

# Paul's U-Turn

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[ 0 : 00 ] Amen. Thanks so much, Gary, for teaching us that song. As he mentioned, we're hoping it really dovetails well with this series that we started last week in this letter of Galatians. So if you've got a Bible, then let me invite you to turn there now.

If you don't have a Bible, you can grab on on the pews or you can scan there, scroll there on your phone. And we're in at Galatians chapter 1, verses 11 to 24 this morning. Here's why this passage should make us sit up and take notice. This here is quite possibly the most remarkable transformation in the life of a human being that there has ever been.

Here's the headline that sent shockwaves through the religious world of the first century. Here's the jaw-dropping news that was doing the rounds in Jerusalem.

Here is your extra, extra read all about it moment. That's all about the stunning U-turn that nobody saw coming.

[ 1 : 08 ] And you'll see this headline in the words that are in the speech marks at verse 12. Do you see it there? Here's the headline. This is Paul's story right here of how pre-Jesus, he was a bigot, he was a fanatic, who was both wholehearted in his devotion to Judaism and in his persecution of the church of Jesus Christ.

And this is about how Jesus changed his life and sent him in a completely new direction. But this is about how Jesus changed his life and sent him in a completely new direction. But this is no autobiography here.

Here's what he's aiming at. You're taking notes, here's the note, okay? The big reason why he's writing this is really so that we know that we can trust his gospel.

He wants us to know, he wants the Galatians to know that we can trust his gospel. If you were here last week, you'll remember the reason Paul is writing to these Christians who are in this region of Galatia.

Try to put it in red there, okay, so you can see it. He's writing because certain people have infiltrated the churches there and their intent on undermining Paul and his gospel.

[ 2 : 55 ] If you remember last week, we thought about Paul's gospel is the one, the message that's totally centered on a totally sufficient Jesus. Say that again. It's totally centered on a totally sufficient Jesus.

Someone becomes a Christian, we thought about this last week, by grace alone, through faith alone, in Jesus alone. The big headline from last week's sermon was that Jesus plus nothing equals everything.

Jesus plus nothing equals everything. And these Paul's teachers are seeking to undermine Paul's message. Now, come with me to the text if we want to just get a run up from last week.

See the third word that he uses there at verse 1. Paul, an apostle. And we thought last week about how in using that word, he's telling us that he's someone who's received his message from Jesus. He's not received it secondhand. He's not received it hearsay. He's received it from Jesus himself. We thought last week that your source really matters.

[ 4 : 01 ] Remember this? In our world of AI, in our world of deep fakes, in our world of fact checking, where you can find anything online. Reliability is absolutely everything.

To be an apostle, Paul writes that word. Here's what he's saying. I got my message straight from the horse's mouth. But these false teachers are saying to the Galatians, are you sure that you can trust him?

Are you sure that you can trust it? Is it not just another conspiracy theory? Life is full of conspiracy theorists. Again, you look hard enough online, you will find anything out there.

History is full of conspiracy theories. Is this a classic example of what Mark Twain said? That a lie can travel halfway around the world before the truth has even put its boots on.

And of course, the irony of that is that many believe that Mark Twain wasn't the one that actually said it, which I think makes the point wonderfully. But a lie gets out there.

[ 5 : 12 ] A lie causes havoc. And is Paul's message just another example of that? The guy's just a few degrees off. Just missed the mark. Just by a few inches.

So what Paul is doing here, his intention is to defend his gospel. And that's why he's telling his story. He's defending his gospel. See him right at verse 11. I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel I preached, this is the one that they heard, is not of human origin. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it. Rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ. So everything he's about to say is to prove that thesis. So we're going to see him point to two big reasons.

Why? Why? Friends, why they? Why us? Why we can trust this message? What we're going to do is see these two things that he says, and then we're really going to think about two quickfire things that we can take from this.

Are you up for it? Here's the first thing that he says. While you can trust his gospel. Number one, he says, trust the transformation. I think Paul's big point is this.

[ 6 : 23 ] What else explains the total transformation of his life other than the truth of his gospel? Now see him speak so honestly and vulnerably, and with great humility from verse 13.

Look at it in the text. I find this so incredibly refreshing and instructive. Somebody that's up for telling you about all the mistakes they made in life? About how they got it wrong?

I was on holiday a few months ago, reading Michael Parkinson's autobiography, rock and roll in my life, okay? Reading this guy's autobiography. The old BBC chat show host. And his son writes the foreword.

About his dad. And he says this. In the foreword. This got me. He said, of course, every autobiography is written through the unreliable filter of personal remembrance and self-justification. Friends, how many autobiographies that you see in Waterstones and Blackwells that people release, the subtitle of those autobiographies is effectively, here's why I did what I did.

[ 7 : 34 ] And here's why I was right in doing what I did. If you're thinking of a former Scottish First Minister who's just released a book, you said that, not me, okay?

Sorry, not sorry. But it's true, isn't it, friends? If we were writing a story about our lives, it would be a self-justification one. Paul is completely the opposite.

What comes naturally to us is to play the defence. What comes naturally to Paul is to tell you every single way that he got it wrong in life and how Jesus has totally given him life and transformed it. And it's just incredibly refreshing. Whoever you are here today, whatever you think about the God of the Bible, what do you make of that? Now, come with me. See this in the text.

He's telling us about his old way of life. See it there. What was his chief ambition from verse 13? See his choice of verb there.

[ 8 : 33 ] Again, attention to detail in the text, really important. What did he want to do to the church? He didn't want to debate the Christians. He did not want to oppose the Christians.

What's the word in the text? He wanted to destroy the church. Because in his mind, in his former way of life, these Christians were making a mockery of everything that he and his people stood for. He was like one of those Daleks in Doctor Who. Exterminate, exterminate. In fact, the first time you meet him in the Bible is at the end of Acts 7.

And he's holding the coat of an angry mob and he's egging people on in the stoning to death of the first Christian martyr, a man named Stephen.

So he wants to destroy the church. It's not just going on up there. He's active in it, you see? But a parallel track in Paul's life, running alongside that desire to destroy the church, do you see it as well, was a desire to excel in Judaism.

[ 9 : 45 ] What does he tell us? That he tells us he was advancing beyond many of his peers. He tells us that he was extremely zealous for the traditions of his fathers.

And can I just pause for a minute and say it's really worth noting that word zeal. We're much more likely to talk about, I think, being passionate today.

But zeal is a word that the Bible uses and encourages us to be as Christians. People who are zealous. It's becoming a big prayer of mine. Lord, I realize I get excited about all the wrong things.

Would you make me zealous for your name and your glory and your gospel and seeing my life in the contours of that? Here's the thing though. Friends, we can be zealous about all the wrong things.

Political causes, career, grades, even church traditions. And so maybe here's a word in season for us who are here today, who are starting new seasons.

[10:55] Whether we're going to university, whether we're just coming back to university, whether we're going on to a new job, whether we're hitting a new season post-retirement, after work, whatever it is.

Friends, life will present you with all sorts of things that are worth being passionate about. It will say, here's all sorts of things that you can spend your life pursuing.

But this tells you that you can be zealous about all the wrong things. Be known as someone who's zealous first for the gospel. Wouldn't that be a wonderful life ambition?

Another way to frame the question is that what are you known for? I've learned that with kids, my kids. I can teach them all sorts of things, but do you know what they'll learn really from me?

They'll learn the thing that I'm excited about in life. Are you known as someone who is first and foremost zealous for the gospel?

[11:56] Paul says, I was zealous, but I was zealous in the wrong direction. It's almost like he's one of those wind-up toys that was really zealous this way, and God's just turned him and said, I don't want you to be unzealous, as it were.

I just want you to be zealous about the gospel. Here's the thing. If the careers teacher at school had asked Paul what he wanted to be when he grows up, there's no debate what Paul would have said. He wants to be a Pharisee, and he wants to be the best. He's not just the next big thing. He's not just the poster boy of Judaism.

He is on the fast-track program to massive things. Paul wants to plant his flag on the world.

Recognition, honor, status.

That was the future that Paul had for himself, and yet see that while Paul had one plan for his life, God had another one.

[12:59] See him begin to talk about his new way of life. Verse 15. See Paul talk about his calling. Paul encounters the risen Jesus on the way to Damascus in Acts 9, where he was going fully intent on causing carnage, and in that moment, everything changed when he meets the risen Jesus.

This is where he's got his gospel from. God had this plan in place for Paul. Do you see it in the text from verse 15? God did this plan in place for Paul before he was even born.

Now, I've done that with all of my kids. We've given them names. You know them from when they were in their mother's womb. You have plans for them. You have ambitions. You have prayers, things that you'd long for them to be true when they grow up.

But do you know what? You've got no control over it. How different then this God who has known Paul and who has called him, who set apart him for this work before he was even in his mother's womb.

How about that for a thought? Sure story too, if you're a Christian here today, we're not Paul. We are not apostles. But we have Paul's God.

[14:17] God thought of you and I way before you and I were thinking of him. You know, in our individualistic world, it can be easy to think that becoming a Christian is about taking Jesus into our lives.

Like an app that we download onto our phone. But the truth that this tells us is that by grace, Jesus has taken us into his. And Paul here is using the language of Jeremiah before him.

Notice the way verse 16 is worded. God revealed his son. And we'd almost expect him to say, to me? Yeah? But he says, God revealed his son in me.

He's telling us just how deeply impacted and gripped by this message he has been inwardly. And again, let me just say, friends, I recognize that there are many of us here today who are thinking through this Christian faith.

And thank you so much for coming. We love that you're here. You're in the best place to do that. To come to church, to think about these things. But can I just say that sitting in church or saying words may well be a great place to start.

[15:32] Singing hymns, singing truths. But that isn't the thing that makes you a Christian. In the same way that sitting in a garage doesn't make you a car.

Friends, we've got to put our faith in this Jesus. But Paul is saying that that gripping has led him to see his life in completely different ways.

This thing has gripped him inwardly. The question you've got to ask yourselves is Jesus, who he says he is? Has this message gripped you inwardly? Inwardly. Paul begins talking about his new commission in life.

Do you see it? Jesus has given him a completely new purpose. That is to take the gospel message to the Gentiles. And that word just means the non-Jewish people of the world.

Here's the thing, friends. We might be in tiny, tiny little font in that word Gentiles here. But look hard enough and you'll see yourself.

[16:36] We're in this verse. God's plan to bless the nations of the world. We're here. But here's the thing, riddle me this.

With all Paul's credentials, his training, his background, his CV, would it make more sense, do you not think, to send him as the missionary?

Not to the Gentiles, but to the Jews. You ever thought about that? Is he like, poor football manager won't say any names, who's playing someone out of position.

Is that this God? Would Paul not be the perfect horse for the Jewish course? Here's what I think. It's just a thought.

Haven't thought about this for a long time, friends. I think, and Kate, it was so helpful reminding me of this on Wednesday, I think this is just how God works.

[17:46] His wisdom baffles human wisdom. His logic is so far above our logic. He does things.

He uses the unexpected. He uses the person who's, in a sense, got not a lot to offer to leave us in no doubt that God is God and all glory goes to him.

And so, don't doubt this morning that God has plans and purposes for where he's put you. If you're thinking, what on earth am I doing here? Friends, his logic is so much greater than our logic. So, number one reason why you should trust my gospel, says Paul, is trust the transformation.

And really quickly, here's the second thing Paul says, just really simply trust the timeline. See the end of verse 17. After meeting Jesus, Paul tells us that he soon went into Arabia.

Now, what was he doing there? All sorts of theories as to what Paul was doing, but I think what seems likely is that he just retreats, which means that he goes away for a time of solitude and reflection.

[19:01] Paul, Jesus has just turned Paul's world completely upside down, inside out, back to front. He's got to get away just to think about everything that's gone on.

And yet, after three years, verse 18, he goes up to Jerusalem, where he spends 15 days with Peter. Now, I would have loved to have been a fly on the wall in that conversation. Clearly, they're not talking about the weather when they get together, but here's the point of all of this.

If the accusation against Paul was that he nicked his gospel from others, but a four attempting to plagiarize it and pass it off as his own, 15 days.

15 days. Why is that significant? Well, they say it takes 20,000 to 25,000 hours to truly master a subject. Have you heard of that one? 20,000 to 25,000 hours to truly master a subject.

[20:06] Even to write a dissertation, it takes you students, what, 18 months to do that? No way was 15 days long enough for Peter to give Paul a crash course in the gospel and the whole framework of doctrinal thinking that goes around it.

Can he do that in 15 days? And yet, 15 days is long enough for both Peter and Paul to realize that they were preaching the same gospel.

gospel. Not in a great minds think alike kind of way, not in a what a lovely coincidence kind of way. No, this is same source equals same gospel.

And this takes me to root two really quick fire bits of application for us. Here's number one. Friends, number one, don't doubt the reliability of the gospel.

As we have it in the Bible, don't doubt the reliability of the gospel. I love, and you'll notice I've gone at pains to point out all the little details there. I love all the details that we get here.

[21:15] 15 days, Arabia, Peter, so we get the timeline, we get the places, we get the people. Do you know I love that? That the Bible isn't full of people speaking in riddles wrapped in myths presented in enigmas.

It is real places, real people, real history. I love how earthy a book the Bible is. What are these false teachers trying to do here with Paul?

They're trying to drive a wedge between what he is saying and what God is saying. To relegate him from primary source to secondary source.

From authoritative teaching to opinion peace. Friends, what we can take from this today, all these little details, is really simply this.

The gospel that has come to us via Paul all those years ago is legit. And I think that's the primary purpose of him doing this.

[ 22 : 17 ] You can trust my gospel. And here's number two. Friends, don't underestimate the power of your story. If you're a Christian here this morning, then you have a wonderful story to tell.

It might not be dramatic, but make no mistake that every single conversion is a miracle. For do you not love the subtle yet profound way that Paul has crafted verse 24?

When we think about the story that we're telling, he says, not that people praised Paul because of God. Paul's not interested in man's praise. What's he writing?

People praised God because of me. That matter, order, really matters. People praised God because of me.

Is that not freeing to know when we share our story that it really isn't about us? Because when it's all about Jesus, friends, the pressure's off. We can talk about our mistakes when we recognise that it's all about Jesus.

[ 23 : 26 ] We can know the freedom of talking about struggles when we know that it's all about Jesus. Because Jesus is all sufficient.

Friends, you've got a story to tell. A story that's all about him. How many of us became Christians through the personal story of a friend? I'd imagine it's probably about 90% of us, right?

Couple that with the fact that according to the recent stats in the quiet revival paper that's just been produced, that 34%, that's over one in three non-church-going 18 to 24 year olds, albeit in England and Wales, say that they would attend church if invited by a friend.

See the combination of the two of those things. Can I suggest that there's never been a better time for us to tell our story? Friends, don't underestimate what God can do through the simple stories that show that you and I are wholly and joyfully, totally dependent on Jesus.

Really simple lives that leave people asking, how on earth do you explain that? I'll just tell you something that happened to me recently and this passage made me think of it.

[ 24 : 52 ] Just as we close, you know, Alex and I had dinner with my friend Class and his wife Beth a few weeks back. They used to be part of this church family about 10, over 10 years ago and they moved out to Wallyford and are now part of Wallyford Community Church.

When I first met Class in this church, he wasn't a Christian. Respectful, I think, but sceptical. Had a lot of questions. And all of our chat used to be about career, houses and stakes.

Loved his stake. I love my stake. We always used to talk about stakes. He becomes a Christian. Long story short, when I saw him a few weeks ago, his plate is full, right?

We, full of career, pressures at work, full of kids and all the things that are going on there. all the things that we could have talked about. All he wanted to talk about was the gospel.

And his desire to witness at work. And his concern for a friend. And his desire to be a good and godly dad who loved his kids and brought them up in the faith.

[ 26 : 05 ] And his church family, about how God is at work there and how God is providing miraculously for them. And all the people that are coming in from the outside, the impact they want to make on the community. And see at a time when I was feeling a bit flat, wow, that was just what I needed.

And here's what I thought as I looked at him and as I listened to him. And I thought about the class that I first knew ten years ago. Only the gospel, as through it Jesus grips the lives of people deep down inwardly through the Spirit.

Only God could do that. What else explains it? The gospel that came to Paul and transformed Paul and has preached to the Gentiles, went to the nations, has come to us.

How else do you explain it? I'll tell you how you explain it. This gospel is legit. Father, we simply pray this morning, as your word continues to work in our lives, we pray Lord that what we see not, you would show us.

Father, what we have not, you would give us. And what we are not, you would make us. Father, thank you for your love for us.

[ 27 : 35 ] And we thank you that we can trust this gospel that has come to us. Father, we thank you that you are the God who is in the business through the gospel, through the Lord Jesus, through your spirit of giving life.

And so Lord, I pray that you would just be with us as we finish our time together. Lord, that these truths really would grip us inwardly. And so Father, we thank you for your grace to us and we pray all of these things in Jesus' name.

Amen.