on their understanding of God's local and global purposes, and to use their time, money and other resources accordingly?
- Are they learning to shape the outward form of what they do, to genuinely reflect the inner reality of the life they have in Christ?
- Are they growing in their commitment to reproducing the life they have in Christ, are they equipped with the resources and skills to do so, and are they prioritizing opportunities where there is real need and hunger?

The previous question under “L” for *Life* considered how clear an individual or group of believers might be about why they exist. We did touch on some practical indicators but on the whole it was a theoretical understanding we reflected on. But in this, the third question, we want to focus on some of the more tangible results in the lives of God's people as they glimpse the scope of His purposes and the part He invites them to play.

## Making good decisions

Growing maturity never involves a decrease in the dilemmas or difficult decisions believers face. But the longer they walk with the Lord the deeper marked, and the more easily followed, are the tracks they use to seek His will and come to appropriate conclusions. As we picture the effective impact of God's Word, or if we're in a situation where we need to evaluate what's already happening, the way people go about making decisions presents a vital sign of health and growth.

We know this from the rest of life. One of the features of adolescence is apparently haphazard decision making. A mantra of many parents of teenagers is, “What were you thinking? Or weren't you thinking at all?” The specific instance they're being roasted for (or, depending on who's telling the story, receiving “constructive input” about) - e.g. how they spent their money, where they chose to go, who they were hanging out with, why they put something off - is being held up as evidence of them not thinking. Of course they *might* have thought briefly, but what's questionable is how careful and valid their thought processes were. They're being charged with choosing selfishly, prioritising wants over real needs, valuing immediate gratification over long-term gain, or being influenced by peer pressure over family values. They started life, like all infants, by responding to the world around them in ways that were completely spontaneous, instinctive and related to immediate necessities. Now into their second decade, their world has expanded, but according to their parents they are still making some random, selfish and ill-advised choices. Their perspective needs to grow so they make decisions based on realities beyond themselves, the present, the immediate, the opinions of whoever they happen to be with. In fact, we can say that the process of becoming more mature is learning to make decisions on an increasingly wider and more solid basis than is currently the case.

For believers and the churches they are part of, this widening perspective, in the words of this third question under *Life*, is “an understanding of God’s local and global purposes”. The *understanding* we’re picturing here isn’t theoretical but a real-life, real world, rubber meets the road, embracing of those purposes in mind, heart, and will. It’s the map on which they habitually locate themselves and navigate by. It most certainly involves overwhelming gratitude for His intentions for them personally, but in their expanding view they see themselves in their setting as people who benefit from His grace so they can share it with others. Like Paul of Tarsus and his companions, they are grasping the fact that God has shone His light into their hearts not only so they can feel its warmth and comfort but so that others will be drawn to Him, the Light of the world, as well. And that realisation begins to actually shape the way they make big and small decisions.

In the passage (2 Corinthians 4) where the apostle uses his famous “clay pots” metaphor, it’s in the context of him reflecting on what motivates his church planting and nurturing team to share God’s Word. They don’t believe God has shone His light into their hearts just for their own benefit. It’s also about Him using them, in all their weak humanity, to shine His light out to others. And that perspective has been costly in some very real, tangible ways. It has meant them giving up what feels familiar, comfortable and secure to go through experiences that are unsettling, painful and very dangerous. But they are making their decisions in light of something infinitely bigger and richer than what is right in front of them here and now. By faith they’re seeing the message of God’s grace going out to one community after another until the job is done. And they look forward to a day when they’re standing among all believers, including their friends from Corinth, before God’s throne enjoying His presence with them.

As we look for evidence of the impact of God’s Word in the choices of individuals or the corporate decision-making of a group, it’s not always going to show itself in dramatic, watershed changes of direction. A much more likely, and in the end probably a more healthy, picture is gradual progress with some missteps and poor decisions showing up here and there. But what we hope to see is people increasingly bringing an awareness of God’s purposes and the part He might have for them into the frame as they determine priorities, allocate resources and choose directions.

## Some extra questions

To go along with the third question under *Life*, ‘Are they increasingly able to make good decisions based on their understanding of God’s local and global purposes, and to use their time, money and other resources accordingly?’, we can also ask:

- *Are they learning to recognize how personal and cultural preferences can exert a subtle but powerful influence on the directions their choices take them?*
- *Does their decision making process involve them regularly asking God how He wants to involve them in the things He's doing in their immediate vicinity and beyond?*
- *Is their relationship with Jesus and growing familiarity with His perspectives having an observable impact on major life-changing decisions as well as everyday priorities and choices?*

The following two stories are fictional, but the circumstances are real:

My name is Jiao, and my husband is Feng. We come from a large industrial city in north-eastern China. We both graduated from university and Feng's economics degree prepared him to oversee the finances at his father's ceramics factory. I gave up my career in advertising after the birth of our son, Liang. We became believers before we were married through the outreach of a house church and have been active members since.

Some months ago Feng ran into a former classmate that he'd lost touch with, but who was back home for Spring Festival. Later, over lunch at our favourite dumpling restaurant near the river, he told us that he's living down in Sichuan province, working among minority people there. Up 'til now, I guess we'd assumed that pretty much everyone in China can speak Mandarin and so could hear the Gospel if they wanted to. But since talking with that guy we haven't been able to get it out of our minds...to think that millions of people in our own country are cut off from the Truth.

In fact, we've started talking with the leaders at our fellowship about the possibility of moving to the south-west to work with Feng's friend. They were cautiously encouraging, but it was a totally different story when we mentioned the idea to our parents. Wow! We probably should have known the reaction we'd get. At first they refused to believe it, then they got angry. My mother wouldn't talk to me for days. And it has been tense with Feng's dad at the factory. They've said things like, "How could you even think about taking our only grandson away from us? It's barbaric down there, not even civilised. You'd waste the education we paid for. You'll die there, and then who will look after us in our old age? You don't love us." On and on! We don't like to upset them but what can we do? And actually, there is some truth in what they say. There are some real difficulties we'd face in terms of educating our son in an undeveloped region like that. And then of course there is the reality of paying the bills, and health insurance...so many challenges.

But then we look at the pictures our friend has been posting on Qzone (like FaceBook) of minority people in the mountains with their traditional dress. And we remember his description of how much they need to hear about Jesus, and

the changes he's seen among the few he's been able to share the Gospel with now he knows their language. We're asking God what to do. Should we take the safe, secure route that is expected of us by our family and friends? Or are God's plans for the world more important?

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Our combined leadership team meeting this morning was pretty intense. Three of us were the first ones who moved with our families eight years ago to plant a church in this rather depressed area of Glasgow, largest city in Scotland. At the beginning it was just us and two single mothers from the council estate, what we call a *housing scheme*. We met in a living room, but we quickly outgrew that and had to rent a room behind a travel agent's office. God blessed by bringing new people to faith, and we had to move again. We've been in our current spot for nearly four years. It was a filthy old building, formerly a print shop that we were able to buy for next to nothing and clean up after we got rid of the machines.

Actually, the building featured in today's discussion. The thing is, even though it has more than enough room, it's less than ideal in a number of ways. It's tucked away down the end of an alley in an industrial area. It would take a lot of money to make the outside look presentable. And it is cold and draughty in winter, pretty expensive to heat.

So there's a push from some on the church staff to move again. They feel in this location we're only appealing to a particular segment of the society. And there's some truth to that. Our church body certainly has a high proportion of underprivileged and new migrants. There are not all that many stable families represented. The advocates for moving want to buy a property and develop a purpose-built facility in a better suburb a few miles away so that we can appeal to a wider range of people and so we'll be able to be a more visible presence in a community.

But some of us have serious concerns. We feel a move to that area could alienate some of those who have been part of the church for years. They might not feel comfortable in that kind of setting. And we tend to believe that the church gathering is not really the place for evangelism. But without doubt the biggest issue is money. A move and building project would mean going into debt and tying up most of our funds for the next ten years. It would curtail some of the community welfare projects we're currently involved in. And, on paper at least, we wouldn't be able to financially support two of our families who've been talking about getting involved in a ministry to asylum seekers in Edinburgh, or a single guy who wants to get training to work in Africa.



Neither side doubts the other's sincerity, but we definitely see things differently. We all want to please the Lord and see His kingdom expanded, but how can we determine which way to go?



## DISCUSSION POINTS

*The purpose for which we exist*

1. Imagine, after being in China for three years studying Mandarin, you meet Jiao and Feng at their fellowship. Over lunch at their favourite dumpling stall they explain their dilemma and ask for your counsel as a foreign believer. What would you say to them?
2. If you were part of the leadership team from the church plant in Glasgow, which side of the debate do you think you'd support - staying in the current premises or moving? What reasons would you give?



## ACTIVITIES

*The purpose for which we exist*

1. Imagine that the leadership team from that church in Glasgow has invited you, as an objective facilitator, to help them move beyond the deadlock they find themselves in. What truths and principles would you remind them about? What steps would you suggest they follow in coming to the right decision?