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Welcome to the New Life Podcast and Ministry of New Life Presbyterian Church in Ithaca, New York. Today we have this week's preached by Tim LaCroix, our senior pastor. Join us for worship each week at 10 o'clock at 950 Danby Road, Ithaca, New York. You can also visit us on our website, [www.newlifeithaca.org](http://www.newlifeithaca.org). Now here's this week's sermon.

00:43

A reading from St. Paul's letter to the Galatians, chapter 1, verses 11 through 24.

01:11

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 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, 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.

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Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and remained with him 15 days. But I saw none of the other apostles except James, the Lord's brother. In what I am writing to you before God, I do not lie. Then I went into the regions of Syria and Silesia, and I was still unknown in person to the churches of Judea that are in Christ. They only were hearing it said, he who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith.

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he once tried to destroy, and they glorified God because of me. This is the word of the Lord.

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Maybe you've heard someone say, or perhaps you've said it yourself.

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I'm not certain whether God exists or not, but in order to believe in Him, I need to see some proof. I need to have some proof. I know I've heard folks over the years say that, and not in the same way, but as I've expressed to you, had doubts and also wanted to formulate reasons to believe, reasons, proofs for the existence of God. So in one way or another, I think we've all kind of wrestled with that question.

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And as we think about that question, there's a couple of observations that I want to make. First of all, I think it partially begs the question because

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Who's to say that there hasn't been, there is not proof, that there is not something that is revealed, we just haven't seen it yet. I think most people would recognize that. And the other observation is there was a time when supernatural things were more common, where there were miracles, where there were people did have visions, doesn't happen that way much anymore, at least in our modern culture. But there was a man who lived in the first century, he did many miracles, he claimed

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to be the Divine Son of God. He backed up his teaching with his works and as far as I can tell the whole world didn't follow him in the midst of his miracles and his mighty works. So I wonder if Jesus' parable

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of the rich man in Lazarus, which some of you may be aware of, is not maybe a quite insightful commentary on this question. If you are familiar with the parable there, Jesus

tells a story of two people in the afterlife. One is, for lack of a better term, the good place, the other is in the bad place. The rich man is the one suffering in the bad place. He looks over, separated by a gulf. He can see a cross, and he sees this poor man in

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Lazarus who he knew from his former life. Lazarus is leaning upon Abraham, father Abraham. The rich man cries out to Abraham and pleads with him to go back to his family and send someone back to his family to persuade them that the existence of the afterlife and that they need to follow God while they have a chance. And Abraham's reply, and this is a peril,

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But Abraham's reply, I think, is poignant. He said, they already have the law and the prophets. If they won't listen to them, then they will listen to anyone. In fact, they had Jesus and they didn't listen to Jesus.

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There's one more observation about this. say, I've heard folks say, you know, I would like to receive some confirmation, maybe a spiritual vision. Okay, let's play that out on a large scale. What if God did reveal himself specifically and personally to every single person on the earth? Because if we're asking for a vision that is not universal, then we're asking for special treatment. We were asking for God to single us out of all the eight billion people on earth, the creator of the

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and give us a vision. But what if God did give everyone a vision? Why doesn't he do that? Well doesn't that really change the nature of free will? Does that really change the nature of our having the ability to choose God and our ability to choose faith? I think it drastically changes the nature of our freedom and the freedoms of our wills. We don't live in a constrained universe where we don't have choices. In fact I wonder if God actually did that, if people would actually

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accept it. You may remember there was there was an incident about 15 years ago where the band U2 dropped a free album in everyone's iTunes. You remember that? They dropped this free album right in their iTunes and people got mad. I mean this is a free album they just dropped it in their iTunes. It was an invasion of their whatever their iTunes or digital account.

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People got angry about that. Why did they get angry about it? Because it was an imposition. It was an imposition of something they didn't want. kind of think that given our stubborn human wills, we don't have to be told what to do if God were to actually reveal himself to everyone on earth, I don't think everyone would actually listen.

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So what are we to do with the question then? Is it not a reasonable question? I think it is a reasonable question. I think it is a reasonable question to say that we would like for God to reveal himself to us and show us and give us reasons to believe. And what I would posit is that we do have something like that in the text today. We do have something like that in the text today. We have a story about a person and that person, it says in the letter,

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That person was radically in one direction and then all of sudden went radically in the other direction. Now often I will talk about how the resurrection of Jesus is one of the biggest

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Well, it is the hinge upon which everything falls out. I've said this, other people have said it. If Jesus has risen from the dead, then nothing else matters. And if Jesus has not risen from the dead, then nothing else matters. But in one respect, to prove the resurrection of Jesus is difficult. In fact, we have stories that were emerging right after his resurrection to posit alternate explanations for the fact that the tomb was empty.

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But this is a story that's grounded much more in, well, not more in history because the resurrection of Jesus is grounded in history. But this story here about Paul's conversion is a story that's a little bit less.

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assailable. It's a story that is more accepted as a historical story. I'm sure there are people who would question the fact that Paul went from being extreme Pharisee to being a preacher of the gospel. I haven't heard very many people question that. And I think this radical immediate conversion is evidence that God actually appeared to Paul and changed his heart. This is what St. John Chrysostom said in the fourth century, 1600 years ago.

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much closer to the events that we're reading about. This is in your bulletin on page three if you want to look at this quote.

09:00

Chrysostom observed this as I said 1600 years ago for when men have been vehement and eager on the contrary side, that was Paul, vehement, putting it lightly I think. So all the way in one extreme, that's Paul, persecuting Christians, zealous to maintain the laws and the traditions of Judaism, all the way on this one side. And when people are on that side, their conviction, if it is affected by human means,

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In other words, persuasion, ordinary means, requires much time and ingenuity. It takes time. People can change their opinion. We see it all the time. People change their viewpoint, change their ways, but it usually takes time. Chrysostom said, it is clear therefore that he who's converted is sudden and who has been sobered in the very height of his madness. There's bias there, of course. Must have been about saved a divine revelation and teaching.

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and so have at once arrived at complete sanity. Bias aside, I think it's a good observation. The fact that Paul converted so quickly is evidence, I think, that what happened, that something happened. And what this text asserts, that it was a divine revelation, is what we read about in Acts chapter 8. And we'll discuss a little bit more in detail, so I belabor it here. But I would posit that among the things that we see in this text is a proof that God is real.

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As we look at the text today, we are in the third sermon in this series, and we're going through some interesting material for a letter. Most New Testament letters are very didactic. They're theological. They're argumentative. We don't often come upon large sections of biographical material in letters. You do find his allusions to biography and letters. Paul has it in Philippians. He alludes to his...

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his life in Judaism and we'll find other people alluding to historical events. Peter does it a couple of times. He alludes to the transfiguration which had a great impact on him. He talks about it in his letter.

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But we don't often have a large section. This is almost two chapters of biographical material about Paul. So why is it in there? Why is this here? Why is Paul telling us about himself? Is it just to give us a history so we know it? No, there is a purpose for it. There's a reason for it. And John Calvin sums it up very well. And this is on your page three as well, the second one from the bottom. This is most powerful argument, the main hinge upon which the question turns.

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Galatians the letter that he has not received the gospel from men but he has been revealed it to him by God that is the main idea of this section and the one that follows because

Paul's apostleship and His message that he gave to the Galatians is being challenged we talked about that last couple weeks I'll just go over it again Paul came to the Galatians and they were saved by grace he told them they were saved by believing in Jesus and being baptized in his name

12:08

He did not make them become to observe the law of Moses. He said they didn't have to observe the law of Moses because when Christ has come and we'll see this later in Galatians, one of his main arguments, we're living in a new era, we're living in a new covenant. And the old covenant, the old world is gone. And we live in the time of Christ and we're not subject to those old ways anymore. They've changed.

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And so Paul, from the start, tells the Galatians, don't have to observe laws, you don't have to earn favor with God, you have it by His grace, and you have it by faith. Well what happened is later some people came up, and they apparently were affiliated more with James, the Lord's brother, and he's referred to in this passage today. They came up from them, and we read about this in the book of Acts, it's all corroborated in different parts of the New Testament. They're basically,

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concerned that these Galatians were not observing their traditions and their laws. In order to follow the God of the Old Testament, there's certain things you have to do. And these men who came up from James, from Jerusalem, they were, as I told you last week, essentially Pharisees who added to their religion belief in Jesus as the Messiah and the risen Lord. But they were maintaining all the rest of their Judaism. And they're scandalized.

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by these Gentiles who are believing in Christ and being accepted into the church but have not been circumcised and do not keep the Holy Days and do not participate in the food regulations that they find so sacred. And so these men were coming up from Jerusalem and telling them, hey, at least you guys, at least you need to be circumcised. It would be

great if you also follow this calendar that we have and you also didn't eat these things. So they were adding...

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to the requirements of the faith, what Paul refers to in Galatians as the works of the law, the law of Moses. In actuality, it is a few things, a few cultural markers of the works of the law to appease these tender brothers' consciences who are scandalized by these Gentile believers, basically. So they come up and said, Paul, look, they are attacking Paul and attacking his message. They're essentially saying that Paul did a bait and switch.

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He came up to you and said, look, all you have to do is believe in Jesus and you are saved. And these opponents came up and said, yeah, well, you also have to do those things. Paul left the hard part out. He told you the easy part to get you in, and now he's going to reveal to you the hard part. And so they were saying that he was pulling a bait and switch. They were also challenging his message, saying, you know, Paul received his apostleship and his message from the apostles, Peter, James, and John.

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Listen, we come from Peter, James, and John. We are telling you what these guys are teaching, what they are observing themselves. They are keeping Judaism. And so they are challenging Paul's apostolic authority. They are challenging his apostolic message. So in essence, the reason why he is giving him biography, giving us a biography, is to defend the source of the gospel. And that's the first main point today. The source.

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of the gospel. What is the source of Paul's gospel? The source of Paul's gospel, he asserts, comes directly from a revelation of Jesus Christ. This is what he says in verse 11. He says, for I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel, for I did not receive it from any man. Now what is he talking about here? He's talking about the accusation.



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that he had been taught about the faith by Peter, James, and John, the pillars that he talks about in chapter 2, the pillars of the apostles. The accusation is that he received his teaching from those three people and Paul is perverting the teaching of those three people.

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But Paul is asserting, look, I did not get the gospel from those three people. I received it directly, he says, by a revelation of Jesus Christ at the end of verse 12. I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. This is Paul's claim. This is the thesis of these first two chapters is that I did not receive this basic message that salvation is through grace alone, by faith alone, and not having to do with works. I did not receive that from them.

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I received it directly from Jesus. Paul's assertion is that the story that is told to us in Acts chapter 8 is true. It's a real story. I make believe that Paul when he was on his way to Damascus was, as I said last week, blinded by the light. He was struck down on the road and he heard a voice of Jesus. So that's Paul's first assertion. I received this message directly

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from Jesus himself and therefore it is the message of the gospel that he wants me to preach to you and to everyone else. The source of the gospel is Christ himself. Secondly, we have the message of the gospel. The message of the gospel. Paul goes on to talk some more. He says, for you have heard of my former life in Judaism.

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how I persecuted the Church of God violently and tried to destroy it and how 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." This is the before Christ, this is the BC, before Christ section of Paul's life. And the before Christ section of Paul's life, he asserts that I, and he says this in Philippians, if there was a way to achieve salvation,

18:12

By observance of Judaism, I would have it. That is the assertion. If there was a way to be saved by observance of Mosaic law, I would have it. If there was a way to be redeemed by it, I would have been redeemed. Basically, he calls himself a Hebrew of Hebrews and Philippians. Here he says that he had advanced in Judaism beyond all of his peers.

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What we know about Paul's life is he had an Ivy League education in many respects. He grew up in Tarsus, and Tarsus had a wonderful school. We're not familiar with the school of Tarsus, but it was just as good as the school in Athens. Now, the school in Athens was different because they had lots of people from the outside coming in, visiting scholars and a lot of back and forth. Tarsus, though, was more for the education of the people there, but it was just as high of a quality. It is evident that Paul had a

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great education especially as he talks about the Greek philosophers and the Greek poets. Here he alludes to stoic ideas. I'll mention that here in a second. So Paul had a great education, we might say primary education, in the education of Greek culture. But then his parents moved him to Jerusalem basically to shelter him because they were worried about the influence of the culture of Tarsus. And when he went to Jerusalem he studied

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we see from the book of Acts with the rabbi Gamaliel. Gamaliel was one of the top rabbis of the time. We find Gamaliel interjecting his opinion in the council when Peter and John were arrested and saying, listen, if these guys are from the Lord, you can't stop them. And if they're not, well, we shouldn't get in their way. And his opinion was heeded. Gamaliel was one of the top teachers, well respected, and that's who Paul studied with. Paul had the top education you could have. If you're going to be a Pharisee, if you're going

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to be someone of an adherent to Judaism, he's the top, right? And then he says, I was so zealous for my religion that I went as far as persecuting the church because they were going against it. So the point here is that his life, if anyone, if anyone could please God, if anyone could earn God's favor through adherence to laws and rules, Paul would have done it. Paul would have done it. And then he moves on.

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from his BC life to his after conversion life, AC I guess, BC to AC, in verse 15. He says, but when he who had set me, called me by his grace, 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. This is the conversion moment, summed up in a couple of verses.

21:04

of the Damascus Road experience. So here Paul was. He is at the pinnacle of his career. He is at the height of Judaism. And he has been successfully persecuting Christians in Jerusalem. And now he's going, obtained a letter from a high priest so they can take advantage of a Roman law that said that the Jewish people could protect the sanctity of their temple beyond their political jurisdictions.

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This is actual Roman law. had this right. So Paul goes to a different city to do the same thing in order to protect the safety of their temple. He's at the height of his career. He's at the height of his faith.

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And then he changes. What is the explanation for this? This is an illustration of the grace of God. The unmerited favor of God. That he was so radically changed from one extreme to another. Let's think of it this way. There's basically four ways to think of the message of the Gospel in Paul's story here. The first is this. If anyone could earn God's favor.

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Paul would have done it. If anyone could earn salvation, Paul would have earned it. Therefore, there is nothing that we can do to earn God's favor. There's nothing that we can do to earn our salvation. And therefore, the second thing is this. There's nothing that we need to keep doing or to maintain it. And that is actually

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the message of Galatians. The Galatians were saved by faith. Paul appeals to that over and over. Why would you, you saved by faith, would you think you have to stay in by works? No, Paul says, look, you were saved by faith and you remain by faith. He wants us to understand that, yes, we are, and most of us would agree with this, that we are not saved by our works, but we also don't maintain our faith by our works. It is all by the grace of God.

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I was speaking about this with someone after church last week who was asking me a theological question. It reminded me of our teaching about sanctification. Sanctification is the process by which we are enabled more and more to obey God. And our catechism says that sanctification is an act of God's grace. We don't often think of it that way. But that's exactly what Paul is asserting. We don't do anything to merit God's favor, to become a Christian, to become a believer.

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We also do anything to stay in God's favor. So those are first two. The third thing is this. There is no sin. There was no sin. There was no awful thing that you've done that can ever prevent God from saving you. Nothing. Look at Paul. Paul was murdering Christians. Can you imagine?

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Can you imagine any other thing that is worse than that? There are worse things obviously that we can imagine. But in the kind of spectrum of bad things that God would probably be angry with and not want to save you, murdering his followers would be up there. It'd be up toward the very top. The fact that Paul was saved in the middle of murdering God's people

shows us there is no sin. There was no failure. There was nothing in your life that makes you unredeemable. Nothing. It's not possible.

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This is what the grace of God means. We think of certain sins, think of things in your life that you think are unredeemable or unsavable, it just simply isn't true. There is nothing, nothing that is outside the grace of God. Not only to become a Christian, but to stay in God's grace, to remain in God's favor. There's no sin you can commit that would cause God to reject you. Now this is maybe little bit more scandalous, but it is true.

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There is no sin that you can commit that would cause God to reject you. If you belong to Him, you belong to Him, period. You will remain in Him. Now, the question might be, what if someone rejects God? Well, what I would say, what I think the Bible teaches is that if someone is truly saved by God, called by Him, renewed in their mind and their...

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given the Spirit of God, will never fully and finally reject God. It will not happen. They'll either come back to Him later, or in fact, they never were truly a follower. And in fact, that's what Jesus says at the day of judgment, if you remember from Matthew 24, depart from me, I never knew you, right? I never knew you. So I would assert that if we belong to God, there's nothing we can do to lose His favor. Yes?

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We can come under temporal kinds of things because of our actions and can come under the discipline of the church and listen, does that mean that we can do whatever we want because of grace? No, and Paul will get there at the end of the letter, trust me, chapter five he gets there. But for now, he wants us to understand there's no sin that you can commit that keeps you from God's grace and there's no sin that you can commit that takes you out of it once you have it. There's nothing about, there's no kind of person, there's no kind of sin, there's

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particular thing at all that would ever keep someone away from the grace of God. God's grace is powerful to save anyone, anyone. Look, He saved you, didn't He? Right? Is there really much of a difference between Him saving me and saving Paul, the worst of sinners? There's really not that big of a difference when compared to the holiness of God. If He saved any of us, of course He could save anyone. He is able to do it.

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He can and there's no sin that can keep us away from the grace of God. This is the message that Paul is preaching. His very story reveals it to us. That we are saved by grace alone. We remain in the faith by grace alone and we do not add any works or any stipulations to that. It is totally of Christ and His righteousness. It is of Him. That is the message of the Gospel.

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the source of the gospel, the message of the gospel, and thirdly, the encouragement of the gospel. This is where Paul goes, and it may not be as obvious, but he goes there in a subtle way. But let's look back at verse 15. He mentions this stoic idea of what the stoics would call fate.

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the Greek philosophers would call fate and we would call providence. We would call the providence of God. But what he says is when he who had set me apart from before I was born Paul says God had a plan for me before I was ever born. And then he goes on to tell his story the bad parts and the good parts. He tells it all. doesn't hold anything back. And then at the end he says and they glorified God because of me.

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This is the encouragement of the gospel is that your story, your story is beautiful. No matter where you've been, all the lumps you've had, the ones you're going to have, your story is exactly the way God planned it. God has a plan for you. He has a purpose for you. And he laid it out before you were born. In fact, he laid it out before the foundations of the earth.

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Your life means something, your story means something, the things you've suffered are for a purpose. They're for a purpose that God is using you for his, according to his purpose and according to his calling. The sins and failings that you have are part of your story. We don't see Paul, we don't see Paul trying to hide his path. He tells us his story because it magnifies the grace of God and the power of

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Your story matters because God made you. He made you fearfully and wonderfully you were made. He made a plan for you well before you were born. And He has a purpose for each and every one of you. And that should encourage us. The gospel in this way encourages us that God is not just some impersonal deity. And this is what I would say to close us out.

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that if we compare, if we need a reason to believe, we can take Paul's word for it, he had a revelation from Jesus, this is the only explanation for his conversion, okay? You can take that, you can leave that, I think it's fairly persuasive. But think about this, if there is no God who created all things, then what I just said to you is not true at all. Your life doesn't have that purpose. Your suffering doesn't have any meaning.

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It doesn't have anything at all. There is no plan for you. You're just cells and neurons firing and chemical reactions and one day you'll return to the dirt. If we're looking for purpose and meaning in this life, the God of the Bible says, I made you. I have a plan for you. All of your sins and all of your suffering have a purpose in my plan. And I will hold you fast. I will keep you in my arms no matter what you do.

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If that is something that we are longing for as human beings, that beauty, the necessity of needing to belong, of needing a purpose, of needing to believe that the things that we go for are not meaningless, this story, Paul's story, is a story of that. That you matter, your story matters, there's a purpose for you, there's a plan for you, works and all. God loves you. And he is calling you into a relationship with him.

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and he is calling you to follow him and to understand that it is by grace alone.