

The Power of God to Save

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[0 : 00] Heavenly Father, thank you so much for your presence here this morning. Even though you're invisible, God, we love you, we believe in you, and we long to one day see your face.

We've not come to church today just to check it off our to-do list as some religious obligation, but we've come to worship you and to meet you and hear from you.

And so now as we open your word, would you speak to every single one of us, including myself, through your word. Speak, Lord, your servants are listening. In Jesus' name, amen. Please be seated.

A few months ago I was walking through the University of Ottawa, inviting everyone everywhere to church on Wednesday. And so I went up to one girl and I said, as I said to each person with my little invite card, I said, did you get the invite?

They had no idea what I'm talking about, so they always say, what invite? I'm like, well, every week, and I share about church on Wednesday and invite them to church. And so this young woman, as soon as she heard the word church, she just pushed the invite away and said, I don't want this.

[1 : 03] And I decided to push this a little more and just gently said, well, every week, people of every faith and no faith at all come. It's a church service we do at the University of Ottawa.

So I said, you know, every week, people of every faith and no faith come, and you're welcome to share your perspective at the end while we eat food together. And she interrupted me, and I remember her look of just cold, raw, earnest fear.

And with a very thick accent, she again just pushed the card away and said, listen to me. I escaped to Canada from a country where religion oppresses. I want nothing to do with this.

And the conversation was over. There's nothing I could do then but walk away and pray for her. And as I walked away, just burdened for the oppression she's faced and processing what she said, I realized that the Bible agrees with this young woman, that religion oppresses.

Throughout the world, different cultures, through words of different languages, religion, man-made attempts to connect with God, religion always oppresses.

[2 : 07] And the scriptures agree with that. And throughout both the Old and New Testament, you see that. If you're familiar with the prophets, over and over and over, God through his prophets in the Old Testament are condemning the oppressive religious people.

One of the passages that comes to mind would be Isaiah 58, where the chapter, God is just profoundly critiquing the people, critiquing is too kind a word, where he's condemning them for the way that they do all this religious activity, religious ritual, and yet the poor are being oppressed and the people are quarreling.

And though they are saying prayers, their hearts are far from God. And as you come to the New Testament, through the words of John the Baptist, you see once again that God is condemning this oppressive religion.

And then through the very words of Jesus again, again and again you see him calling for freedom from this oppressive religion.

And then here in Acts 9, you see once again a descriptive passage, not only of oppressive religion, but also of the solution to that. And we'll see how the gospel, how the good news about Jesus, and what Jesus did on the cross and through his resurrection, he has turned religion on its head.

[3 : 22] That's what we'll look at as we read through these words. But Saul, he's known by his Greek name more commonly as Paul, but Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.

The way is an ancient word, an early word to refer to Christians. And so this man who you and I know as Paul, his Hebrew name is Saul, and he, it says, is breathing, this is Acts 9, you can follow along in your Bibles, it says he's breathing murder against the disciples.

He is so violent in what he's seeking to do, it's like his very breath is murder. And he is this very pious man, a man who knows the Old Testament better than probably any of us in the room.

He is a man who is very devoted to his understanding of who God is. He is zealous for God's glory. And he is, he's concerned about what seems to be some type of upstart sect of Judaism that he finds offensive at these people who are worshiping Jesus.

And so he sets out to have them destroyed. And you see in the chapter, a couple chapters earlier, how he oversees the stoning, the murder of Stephen. He was there hearing Stephen preach the gospel and had him be murdered.

[4 : 46] And now the chapter before, chapter 8, says that Saul is ravaging the church, and now he is traveling far up into Damascus in order to destroy them. He's so passionate about the glory of God that he sees these people as undermining it.

But in his desire to stamp it out, he doesn't try to do it just on his own as a vigilante. He's not trying to be a Batman, trying to seek justice on his own. Instead, he goes to the religious authority. He goes to the temple, to the high priest, and he gets their permission to do this.

You see that he's working within this religious system to destroy this minority people. So he goes with the blessing of the priest. He goes up to Damascus.

He's on his way, getting close to the city to have the Christians destroyed. Verse 4, or verse 3. Now, as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him.

And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? And he said, Who are you, Lord? And he said, I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.

[5 : 50] There's so much that we can mine from these words that speak to us today. But the first thing I want you to see is those first two words. Really one word repeated. Saul, Saul. Throughout the world, throughout time, including today, man-made religion ignores the human being for the sake of the group.

And so you'll see, I was just reading a news article. I'm sure some of you saw it about one of the ISIS people who had his mom. He had his mom killed because his mom was seen as maybe blaspheming their god.

And so not only did he have his mom martyred, but he himself did it. Just horrible stuff. You read headline after headline about Afghanistan and Pakistan, the way that women are treated.

And you see this throughout the world, the way that the individual really has no value. It's all about the well-being of the group, in a sense, about the conformity, hedge money of how the group is, their religious experience together.

And so individuals don't tend to have a lot of value. But you see that God himself, that Jesus is saying in these words, and he's speaking not to a friend. He's not speaking to a follower.

[6 : 59] He's not speaking to a Christian. He's speaking to a man who is persecuting the church, a man who, if I had the chance to speak to Saul, I would probably use some kind of derogatory, I don't know, just rebuke.

But Jesus' rebuke begins with the words, Saul, Saul. He calls him by name. And in calling someone by their own name, there's such a sense of value and worth, of knowing, of identity.

And you see that the gospel is different than man-made religion in that it shows us that God bestows upon these people, all people, that he's made in his image a sense of identity, of worth, and value.

There's a profound sense of human identity, worth, and value that's found through the pages of Scripture in the gospel. And so the first point I want to draw from the text for us today is, if you can put it on the screen, Andrew, is this.

Jesus knows my name. Jesus knows my name. I'm not just talking about my name, Daniel. I'm talking about, this is for each one of us to be able to write down and remember.

[8 : 04] Jesus knows your name. Jesus knows not just the names of those who are followers of him, those churchgoers, but even someone as violent and against him as Saul.

Jesus knows his name. And he doesn't just know it intellectually. He calls him by name. And in calling him by name, even in his rebuke, even in his call to repentance, he's bestowing such a

sense of identity, of individual worth and value.

And in that, it turns religion on its head. It's so different than religion. But continues, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It's incredible. It's, these words are so intimate as you see that Jesus is saying, you're persecuting me.

But really, who is Paul persecuting? He's actually persecuting, not physically Jesus. Others crucified Jesus. Paul is persecuting Jesus' followers. But Jesus so closely identifies with those who are being persecuted that he says, you're hurting them.

You're hurting me. I don't have any children yet, but my brother Josh does. And to hear the way he talks about how his own well-being is so wrapped up in the well-being of his children.

[9 : 13] I know if someone was to slap his kid, he would feel, like he so closely identifies with the well-being of his children. And you see that this is how God relates to his children, to Christians, those who follow him.

And that they're getting persecuted, he takes it personally. I think there's three things to draw from this, at least three. I'm sure there's more. But the first is for those who are being persecuted today and throughout time.

Christians are being persecuted in places like North Korea, in China, the places where ISIS has a grip on things. And throughout the world, Christians are being persecuted. And for them to hear these words where Jesus says, why are you persecuting me?

That to hear the message that Jesus so closely identifies with them is such an encouragement, such a strengthening for their souls, for their resolve to continue and endure. For those of us who are not being persecuted, for those of us in North America and throughout the free world, there is profound implications for how we pray and what we do with our time and money in these words.

Because if we are people who love God and want to worship him, then we must not only be people who come to church and worship him through singing. Singing is a beautiful way to worship God.

[10 : 29] But if our worship ends with singing, then I don't think it's actually worship at all. If we're actually going to worship God with our lives, if we want to care for God, we have an opportunity to kind of care for the persecuted Jesus, to care for Jesus getting whipped and punched in the face and oppressed by caring for those Christians who are being persecuted.

And so we've talked a few weeks ago about being a church that prays. One of the ways we should be praying when we get together and in our own daily times with God, in our devotional time, we should be remembering and praying for the persecuted church.

Because as we pray for the persecuted church, it's as if we're praying for Jesus himself. Because he so closely identifies with them. So that should change and enhance the way we pray.

But third, it doesn't just have implications for the persecuted church and for us, but it also has implications profoundly for Paul himself. Because as Paul hears these words, he had no idea at that moment that years from then and throughout the rest of his life, he himself would experience profound persecution.

What was it like for Paul as he was writing the letter of Colossians or the letter of Philippians or 2 Timothy? As he's in jail, chained to a wall in his own human excrement and filth. In 2 Timothy, he's awaiting his death.

[11 : 42] And for him to remember this moment when Jesus showed up on the road to Damascus and said, why are you persecuting me? For Paul to remember that truth that Jesus so closely identifies and is with those who are persecuting, must have been a profound sense of strength for him.

And so you see Paul writing things like in 2 Timothy where he says, if you die with him, you will rise with him. And he talks often about the intimacy you experience with God, this profound sense of closeness with him and knowing of him in your persecution.

I can't help but think it must be from passages like this where Jesus said to him, why are you persecuting me regarding those he was persecuting? And now later he finds himself being persecuted and knows that Jesus takes that personally as well.

I've been trying to come up with a good analogy or story to expound that. And I haven't come up with a great one, so maybe your own imagination will help you. But if you think of a situation of some kid getting made fun of or bullied at school for, I don't know, maybe having like a, there's a kid in my neighborhood who had a pink bicycle.

I was living in a very poor neighborhood, so the kids couldn't afford much. Someone gave him a little bicycle. He's a boy and a pink bicycle. He was really embarrassed. And so we were trying to

encourage him, like, hey, that's not something to be embarrassed about. Like, you have a bike. [13:04] Like, I don't even have a bike. That's really cool. But he didn't really buy it. Imagine if instead one of my roommates with a bike, like, painted his bicycle, his own bicycle pink. You know, and all the people in front of him. And then my roommate who's an adult and clearly cool, like Joey, one of my roommates, imagine if he was to just come up with his pink bike.

And then, like, he bikes it out. And all of a sudden all the kids would just stop. Like, oh, like, you know, he's with him and they're together. Like, there's a sense where it's no longer an embarrassing thing. I don't know if that analogy makes any sense.

But what Paul found, and this is for you and I to find too, in Jesus so closely being with those who are being persecuted and mocked and hurt, there's a sense of it removing not only fear but also shame.

And so week after week as we're going through Romans as a church, and we say Romans 1.16, for I'm not ashamed of the gospel. I believe that that's part of Paul's lack of shame of the gospel in that even as he is being persecuted, he knows that he is following the one who so closely identifies with the persecuted.

I mean, as Christians, we're following the one who brings healing to the world through his death on a sinner's cross. We have in this fake stained glass window over here, Jesus is wearing a cloth, like a loincloth, to cover up his private parts.

[14:20] But from my understanding of actual crucifixion, he would have been completely naked. There's great shame in that. There's so much shame that the painter decided to cover that up because there's shame in that.

He's exposed. I found it really hard when I discovered that about crucifixion. I was like, what? My Lord, my king was naked? Like, that's troublesome. There's shame in, there's a reason that people in Paul's day and still today thought Christianity is so ludicrous because these people are worshiping someone who was tortured and mocked and really seen profoundly as a loser and then put up naked.

And, of course, there's more to the story than that. Jesus didn't stay dead. He came back to life. He's the conquering king. But still, for any of us who are experiencing persecution of any kind, there's a profound strengthening and encouragement we can find through Jesus' own suffering with us.

And so I think that it's easier to imagine that for encouragement to those in North Korea who are being persecuted. But even for you and I, when maybe you're in class and a prophet is saying something and you have an opportunity to identify as a Christian, or you're at work and someone asks something about your faith and you realize, like, you're kind of outed.

Now there's an opportunity to mention something about Jesus. And if you're anything like me, there can be a sense of, like, kind of want to withdraw from that and just not go there because people might think you're weird. But even though that's, like, the most minor of a persecution for someone to make fun of you or think you're weird, to remember that Jesus is with us even in that experience of minor persecution or minor mockery, that remembering who it is that we're following anyway, that's Jesus who suffered and died and brought you and I life through suffering, death, and resurrection, that removes the shame for us, to remember that Jesus is with that.

[16:13] And so there should be a profound strengthening of our faith and willingness to suffer for Jesus, even if it's just a little bit of mockery, as we realize that there's no shame in the gospel because Jesus himself is with us in it.

So moving forward, we see there's a beautiful word, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? And he says, who are you, Lord? He said, I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting, but rise and enter the city and you will be told what you are to do.

The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing, so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus.

And for three days he was without sight and neither ate nor drank. Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, Ananias. And he said, here I am, Lord. And the Lord said to him, rise and go to the street called Straight. And at that house of Judas, look for a man. Now I know in chatting with people about life decisions, what you should do and stuff, and I know many of us have said, like, oh, I would love if God would just speak through a bolt of lightning or if I just heard an audible voice.

[17:18] Wouldn't that just give me such clarity? For most of us, that's something we don't actually expect God to do. But for Ananias, God did just that. I don't know how excited or how Ananias, like, also in God, who he loves, who he worships, is also speaks to him in a voice more clear than mine own today.

I would have been so like, what? Like, God's sending me on a mission? Like, I'm always waiting for that call to get to go do something epic. And Ananias, God himself, calls him by name. Ananias, here I am, Lord.

And he says, rise and go. And he's giving such detailed instructions. If I was him, I'd be just, you know, quickly typing it down on my iPhone so I know, okay, this street's called Straight. And then God drops this bomb on him. Go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas, look for a man of Tarsus named Saul.

For behold, he is praying, and he has seen a vision. A man named Ananias, come in and lay his hands on him, so that he may regain his sight. And Ananias' response, it goes from being, like, kind of excited, kind of thrilled by this experience of God talking to him, and all of a sudden it's just complete, unadulterated fear.

Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem. He doesn't just say to the saints, but how much evil he's done to your saints at Jerusalem. And here he has the authority from the chief priest to bind all who call on your name.

[18:36] I don't know if you've ever found this, where you know what you're supposed to do. Maybe just from the clear teaching of the Bible, you know what you're supposed to do. You're praying about a decision. You know what's right. And as you're praying, you just so badly don't want to do that thing that you know you should do.

And so you're praying about it, and you're kind of like, God, should I do this? Should I do it? Kind of like option A, B, or C. Kind of giving God multiple choice. Like, at least, you know, you can pick any of these, you know? Like, should I apply to this college, that college, this?

And God just doesn't even, doesn't even, he just, God says, verse 15, but the Lord said to him, just go. Like, just go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel.

I mean, so many times you and I are praying about stuff, and we know God's way, we know God's will for us, and yet it's just like, okay, I know that you're all knowing, but I need to tell you something that you clearly don't know.

And we really make fools of ourselves in that respect, and we're better off just doing what Ananias ends up doing, which is he just obeys God. And so we have verse 16.

[19:40] God is still speaking to Ananias. For I will show him, Paul, how much he must suffer for the sake of my name. So Ananias departed and entered the house, and laying his hands on him, he said.

If you're familiar with more Pentecostal charismatic circles, you might see the laying on of a hand as some kind of spiritual activity. But I want you to see the tenderness in this.

Paul is blind right here. And if you've had the privilege of getting to minister to someone who's blind, it's all fine and dandy to call them by name or something. But if they can't see you and you can not really quite know where you are, it's a kind and tender thing to be able to go up and have some tactile contact to let them know you're there.

And so to see the tenderness in this is Ananias, who has been clearly living in fear of this man, who has quite literally overseen the slaughter, the murder of Christians, brutally through stoning.

Ananias has been in fear of this evil man. And now he comes and he puts his hand on his shoulder, and he says, listen to this. Brother Saul, how is it that these two men who are enemies of each other, one seeking to oppress, exploit, even bring to death this other man, this man who's living in fear of him, now in an instant are brothers.

[21:02] That's an incredible thing. And working through this, thinking through this issue of how the gospel turns religion on its head, man-made attempts to get to God, how the gospel overturns that.

First, we saw in the naming of Saul, the naming of Ananias, how Jesus knows you are my name, how he bestows on us a sense of dignity and value that is so foreign to other religions.

But second, we see that in more modern attempts, and you'll see this type of thing not just today, but throughout history, where you have some people subscribing to a system of religion, then other people trying to kind of overthrow that, invent their own thing, more like new age spirituality, and

they're like, I'm not religious, I'm spiritual, they'll say.

But even in that, it's still this man-made attempt to try to connect with the divine or some type of energy. And so although they might not be so much about the group and the hegemony, they're very about autonomy and individualism.

And yet even there, in all that individual autonomy and trying to connect with your own spiritual way, it kind of breaks you off from an ability to really share in a real meaningful community.

[22 : 06] And so just as the gospel brings about a sense of individual identity that the systems of religion don't have, so also the gospel provides a sense of community and belonging that individual spirituality can never, ever get to.

So you see this profound double sense of individual worth and identity as well as community and belonging, as he says, Brother Saul. Because through the gospel, every human who comes to Jesus joins in the family of God, and you experience a real, legitimate sense of family, community, and belonging.

And so the second point up there, if you could put it, Andrew, is real community, belonging, and family is found in Jesus. And the reality is that every other attempt at those things will always fall short.

But the gospel turns religion on its head by providing individual worth and value as well as real, real community. So Ananias says, Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit. And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he, Paul, regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized. And taking food, he was strengthened. You now, you go from having the passage opens with this murderous man, and it ends with him now being baptized and following Jesus, gaining not only his sight physically, but he gains the spiritual sight of being able to behold and love and treasure the true and living God.

[23 : 48] I want to just pull out a couple things for us before we're done. Back at the beginning, who is this man who is now a follower of Jesus? Who's going to spend the rest of his life mentoring, empowering other people to thrive?

This man who ends up, we read in Acts as well, where he's fundraising for the vulnerable and the poor in Jerusalem. He who was oppressing others is now himself willing to be oppressed for the sake of others' well-being and thriving.

He's completely changed. And we see in Acts 9, verse 1, at the opening of the passage, that Saul was a man who was breathing threats and murder. Paul writes in 1 Timothy that he was saved as he was the chief of sinners, but that God saved him so that each one of us can know that none of us are beyond being saved.

And the verse we've been reading over and over as we go through Romans is Romans 1, 16 to 17. And if you could put that on the screen, Andrew. That's the next slide. Let's read these words together.

Okay, I can actually see the screen from where I am. So if you can read it aloud, that'd be great. As Paul writes, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone.

[25 : 22] He's not just thinking of everyone of the far off in Spain or the far off in Turkey who he got to share the gospel with, but he also would be thinking of what God did in his own life.

Because he was this man whose very breath was murder. And he was violent. And yet God had saved him. And as we take the time today to think upon the salvation of this violent man named Paul, this should change the way that we look at those around us.

The way that we interact with people. The people that we would feel like our must be beyond salvation. A couple years ago, I had the privilege of meeting someone who had sexually abused some minors.

And my gut reaction was just, like, I want to destroy this guy. But instead, because of the Bible's teaching on God's power to rescue and restore and transform, I was able to be able to go through the gospel with this guy.

And his heart was changed, helped him turn himself into the police, helped him find professional counseling, and then was able to walk with this guy seeing God transform him.

[26 : 29] And so for sure, he had to face the consequences of his action and submit to all that, the police and justice and all of that stuff. And there's a lot of consequences, obviously, in the justice of all of that.

But it's incredible to see, even as justice came down on him, him be transformed by the power of the gospel. And I think of him as another example of what God is doing here and an example of Romans 1, 16 to 17, that it's the power of God that tells of salvation to everyone who believes. And so for you and I, when we encounter people in our lives, people who hurt people, whether it's through violence or other types of abuse, this truth, this truth, Paul's conversion in Acts 9 and Romans 1, 16 to 17 should give us hope and change our conversations from just condemning them to being able to, for sure, seek justice, but also invite them to come to know God. It should change the way that we see the 6 o'clock news, or for me, it's not so much the 6 o'clock news, but the Twitter news that shows up on my phone. As you see headlines of people in ISIS or whatever violent, murderous people, remember Paul. Remember Acts 9 and let that remembering lead you to prayer. Because if it wasn't for that, if it wasn't for this truth, then you would see them and just hopeless and live in fear. But there's a profound hope that replaces fear as you think of what God did in Paul's life, perhaps what God has done in your life.

[27 : 58] And so it changes the way we do that. So the next point, if you can put that up, is that the gospel changes the way I hear the 6 o'clock news, how I pray and speak. When I spoke to this young man, I was able to speak to him, calling him to repentance, calling him to receive forgiveness in Jesus and have his life transformed.

It changes how we pray because we're able to pray about the news and the people we hear about, knowing that the gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone. It changes the way we hear the news and receive it.

But just before we wrap up, not only is Saul, this man who is violent and then breathing murder, but he's also, another aspect to him is he's a very, very pious and learned man.

He knew the scriptures better than probably anyone in the room. He knew them so well. And he knew the prophecies that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, that he would be a man of no recognition, that he would be one who would heal the sick and raise the dead.

He knew all this stuff and yet knowing it, he rejected Jesus. He heard the gospel profoundly preached and explained through the Old Testament, through the words of Stephen, he had heard the gospel and he rejected it.

[29 : 05] I think that sometimes it's easier for you and me to believe that God might save the most violent thug who has never been exposed to the gospel. If only God will share, if someone will share the gospel with him. But it's hard for us to believe sometimes, for those people who know the truth so well and yet reject it.

And so perhaps there's a church that you know of where the church has become so profoundly liberal that they don't even believe the Bible is the true living word of God anymore. Instead, they believe that it's just like inspiring chicken soup for the soul.

And perhaps the pastor himself, though he preaches some type of homily each week, he doesn't even believe Jesus really rose from the dead. And so you hear of that and it's so easy to think, okay, maybe, maybe the Lord will save this violent fellow, but not this pious man who is so cold in his inner spirituality to the point that he's spiritually dead.

And yet, as you look at Paul and you see this man who was exactly and even more exposed to the truth and yet even more profoundly rejected it, it should give us hope to be able to pray for those family members, for those churches that we know of, for whoever it is, that the gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, truly everyone.

This really should break down those walls of fear regarding or hopelessness regarding those ones we think are really beyond the pale of salvation. But, but even as we look at this, even as we see God's transformation of Paul, it's an incredible and beautiful thing.

[30 : 37] I think it's easy for us to miss what was he being saved from and what was he being saved to. Was Paul just saved from being a mean, nasty, murderous man?

No. No, he was saved from so much more than that. I was chatting with some Muslim students after church on Wednesday ended a few weeks ago and we chatted for about an hour and a half about the gospel, about the Quran and the Bible and then toward the very end one of the girls said, ah, I have something I know Christians don't have an answer to.

She said, Islam provides a very clear reason for why we exist, why we're alive. And she said, I don't think you have an answer to this. We know that we are alive or that the purpose of life is that life is a test.

And she was very proud of that. And I just said to her, you know what, what is the worst time of the school year? And she said, exam time. And I was just like, so every day of your life is exam time. Every day of your life is a test. Every day is an exam time. The anxiety in your heart, the pressure you feel, oh, I must not mess up, I must not mess up. And that's not just true of Islam.

[31 : 42] Every religion, my family background, all sides is Jewish. We have 613 laws, all these mitzvahs we have to do for, not just for the very like old school religious, but even when, with Brian, we were walking the streets earlier this year.

He led a bunch of us in evangelizing and we would ask people on the streets, like, so if you died today, where would you go? And these people are, are people who aren't very religious or spiritual, but still in that man-made attempt to be able to connect with the divine, I guess, in a way, they would all say, I'd go to heaven.

And you're like, okay, well, why would they go to heaven? Why would you go to heaven? They say, I'm a good person. What they're saying is the same thing that Islam, Judaism, people around every ethnicity and tribe say, which is that basically if they can do enough good, basically it all comes down to karma, if they can do enough good, then they're going to get the reward of heaven.

If they're good outweighs their bad, then they get to heaven. In other words, it's an attempt to man-made, to climb up to heaven by your own good deeds. Or you can move to more Eastern religion and thought, which is not so much about what you do, but how you think.

If you can just learn to detach yourself and think a certain way, then you'll connect with nirvana.

Then you get to be there. And once again, that's not so much about the good deeds you do, but with the right way you think. And so what you see around the globe in every ethnicity, culture, and language is that the human way to try to deal with the pressure and that sense that life is a test is to try to be able to pass that test, climb up to heaven by either our good deeds or our good thoughts.

[33 : 10] If we can learn to do right or think right, then we'll end up okay. But the gospel turns it all on its head as it says, yeah, there's a test and every one of us has failed it except for Jesus.

Jesus has passed the test that he who knew no sin became sin, that we might become the righteousness of God, that he has passed the test, that heaven has come down to earth in the person of Jesus.

And so you and I no longer have to climb to heaven, but rather just receive what he has done for you and for me. It's an incredible thing as it turns religion on its head and because Jesus has passed the test, you and I no longer try to do right or think right in order to pass the test and get enough karma to heaven, but instead you and I are able to live a life in freedom, live a life of wholeness with meaning and purpose where we're doing right and thinking right in response to what God has done in our life.

And that's what Paul found. But that's not all that Paul was saved from. He wasn't just saved from the anxiety of living life as a test, he was saved from the very wrath of God. And it's the wrath that every single one of us is awaiting, whether we believe it or not, whether we like it or not, it's the wrath every one of us is going to face unless we receive the forgiveness that comes through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

That's what Paul was saved from and he was saved to a life that is fully alive, true life in Jesus as he received the joy and the meaning and the purpose of knowing Jesus.

[34 : 34] And so Paul's glory and his cherishing of the gospel wasn't just that he was saved from the wrath of God, but that he was saved to true life, true joy, true hope, true meaning as he came to know the true and living God.

And as we think about Paul's conversion, it's easy for us, I think, for us to think that, for us really to be saved, for us really to be part of God's elect, that we must go through an experience as dramatic as Paul's where the light flashes and you hear a voice or some type of thing of some type of spiritual experience like that.

But in God's mercy, the chapter just before Paul's conversion is that of the eunuch from far away, the Ethiopian eunuch. And for him, as he gets, when he gives his life, when he becomes a follower of Jesus and gets baptized, you don't see some dramatic light shine and all this kind of stuff happens.

He just gets explained the Bible, he believes the message, and says, I want to follow him. And he gets baptized. And so whether you're someone in the room today who has had some dramatic experience, you're someone who you've simply, you've heard the truth, you believe the truth, and you're done with that anxiety and the fear of life of a test.

And you just, as I was coming this morning, I was remembering Matthew 11 where Jesus says, come to me, all who are weary, and I will give you rest. I just want to invite you today, even as in a moment we stand, and I'll pray that instead, if you have not yet had the experience of giving your life, of surrendering your life to Jesus, receiving what he's done for you, I just want to invite you to just cry out to Jesus yourself and say, Jesus, save me.

[36 : 16] Save me for myself. Save me from life as a test. I receive your life. Jesus will not turn away those who call out to him. If the way we're able to call to him and ask him for forgiveness and become his followers, not by the works that we do or the things that we think, but by what he's achieved for us.

And so, if you are someone who believes in him, if you're someone that you want to follow him, fear not. No longer live life as a test, but it's time this day to finally receive his gift of life.

Would you stand with me now? Heavenly Father, all throughout the world there are people oppressing other people as we human beings try hard in our own attempts to try to find meaning or purpose or connect with the divine or whatever it be.

But God, thank you that you set us free from that just as you set Paul free from his oppressive way. Lord, I thank you for what you do, what you've done through the death and resurrection of your own son.

And so, Lord, I want to pray with the church right now that you would come to those oppressors, those persecutors throughout the world and that you in your mercy would call them to yourself and save them.

[37 : 38] Lord, I pray for those who are being persecuted right now. Thank you that Jesus so closely identifies with their suffering and we pray that you would give the persecuted church throughout the world relief, strength, hope, and endurance.

And Lord, I pray for every one of us in the room that what Paul experienced, not just the voice or the light, but his experience of you rescuing him from his sin, rescuing him from life as a test, rescuing him from a life of fear, rescuing him from a life of decay and death, rescuing him to life in you.

Lord, I pray that that would not be something that any of us in the room simply hear about, but that would be something that we know for ourselves, that we would know firsthand the gospel, the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, that you would give us that gift of faith and that you would give us that gift of eternal life that is found in Jesus, that you would help us to live that out each day of our lives for your glory and our good in Jesus' name.

Amen.