

The Gospel of Grace Transforms

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[0:00] I'm going to turn now to our Bible reading for this morning. And Joel is continuing through the letter to the Galatians. So we're in Galatians and chapter 1, page 972 in the Vista Bible.

So do grab a Bible if you need to. There's some at the side there or at the back. Do please grab a Bible. And we're picking up where we left off last Sunday morning. So Galatians 1, and we begin at verse 11.

Galatians 1 and verse 11. The Apostle Paul writes, For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel.

For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it.

And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people. So extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers. But when he, who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone.

[1:30] Nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me. But I went away into Arabia and returned again to Damascus. Then, after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and remained with him fifteen days.

But I saw none of the other apostles except James, the Lord's brother. And what I am writing to you before God, I do not lie. Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia, and I was still unknown in person to the church of Judea that are in Christ.

They only were hearing it said, He who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy. And they glorified God because of me. Then, after fourteen years, I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me.

I went up because of a revelation, and set it before them. Though privately before those who seemed influential. I set before them the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles, in order to make sure I was not running or not run in vain.

But even Titus, who was with me, was not forced to be circumcised, though he was a Greek. Yet because of false brothers secretly brought in, who slipped in to aspire our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery, to them we did not yield in submission, even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you.

[3:08] And from those who seemed influential, what they were makes no difference to me. God shows no partiality. Those, I say, who seemed influential added nothing to me.

On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised, for he who worked through Peter for his apostolic ministry to the circumcised, worked also through me for mine to the Gentiles.

And when James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave me the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.

Only they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do. But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned.

For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles. But when they came, he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by the hypocrisy.

[4:30] But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, if you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?

Well, amen. And may God bless his word to us. Well, a very good morning, folks, and to those joining us from Bath Street and Queen's Park.

If you give your Bibles open to Galatians 1 and 2, they'll be great. Well, we live in a world that is bombarded with information, flooded with messages, don't we?

News alert, forwarded WhatsApp links, messages, calls, claims, opinions. And yet we know that not every message is trustworthy.

Some things sound true, but they aren't. Some things feel authoritative, but they mislead. And some things appear spiritual, serious, even biblical, but actually they quietly steer us away from the truth.

[5:53] When the source is unclear, well, then the message becomes uncertain. And that's what we see happening to the churches in Galatia. A group of troublemakers have arrived, and they were whispering doubts about Paul.

Is he really an apostle? Is his message the whole message? Why settle for the gospel light, when you can have the gospel plus?

And some of the Galatians going about their slow, mundane, ordinary day-to-day, well, some of them have begun to wonder, can we really trust the gospel that Paul has preached?

Can we stake our lives fully on it? Well, in Galatians 1.11 to 2.14, we see Paul answers those questions, and in four movements.

Four movements with one single purpose, to demonstrate that the gospel he preached is trustworthy, that it is divine and non-negotiable. Because it is God's gospel, it has the power not only to recreate the sinner, but also to restore the believer.

[7:02] So then first, look with me at Galatians 1.11 to 14. And in these verses, we see Paul begins by underlining the gospel he preached is a gospel received from God.

It is a gospel not of men, but of God. He wants to give clarity, certainty, that his gospel isn't just a human construction, but it is the message about God himself, given from God, that comes from above.

And because its origin is divine, so its authority absolute. Look with me at verse 11 and 12. For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel.

For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. Now Paul was quite deliberate here, isn't he?

As we saw earlier last week in verse 1, well now again he affirms that the message he preached isn't something he made up. His gospel is not man-made, but God-given.

[8 : 10] And you can imagine why. Remember the troublemakers from Jerusalem? Well, their tactic was subtle, but effective. Yes, Paul, yes, Paul, he's a good fella.

He's well-meaning, he's sincere, he's honest. But let's not exaggerate. Paul's not exactly the real deal. He wasn't trained in Jerusalem. He didn't sit under the apostles.

So actually his message is thin. The message he preached is the gospel light. Whereas we, from Jerusalem, we have the gospel plus, the full package, the real deal.

So you really want to be listening, to be following us instead. What better way to undermine the gospel than to undermine the gospeler? And we see the tactic is still the same today, isn't it?

Smear, tarnish the reputation of a gospel minister, or of any Christian believer, and how easily you weaken or even silence their witness. But Paul's point is clear.

[9 : 10] You may attack the preacher, the believer, but you cannot touch the message. Because the authority rests not in the charisma of the messenger, their reputation, ingenuity, but in the God who reveals it.

And to underline that point, we see Paul turns in verse 13 to 14 by giving us a self-biography. But the point is not in the biography itself, but rather is to show that no human message could possibly have brought such transformation.

Only a gospel that is divine could produce such an astonishing transformation. So look at me at verse 13 and 14. For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it.

And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people. So extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers. Well, that's interesting, isn't it?

Paul doesn't describe his life, his former life, as having just been on a slight spiritual wonder, as though he merely drifted off course and was a little confused. But no, rather his behavior, his identity, his very zeal was directed towards a determined and organized, passionate hostility towards God and the people of God.

[10 : 33] Look again at the strong verb he uses. I persecuted violently. I tried to destroy. Extremely zealous was I.

That's precisely what we see in Acts 8 and 9, where Paul was described to be ravaging the church, dragging men and women into prison, proving threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.

And the great irony, in fact, the frightening reality, was that Paul was completely convinced that he was serving God, that he was in the rites. But in reality, it was a kipmim into silencing the gospel, crushing the church.

And that's sobering, isn't it? Because it shows us that one can be passionately, energetically committed, but actually be profoundly wrong.

A Christian may be feeling wonderfully enthusiastic about ministry, but the manner they pursue that zeal, their posture, their actions, their stubbornness, well, it may in fact end up damaging rather than developing, dividing rather than strengthening the church.

[11 : 44] It may be clothed in the appearance of serving Christ, but actually undergirded by selfish motivations. So we see that zeal is only safe, it's only right, when it's shaped, guarded by, and rooted in the truth.

But that's just a side point. Back to Paul's argument. Do you see the force behind his reasoning? Paul was saying here, if what troublemakers claim is true, that my gospel depended on human insight and ingenuity, then I would not have invented it.

Because look, I was doing everything I can to eliminate it. Paul's former life was testimony that he would have been the least likely candidate for fabricating a gospel message as such.

one that exalted Christ and instead dismantled the ceremonial law. But as we see, that is not the case. The gospel had interrupted his life, confronted, contradicted everything that he stood for.

His former zeal made him the least likely candidate for conversion. And yet, when Christ revealed himself to Paul on the road to Damascus, Acts 9, well, he truly was transformed.

[12:55] And so all these serve to strengthen Paul's argument. Only a gospel that comes from God could take a man like Saul and turn him into Paul.

Only a divine revelation could transform a destroyer of the church into a servant of Christ, a persecutor into a proclaiming of the gospel.

Only a message with God's authority could overturn a lifetime of zeal and tradition and that is why his gospel holds such authority. Not because it's clever, practical, culturally appealing, but its authority lies in its source and the God who reveals it and the Christ who transforms it.

Paul's biography is a living proof of divine origin and divine power of his gospel. and there lies a real challenge and comfort for us, isn't it? Because first, it reminds us that no man-made gospel holds any authority.

No manufactured message has any power to answer human's deepest problem. It's easy for us Christians to think that perhaps a more humanistic approach to life is better.

[14:11] Maybe the answer lies in more self-help, religious performance, moral improvements, to be zealous as Paul was in his former life. But can you imagine if you were in Galatia back then and a brother came up to you and said, well, Joel, I've just completed the law of circumcision and boy, oh boy, I feel truly delivered from this present evil age.

Alas, I'm free from all the temptations, the guilt that weighs upon my heart. When we call the spade a spade, well, it helpfully reveals to us the absurdity of it all.

And yet, our human hearts are ever symptomatic of it, isn't it? Endlessly creative at reinventing new idols, new ways of trusting ourselves.

But no, if the gospel was of men, then its power would be dependent on our strength, our performance, our ability to keep it. And anything we add to the gospel eventually only becomes a burden that we cannot bear.

Not only was it utterly meaningless in the first place, but it ends up enslaving us. But we see at the same time there's real reassurance from Paul's biography.

[15:26] Because if Paul's violent opposition became the very canvas that God displayed his amazing grace, that no matter how sinful, how awful, how guilty you may be feeling about your past, your former life, well, you and I, we can be fully assured that nothing, nothing can disqualify us from the gospel.

That when we come to Christ in repentance and faith, there is no sin too dark, no guilt too heavy, no shame too deep. nothing can ever hinder and constrain the saving power and reach of the gospel.

The gospel of Christ who has given himself for our sins to deliver us from this present evil age. The gospel that Paul preached. That is the reassuring truth of the gospel.

So friends, chew on that. Digest that. But then next in verse 15 to 17 we see the second movement. And here Paul avers that the gospel he preached is trustworthy because his calling was from God.

His transformation, his calling did not arise from man's commission but was shaped entirely by God's sovereign initiative. Look with me at verse 15. But when he who had set me apart before I was born and who called me by his grace.

[16:55] Notice the transition Paul makes here. Having spoken about his past achievement, his former zeal. Well, Paul now turns almost as if drawing back the curtains to show us what God was doing all along.

And that is even before Paul drew his first breath, before he studied, trained, became extremely zealous for the traditions of his fathers and went around persecuting the church.

Well, God had already set him apart. God had planned Paul's salvation and ministry long before his actual rebellion. And how does God do that? Well, by calling him by his grace.

Grace. Not of merit, moral performance, religious pedigree, but God's gracious initiative. Paul contributed absolutely nothing except the sin that made the call necessary.

But also, what's most extraordinary lies here in verse 16, that God was pleased to reveal his son to me. Or perhaps more helpfully, as the footnote translates, that God was pleased to reveal his son in me.

[18:06] It wasn't just a mere great blinding light on the road to Damascus where Christ was revealed to Paul, was it? No, but Christ was revealed in Paul, in his inner man, and his heart, soul, and mind.

It wasn't just an abstract, impersonal, imparting of knowledge, but it's a deeply personal, dynamic, unveiling of Christ, the person of Christ.

A revelation that changed everything for Paul, recreating, reshaping him from the inside out. And to do what? Verse 16, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles.

So we see once a persecutor, now called to be a preacher. Once an antagonist, now an ambassador. But also in verse 16 and 17, we see Paul doesn't immediately rush to Jerusalem to seek instruction or approval, but instead he goes to Arabia and then back to Damascus.

Now, why mention all this? Well, I think it's because Paul wants them to see that the same God who revealed his son, who called him, would also then be teaching and shaping him directly through the gospel.

[19:25] Paul's message and ministry did not depend on human authority, but on divine initiative. So there was no need for him to rush to Jerusalem for approval, to secure credentials, to say, before he went out preaching, but rather the revelation of Christ itself was sufficient and all that truly mattered.

That God had set him apart, called him by grace, revealed his son in him, and would also be shaping, equipping him for the ministry which he had called him for.

And so I think tucked in Paul's testimony here lies a foundational truth for all believers. Because first, it reminds us that our salvation does not begin with our movement towards God, but by his divine initiative towards us.

As Paul quotes elsewhere in Romans 3, that there is no one who understands, no one who seeks after God. Well, if no one is seeking God, then salvation can and must only begin with God seeking us.

And that is the gospel that Paul preached, the gospel of Christ, in whom God reveals himself not merely to sinners, but in sinners. Christ isn't simply an idea to be understood, a figure to be admired at a distance, but he is a person to be received, revealed in us, and a person who transforms us.

[20:51] It reminds us that salvation is never the achievement, the reward of our spiritual, religious piety, but it's God's gracious work. But precisely because it is God who has started this work, we can therefore be absolutely certain, confident, that he will carry it on to completion.

Our salvation, justification, sanctification, from start to finish, is eternally secured in Christ. So isn't that liberating, comforting to be known, to be reminded of?

Perhaps you come here today feeling weary, worn down, struggling to persevere in your faith, battling your guilt, your shame, as you seek to follow Christ each day.

Well, the answer is not to look elsewhere for strength, not to look for some secret technique, something new to add to your faith. Real transformation comes not from us trying harder, striving harder, but by beholding Christ, the one who was sent by the Father, who had come willingly to give himself for our sins and has delivered us from this present evil age.

So friends, behold him, for when he becomes beautiful to us, then we see that sin begins to lose its appeal. When Christ becomes more precious, more dear to us, then obedience becomes joyful, less of a burdensome beauty, but more of a glad response to the one who has captured our hearts.

[22 : 29] That is the gospel at work, as it is revealed in Christ, in our hearts, of God's gracious initiative that recreates and restores the very gospel that Paul preached.

But thirdly, we see Paul's gospel is trustworthy because it is a gospel affirmed by the apostles. In this next section of chapter 118 to 210, through two visits to Jerusalem, Paul demonstrates that even though his gospel had not come from the apostles, well, it was nonetheless fully consistent with the gospel they preached.

That there was unity between Paul and the apostolic leaders in Jerusalem, contrary to what the troublemakers were claiming. Look at verse 18. Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and remained with him fifteen days.

This was Paul's first visit to Jerusalem after his conversion and after having preached the gospel for three years. But even here, the emphasis was on how brief the contact was.

Fifteen days with Peter, that's all. He didn't even see the other apostles except James. In verse 22 to 24, he clearly expresses the Judean churches had never even met him.

[23 : 50] He was still unknown in person. They had simply heard the report that he who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy. And the response?

Well, they glorified God because of me. not because Paul was impressive, but because the only explanation for such a transformation was the sovereign grace of God.

But Paul doesn't just illustrate his point through one brief visit, but he recounts also a second visit described in chapter 2 verse 1 to 10. And here he conveys the same vital point, that the apostles in Jerusalem not only recognized Paul's gospel, but they affirmed it without adding a single thing.

Look at verse 1. Then after 14 years, I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me. I went up because of a revelation and sat before them, though privately before those who seemed influential, the gospel that I had proclaimed among the Gentiles in order to make sure I was not running or had not run in vain.

That's quite clear, isn't it? Paul went to Jerusalem not because the apostles summoned him, called him, but God did. And what does he do? Well, two things.

[25 : 09] He brings Titus, a Gentile, along with him, and he sets before those who seemed influential the gospel that he was proclaiming among the Gentiles. And first notice verse 3, but told that Titus, who was with Paul, a Gentile, for he remained uncircumcised.

If the apostles were going to insist that Gentile believers needed to adopt Jewish practices, then this was the moment to do so. And yet, that was not the case.

In fact, as Paul puts it in verse 5, we did not yield in submission even for a moment so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you. He raises the issue, the necessity for circumcision, as enforced by the troublemakers.

troublemakers, it wasn't just a minor administrative matter, but it threatens the very heart of the gospel. If circumcision is necessary for salvation and sanctification, then Christ's work is insufficient.

And if the gospel becomes a Christ-plus, grace-plus gospel, then the truth of the gospel is lost, because that is not what the apostles imposed.

[26 : 22] And so we see Paul's gospel is still intact, affirmed. But also notice the phrase used to describe the apostles in verse 2, those who seemed influential.

We see that something repeated later on twice in verse 6, and we get a variation of it, who seemed to be pillars in verse 9 to describe James, Peter, and John. And I think that's deliberate of Paul, not because he's trying to make fun of the apostles, teasing their authority, like, oh wow, the influentials, but rather I think he was simply using the language that the troublemakers were throwing about to those who were questioning his authority, trying to undermine him, saying that Paul, while he isn't one of these influentials, but we see Paul, he plainly refutes.

Even if you were so bothered by these influential apostles, well just so you know, that even they recognize, and they confirm the gospel that I was preaching. In fact, verse 6, they added nothing to me.

Paul's gospel is full, sufficient, complete to begin with. But now, he also has the agreement of the apostles as well. Verse 9, when they preached the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me.

All of this underscores the main point. Paul's gospel is not man-made, it is not apostle-made, not tradition-made, but it is God-given, revealed in Christ, and sufficient.

[27 : 55] I mean, to be clear about that today, don't we? That the gospel revealed to Paul, affirmed by the apostles, preserved for the church, well, it needs no supplements, no add-ons, upgrades, but it is complete, sufficient.

And because it is complete and sufficient, well, you and I, we can have full confidence that it really does deliver us from this present evil age, that when it says that Christ has given himself for our sins, he really has.

When Christ offers us peace today, he does. We're not missing some part of salvation that is still hidden somewhere else. We don't need to revamp the gospel to make it more effective, but we can simply cling on to, trust, resting our eternal hope on this gospel, Paul's gospel.

Isn't that reassuring, comforting? But finally, in Galatians 2, 11 to 14, we see that Paul's gospel is trustworthy because it was the gospel that even the apostles were held accountable to.

If earlier, Paul had shown that his gospel was trustworthy because it was affirmed by the apostles, supported by them, well, here he shows that it's so trustworthy because even the apostles themselves had to submit to it.

[29 : 23] His gospel wasn't just some common ground to be agreed upon, but the bedrock of absolute authority. So look with me at verse 11 of chapter 2. But when Cephas, that was Peter, came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face because he stood condemned.

Now that's quite a striking and surprising exchange, isn't it? Paul confronting Peter, the Peter of Pentecost, the rock upon whom Christ will be building his church, Matthew 16, the acknowledged leader of the twelve, it's not the sort of scene that you would normally imagine or naturally raise up.

But yet, that's what Paul does here, to make the point of his argument. It was not because of a personality, personal rivalry between Paul and Peter, not because Peter had abandoned the gospel in his doctrine, but because of verse 14.

Peter's conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, because his behavior had contradicted the gospel. Verse 12 tells us plainly that before certain men arrived from James, Peter had been eating freely with the Gentile believers, an expression of the new unity that Christ has established, where there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, but all one body in Christ.

And yet, when these men arrived, Peter withdrew. Fearing them. A living illustration of what Paul warned earlier in chapter 1 verse 10, of seeking to please men rather than God.

[30:56] But it wasn't just Peter. Even the rest of the Jews were with him. Even Barnabas withdrew as well. Now you may be thinking, is there really a big issue in withdrawing?

Well, yes, because it implied that Gentile believers were not fully accepted until they adhered to Jewish practice. It implied that Gentile Christians had to become Jews in order to enjoy full fellowship with the Jewish Christians.

A behavior which again undermined the truth of the gospel. And so unlike earlier in chapter 2, 1 to 10, where we see unity between Paul and the apostles, well here we see an instance where the apostles were not in line with the gospel that Paul preached.

And yet, it was not Paul's gospel that got invalidated, had to be compromised, but instead Paul's gospel was used even to hold the apostles to account.

And I think there lies great confidence for us, too, even today, especially because we live in a world that is fascinated with the influential, the impressive, the celebrated.

[32:04] it. But Paul reminds us plainly here that even if your or my favorite, most trusted preacher, well, I don't know, that'd be William Philip, Paul Brennan, Phil Copeland, Josh Johnston, Edward Lobb, Andy Gamble, John Gamble, Sinclair Ferguson, I'm just name dropping at this point, or even an angel from heaven should preach a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, chapter 1, verse 8.

Something different to Paul's gospel, to God's gospel, then we must not listen, we cannot listen, because there is not another gospel, but there is only one true gospel, Paul's gospel.

And so being clear, confident about this, guards us. It keeps us from chasing any form of Christianity that might disguise, dress itself in spiritual language, but actually adds conditions to the work of Christ that distorts the truth of the gospel.

It reminds us that the power and authority lies not in personalities, however gifted, respected, prominent they may be, but it lies in the gospel alone. But also I think it helps us all to be realistic, to be realistic that we will all mess up.

I don't think Paul confronting Peter here was to condemn him as a failure, but to quote him as an example, an experience of what the real, genuine Christian goes through.

[33:33] A man who was having understood the gospel, preached the gospel, suffered for the gospel, and yet still needed the gospel at every step of the way. If that was true of Peter, the extraordinary, well isn't that much more true for you and I today, ordinary folks?

Christian maturity doesn't exempt any of us from failure, but at the same time there is no need to be alarmed or panicked, but we can take comfort knowing that the gospel that brought us in is the gospel that will bring us on.

And so even when we find our feet adrift, as they inevitably will at times, well the answer isn't to do anything extra, to compensate with our works, our efforts, but the answer is to return to the gospel, to humble ourselves before Christ, coming with empty hands of faith, believing and trusting that all that he has achieved, accomplished at the cross, is sufficient once and for all.

And as we do so, we find that God's mercy, God's grace, is readily available in our time of need. So brothers and sisters, as we draw our time to a close this morning, as we gather the threads of Paul's arguments in these verses today, well I wonder, do we too trust in Paul's gospel?

Do you? Is Paul's gospel the gospel that we are holding fast to? Not merely a gospel we articulate, but the gospel we truly place our confidence in?

[35 : 15] Is Paul's gospel the one that we will be willing to defend, even when convenience, comfort, opinion might draw us elsewhere? Well I hope so, I pray so, because Paul was clear, there is no other gospel but this gospel, the gospel that reminds us, you and I, we are not chosen because of any good within us, but because of his grace, the gospel that has not only saved us, delivered us, but also the gospel that continually, abundantly, freely sustains us.

So may this truth govern, direct our lives, our thoughts, our priorities. May we be a people who cling to it, not casually, carelessly, but with a firm conviction, ready to be corrected by it if necessary, willing to be shaped through it, and most of all eager to testify to the goodness and the glory of God who gave it.

let us pray. Heavenly Father, how we marvel at your grace as we learn of how your gospel was not only revealed to the apostle Paul, but had utterly transformed his life, turning him from someone who persecuted your people, an enemy of God, to one of the greatest preachers, proclaimers of the gospel message.

And a child of God. And how we thank you, Father, that the gospel you entrusted to Paul is the gospel of Christ, the same gospel that breaks into our darkness and overturns our self-reliance, the gospel that offers and brings true salvation and deliverance from this present evil age, as we believe and trust in Jesus.

Jesus. And so it doesn't matter how ugly our past might have been, how deeply we may fail you in the present, nothing can place us beyond the reach of Christ's redeeming work, for your grace is stronger, your grace is sufficient.

[37 : 27] So help us, Father, not only to marvel, but to stand firm, make us a people shaped by your gospel of grace and peace, and to live it up with integrity as we proclaim it, and strengthen us to defend it whenever necessary, so that others too may glorify you because of the work that you are doing in us and our lives.

For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.