

As a young lad, I never wanted to be anything but a farmer. When I went to school, I actually did well at school. But my plan was, I was going to leave school after grade 10, and go to Ag College... And numerous teachers over the years, pled with me to re-think that plan – in their eyes, I should go and be a doctor or a lawyer or something...

But I was wired to be a farmer. I loved the rural life; I loved agriculture; I loved the variety:

- *Making stuff;*
- *Fixing stuff;*
- *Operating machinery;*
- *Physical work;*
- *Working with livestock;*
- *A bit of shearing & crutching;*
- *Managing the farm plan, to work with the season you've been dealt;*
- *The practicalities of tying it up with a Cobb&Co Twitch, to keep the show on the road;*

Everything about farm life, I loved it. I couldn't think of anything else that would give me the satisfaction...

And so, that's what I did: After Grade 10, I went to Ag College for 2 years, and then I came home to "Tenomby" (family farm). And life was pretty-much as I'd planned it...

But 4.5 years later, my world fell apart... A real estate agent knocked on the door, and asked my parents the question, "Would you consider selling your farm?"

And within a few months, it was gone... I felt like my whole world had been ripped out from under me... I'd been working

on station hand award wages. I had no financial means of buying my own farm... At this stage, interest rates (depending on how much capital you had behind you), were around about 18-22%. My dream of having my own farm, was gone.

And, unless you understand the connection a farm boy has with the land, you're not going to understand the grief I felt. I wept a lot of tears. I put on a brave face and continued on, but I was broken...

*That was one of the worst times of my life. There have been other times that were just as bad... But for me, that was **one** of those crushing times.*

Hind-sight's a wonderful thing. Because I can now see, that that 'crushing time' for me, has served to advance the Gospel. (It took a while, but eventually it happened)... And sometimes, some of the most painful experiences we endure, we search for a reason; And we cry out in those times of distress, and we plead for them to be taken away...

For some people, they view any time of distress as something for God to rescue us from, so that we can prosper again... - and they have the attitude that, "If only you have enough faith, you won't **have** to suffer anything..."

Well apparently Paul didn't get that MEMO. Today, Paul shows us how times of distress, are often opportunities and the means, by which God advances the Gospel...

And, I'm pretty sure, that if my Mum & Dad didn't sell our farm all those years ago, I'd probably still be on "Tenomby"; And I'd like to think that I'd be a successful farmer.... But I wouldn't have been preaching the Gospel (almost every week) for the last 15/16 years. And (God willing) will be, in the foreseeable future.

Paul said to the Philippian church:

¹² I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel,

What had happened to him? Well, Paul was in prison. He was in prison for the sake of Jesus. And, I don't think that this is a case of "Every cloud has a silver lining" – you know how some people always have a need to try and find the good because the bad doesn't make sense to them... Well, we won't always know...

In hindsight, we can see that this was God's plan. Paul's imprisonment, **did** serve to advance the Gospel. And even **Paul** identified a couple of ways that the Gospel was being advanced, but he had no idea, just **how much** his imprisonment, was going to advance the Gospel through the centuries and the millennia. ...

So, what could Paul see? Well, being in prison, he was guarded by the imperial guard – Roman soldiers... And of course, they saw Paul as **their** captive, but in Paul's view, he had **them**, as "**his** captive audience"... As the Imperial Guard were rostered in and out of guard duty, he had lots of people to

share the Gospel with... And they knew the conviction that Paul had (in the truth of the Gospel)...

Paul was demonstrating the difference between a preference and a conviction... A preference is something that you'll do if you have a choice (without too many negative consequences) – A Conviction, is something you'd die for – a conviction, is something that you'd go to prison for...

And Paul had a conviction in the truth of the Gospel, and in the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. And with a conviction like that, **nothing** would deter him from his mission...

What's the Gospel for you and I? Is it merely a preference? Or is it a conviction? Is the Lord Jesus Christ, someone you'd go to jail for? If you stood before a firing squad, and were told to denounce Jesus or die, would you denounce Him??? Would you say to yourself, "I'll still believe in my heart, but with my mouth, I'll denounce Him, to save the lives of me or my family"... That's the difference between a preference and a conviction.

And Jesus calls disciples of 'conviction'... He couldn't have been clearer. He said:

Matthew 10: (ESV)

³⁷ Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. ³⁸ And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy

of me. ³⁹ **Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.**

That's a picture of discipleship with conviction... And a people of conviction, are the best witness to the truth of the Gospel..

In prison, Paul had become a picture of discipleship (as Jesus described it). And imagine if you were one of the imperial guard – and it was your duty to guard the Apostle Paul for hours... It's a wonder the whole imperial guard didn't **all** become disciples of Jesus... They didn't only hear the word he preached – they saw the conviction by which he lived it.

The second observation Paul made, was the way his imprisonment, emboldened **other** disciples of Jesus...

If a Christian leader folds under pressure, so will many in the church. But when a disciple of Jesus remains strong, and firm in their faith/conviction (and this endures through every persecution and hardship), this inspires us to follow Jesus too, doesn't it???

Paul noticed this – he said: **most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.**

Do you remember when Ting Ting shared her story last year, about being a Christian in China,,,, didn't that increase our boldness??? (at least for a while)

Didn't we say to ourselves, "These people risk a lot to follow Jesus... Especially the leaders in her church, risk jail for preaching the Gospel and baptising in the Name of Jesus... And here we are, we're scared to be embarrassed, because we might feel a bit uncomfortable, or we might make somebody else feel a bit uncomfortable..."

But when Ting Ting spoke, didn't she put it all in perspective for us? Weren't we emboldened, "Well, if the persecuted church are willing to go to prison for preaching the Gospel, We should just jolly-well 'get over' being embarrassed, and being afraid for no good reason".

Isn't God wonderful... Those who sought to stifle the Gospel – they put Paul in prison, to try and deter **other** disciples of Jesus from preaching the Gospel... And it back-fired on them. It gave other Disciples of Jesus confidence to speak the word without fear... And next week, when we study V19-30 we're going to talk about **why** they had no fear... But that's next week...

So, Paul could see how his imprisonment served to advance the Gospel. But what he couldn't see, is how it would **continue** to advance the Gospel today.

- Ephesians;
- Philippians;
- Colossians;

- Philemon

All of these letters, Paul wrote while he was in prison... He had plenty of time on his hands. He had churches to communicate with. And so he wrote letters (filled with Gospel and theology), and we still have them today...

Righto:

For a lot of us, it's a big step in faith, to begin to understand how 'bad can work for good'... It's a big step of faith, to start to understand verses like **Romans 8:28 (ESV)**

²⁸ And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

Alright, that's a big step in faith, when things are going a bit tough, we have faith that all things (even these bad things, are going to work together for the good of me)...

And sometimes people try to clutch at straws, so they can come up with the answer, "I need to know what this good thing is." I need to discover the wonderful thing that happened to me (through the bad), because God's making everything work together for my good...

e.g. Somebody might come up with: My house burnt down. It was terrible. But the insurance built us a new and better house...

That's a silly example, but you get the point: We look for some kind of personal benefit (financial/physical/personal advancement), that advances **our** well-being... (Looking for

something that will justify all the hardship we've been through)

But Paul's situation here, stretches us, to understand this in a whole new way:

Romans 8:28 (ESV)

²⁸ And we know that for those who love God (**us**) all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

- What good??? Who's purpose???
- It's for the good of the Gospel...
- Who's purpose? It's for God's purpose.

Alright, this takes us to a whole new level of faith... We need to get **out** of our temporal, earthly way of thinking (temporal simply means temporary – things that will pass away. **Not** things of eternal significance.) And we move to the eternal...

And when we are in Christ – when we are **united** with Christ, we share His eternal perspective. What is good for the Gospel, is good for us, even if it means death... We need to open our eyes to the things of God, instead of being caught up in the temporal. With an eternal perspective, what's good for Christ, and what's good for the Gospel, is good for us...

And when we realise this, the old worldly way of looking at things – it is so hollow... Why do so many Christians, make a big deal, about having faith for things that are going to pass away, instead of fixing our eyes on things that are **unseen** – things of eternal significance...

2 Corinthians 4:16-18 (ESV)

¹⁶ So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. ¹⁷ For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, ¹⁸ as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

OK:

So, in his imprisonment, Paul could see the good happening – the Gospel's being preached... But although it's good, there is a bit of a glitch. Not everybody who preaches, are preaching with good motives... And I think we'd all agree with that:

Some are in it for:

- their own glory;
- to make money;
- for the power / prestige;
- for the influence;
- acclaim

But what I really struggle with, is even though some people are preaching the Gospel with wrong motivations, Paul is rejoicing, because at least the Gospel's being preached...

Now, I had to chew over this for quite a while.

¹⁵ Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. ¹⁶ The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defence of the gospel. ¹⁷ The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict

me in my imprisonment. ¹⁸ What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretence or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice.

So, I read over that (many times),,, And the more I did, the more I realised the masterful way that Paul was able to both encourage, and give a warning, at the same time... Let me explain that:

Some people (Let's call these ones "the Goodies") – the Goodies, were preaching the gospel out of love. Out of love for what? – Out of love for Paul? Probably.

But more so, out of their love for Christ, and the love of His Gospel. These ones knew that Paul was in prison, for his defence of the Gospel.

The Goodies realised that Paul's imprisonment, was a mark of God's approval,,, because Jesus said that His disciples would be thrown in jail.

But, the baddies, were preaching out of envy and rivalry / selfish ambition / insincerity / masking their true motivation...

With Paul locked up, others saw the opportunity to build their own profile. They saw the opportunity to step in, and to take the positions of authority... And back when we studied 2 Corinthians, we could see how some false apostles were claiming that the persecutions that Paul suffered were evidence that God didn't approve of Paul as an apostle (maybe this is what Paul had in mind)...

And they were vindictive toward Paul... They wanted to **afflict** him in his imprisonment. And I think “inner distress” is what they had in mind – to somehow cause Paul distress by their rise in popularity through usurping Paul’s position of leadership ...

Alright, so the Goodies were emboldened to preach because Paul’s conviction inspired them. And the Baddies were emboldened to preach, because they used their preaching as a ‘mask’ or an ‘excuse’ to achieve their own selfish ends...

Let’s face it: Some preachers have an almost celebrity status – in their own congregations – in church world... And some people really enjoy that celebrity status, and some seek it.

But the thing that really ‘gets me’ here, is Paul’s attitude ... that in every way, whether in pretence or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice.

Now, I’ve gotta confess, Paul’s a bigger man than me... I find it hard to rejoice, when, through wrong motives, the Gospel is preached, and a church grows... I’ve seen it happen, over and over again,,,

Where a man’s ambition (ambition of a church group) is to build an image of success, by building the biggest, flashiest church that he can... And yet, in the preaching, some turn to Jesus... For some, they may **have** fallen for an empty; truthless; self-centred gospel (which isn’t the Gospel at all,

and not be saved).... But for others, it's been real... And they've truly found salvation in Christ...

So, what do **we** learn from this??? Well, this is why I reckon it's quite 'masterful', what Paul says here. There is a message here, for those who (like me) have concerns about the way the Gospel is preached out of wrong motives.

But there is also a message here, for those who have come to know Christ, through exactly that sort of preaching.

Whether a **true** Gospel is preached, or whether a **false** gospel is preached, when a person discerns the **true** gospel (through the Word of God), and the Holy Spirit does **His** work in their heart, their response, is a response to **God**, and it's a turning to **God** – not a turning to the preacher or to a church...

Do you hear what I'm saying?

*On one of the major inland highways in NSW (Dubbo/Coonabarabran/Narrabri/Gunnedah???) there's a billboard with a picture of somebody with matchsticks holding their eyes open, and says something about driving tired/need a rest or something. And it's an ad for a motel... The motivation of this clever advertisement, is entirely self-serving: Are you too tired to be driving? Come and stay at our motel... But even though its **motivation** is self-serving,,, I wonder how many lives have been saved because someone's seen it, and decided to have a bit of a camp on the side of the road, before they do the next 5hr leg of their trip...*

Selfish motives, but a good thing comes of it...

Now, let's bring it back to the Gospel. Regardless of the motivation of the preacher, and sometimes regardless of the appalling version of the Gospel that might get preached,, sometimes, people have a true conversion experience to Jesus Christ... And we rejoice.

- Do we rejoice in a false gospel being preached? No, we don't.
- Do we affirm and support preaching with insincere motives??? No we don't.

But we **do** rejoice when despite this, someone encounters God, and gives their heart to Him...

Now, for those of us who preach, it pushes us to consider, "What's **my** motivation for preaching?" Is it out of love – Christ/Gospel/the lost...

Or do I sound all righteous, and **tell** people my motivation, but with the inner self, it's actually a mask for a more self-serving motivation. More about:

- image;
- vain glory;
- acclaim;
- our own sense of self-worth...

So as preachers, let's question our motives, and search our hearts...

But it also pushes those of us who **don't** preach, to consider something else:

“Be glad when we hear the Gospel being preached... But be careful which horse we hitch our cart to”... Do you hear what I'm saying???

“Be glad when we hear the Gospel being preached... But be careful which horse we hitch our cart to”...I don't want to be listening to someone who's preaching is motivated by selfish ends. Or worse still, such as the case that Paul was dealing with, I don't want to be listening to somebody who's preaching is motivated by 'sour grapes'...

“I've gotta build my church bigger than that church – that'll show 'em.”

Alright, to those who believe, we follow **Christ** – we are disciples of Jesus Christ – not of a man...

Sometimes (probably because I'm known in the community, and Bush Disciples isn't), but sometimes I've heard this church referred to as “Michael's church”... This isn't my church. Bush Disciples isn't Michael's church... It belongs to Jesus... And you are the church. You belong to **Jesus**. You follow **Jesus**. You don't follow me. You and I, follow Jesus together...

So, rejoice when you hear the Gospel preached, but be careful what horse you hitch your cart to... Be hitched to Jesus, and see where He'll take you... He'll take you on a wonderful journey of faith – far greater than any man will.

Let's pray:

Lord Jesus Christ, we want to thank You,
that You bring into being,
and You rule, Your church.

Lord, we give You thanks that Your Gospel has been
preached, and we have heard it.

Some of us have responded to the Gospel, as it was preached
with love and sincerity...

Some of us have responded to Your Word, even though it was
preached with questionable motivations...

But Lord, we want to thank You, that in Your grace, You took
Your word, and You made it powerful in our hearts...

That we would repent of sin, turn to You and become Your
children...

Lord, give us wisdom, to follow You and to be witnesses for
You, with the pure motivation of Love.

Lord, may we (in this church) never be motivated by
insincerity, but by Love.

Lord, we pray for the persecuted church.

We pray for all those who are imprisoned for the sake of Your
Name,

Keep them strong, that they would never deny You.

And Lord, by their conviction

and their obedience to You,

may they embolden us,

to speak Your Word without fear.

And Lord, strengthen us,

that we would be disciples of conviction,
who would follow You, no matter what.

In Jesus' Name, Amen.