



**Galatians 1:11-24**  
**The Gospel Changes Lives**

Summary: Total life transformation is possible through the gospel.

This morning, I have the privilege of announcing some very, very, good news. It has nothing to do with present politics or COVID, but if you understand it, it will shape the way you respond to both.

I get to declare the gospel – which is actually an old, old, English word meaning good news. We talk about it often around here, as we should, but this Sunday, of all Sundays, I get to share an especially encouraging aspect.

I get to share the fact that you can be totally and completely transformed by Christ. There can be, in fact, there must be, a new you and the you you used to be. There is a transformation that *all* Christians must go through. Many of you have, but no doubt some of you have not, and I get to tell you that if God is stirring you, agitating you, helping you see things about yourself that you don't like, it may be because He's calling you to complete transformation through the gospel.

We'll see that happen this morning through the life of Paul who went from being a persecutor of the church to a preacher of the gospel and had his life totally, completely, transformed by an encounter with Jesus – he had a before and an after, and friends, so can you...so must you.

So we read:

**Galatians 1:11** But I make known to you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. **12** For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught *it*, but *it came* through the revelation of Jesus Christ. **13** For you have heard of my former conduct in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and *tried to* destroy it. **14** And I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries in my own nation, being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers. **15** But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb and called *me* through His grace, **16** to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately confer with flesh and blood, **17** nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those *who were* apostles before me; but I went to Arabia, and returned again to Damascus. **18** Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and remained with him fifteen days. **19** But I saw none of the other apostles except James, the Lord's brother. **20** (Now *concerning* the things which I write to you, indeed, before God, I do not lie.)

21 Afterward I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia. 22 And I was unknown by face to the churches of Judea which *were* in Christ. 23 But they were hearing only, “He who formerly persecuted us now preaches the faith which he once *tried to* destroy.” 24 And they glorified God in me.

One of the most common tools in advertising is to use before and after pictures. This is what things looked like before we used this product, followed this plan, or purchased this service, and this what they look like now.



Your house needs renovation? You need a little Joanna Gaines and some Fixer Upper.

Saw your boat in half? Phil Swift can help you fix it with flex tape. You'll be able to use it again, even in shark-infested waters.



But what's the equivalent for your soul? Can you have a complete tear-down and rebuild of your heart, mind, goals, desires, ambitions, and values? How do you remodel your life?

The answer is, through the gospel – the good news that if you are tired of your approach to life, burnt out by it all, or frustrated, unsure of the path you're on, you can have a complete and total reset in Christ.

Jesus said *you must be born again*. And that process has nothing to do with your mom unless she's the one telling you about the gospel. No, this birth can only occur by the grace of God in your life. He must bring you conviction that things have to change. He must help you see that you are sinner – that whether it's on purpose or accidental, you're resisting or ignoring God, you're living for your own ideas and values, your own dreams and ambitions, and it has nothing to do with the God who made you and has a plan and purpose for you. You're busying trying to find meaning and fulfillment on your own.

And maybe that's actually what's so frustrating, you keep looking and searching and striving and you still haven't found what you're looking for. That was Paul before his conversion.

Sometimes we hear stories of people coming to faith in Christ and their life was a raging dumpster fire before their conversion. They were addicted, life was a mess, things were falling apart, their spouse was about to leave them or they were having suicidal thoughts and making final plans. And no doubt, God does show up in those moments. And if you're there, you need to know – God can pull you out, things really can change for you like they have changed for millions of people before you. For some people the gospel is their rescue from the pit, the thing that pulls them up out of the mess their life has become.

But last week I shared the fact that Mark Dever, a pastor up on Capital Hill once pointed out that we have to help people see that, at the end of the day, throwing your life away on a successful career is really no different, from an eternal perspective, than throwing it away

on drugs and addiction. Both the career-minded professional and the crack addict are using their lives for their own purposes, both are ignoring God, and within a hundred years, it is probable that no one alive on earth will remember anything about either of them except maybe their name in a record somewhere.

Before his conversion, Paul was on the power path – moving a hundred miles an hour, but actually headed nowhere. He said:

13 For you have heard of my former conduct in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and *tried to destroy it*. 14 And I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries in my own nation, being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers.

In other parts of Scripture we get more details on Paul's bio. He was born into a good family, went to a good school, sat under one of the most well-known and respected scholars of his day. And then, he had a good position in the religious hierarchy. He had all the right connections, an impeccable resume with checks in all the right blocks, and he was driven, a hard worker putting in the hours and getting things done, advancing faster and farther than his peers, exceedingly zealous. This man was going places.

Here in Northern Virginia we see a lot of people like Paul. People who feel like they have to have it all put together, and then, they have to hold it all together, and keep it all together. So you build and you build yourself and your image and your reputation and your career and then you have to maintain all of that and keep it going and growing. And friends, it can be exhausting. You can spend your whole life running and chasing, what?

Wouldn't it actually be a mercy of God to save you from all of that? To save you from throwing your life away by exhausting yourself and your family in the endless pursuit of the next project, purchase, or promotion, the next assignment, or whatever it is you think you have to do or need to get?

My friends, I love you, and that's why I need to you know – some of you are burnt out, stressed out, anxious, angry, or depressed about things that God isn't asking you to care about.

Not all movement is progress. God is calling some of you to stop and reconsider, are you really on the right path? Are you really pursuing the right things? I know you're getting after it; I know you're dedicated and diligent, I know you're advancing beyond your peers. But two questions: are you headed in the right direction, and are you moving at the right speed? Can you answer both of those with certainty?

That's a question for people who say they are a Christian as much as it is for those who say they are not. Christian, you can get off course too. You can start with the best ambitions, and slowly drift over time – isn't that the whole reason for this letter? Paul is warning the Galatians not to drift, not to add other things to the gospel, to stay close to Jesus and Him

only because God is calling us to a simple gospel that undergirds, directs, and supports our entire life.

And in order for that to happen, God first needed to completely tear-down and then rebuild Paul's life – they had demo day, and then it was a process of restoration and remodeling. God reassembled Paul's life piece by piece – putting everything back in the right order. And I want you notice – that was a very personal process. Paul says,

15 But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb and called me through His grace, 16 to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately confer with flesh and blood, 17 nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those *who were* apostles before me; but I went to Arabia, and returned again to Damascus.

Paul tells of his conversion as an act of sovereign grace. God had a plan for him before he was even born. That's actually not uncommon to find in Scripture. It was true of Samson who was a Nazirite from his mother's womb. Jacob was chosen over Esau in his mother's womb. Jeremiah was called to be a prophet before he was born.

But it's not just the spiritual big shots. All throughout Scripture we find this message – God knows us. Intimately and sovereignly. He knows the number of hairs on our head, the number of days we will live, and where we will live them.

Friends, you need to know that you are known by God. Even if you feel like He is silent, even if you feel like He is distant, the constant testimony of Scripture is: He is there, and He knows. He sees, He cares, and He has plans and intentions for you.

Now, you might not be aware of that. You could be ignorant of it, or resisting it. I don't know the exact story you're telling yourself, but I know the one God is telling you – He's telling you He has a role and a purpose for your life. And that's true even if you're making a mess of it right now.

Remember, Paul was on his way to Damascus with a letter from the high priest giving him authority to search out and arrest Christians. And on the way, God stopped him and transformed his life.

Now, if God can use that guy, do you think He can use you? Are you too much of a wreck for God, if He can use that guy? No.

So, what do you do? Simple – you turn to God, submit to Him, and tap out - stop resisting and start listening.

Paul says look, I didn't learn this from people, God taught me directly.

Now you can take that idea and go really crazy really fast so let's put some borders of truth around it. Paul did not just have some private discovery of God. He wasn't playing around

with some psychedelics and having a little God trip. He knew the Jewish faith, what we would call the Old Testament, in and out –he was a religious scholar. And, He had heard of Jesus. He had heard Christian testimonies and preaching. So he's not saying, Jesus came to me in the middle of the night and gave me a secret message no one ever heard before.

But there was an unexpected, unsought, moment when God pressed all this truth upon him in a new way and opened his eyes to see and understand things he had never fully appreciated before. And, this is very important: he goes on to say, when he shared what happened to him with the apostles in Jerusalem, with Jesus' personal disciples, they confirmed, "Yes, that's exactly what He taught us too." So, the whole thing was fact checked, the whole thing was inspected for integrity, and it passed.

There are two things for us to know here. First, be super cautious about anyone who says they've had their own spectacular religious experience. It needs to line up with what has already been established by the apostles and the early church. There's a saying I learned a long time ago when it comes to Christian doctrine and experience: if it's new, it's not true, and if it's true, it's not new. Stick to the old ways, because they may not be flashy, exciting, or spectacular, but they're tested, inspected, and confirmed. Remember Paul said even if some religious leader or an angel from heaven tells you something different – [let them be accursed](#). The Bible says we should [test the spirits \(1 John 4:1\)](#), because not all voices speaking on spiritual subjects are truly from God.

Now, when I say all of that, I'm talking about you hearing from other people. But I also want to say something about your own personal experience. Paul says God taught truth to him directly. And Scripture says the same thing still happens today. God can, and will, teach you things directly. He wants to. All by yourself. Without your parents, your friends, your spouse, or your pastor. *Now, what He teaches will always line up with the historic understanding of the Christian faith*, but you should know, and expect, and seek out, the fact that God wants to speak to you and teach you directly.

When was the last time you spent 20 minutes alone with God? When was the last time you spent 2 hours? Friends, solitude – spending time alone for the sake of spending time with God is a natural, normal, and necessary part of the Christian life. I fight for time alone with my wife. I hope you do the same for your spouse. But what do we do about time with God?

He wants it and He often has the answers for the questions we're struggling with or the comfort or direction we need for the issues we face.

Those answers may come through your time reading Scripture, God will bring a passage to light and impress it upon your heart and mind. Sometimes you'll see an exact application of how a passage applies to you or what it means for a situation you're facing – God gives you the understanding and application directly. How many of you have ever had this happen?

Another way God speaks is in prayer. How many of you have ever felt like, while you were praying God spoke to you, gave you some sort of direction or guidance? Raise your hand. It's a common experience, you should ask for it, you shouldn't be surprised by it, but you

should also expect that it will line up with Scripture, it will line up with what the Church has believed and taught through the ages.

God is not calling you to divorce your spouse and marry that other person. He's not calling you to avoid your taxes and invest in that volatile new stock option. He's not telling you to lie about your project or product to avoid the consequences.

Remember, Paul subjected everything he was sure he had learned from Christ to the rest of Christ's disciples and they affirmed it. If you think God is showing you something, take it to another Christian who loves God and loves you and say, I think this is what God is showing me, what do you think? Ask for someone to check your work. Don't act alone.

And a great place to do that is at church, which is another way that you should expect God to speak to you. You should expect that when you come to church, either online for the sake of your safety or the safety of others, or in person, you should expect that God will take the things that are said and drive some of them into your soul. You should expect that God will take something from the passage, or something that is said from the pulpit and give you some special encouragement, understanding, or application for your life.

And if that's not happening – you should be praying that it would. When people ask how they can pray for me, I often say, pray for your pastor selfishly – ask God to speak to me and show me what He wants to say to you. When God blesses me, it's often a blessing to you.

And the same thing is true with the worship team. You should find that there are times and there are songs that God uses to specially minister to you. Again, that could be encouragement, there's a song that gives you what you need to keep going, or it could be understanding - we review the songs we sing for their doctrinal content. We want songs that sound good, but that are also true and which most of us can apply to our lives.

So, you should expect God to speak to you through our time in worship, and if that's not happening pray for us. Ask God to lead us in the selection of music and the way it's played. Pray for our worship team and leaders, don't just critique their sound and style. This isn't Christian radio, it's not Spotify, or Apple Music - it's not entertainment or the opening act, it's worship and it's a chance for you to meet with God.

One other thing happens in church, God will sometimes speak to you through someone else. And it might not even be something expected. You're just in conversation and they suddenly bring up something and it catches your attention, like, how did you know? Or maybe it's the other direction, and they feel like God is pressing them to share something with you.

How many of you have ever had that experience, you felt like God spoke something to you through someone else at church or in private conversation?

And now, how many of you have ever felt like God wanted you to share something very specific with someone else? My friends, this is supernaturally normal. This is how God works. It's all part of how He transforms us and gives us new life.

And then, as we change, as we transform, as we look increasingly different from what we once were or what we would have been - people notice the results and God gets the glory.

21 Afterward I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia. 22 And I was unknown by face to the churches of Judea which *were* in Christ. 23 But they were hearing only, "He who formerly persecuted us now preaches the faith which he once *tried to* destroy." 24 And they glorified God in me.

So, people heard about Paul and said, wait, this guy? What happened to him? And they glorified God for the change in Paul's life.

Friends, this is the story I want you to have. I want you to have the kind of life that makes people scratch their heads and do a double take. And so does God. He wants to make something out of you and something in you that would not have occurred if He had not shown up in your life and if you had not responded. Because the good news of the gospel is: you're not stuck.

You don't have to be this way. You don't have to turn out this way. You don't have to keep going down this path. You can be fixed. You can be transformed. You can have a before and after. It could happen in an instant. Sometimes God does that suddenly and thoroughly, or like remodels in the real world, it might take time.

You might need a complete tear down and rebuild – things might need to come up and be thrown out, you might need to rent a dumpster for all the junk that needs to be hauled off spiritually. You might need to work on new habits, new attitudes, new reactions and responses. And, you might need to fight for it to happen. But God will give you guidance, He will give you strength, and we are all here with you. Remember, the gospel is not just personal, it puts you into a family, a family full of people who know and understand because we all got here the same way – we're all adopted.

We all have a story about the way we were before or the way we would have been if God had not rescued us so early. The timing is different, the details are different, but there is one thing all Christians share – we have been saved, by grace, through faith. There's the story of who I am and who I'm becoming and then, back there in the past, there's the story of when things changed, and what I would have been.

Christians, let me encourage you, let God keep writing your story. I'm afraid some of you might think you know enough. You've grown enough, you're already different enough from who you used to be. Well, praise God for what you are, but are you sure you're done? Are you sure there's nothing more?

Christians, brothers and sisters, and especially those you old enough to be my mother and fathers or even my grandparents, physically if not spiritually – are you done growing? When was the last time God put His finger on something in your life and said, “let Me talk with you about that?”

You know the Scriptures. I know you do. You pray. You’ve been going to church for years, maybe even active in ministry – you’ve got your stories of the things you’ve seen and heard and done, but is it possible, that you’re coasting now? Is your relationship with Jesus still fresh? Is He still speaking to you? Is He still directing you? Are people still glorifying God for what they see in you? Moms, dads, grandparents, don’t coast along on your past spiritual experiences.

God called you from your mother’s womb and until you’re in the grave He’s not done with you. You’ve got your new life, you’ve got your “I used to be,” but God’s not done with you.

I don’t know exactly who that’s for, or what’s it’s all about, but I know it needs to be said. Some of you need to be encouraged, to keep pressing on. Go back to meeting with God. Ask Him to do the things He used to do and speak in the ways He used to speak.

And to those of you who don’t fully understand all of this – those of you who feel a little confused, a little unsure – maybe you’re still in the before picture spiritually speaking. So I want to ask – are you ready to move across the line to the after picture? Are you still the man or woman, the boy or girl you were born as, or are you the person God intends for you to be? Have you been born again?

Are you ready to receive the gospel, this good news? That you have ignored or resisted God and His direction for your life, but God is merciful and gracious, and instead of punishing you for that, Jesus takes the consequences and offers you adoption. Are you ready to say, “God, you can have my life, and rebuild it however you see fit?” Are you ready to stop calling the shots, setting the goals, and doing all the work on your own? Are you ready to call Jesus your master, lord, and King? Are you ready to submit to Him? Tell Him that and if you have questions, ask.

My friends, you really can have a before and an after in your life. In fact, as we see here through the life Paul, that’s actually what life is all about.

Let’s pray.