



GOSPEL ON THE GO

*Jeff Peabody
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In these economic times, they say any job is a good job, because there just aren't a lot out there. But I'm not so sure about that. I heard about a man this week who just got a new job this summer that I don't know if anybody else would want.

His name is Farah Ahmed Omar, and in June he was appointed as chief of Somalia's navy. Now as you know from the news, Somalia has a terrible problem with pirates off their coast that run havoc with all the ships that past that way. They board and loot vessels with abandon, because there has been nobody patrolling the seas to stop them. So Omar's primary task as navy commander is to get a handle on the piracy, which in and of itself would be daunting. But what makes his job a terrible job is that Somalia's navy doesn't have a single navy ship and Somalia's navy doesn't have any sailors. And Omar himself hasn't been to sea in over 23 years.

But he still sees the glass half full. He told reporters that if they give him a year and the right resources, he will be able to eliminate the piracy problem. Now that's optimism for you. One year to do away with the whole problem. I would like to hear exactly what his plan is. Maybe we'll check in on him next summer and see if he's looking for a new job with bigger challenges.

Omar's positive attitude toward his terrible job reminds me of Paul, because Paul was facing some equally ridiculous challenges. We're looking at his letter to the Philippians, which he wrote to them from jail. We know from the book of Acts that several things led up to his being thrown in a Roman prison. Problems started in Jerusalem when he caused a riot. He might have been released but he opened up his mouth and appealed to Caesar, so he had to be sent to Rome. On the way, there was an assassination attempt made on his life. Then the ship he was in wrecked on an island. Then he was bitten by a poisonous viper and finally he lands in jail again.

All of this is while Paul is trying to do his job of being God's missionary, out preaching the gospel. It's starting to make the Somali navy job look pretty good. But Paul isn't fazed by it at all. He tells the Philippians:

Philippians 1:12

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

Really?? I look at his life and go, “What are you talking about, Paul? You’ve been chased out of town all over the place, you’ve almost died on more than one occasion, you’re on lock down –can you really say that’s helpful?”

And he says, yes, REALLY. I think he put the really in there because he knew it sounded like he was just putting a positive spin on a bad situation. Humanly speaking, the circumstances he faced should have shut down or at the very least slowed his efforts. They should have discouraged him, but instead he says, “No – really. What has happened to me has enhanced my work rather than detract from it.”

We’ll get into what Paul saw happening that convinced him this was true, but I think I need to pause here for a moment. As I was writing this sermon, I was mapping out where I wanted to go with the next section, but it felt like I was missing something. And as I thought about it more, what struck me was the need to talk in more detail about the idea of the gospel advancing, because I don’t think that’s the way most of us talk.

As you are probably aware, gospel is a word that simply means “good news”. When Paul talks about the gospel, he is talking about the good news that Jesus came, died for us, rose again and has restored the channels of communication between people and God. This message of hope and love is so potent and positive that it is referred to simply as THE good news, or THE gospel.

So far so good. That’s something we pretty well grasp. But Paul says this message is advancing. And he seems to be very excited about that. It’s good news that the good news is advancing.

But I don’t know that we normally relate so much to that concept. If we think about the gospel at all, we think about it as a story anchored to a fixed point in time, or those four books of the Bible called gospels. It’s a body of information that we either believe or we don’t. We don’t think about this good news as having a life of its own or an agenda of its own. It’s more static.

Maybe we even have a negative reaction to Paul’s statement because an advancing gospel sounds too militant. Maybe it calls to mind images of the crusades and forcing religious conformity down people’s throats as we stomp our way along. But that’s not the gospel.

Or maybe it conjures up all the guilt and fear we have about sharing our faith. We don’t like to think about advancing the gospel because honestly we aren’t very bold and the whole concept sounds intimidating. It’s something we’d rather leave to other Christians like Paul who seem to have the personality for it.

But frankly, I don’t think many of us even put that much thought into it. For most of us, the gospel is like a newspaper on our front porch. It’s data we take in. We pick it up and

read it, or we just throw it in recycling if we're not interested. If there's something we REALLY like, we may share it with a neighbor. But it's information we hold in our hand and use or ignore as we choose.

Paul's vision of the gospel is radically different. It's more like an ocean current such as the EAC – the East Australian Current. Scientists were thrilled with how the movie *Finding Nemo* captured the essence of the EAC, because it's something the fish use in real life. There's a scene where Nemo's dad Marlin and his friend, Dory are desperately searching for Nemo and need to get from the Great Barrier Reef down to Sydney, Australia. And they're told the best way to get there is to catch a ride on the EAC – the East Australian Current. The EAC is like this superhighway of rushing water that travels in an invisible pipeline along the coast of Australia, and the fish and turtles get swept up and transported by it as it moves along. And in the movie, Nemo's dad is nervous and unsure about being in this swirling vortex as he calls it. But he meets these turtles who thoroughly love the sensation of being carried and propelled by this endless moving water. They ride it effortlessly and treat it like a great surfing adventure.

The gospel moves like that big current. It's this rushing force that wants to sweep us up into it and take us along for the ride. It's way bigger than us, and it's going places. Paul is like one of those turtles who loves nothing more than riding with the current of the gospel and going where it is going, enjoying being carried along by it.

That's a far cry from feeling pressure to be the ones keeping it moving. Instead it's an invitation to jump in and experience it for ourselves. We join what God is already doing rather than trying to make something happen ourselves.

Part of why Paul is so passionate about it is because he has a sense of where this current is going. It's not just a random joy ride -- there is a goal or a destination that makes the advance of the gospel urgent and vital. Before going back to heaven, Jesus had told his disciples this:

Matthew 24:14

And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.

God is wrapping up history, and he is doing it by making sure the world gets his message of good news. That's why the gospel is advancing. The return of Jesus is tightly linked with the gospel's progress. So it's now wonder Paul would devote his life to being part of this great movement of the gospel.

Paul saw this movement as powerful enough to transform even the negative circumstances of his life into vehicles for its progress. The events that had happened to him were serving the purposes of the gospel – not interrupting it. Here were what looked like the least conducive conditions, and even still the gospel was unstoppable.

This to me is one of the most compelling aspects of the Christian faith. You may be able to explain away a lot of answers to prayer, but the spread of the gospel defies logic. All over the world, things take place that seem like they would block the expansion, but the opposite happens. Take for example the story of Madagascar. A missionary named David Jones first arrived in the country in 1816. It wasn't until 1831 that the first converts were baptized. By then a new queen had come to power who outlawed Christianity. Vicious persecution broke out. The missionaries worked feverishly to complete a translation of the Bible and got about 70 copies printed before being kicked out of the country.

In 1840, David Jones returned to Madagascar to try to intervene for the Christians. What he found was all the schools he started had been closed, the Bibles had been banned or burned and all the Christians were scattered. While he was there, nine of his converts were executed. He left and died a year later.

What he did not know was that the Christians who remained took their few precious Bibles with them wherever they went. And when missionaries were allowed to return to the country in 1861, they discovered that the gospel had spread so effectively that the number of Christians had grown to over 7,000.

Or take a more modern example like Cuba. The church was officially outlawed when Castro and the communist government rose to power. Christians lived under the threat of great persecution, from long prison sentences to not being able to attend university. Every effort of the government aimed to squeeze the gospel off the island. But it didn't work. Author Thomas Oden went for a visit in the mid 1990s. He was visiting Methodist churches there. When the communists took over, there had been 6,000 members of that denomination. By 1994, after 35 years of repression and resistance, there were over 50,000.

The gospel continues to advance, turning even hostile conditions into a seedbed for its own growth. God has a plan for his message to get out, and nothing will thwart his plans. He said as much in the book of Isaiah.

Isaiah 55:11

*So is my word that goes out from my mouth:
It will not return to me empty,
but will accomplish what I desire
and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.*

In other words, no bad news is going to outgun the good news.

So Paul isn't just putting on a brave face when he says, "What has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel." He means it. God can turn the most impossible conditions on their heads.

I'm a big fan of the Jason Bourne movies. Supposedly there's a fourth one coming out next year, and we may have to make it an official New Day activity to go see it. I love the whole concept of those movies. If Jason Bourne ever took one of Christopher Redner's strength-finder classes, I know that one of his strengths would be getting out of absolutely impossible situations using almost anything for transportation. If you follow him around, it's pretty amazing. He goes on this long police chase in the first movie, driving an old Mini Cooper. Sometimes he runs on foot. In one sequence he went from a foot chase to a tram and then onto a big boat carrying garbage. He's also escaped on motorcycles, a hijacked taxi and a train.

Everywhere he looks, he sees different modes of transportation, ways of moving beyond the barriers that surround him.

Paul saw vehicles for the gospel everywhere he turned, alternate modes of transportation for the gospel to keep moving. Things that you'd never expect God to use become exactly the right tools in his hands to take his message to a new place. There is never a dead end for Jesus.

What has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, he says. That poses a question: What has happened to us? What are the circumstances we find ourselves in, and how could they possibly advance the gospel?

With that question in our minds, I think we're ready to go back and look at what Paul saw as evidence that his circumstances were a help instead of a hindrance.

Philippians 1:12-30

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

As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly.

It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. The latter do so in love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice.

Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance. I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I

am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, so that through my being with you again your joy in Christ Jesus will overflow on account of me.

Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.

There is a man in Australia named Jeffrey Lee who could be one of the richest men in the world if he wanted to. He owns a piece of land that has huge uranium deposits underneath. But he has no interest in selling. He says, "I can go fishing and hunting. That's all that matters to me." Experts say there's up to \$5 billion worth of uranium there. But until he believes the good the money would do him is worth giving up the land, the resources will remain untapped.

There's a lot of value in our circumstances. We don't even realize what we're sitting on and how much it could do to advance the gospel. The things that have happened to us don't automatically become something God uses for his purposes – we have to be on board, or they will simply remain untapped.

The theologian Alec Motyer put it this way: "Many a Christian suffers without exercising any influence for good upon the world or the church. In other words, the fruitfulness, though it stemmed from Paul's suffering – his imprisonment, his bonds – is not explained by it. There must be some other explanation."

That explanation lies in Paul himself. If we look more closely at the ways Paul saw the gospel advancing through his circumstances, we discover that he was willingly cooperating with the Holy Spirit to make the most of where he was at. He believed God could use the hardships, and he acted in accordance with his beliefs.

There are at least three ways in which we can see the good news progressing because of Paul's imprisonment, and they are three ways we can look for it in our own lives as well.

Paul tells the Philippians,

As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ.

This is **the gospel advancing outward**.

When we talk about advancing technology or advances in medicine, we're referring to breakthrough ideas that are taking science into new territory where it hasn't been before. Probably the most obvious way we think about the gospel advancing is as it reaches new territory, coming into places and lives where it hasn't been presented before.

Paul found himself as a prisoner on standby to come before Caesar himself. That placed him in an incredibly strategic spot for rubbing shoulders with the palace guards. There were roughly 9,000 of these Praetorian guards – an elite corps who had a coveted job because of better pay and prestige. And as the different shifts were taking their turns with Paul, they were getting to know him and his story. And the more they knew, the more they talked, until finally the entire division knew about this man and why he said he was there.

Now they had to find this out some way. You don't know what a prisoner is in for just by looking at him. Paul could have just been quiet and kept to himself. But instead he chose to engage the people he was placed with. And all he uses to begin the conversation is his own imprisonment. He's not doing a Powerpoint presentation on why Jesus is the Christ – he's telling his own story. And he's telling it from the perspective of someone who is struggling – he's wearing chains. This adds so much credibility to his words, because people identify with fellow strugglers far more than with people who claim to have it all together.

When Karin's brother Jon returned from Iraq, he was asked to speak to a group of doctors about his experience. It was a large gathering of peers, an intimidating crowd of highly educated professionals. Jon had a choice as to whether or not he would include anything spiritual about his time of service. But to leave God out would be to only tell part of the story. So he took the bold step of sharing with the group in a simple, direct way how his faith had helped him through that incredibly intense experience. He said, "Everybody turns to something to get them through over there, and for me that was God." And when he was done, the entire room gave him a standing ovation.

The sharing itself wasn't hard or complicated – it was his own, authentic story. It's the fear that almost shut him down, and after the reaction of the crowd, that fear seemed so unnecessary, because people are not offended when you are talking about truth in terms of your own experience. There is nothing to feel threatened or defensive about when someone is sharing honestly and humbly about their struggles.

God has placed you in a unique situation. You are the only one with your particular sphere of influence. Think about who your relationships are with. Some of them are by choice and some are by necessity. Your kids are in the same class or on the same team. You both catch the same bus to work. Your workout schedules coincide at the gym.

God has also given you a unique story. You're the only one with your particular set of chains. To be a part of the gospel moving outward means looking for opportunities to share your encounters with God, to talk about your struggles with the people who you're stuck with on a daily basis.. Your being with them is more than coincidence – it's opportunity.

That's one way the gospel is advancing. Paul mentions another right after that:

Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly.

I refer to this as **the gospel advancing upward**. If the stock market is advancing, that means it is climbing, rising higher and higher. The gospel not only has an outward component – it has an upward component. As Paul’s fellow Christians see what is going on for him, they are encouraged, lifted up and buoyed by his example.

As a result, it raises their expectations of themselves. They begin to have more courage. They begin to talk about their own experiences with Jesus and they start feeling less fear. That’s the gospel advancing upward. As Christians rise to new levels of maturity, boldness and love, that is progress for the gospel.

Now Paul lets us know that he’s aware there are some less than scrupulous people in the bunch. Not everybody is truly doing it for the right reasons.

It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. The latter do so in love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains.

Then he says this:

But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice.

I think this is one of Paul’s greatest contributions to the upward advancement of the gospel, in that he refuses to get drug down into a witch hunt. He is not going to go around assessing each person’s motives and declaring who is okay and who isn’t. Imagine what would have happened if that had been what he did. Distrust would have run rampant. Bitterness and anger would have seized the day. And all the sharing would have come screeching to a halt.

Instead, Paul stayed above the fray and decided to keep the main thing the main thing – working toward the advancement of the gospel. And one way or another, that was definitely happening. So he chose to be joyful in that rather than worried and fretting over who might be doing what for the wrong reasons.

Now that Karin’s dad has retired, churches are lining up to ask him to fill in as an interim pastor for them. One group was interviewing him, and a man on the committee was grilling him for his opinion on this or that movement in Christianity right now, trying to get him to make a judgment on their value. But Karin’s dad said, “I believe that if our focus stays on the people who don’t know Christ, the gospel will advance and people will be caught up in the joy of God at work, rather than feeling glad for a moment that they’re right.” And the whole tone of the interview shifted as committee members recognized the need to stay focused.

Instead of looking for where we can poke holes, we need to spend more time affirming and taking joy in the good we see in each other. I had lunch with Jordy McCall this week, and he told me about an exercise the marriage small group did a couple weeks ago that I thought was just excellent. They took each individual in the group one at a time, and other people in the group would speak a word about them, something that they saw in them that they could affirm. After they were done, the spouses were challenged to think about how they could best support and affirm and rejoice over those good things they had heard other people observe about their spouse.

We so rarely celebrate the things we can rejoice over in each other, but it is such a huge encouragement when we do. That is the advancement of the gospel, because it is lifting each other up, recognizing what God is doing in each other and enabling each other to more fully know and live out who God made us to be. And that in itself adds to our ability to share more of our story with others.

Paul goes on and says this:

Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance. I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.

Here we have **the gospel advancing inward**. Again, Paul is talking about what has happened to him, but this time he is looking at it from a personal perspective. He mentions his own desire to be freed from shame and freed from fear. The gospel is doing an inner work on him – it's for his deliverance as well as anyone else's.

Paul attributes this kind of advancement to two things. First off is prayer. He knows that the Philippian church is talking to God about him, and he's thankful for that.

Secondly, the Holy Spirit is giving him help. He's not alone in his journey.

In some ways, as scary as it is to think of going outward with the gospel, it is even more intimidating to think of it going further into our souls. But that is just as much a part of the nature of the good news as anything else. It is constantly seeking territory where it hasn't been fully acknowledged, and we all have areas in our lives where we are not fully consistent with the message of the cross.

Like Paul, it begins with prayer. We have to ask God to come and do his work of freeing us from our chains. We ask him to free us from shame and fear. And we ask him to speak to us about our blind spots, the places we don't even know still need the gospel.

And the Holy Spirit will be our helper as much as he was Paul's. He will bring conviction where needed. He will give strength and courage where it is needed. And the

gospel will keep moving forward in us. Paul was convinced of that and stated it in the verse we read briefly last week:

Philippians 1:6

He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

Where is that work being carried on in me right now? Where am I needing to get on board with what God is doing? Is it in seeing the gospel advance outward? Who has he put in my circle, and how intentionally am I sharing my story with them? Maybe I haven't been doing much to see the gospel advancing upward in somebody else's life. Maybe I've been more of a critic of my spouse than rejoicing in the good I see happening.

What inward journey is God taking me on? Am I willing to go to him and ask him to show me what needs more gospel?

I come back to that image of the current, with the gospel flowing ever forward. As Stephen Curtis Chapman put it, we need to let ourselves be swept away in this holy flood.