



Season 9: Episode 5 | Paul Williams | Reading the Bible: A Turning Point in Coming to Faith

Hello and welcome to Scripture Untangled, a podcast by the Canadian Bible Society. My name is Joanna LaFleur. I'm a friend of the Canadian Bible Society and I'm going to be your guide for today's episode.

Today, Paul Williams of the British and Foreign Bible Society will be interviewed by Canadian Bible Society Ambassador Andrew Stirling. Paul Williams, now CEO of Bible Society (British and Foreign Bible Society), worked for over a decade in business in London and then as an academic theologian in Canada. He is a visionary behind Reframe, an innovative resource for the whole life of discipleship produced by Regent College Vancouver, where he holds a research professorship of marketplace theology and leadership.

His 2020 book, *Exiles on Mission: How Christians Can Thrive in a Post Christian World*, calls for a radical reimagining of the church's mission and provides concrete tools to help Christians play their part in God's purpose to redeem and reconcile all of creation. He is married to Sarah, and they have two adult daughters, Hannah and Amelia. Please enjoy this rich conversation.

Andrew Stirling: Paul Williams, it's a great delight for us to have you with us at the Canadian Bible Society and Scripture Untangled. Paul, you are known for having a rich background in very diverse things, economics, strategy, theology, but tell our audience how your Christian faith developed and what or who were the greatest influences in your journey of faith.

Scripture Untangled

Season 9: Episode 5 | Paul Williams | Reading the Bible: A Turning Point in Coming to Faith

Paul Williams: Yeah, thank you Andrew. It's great to be with you at CBS. Thanks for inviting me to be part of this conversation. Very straight, very basic in a sense, very ordinary.

I was privileged to grow up in a Christian family. I was very influenced by my parents, particularly my two grandparents were brethren preachers. They gave me a love for the Bible.

My uncle was a Baptist pastor, and he also played a big role in developing a love for the Bible alongside my grandfather's. I went away from faith. I guess that happens, often a common theme within Christian families, during my teens and then going up to university at Oxford.

And it was under the preaching of Michael Green, the great Anglican evangelist, that I came back to faith. And then I guess people who were really significant in the formation of my adult faith. I read a lot of C.S. Lewis, Lesslie Newbigin. I had the privilege of meeting him. We might want to talk about more about him because he was a huge influence on my life, still is today. Some Christian economists, you know, I trained as an economist.

So, Mike Schluter from the Jubilee Center in Cambridge, Donald Hay, a tutor in economics at Oxford. They were both really, really helpful to me at core moments. And I was fortunate.

I've realized that at the time I just took it for granted that I was part of a church in Oxford, the Oxford Community Church that was incredibly good at discipling students. And I benefited hugely from that local church pastoral, intentional pastoring and discipleship. And I am incredibly grateful to that community.

They've given me and Sarah, my wife, a great deal. So, yeah, those have been some of the big influences and family and friends and pastors and some key thinkers, I guess, that I came across and was introduced to me at core moments.

Scripture Untangled

Season 9: Episode 5 | Paul Williams | Reading the Bible: A Turning Point in Coming to Faith

Andrew Stirling: Fascinating you should say that you wandered away at one point after you'd had this sort of formation within your family. Was there anything that caused that to happen specifically or did you just sort of drift, Paul?

Paul Williams: I think it was the arrogance of youth, Andrew.

You know, I mean, I was of that age, you know, when things were all sort of, you know, going well, my intellect was coming alive. I became very critical of things in the church. And let's face it, there's always things to be critical of in the church.

And I was pretty confident I could do things, you know, I could sort my life out and do things better. And I became distracted and tempted really by the things of the world, by going my own way and charting my own course. So that's what I did.

And I got disaffected. The excuse I gave was I got very disaffected with church. But frankly, it was an excuse.

There were things that were true in what I was upset about, but they weren't a good enough reason, really. They were just presenting the re-rationalization I gave at the time. It was really about wanting to do things my way.

Andrew Stirling: And so, when you came back, I mean, in a sense into the fold, was Michael at St. Aldates there or was he somewhere else? And how did you sort of encounter with Michael Green?

Paul Williams: Well, it Yes, he was he was still at Oxford. And it was a bit of a setup. So, I'd had quite a powerful encounter with God through an accident.

Scripture Untangled

Season 9: Episode 5 | Paul Williams | Reading the Bible: A Turning Point in Coming to Faith

And that really was the turning point from walking away to walking back. And I think my parents discerned that things had changed. And they asked me, you know, in a way that parents can do.

And I felt like I had to say, yes, they asked me to help out looking after some family friends, long standing family friends of mine as well as theirs, who were wanting to visit Oxford and have a little tour. And would I do that? And would I take them to church, so that they had an experience of church.

And because of this request from my parents, and because of the family friend, I agreed to do the tour and take them to church. And we ended up sitting. In those days, St. Aldates was organized in the traditional orientation, they've moved it around more recently sideways, but we were behind the altar. And I can remember exactly, you know, the orientation where we sat, I couldn't see Michael very much, but I could hear him. And he preached on the father heart of God. And that was the thing that was then, interestingly, I was on the journey, but I couldn't get in, it needed God to invite me in.

And that was the invitation that spoke to me. And I responded. And I went and talked the whole thing over then, in Michael's study in Oxford. And yes, he was still at St. Aldates.

Andrew Stirling: Wonderful. Big influence on my life, too, I must say, Paul.

Prior to your current position, now we're moving into some more current things now, at the Bible Society in the UK, you held various positions, you were an Academic Dean at Regent College in Vancouver, here in Canada, and the Brown Family Chair of Marketplace Theology and Leadership. What precisely is marketplace theology? And how does it impact the church's mission?

Scripture Untangled

Season 9: Episode 5 | Paul Williams | Reading the Bible: A Turning Point in Coming to Faith

Because I've heard this phrase, I've read this phrase, and I suppose there's a lot of our listeners who wonder precisely what is it? So, Dr. Williams, tell us, please.

Paul Williams: I'm so glad you've asked this question, because of course, in a way, it's a phrase slightly coined by Regent, probably it comes, I would imagine, from Paul Stevens, who was my predecessor in the role.

The chair was created for him originally, and he was one of my teachers. And I think in a way, it's great marketing, isn't it? Because I'm always asked this question, I was always asked it at Regent, I'm always asked it now.

What is marketplace theology exactly? And it gives you the opportunity, it's perfect marketing, isn't it? Because then you can explain it.

So, it's very simply a way of talking about the public square, without using a term that I think has taken on a narrower connotation, which is public theology. And there's an overlap. But the public square, the marketplace, the Greek agora, you're thinking of that place where economics, government, business and trade, networking, any kind of public gathering, communication, media is happening.

It's all crunched together in this ancient city square, the agora. And what is the witness of the gospel in that arena? How is the gospel relevant?

And how is it proclaimed? And how is it embedded and embodied in all of those different spheres of society that make up our public life? Yes, government, business, media, education, law, these are all part of the marketplace.

And so, it's a bit more than simply saying it's about theology of work. So, it is that. But these institutions don't just exist to do stuff for customers.

Scripture Untangled

Season 9: Episode 5 | Paul Williams | Reading the Bible: A Turning Point in Coming to Faith

They kind of play a larger role in the whole way we think about what a good society is. And they're meant to work together in certain ways. Well, how do we understand that?

How does the Bible shape our imagination of that? And the key thing you asked about the impact on the church's mission. So, this was a huge insight of Lesslie Newbigin being formed in the early part or the mid part of the 20th century, going to India as a traditional missionary for most of his life, coming back to Britain and the West in the 1980s, and being shocked at the extent to which the church had allowed and the culture had pushed for the privatization of faith.

Andrew Stirling: Yes, absolutely. Right? Yeah.

Paul Williams: Pushing of faith into a private personal sphere. Yes, to the boundaries, but also out of the center, out of public discourse, so that it becomes inappropriate, unacceptable to talk about faith, to give reasons on the basis of faith, in making the case for something in the public square for the good of society. And even religious language is not welcome.

And so that sort of acquiescence to that situation was a real shock for Newbigin. And I think that it ought to be a shock for us, because his point surely is right, that if the gospel is true, it's not just true for Christians, it's true for everyone. And if it's not true for everyone, it's probably not true for Christians either.

You know, we're not in this as a kind of private club that's just something we happen to like, you know, like people like jazz music. We're here, we're involved surely, because we've come to the conviction based on experience and evidence and I guess, an encounter that everything that we think about the world has to be lined up against the resurrection of Jesus Christ. If that's true, if that happened, if the claims of the gospel are true, then it's the starting point for thinking about everything else.

Scripture Untangled

Season 9: Episode 5 | Paul Williams | Reading the Bible: A Turning Point in Coming to Faith

If it's false, then you can just discard all of it. And this is the way the Bible itself speaks about the cross and resurrection. And this is the point that Newbigin was kind of taking us back to.

So, it's absolutely central for the mission of the church to understand that Christianity is making public claims on everything. And the mission of God in the world is about all things being renewed and reconciled in Christ. And if our view of mission is narrower than that, then it's narrower than the gospel, it's narrower than the scope of the kingdom, and it's narrower than the horizon of the Bible.

So, it's a huge impact. And it's like many things, Andrew, it's sort of one of the ways, I guess, that in the late 20th century, we're trying to recover that within Protestantism, that understanding of the scope of the gospel has included the innovation of this phrase, marketplace theology, which, if we're really successful, should be redundant, shouldn't it?

Andrew Stirling: It should.

Paul Williams: We would just be talking about missiology or theology.

Andrew Stirling: I mean, Lesslie Newbigin also has a big impact in and here in the world we're in now currently, and the makeup of so many of our countries in the West that are highly pluralistic. Lesslie Newbigin was helpful in coming to terms with Christian witness in the midst of a pluralistic society.

And I mean, you know, of course, the influence that he had in India and coming from India. And as you rightly said, the shock he found when he came back into sort of the Western culture. Does he have something to say today in terms of mission within that pluralistic culture that we find ourselves in?

Paul Williams: Absolutely. I mean, and in a way, the things that he wrote in the 1980s and the 1990s are still relevant. Only a week or so ago, during the assisted dying debate in the UK

Scripture Untangled

Season 9: Episode 5 | Paul Williams | Reading the Bible: A Turning Point in Coming to Faith

Parliament, did we have senior parliamentarians challenging the appropriateness of people of faith to articulate faith-based reasons for their objections to that bill.

So, it wasn't simply a case of saying, well, we disagree with you, but it was we not only disagree with you, but we disagree that you should even be mentioning the faith-based reasoning in a public debate. So even though mostly the mood of that hardcore secularism has passed in Britain now, it's still there. And the impact of it on the church is much more there.

So, when I go around talking to church leaders and I go in my current role at Bible Society, I go around a lot talking to a wide range of church leaders. So many of them are still carrying this feeling that first of all, they bought into the decline narrative. You know, the church is in decline and it's kind of inevitable.

They bought into that narrative. It's not true. It's false.

It's been resoundingly kind of disproved. But nonetheless, people have bought into it, and they bought into this, that they're living in the kind of intimidation of, I can't speak about my faith in public. I'm going to get shouted down.

I'll be rejected. I will only meet hostility. And that's no longer true.

And even if it were true, it shouldn't stop us from doing that. But we are self-editing far more than most of the culture now is expecting us to. And so, there's a real need for us to overcome the legacy of this secular narrative that we've also got a kind of, we've almost spiritualized it in the sacred secular divide, haven't we?

Andrew Stirling: Yeah, we have, Paul. What has shaken me and sort of thrown me out of that mindset, not that I was ever completely engaged in it, but it definitely influenced in it. And that sense that, you know, all we are is a faithful remnant and was a faithful remnant.

Scripture Untangled

Season 9: Episode 5 | Paul Williams | Reading the Bible: A Turning Point in Coming to Faith

We've just got to hunker down and sort of preserve ourselves and, you know, move our buildings along and things like that. What has shaken me out of that, Paul, is my engagement in Canada with diaspora ministers, with clergy and pastors who have come here, and they take our preaching courses. And they've come from everywhere, from Iran to Eritrea, to Syria, to Brazil, to the Philippines.

And we just did one a month ago with 13 different countries represented. And they've all come here. They do not understand our hangup.

They do not understand our reluctance to share the gospel. They are free amongst their own people. And they're often in a minority culturally.

They are in a minority culturally. And they just cannot understand why we have this retrenchment, why we're pulling back, rather than engaging and sharing the gospel with not an arrogance, but a confidence in the truthfulness of it. So, you know, that's really put me in my place, I'll be honest with you, Paul.

Paul Williams: Yeah, I mean, confidence is a good word, because I think we really have lost our confidence. Newbigin talks about having a proper confidence, which is a confidence rooted in the truth and the promises and the character of God, which goes with it, of course, the kind of conviction that has winsome humility and patience. But we have the same, I think, encouragement.

And indeed, I often say this to many intercultural gatherings that are going on around Britain at the moment, that the massive wave of church planting missionaries coming from all over the world. I mean, London is home to pretty much more nationalities, I think, than any other city on earth. It's ridiculously diverse, but almost all of them have got not just church Christian representation, but church planting and missionary impetus within them.

Scripture Untangled

Season 9: Episode 5 | Paul Williams | Reading the Bible: A Turning Point in Coming to Faith

And it's actually an answer to prayer of the Bible Society movement. And I was astonished to find this in the history of the British and Foreign Bible Society, that right from the outset, one of the things in the very early days, we're back to like 1805, that they talked about the blessed return, that when, if we sowed our energy, our wealth, our innovation into sending the Scripture, distributing the Bible, translating the Bible, getting the Bible out there across the world into all the languages of the world, for all the peoples of the world, there will be a return when these people would come back and re-evangelize Britain, which in 1805, they saw as in desperate dire need of a spiritual renewal that could only come from others.

So here they are, 200 years later, they're showing up in, you know, in significant numbers and beginning to really change the church's confidence. I think you're right; it's also having that impact on the church's confidence in this country. But you know, by God's grace, we, you know, are also seeing that amongst the white indigenous churches, if you like, beginning to realize that we're in a different era now.

And we've got to recognize that and see what is changing around us and what God is doing around us in the hearts and lives of so many people who are searching again afresh.

The Bible Course: Taking a moment out of this conversation to tell you about The Bible Course, because whether you're a seasoned Bible reader or you're just starting on your journey, The Bible Course offers a superb overview of the world's best-selling book. This eight-session course will help you grow in your understanding of the Bible. Using a unique storyline, The Bible Course shows you how key events, books, and characters all fit together.

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Scripture Untangled

Season 9: Episode 5 | Paul Williams | Reading the Bible: A Turning Point in Coming to Faith

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Andrew Stirling: Very true. Paul, I mean, you mentioned, and you alluded to the history and the history of the British and Foreign Bible Society involves the Clapham sect and, of course, the great William Wilberforce. And over the years, the British and Foreign Bible Society has developed into one of the most influential organizations within the Christian world.

What initiatives is the Bible Society now in the British and Foreign Bible Society, taking to influence the next generation of Christians? So almost following up on what you've just been talking about, where there is that hunger and there is that openness now, what does the Bible Society do and offer to help those who are, in fact, seeking at the moment?

Paul Williams: Yeah, well, we're very focused on growing the Bible confidence of the church and Christians.

And so, we have developed careful measures of Bible confidence and developing resources that help churches and Christians grow in their Bible confidence across. We distinguish head confidence, heart confidence and hands confidence. So, knowing about, knowing personally and knowing how, you know, actually being able to put things into practice in the world, in your environment, those sort of three dimensions that interrelate.

That's one part of our focus. The other part, growing confidence, but also changing the conversation about the Bible in the wider society. So, we have a public think tank called Theos.

We undertake campaigning work. We have a team focused on engaging the spiritually open groups. We've undertaken a massive amount of research to understand our audiences and identified a large and growing, quite rapidly growing, spiritually open audience.

Scripture Untangled

Season 9: Episode 5 | Paul Williams | Reading the Bible: A Turning Point in Coming to Faith

So, we're working to also nurture the ecosystem of people who are trying to reach those audiences because it's a new frontier and we're all learning how to do that. And there's a completely new language to learn amongst those groups. So that's a big area of investment and we will do digital, but also mainstream advertising, billboards, YouTube ads.

We bought, you know, half a million spaces at regional airports, train stations, things like that. So, we're trying to work in different ways to engage this newly open, newly seeking culture that's particularly significant. It's happening right across the world, right across the Western world, particularly large at the moment in Britain.

And then wider than that, we're trying to resource and work with other Bible Societies, including the Canadian Bible Society, but other like-minded Bible Societies to resource the whole fellowship of Bible Societies worldwide with the kind of evidence base that you need if you're thinking about the attitudes of audiences and their barriers to reading the Bible. And that's a new mindset for the Bible Society movement. And I think that's very important.

So we've just completed this major piece of global research interviewing nearly a hundred thousand people, a hundred countries around the world to really try to understand the audience in different spiritual climates around the world, so that all of us can work together in this extraordinary Bible Society environment where we have such depth of local insight and intelligence, but also the breadth of the confessionality of Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant working together to get the Bible known. Hearing people hear God speak, to quote the CBS, you know, which is a great, and many Bible Societies have something like that, because that's what it's all about. It's not simply a text.

It's a living word that needs to move from the Bible in your hand, whether that's physical or on your phone, to your head and your heart. And that is such a powerful living text that when that happens, things start really changing. We get transformation of lives, relationships, communities, societies.

Scripture Untangled

Season 9: Episode 5 | Paul Williams | Reading the Bible: A Turning Point in Coming to Faith

That's what we're after, isn't it, in the movement.

Andrew Stirling: And, you know, we love, and I want to put a plug in here, of course, for the Bible Course, because I think that this has been something that congregations here have been starting to really pick up on and to use, and individuals as well. Tell us a little bit about that, Paul, because that's also, I believe, am I not correct, one of your initiatives?

Paul Williams: Yeah, the Bible Course has come from one of our staff members, a guy called Andrew Ollerton. He actually developed it in an evangelistic context, and I think that's really significant, amongst some of the very early spiritually open communities in the surfing culture in Cornwall, you know, if you want to get very granular. And he was very effective in unexpectedly growing a church and realizing that people needed to be taught.

So that was how the Bible Course came into being in an evangelistic context. You know, fast forward, we're now on about to launch the fourth edition, later in 2025, much higher production value than the first sort of version. But nonetheless, the goal is the same, because it's about helping unlock this book, which many people find daunting, overwhelming, inaccessible.

I don't know where to start. I don't know what the difference is, how do all these things fit together? Does that story mean that God thinks that, you know, and just understanding some of the basic ways in which actually we can read this ancient literature, understand the different genre, understand the different ways in which it's put together to tell this big story of, you know, God narrating the world and his love for his creation and human beings and our role within it and how things have gone wrong and how God is acting to put them right. And it's such an incredible meta story that comes together across all these different authors and books and time periods and languages, but helping people see that so that it unlocks the ability to read and engage.

Scripture Untangled

Season 9: Episode 5 | Paul Williams | Reading the Bible: A Turning Point in Coming to Faith

And this is what we find. So, we're trying that's what we're trying to do for people is not tell them what the Bible says. Of course, you do a bit of that as you go, but more help them read for themselves and discover what the Bible says.

Andrew Stirling: I agree. It also helps. I mean, and I hear this anecdotally, Paul, from people who have used it, that it helps them sort of locate things within the broad sweep of the Bible.

You know, it puts things within a broader context and gives, you know, sort of a panoramic view of the Bible as well that enables people to sort of when they read a passage and a text or an author, locate it. And so, they understand sort of the context around it. The problem, I think, sometimes is that people get intimidated by the Bible.

They read something. They don't look what comes before it. They don't look what came after it.

They don't see it with any context and so on. And that's a real gift. And I know preachers who have told me, Paul, that when their people take that course, they're able to understand their sermons better.

That in fact, if the laity engage in the course, they become a better discipleship group with whom they share the message. So, it has a ripple effect, I think, in many ways.

Paul Williams: Yeah. And hopefully gives preachers confidence, because what we found is that it's not only Christians who've lost confidence in the Bible, it's often also preachers, church leaders. Yes. And even down to feeling that the Bible is a barrier to mission.

We've had church leaders say that bluntly. And yet what the research shows, very distinctly and clearly, is that the second most significant turning point for people, factor in their coming to faith, after a pastor or a close family member talks to them about Jesus, is reading the Bible.

Scripture Untangled

Season 9: Episode 5 | Paul Williams | Reading the Bible: A Turning Point in Coming to Faith

Often without any other intervention, just by themselves. So actually, the Bible is a huge asset for us in mission.

And we can make it even more of an asset if we do a better job of A, being confident, and B, yes, just opening up some of the basic things about how to approach this book for people.

Andrew Stirling: Paul, we've recently held the United Bible Society's International Fellowship Gathering in Toronto and with Christians from all over the world. It was a marvellous event, an inspiring event.

What do you see as the future of that inter-confessional and international gathering? And what is sort of your relationship, or the British and Foreign Bible Society relationship, with the United Bible Societies? Because they really are doing some remarkable work in places around the world.

Paul Williams: I mean, I have to say, I think that coming into the Bible Society movement, as I have in 2016, from actually a pretty international and open environment, being full-time faculty at Regent College in Vancouver, travelling a lot with that job, travelling all over the world. Nonetheless, moving into the Bible Society world was an absolute quantum leap in being exposed to global Christianity. Everywhere, you know, we, as a fellowship, operate in over 220 countries and territories, as you know, so the breadth is extraordinary.

I love being able to say to people, especially the people I used to work with in investment banking world, you know, we're in more countries than Coca-Cola.

Andrew Stirling: And an infinitely better product, just to be clear.

Paul Williams: Exactly. But, you know, the experience of meeting with, praying with, people working amongst the poor in Central America, or in Muslim majority contexts in the Sahel, North Africa and the Middle East, you know, we've got Bible Societies, haven't we, in Israel,

Scripture Untangled

Season 9: Episode 5 | Paul Williams | Reading the Bible: A Turning Point in Coming to Faith

Palestine, Arab-Israeli communities, and how those leaders cross those incredibly tense political divides, come together across not only denominational, but those incredibly tense political divides, as Christian brothers and sisters, is extraordinary.

It is. And I think that, for me, what we have got at UBS is far more precious than I think we realize, because we have a Christian community centered around the Bible and Jesus Christ, that really does transcend the sort of particulars of locality without pressing them out, but instead we're all enriched by them. And that's an amazing, you know, that unity in diversity is, of course, the sort of gold standard, isn't it, of Christian community, modeled on the Trinity, rarely experienced.

We pursue it, don't we? Although I say that, but, you know, even at a microcosm of a local church, I remember a friend of mine who wasn't a believer, finally got persuaded to go, because of a girl he was attracted to, to a local church in London, and his experience of that was all this diverse group of people, ethnically and particularly socioeconomic class, we're all together kneeling, and we're equal. So, I think that unity and diversity is so important, and I think that what we have is very important for the future witness of the church.

So we are always trying to encourage, every time we do an event, that there is some inter-confessional dynamic to what we do when we gather leaders, that there is an inter-cultural dynamic, reflective of the community that we're in, the society that we're in, the nation that we're in. And I think that that very fact of centering around the witness of Scripture and the person of Jesus Christ but having that unity that's inter-cultural and inter-confessional, is itself an incredibly powerful prophetic statement about what the church needs to step into more and more and more in this new era.

Andrew Stirling: Yeah, yeah, I agree.

Paul Williams: The denominationalism, Newbigin called it a sin.

Scripture Untangled

Season 9: Episode 5 | Paul Williams | Reading the Bible: A Turning Point in Coming to Faith

Andrew Stirling: Yeah, he did, he was pretty blunt about it, he was, you know. I've been fascinated, just in my capacity as the ambassador for the Canadian Bible Society, within the last month, I've preached a service in memory of Metropolitan Andrey Sheptytsky, an Eastern Rite Catholic, really saint, who saved children in Ukraine in World War II.

I've preached at a service there, and I've been engaged with Pentecostal pastors who are wanting to sort of become more biblical in their preaching and want to have conversations with me about how they can do that. I mean, the sheer breadth of it, the Bible Society, and just the name, the nomenclature, just opens up doors as opposed to closes them now, and there's, as you said, a commonality of purpose. Paul, we're concluding our time now, unfortunately, but I do have one last question for you, and I ask it of all my guests.

What can we pray for, for you? What would you like those who are listening to say? Paul Williams would like us to pray this.

Paul Williams: Thank you, Andrew. I've been, I mentioned that one of the most significant pieces of formation in my life, persons really, was my grandfather, and every time I left his home, he would quote the same verse, and it's, many of you, you know, you'll know it well, many of your listeners will know it, trust in the Lord with all your heart, lean not on your own understanding, in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your path straight. And I think that that is a prayer, which is really kind of what it is. That text is my prayer, that I would do that, because I know that I need God's wisdom, I need God's leading, I need trust, and the childlike trust, to be an effective leader.

But my strategic brain sometimes, sometimes God uses it, of course, I'm not against the life of the mind, or the intellect, or the gifts God gives us, but of course, we all know they can get in the way, because we're so much in a time now, where everything is moving, everything is changing, and that means that as leaders, we have to figure out, how do I need to change?

Scripture Untangled

Season 9: Episode 5 | Paul Williams | Reading the Bible: A Turning Point in Coming to Faith

What is God doing that's fresh, that requires something different from me, from my community, my team, my organization? I'm asking those questions, and I don't know all of the answers, I'm not clear, I need to hear God, I need to stay sensitive to the Holy Spirit, to stay in step with the Holy Spirit.

So right now, what I'm praying about is my next step, my next change, my next move. I don't mean leaving Bible Society, I'm just saying that.

Andrew Stirling: Thank you, good.

Paul Williams: In case any of my staff... Or perhaps, you know, glorifying.

Andrew Stirling: We don't want you to leave, but anyway, yes.

Paul Williams: But I'm meaning, I'm meaning directionally.

Andrew Stirling: Yes.

Paul Williams: Right? Emphasis. Where is God at work? Where is the Spirit drawing us?

And it's so easy in organizational life to get stuck in what's comfortable for us, and it's so easy for us as individuals. So, I know that I'm being led again, to go on that search, to sort of go out into the wilderness for a bit, and until I've heard God speaking for me in my life, and to do that work collaboratively and of discernment with my team about Bible Society. So that would be my prayer.

I want to stay in step with the Spirit because I see the Spirit at work in the culture, in a phenomenal way that I haven't seen before in my lifetime. And so, I'm incredibly excited about it, and I want to be part of it.

Scripture Untangled

Season 9: Episode 5 | Paul Williams | Reading the Bible: A Turning Point in Coming to Faith

Andrew Stirling: Amen to your prayer. Amen to your prayer and be assured of our prayers for you and ongoing support as you trust in the Lord with all your heart, Paul. And thank you once again for taking this time. It was a great pleasure to have this conversation, and I know that our audience will be deeply, deeply enriched by it.

May God bless you and your continued work. Take care.

Paul Williams: Thanks so much, Andrew.