

## 2CH Sunday at 7.30

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Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

### What is your passion

Presented by Alan Best

Good morning. I was privileged to visit Rio de Janeiro for a conference during the days leading up to the 2010 Football World Cup in South Africa. It was amazing to experience the build-up to the tournament. Wherever we went, there was no escaping the growing excitement in a football-mad city and nation. But the build-up was only a foretaste of what followed. How thrilling it was to be there when the Brazilian team played its first match. Green and gold decorations were everywhere and tens of thousands gathered on Copacabana Beach to watch the match on a huge screen and celebrate together. Businesses were closed in the middle of the afternoon, the streets were deserted and when the home team scored, fireworks erupted across the city.

As I witnessed first-hand, Brazil's passion for football, I found myself thinking about the things that fire our imaginations. This morning, I want to invite you to think of the things about which you are passionate. What is it that gets you up in the morning and fires your engine?

#### SONG

When we start to think of the things about which people are passionate, the list is apparently endless. Some are shared by many people, such as marriage, family, education, career, sport, recreation and travel. It is quite possible that there will be more than one of these about which many of us are passionate and this should not surprise us. After all, the good and wholesome things we share are gifts from God, and we can be certain that He is also very passionate about key aspects of life such as His gifts of friendship, marriage and family.

But as we know, there are countless other things about which people are passionate – if something can be experienced, studied, collected, grown or raised, we will find somebody who is passionate about it. This provides great variety in life as we mix with those whose passions are different from ours.

But we know that there are other aspects to this picture. Sadly, there are people who are passionate about things that are evil or addictive and destructive – they dominate their lives and threaten their futures and those of people around them.

Then there are those for whom a passion for anything in life is only a distant memory as they live, to use the words of Thoreau, “lives of quiet desperation.” For them, it seems that every aspect of life only brings disappointment, frustration and despair. Two of the saddest words must be “if only” and I am certain that some of these people would say, “if only I had followed my passion” – but instead, they have found themselves trapped in employment for which they have no passion or interest.

Another group that comes to mind is the millions of people whose passion for life has been stolen by others or circumstances beyond their control. Some have been robbed of their childhood or cruelly exploited, and others live in crippling poverty. The tragedy is that so many in our world would love to be passionate about something, indeed anything, but the best they can hope for is survival for one more day.

Most of us can be passionate about the important things in our lives and we can also afford the luxury of being passionate about other things that bring us pleasure, but not them. There are many shocking facts that we cannot afford to ignore. More than 3 billion people live on less than US\$2.50 a day and approximately 50% of the world's children live in poverty; 1.1 billion people have inadequate access to water and 2.6 billion lack basic sanitation. According to UNICEF statistics, 24,000 children die each day due to poverty; approximately 158 million children aged 5-14 are engaged in child labour; more than 300,000 are exploited as child soldiers; and 2 million children are believed to be exploited through prostitution and pornography.

As we think about the awful reality facing so many around the world, we must acknowledge that it can be too easy for us to enjoy the passions in our lives but forget about people for whom life offers so little hope and joy.

## SONG

We cannot afford to ignore the plight of those who live lives of misery and deprivation. In the Old Testament, the prophet Micah reminds us that God expects His people to help the downtrodden and poor with these words:

*He has showed you, O man, what is good.  
And what does the LORD require of you?  
To act justly and to love mercy  
and to walk humbly with your God.*  
(Micah 6:8)

Jesus loved, respected and helped the poor and marginalized. He even healed lepers who were the outcasts of society. On one occasion, when John the Baptist sent some of his disciples to Him to ask whether He was the promised Messiah, Jesus told them:

*"Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor."*  
(Matthew 11:4-5)

In his letter, James gives us this clear instruction when he writes:

*Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.*  
(James 1:27)

As we think about our response to these truths and the things about which we have the privilege of being passionate, I want to remind us all that there is a passion that is greater and more important than all others. I am talking about our love for God and the pursuit of His glory. In Matthew 22 we read that Jesus was once asked a vital question about the most important thing in life.

*One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"*

*Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'" (Matthew 22: 35-39)*

Love for God should be our greatest passion, and it will result in love for others. The reality is that the other passions that occupy our interest, time and energy will not last forever. Sporting teams will come and go, hobbies will lose their appeal, careers will end, physical beauty will fade, youth will give way to age and good health will fail, relationships and families will change, and death will eventually separate us. But God is always worthy of our love and praise, and throughout the pages of the Bible, we learn that He never changes. In Psalm 102 we read:

*In the beginning you laid the foundations of the earth,  
and the heavens are the work of your hands.  
They will perish, but you remain;  
they will all wear out like a garment.  
Like clothing you will change them  
and they will be discarded.  
But you remain the same,  
and your years will never end.  
(v. 25-27)*

And God the Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, was described by the writer to the Hebrews like this: “*Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever*” (Hebrews 13:8).

## SONG

As we think about loving God above all else, we are reminded that we cannot overstate the importance and value of belonging to His kingdom. Jesus told two short parables to demonstrate that the kingdom of heaven is worth more than anything else we might ever pursue or anything it may cost us. In Matthew chapter 13 we read:

*"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.*

*"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it. (v 44-46)*

When love for God and His kingdom is our passion, we will seek to bring honour and glory to Him. This love will produce obedience to Him, as He commanded His disciples. It will include loving others and we will express this by doing all we can to meet the needs of the poor, marginalised and oppressed.

Another result of our love for God and His kingdom will be a passion for His Word. The Bible is His story – it reveals His character and His dealings with His creation – it is His love letter to mankind, and throughout, it points to Jesus Christ and the salvation He came to bring. This powerful book is like no other, and the writer to the Hebrews gave us a wonderful description of this truth:

*For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. (Hebrews 4:12)*

Passion for God’s Word is expressed within its pages, especially by the psalmists. For example, in Psalm 119 we read:

*I delight in your commands  
because I love them.  
(Psalm 119: 47)*

*Oh, how I love your law!  
I meditate on it all day long.  
(Psalm 119:97)*

*I obey your statutes,  
for I love them greatly.  
(Psalm 119:167)*

I trust that these verses express the way we feel about the Bible – not only because it is a unique book filled with exciting events and beautiful language, but because we have experienced its transforming message. I am reminded of the hymn that begins:

*Break Thou the bread of life, Dear Lord to me,  
As Thou didst break the loaves beside the sea;  
Beyond the sacred page I seek Thee, Lord,  
My spirit pants for Thee, O living Word.*

If these words are true for us, we will be passionate about the spread of the Bible's Good News. This Good News is for sharing and we will be keen to be involved because people everywhere need to hear that God offers us the forgiveness of sins through Jesus' death on the cross. If we are passionate about this Gospel message we will be like the Apostle Paul who was committed to it and convinced of its power. In his letter to the Romans he wrote:

*I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. (Romans 1:16)*

## SONG

As we draw this time to a close, I want to return to the question with which we started: What is it that gets you up in the morning and fires your engine?

I trust that we've all been able to answer positively as we've remembered valuable passions that enrich our lives, especially our relationships with family and friends. I also trust that our relationship with God will be our most important passion, so that we will be able to say with the psalmist, King David: *I love you, O LORD, my strength.* (Psalm 18:1)

Once again, I am reminded of a well-known hymn, and as I conclude with the words of the first two verses, I pray that they will express the response of our hearts:

*My Jesus, I love Thee, I know Thou art mine;  
For Thee all the follies of sin I resign;  
My gracious Redeemer, my Saviour art Thou;  
If ever I loved Thee, my Jesus, 'tis now.*

*I love Thee, because Thou hast first loved me,  
And purchased my pardon on Calvary's tree;  
I love Thee for wearing the thorns on Thy brow;  
If ever I loved Thee, my Jesus, 'tis now.*