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I wrote the following “Spiritual Autobiography” as part of the preparation for a contemplative retreat last year. Looking it over now, it’s rather incomplete. For example, it lacks any reference to how my internship and field ministry contributed to my growth as a Christian, which is a glaring hole. In fact, it all but skips my five years of seminary, focusing more on my childhood. It also ignores the role of tragedy and grief in the process of sanctification. But, flawed as it is, I like the “snapshot” nature of the document (kind of postmodern) and the theme of God’s sovereignty working out our sanctification. So, for what it’s worth, here it is...

-Zachary

# My Journey Christward

A Spiritual Autobiography by Zachary Bartels

## *Introduction*

I'm no fan of the theory of naturalistic evolution. I find it to be rather illogical—mankind's last desperate grasp at justifying atheism and secular humanism. The theory claims that all life on this planet has slowly and relentlessly developed from single-celled organisms into unbelievably complex and amazing creatures—all by itself. A more recent spin on the theory, called *punctuated equilibrium*, suggests that creatures developed in huge spurts of evolution, rather than long, slow processes of change. (Both theories are worthless as such, of course, since order can never come from chaos without some intelligent agent orchestrating the change.)

Although it cannot explain the origin of the universe or of mankind, I think “evolution” is a good picture of the process by which our Lord Jesus sanctifies believers, making us more like Himself. He *orchestrates change*, guiding us through the chaos of life, slowly refining who we are—how we think, act, believe, and especially how we understand our relationship with Him and with our fellow creatures. Sometimes, like *punctuated equilibrium*, he changes us quickly in a short period of time. More often, our progress is slow and steady, with ups and downs. Like the poor dodo, we occasionally evolve into dead ends or in the wrong direction, unwilling to follow the leading of His voice. Yet the true Christian perseveres, returns to the narrow path, and with God's help, overcomes the world.

What follows is a brief look at how God has continually molded me more and more into who He wants me to be—into a man who is more like Jesus. I will look at eight different areas in which God has shaped me—usually against my will—into the image of His Son. Although these are all, in a sense, stories of success, they have all involved much resistance, argument, and rebellion on my part. And by no means have I arrived completely in each of these areas. He continues to lead me in these areas and more. God is still in the process of taking me over, piece by piece.

### *From Sinner to Saint at Five Years Old*

“When are you going to ask Jesus into your heart,” my sister Jennifer casually asked me one night as we got ready for bed. At five years old, I was pretty sure what she was talking about, but unsure what my answer should be. She was nine at the time and, having just recently prayed the “sinner’s prayer,” she talked about little else. She had hinted that I should take the plunge, but this was the first time I had been put on the spot.

“When I get done brushing my teeth,” I said. It seemed as good an answer as any.

“Really?” She beamed.

“Yep,” I affirmed, now committed.

“I’ll go get Dad,” she exclaimed and disappeared down the stairs. A few minutes later, as I crawled into bed, my father appeared at the door of the bedroom. He asked if I knew what it meant to ask Jesus into my heart. I did: Jesus had died for my sins and if I asked Him into my heart, I could go to Heaven when I died. He held my little hand and told me to repeat a prayer after him.

A sentence at a time, I repeated, “Dear Jesus, I know that I am a sinner. I believe that you died for my sins. Please come into my heart and make me a new person. Amen.”

I was slightly disappointed as I opened my eyes. I didn’t feel any different. My dad, on the other hand, was ecstatic. I later found out that he went down to his desk and made an informal “second birth certificate” for my rebirth as a child of God to mark the occasion.

As I grew up and began to study the Bible in earnest, I would seriously doubt whether or not I had truly been born again when I was five years old. “I didn’t die to myself,” I reasoned. “I was too young to even *understand* what it means to be crucified with Christ and share in His resurrection.” Besides, the whole “sinner’s prayer” mentality behind salvation is a recent, extrabiblical innovation. I would conclude that I didn’t know exactly *when* I had been saved—probably sometime during my early teens.

It was my pastor in college who told me, “Zach, you *were* saved when you were five. Jesus doesn’t demand that we understand the whole of Christian doctrine to be saved, just that we have childlike faith in Him.”

Pastor Pikey was right. I believed in Jesus with all my heart when I said that prayer. I was truly sorry for the sins that I knew I had committed. And, although it is by no means a requirement for salvation, that simple “sinner’s prayer” was a true confession of faith and commitment to repentance. That night, God had snuffed out my old self—with all the wicked possibilities of who I would become—and made me a new creation. He imputed into me Christ’s perfect righteousness so that I would never perish, but have eternal life.

### *From Wheeling & Dealing to Submission*

“What is it,” Ashley asked, trying to get a better look. Four of us were crowded around the object in my hand. We were in fourth grade, on the short walk home from school when I spotted the little blue cylinder. It was about four inches long and about as thick as a pencil—plastic and flat on one end and rubber and rounded on the other.

“It looks like a condom for a smurf,” joked Sarah. I laughed for a second until I felt a prick in my finger. I looked down and saw blood running down my index finger, into my palm. Under the thin rubber surface was a needle, which had poked through and punctured my finger tip. I dropped the object and kicked it into the road.

It was about a week later that I read the *Ann Landers* column, in which she gave credence to the urban legend that AIDS victims were leaving syringes full of their infected blood all around the country in order to share their misery with as many “innocent people” as possible. Having never *seen* a syringe, I assumed that I had fallen victim to this plot and was sure that I had been infected with the deadly disease, doomed to die a horrible death like Ryan White on the *Movie of the Week* the Friday before.

I thought about my impending death almost constantly for at least two months. I prayed again and again for God to miraculously cure me. Each entreaty was accompanied with some “Gideon’s fleece” type sign by which He should let me know that I would be okay. The signs never appeared.

Finally, one night I told Him, “God, if you cure me, I’ll devote my whole life to you. I’ll be a missionary or something, I promise.” Of course, it seems silly looking back, but really no sillier than Martin Luther promising St. Anne that he’d become a monk if she saved him from a thunderstorm. Anyway, no sooner had I said “amen” than a peace came over me for the first time since I “realized” that my young life was going to be cut tragically short. I went and told my mom (a nurse) about the little object that had pricked my finger. She laughed and explained that a syringe didn’t look like that and that you don’t get AIDS that way (and next time, to tell her about such things right away instead of worrying for months).

I viewed my mother’s response as an answer to my prayer and I began trying to think of creative ways that I could fulfill my end of the bargain, without ending up in Africa or something (I think I settled on drawing Christian comic books for a living). But, most importantly, I began trying to make “deals” with God on a regular basis. “I’ll stop swearing if you help me pass this test.” And who hasn’t prayed, “If you get me out of this mess I’ve gotten myself into, I’ll never do it again. I’ve learned my lesson!” The strange part is that it really did always seem to work. God seemed to come through on His end of the “bargain” and I did my best to hold up mine (at least for a while).

A few years later, I was at church on Sunday morning. The minister was praying the standard pastoral prayer, listing the sick and shut-ins of our congregation. He was praying for a man who was probably going to die within the week. I heard the man's family quietly sobbing somewhere in the back of the sanctuary. Suddenly, it hit me how screwed up my view of prayer had been.

It occurred to me: God knows every thought in every person's head. God hears every prayer...from brats like me looking to avoid small inconveniences in life to the family whose loved one was about to die, to people who are starving to death and desperate for a bowl of rice. I became incredibly convicted. I had been working under the assumption that God was concerned primarily with me—keeping me happy. After all, *I'm me*. In reality, I was one of billions of self-absorbed little people looking for special treatment from the Creator of the universe. Yet, amazingly, He still hears my prayers.

My view of God was never the same after that. It was like the scales had been removed from my eyes, allowing new access to understanding who God Is. Prayer became an honor, not a vending machine. And, of course, “making deals” with the Almighty was out of the question.

### ***From Waffling to Calling***

At thirteen, if you asked me what I wanted to do when I grew up, I'd tell you that I wanted to be a “businessman.” I didn't know what kind of business. Who cares? My ideas of success had been forged by the movies and TV of the Reagan era. I had watched *Wall Street* and *The Billionaire Boys Club* and completely missed the irony. All I knew was that I wanted to wear cool suits, be driven around in limos, and have a high rise apartment in New York City, where I would regularly entertain beautiful women with big hair. I wanted to be Alex P. Keaton.

Still, I always knew that I'd use all my money to do something great for God. When I read my favorite stories in the Bible—about men like Joshua and Peter and Paul—I felt a kinship with them. I knew I was called to *something*; I just figured that the content of my calling wouldn't be clear until I had a sufficient stockpile of cash with which to carry it out. I was heavily involved in my youth group during my teen years and I dreamed that maybe I'd fund some huge resort where youth groups could come and have fun and learn about God.

God, however, had different plans for me, which He was kind enough to share with me when I was fifteen years old. Someone had bought me a book on tape called *Life on the Edge*, by a man I admire very much, Dr. James Dobson. It was your standard teen book about how to make good choices in life (college, career, marriage, etc.). But somewhere in the midst of listening to that book, it became

clear to me that I was going to be a pastor of a church. I've since scoured a print version, looking for that one inspiring, epiphany-inducing line or paragraph, but have come up empty. All I know is that when I finished that book, I had no doubt what God wanted me to do with my life.

That night, I told my family the news. I was surprised that they weren't. Apparently, it had been clearer to them what God was doing in my life than it had been to me. I've never once second-guessed my calling or considered other paths. It sounds strange, but even through times of doubting God's existence, I never doubted that I was called to minister and serve the church.

### ***From Vicarious Belief to Personal Faith***

I've always loved Christian rock music, especially in the mid-nineties when it was really, really bad. I volunteered as a deejay at the local Christian radio station and, in return, got to attend every Christian concert that came through Bay City, Saginaw, or Flint. So imagine my bliss when my parents agreed to bring our family to Hershey, Pennsylvania for "Creation Festival," the Woodstock of Christian Rock. There, my favorite bands would give concerts twelve hours a day for four days, accompanied by speakers like Josh McDowell and Tony Campolo. I had gone to the event in 1993 and rededicated myself to Jesus after a particularly stirring sermon.

In '96, though, I had a different experience. I had just graduated high school and was set to start the pre-seminary program at Cornerstone College in the fall. The first day of the festival, one of the non-famous speakers with a bad timeslot had challenged everyone to have "quiet time"<sup>1</sup> every morning before we started our day. I wasn't overly moved by his presentation, but decided that as a future pastor, I'd better get in the habit of reading my Bible and praying regularly. I got up before anyone else the next morning and walked up to a scenic overlook, where I could see for miles. I unzipped my little NIV and flipped through it randomly, settling somewhere in the minor epistles. I read a few paragraphs and then bowed my head to pray.

"Dear God, thank you for letting me come to Creation." I stopped. I had a gnawing bad feeling. For some reason, it didn't feel I was *really* praying. I tried again, "Please help me to pray and read Your Word everyday, like the speaker yesterday said." I opened my eyes. No one was around.

Then it hit me: I was talking to myself. I wasn't talking to God; I was talking to me. I had always assumed that God was there and could hear my prayers because my parents had told me that's how it works. But what did they know? (In the past couple of years, I had made a regular practice of pointing out their flawed logic at every opportunity.<sup>2</sup>) I looked at the beautiful green hills of

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<sup>1</sup> *Christianese* for prayer and Bible reading

<sup>2</sup> Like Mark Twain, I was amazed by how much smarter my parents had gotten by the time I turned 25.

Pennsylvania. Obviously, there had to be a God or this amazing creation couldn't exist. I believed that. I had read *Evidence that Demands a Verdict*; I was sure that God was real. Slightly comforted, I made another attempt at prayer. No dice. They were just words inside my head; common sense was telling me that no one could hear them but me. I was suddenly filled with intense anger. I remember slamming the Bible closed and saying out loud, "This is *stupid!*"

I went back to the hotel to talk to my sister. I was sure that I could get back into the swing of things by taking part in a group prayer. I guess I thought that I could sort of ride the wave of everybody else's belief that God could hear them. That night, I was able to test the theory. No luck. Even with 40,000 other people, I couldn't get past the idea that God was incredibly far away. To this day, I'm not sure if I ever really doubted God's existence or if I just doubted that He concerned Himself with human affairs. Either way, that summer was a very uncertain time. I began to think of the Bible as a strictly human book and looked skeptically at the teaching and activities of my church, although I never voiced these doubts to anyone until years later.

My faith returned much more slowly than it had left. I read most of the Bible (some of it for the first time) and forced myself to pray. I eventually realized that I had been content to believe in God based on my parents' faith. My pastor and most of the adults I knew had always reinforced the idea that God *obviously* existed and the Bible was *obviously* His inspired Word. Questions weren't encouraged, so I had never really questioned it. Part of growing up in my faith was that I *had to* question it. That summer, I explored every aspect of my faith—and God held my hand through the entire thing. Through that process, I got closer to God than I had ever been. By the time I attended my first chapel at Cornerstone, I was able to honestly join the community in worship and prayer.

### ***From Exclusivist to Ecumenical***

Mark killed the lights and pulled the car up silently to the front of St. Bernadette's Catholic Church. It was cold and the car's heater didn't work, so I was shivering. Plus I was nervous. Mark and Josh were my two best friends my freshman year at Cornerstone. They were the two with whom I smoked cigars and watched R-rated action movies in defiance of the lifestyle statement we had all signed. Such hypocrisy notwithstanding, we managed to be quite self-righteous in our religious views and were not shy about making them heard.

We also liked playing pranks. Which brings us back to the Catholic church, where we had all huddled at the door in black sweatshirts, hoods up. I pulled the three page document out from under my shirt. It was printed on that old-school perforated computer paper, so that it essentially formed one long page. Josh kept a lookout while Mark retrieved the roll of duct tape from his pocket and secured

the pages to the door. We hopped into the car and made a break for it, pulling out onto I-196 and driving like half the GRPD force was on our tail until we were sure we had “lost them.”

It had taken me more than half an hour to type up Martin Luther’s ninety-five theses, yet I hadn’t absorbed enough of their meaning to keep me from adding “we’re still waiting for you to address these” at the bottom and signing it “The Second Reformation.”

How stupid.

We had plans to tape these to the door of every Catholic church in town.<sup>3</sup> At this point, I don’t remember if we actually did any more or if we just talked about it as if we had. I *do* know that we never literally nailed a copy to the doors of the diocese headquarters like we planned, thank God.

That anecdote is pretty much representative of my attitude toward other stripes of Christianity at the time. I grew up in Bay City, Michigan, where most people were very nominal Polish Catholics. I saw that the people who went to catechism and had ashes on their foreheads one Wednesday a year were the same people who partied, drank, slept around, etc. Confirming my perception was the conventional “Evangelical wisdom” that Catholics believe you get to heaven *by being good*.

In high school, I began to notice that members of mainline Protestant denominations were just as likely to live what I deemed to be immoral lives as their papal brothers. When I tried to witness to them, they didn’t even speak “Christianese.” Observe:

**Me:** “Are you saved? Have you asked Jesus to be your personal Savior?”

**Them:** “Huh?”

*Must be a heathen!*

I became rather convinced that the true remnant was present only in Baptist and Bible churches. Therefore, anyone who operated differently was suspect. I openly mocked Christians who recited creeds, practiced glossolalia, waved their hands when they sang, or used real wine in communion.

Unfortunately, life at Cornerstone did little to challenge these attitudes. Obviously, the friends I chose weren't about to broaden my understanding of the Kingdom. They *were* passionate, however. Our idea of excitement was to go down to the crummy part of Division Ave. and witness to people (apparently, people on safer streets didn't need Jesus as much). We also started going to meetings of other faiths, hoping to meet up with some people with whom we could develop relationships and,

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<sup>3</sup> On the upside, that’s a full month of cost-effective “fun.” Gas was only \$.90/gallon then.

eventually, convert. I'm still unclear as to what our master plan was, but within the span of a month, we attended a mosque, a Mormon service, and a Catholic mass.

It was at the mass that first I began to understand that the Church was larger than my tradition. On the way into the church, we snickered and pointed at the “idol” (statuette). We whispered jokes about the kneelers and braced ourselves for the voodoo and Latin mumbo jumbo to begin. It never did. A song leader led us in some praise choruses on his guitar, there were some prayers, and then a priest delivered a homily about how Christ died for the sins of the world. He said that, through faith in Christ, our sins can be forgiven, and that our faith will necessarily work itself out through love in good works. Then people started going forward for communion and we bugged out of there.

A few Sundays later, I went with my *Religion in America* class to a Greek Orthodox church. They were very kind to us, hosting a question and answer session before the service. We asked them all sorts of naïve questions and their answers were certainly different from the ones we would have offered. The service was full of smoke and Greek and people frantically making the sign of the cross. Someone brought a baby up to take communion. It was completely foreign to me.

That Tuesday, we talked about the experience in class. “Do you think those people are saved,” someone asked. Dr. Mayers said that he thought that most of them were. I was blown away. Especially because I found myself agreeing with him. I had been searching the Scriptures for proof that only Evangelicals (with a capital E) were saved. I found Romans 10:9, “Confess with our lips that Jesus Christ is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead and you will be saved.”

Thus began a long process of reevaluating what I thought I knew about the Kingdom of God. It was much bigger and far more diverse than I had thought, and it had many different forms, customs, and languages. It looks different in Russia, Rome, and Grand Rapids. What at first was very confusing and disorienting has become a comfort to me. As a “recovering Fundamentalist,” I now love discovering new corners of His Kingdom.

### ***From Emotionalism to True Worship***

The “contemporary worship movement” hit full force when I was a sophomore in college. Suddenly, it was really *cool* to worship. Christian bands quickly stopped imitating the world with watered down lyrics<sup>4</sup> and set about producing a flurry of worship albums with names like *Passion* and *Illuminate*. Previously obscure songwriters and worship leaders with exotic British accents were suddenly elevated to rock star status. In the midst of this cultural shift in the church, I left a

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<sup>4</sup> I think there is a certain sick art to the way Christian music can walk that line, producing songs that could either be describing a really great girl or a pretty good God.

progressive non-denominational storefront church (where I had been playing bass guitar in the praise band) for a very traditional Baptist church. There, sermon illustrations stood in for movie clips and an organ and slightly out-of-tune piano had to suffice in lieu of a praise band.

The reasons behind the change are irrelevant. The fact is, as a young twenty-something, I was less than excited about the worship going on at my new church. The pastor let me bring in my acoustic guitar and lead some choruses at the beginning of the service. People grumbled. “The guitar is too loud.” One person even got up and left the service first time I played it. The choir was the typical “small church choir” with a modest repertoire and a generally snail-like pace.

The thing I liked best about the church was that I was allowed to preach. I had already delivered a few sermons with a good response and so I began planning a message about worship. I was going to really let them have it. Just as God despised the blind, deaf, and lame sacrifices of the Israelites, I was sure He hated hearing their slow, half-hearted singing of old, irrelevant songs. I settled on the woman at the well for my text since I love preaching narrative sermons, especially from the Gospels.<sup>5</sup>

I learned something from that experience: never preach on a topic unless you are ready to be convicted yourself. As I exegeted the passage about worshipping “in spirit and in truth,” I came to realize that my receiving an emotional high had nothing to do with worship. It's not about me. Whether or not the music sounds pretty to our ears or gives us a “rush” is irrelevant. We are commanded to worship God. I remembered that the common Hebrew word for “worship” can also mean “serve.”

I began to measure my preferred forms of worship against this concept, as well as the worship that was happening in my and other traditional churches. I noticed that my favorite contemporary choruses were heavy on first person pronouns while the great hymns of the faith favored second and third person—choosing to celebrate true doctrine and praise God directly, rather than talk about how awesome our worship is going to be when we get around to it.<sup>6</sup>

I still see a place for contemporary worship. I still like singing those songs. And I certainly do not judge churches who worship in this way. But my own preferences have moved toward traditional worship that reflects the majesty of our Lord and contemplates the marvelous Truths contained in His Word—whether it makes me tap my foot or not. God used that passage and that experience to teach me what true worship is. It was the first—but certainly not the last—time that God used my own sermon to break my autonomy and self-centeredness, refocusing my desires on Him.

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<sup>5</sup> Granted that was a very “backwards” approach to sermon preparation. One should never “look for a text” to support what one wants to say. In the eight years since, I’ve learned that lesson well.

### *From Two People to One Flesh*

I started dating my wife in 1995 (she wasn't my wife then). We dated for five years before getting married. During those years, I always knew that we would one day tie the knot. Even in high school, we talked about it—we were one of those annoying couples. She knew I was going into the ministry and I knew that she was going to have a career outside of the home and the church, and we were both happy with the arrangement.

Our wedding ceremony was something of a compromise: a shorter, bald Baptist preacher in a three-piece suit (he was with me) and a towering, lanky, moustached Lutheran minister in full vestments (Erin's). During our pre-marital counseling, Pastor Ed—the Baptist—had told me never to think of “my ministry,” but always “our ministry” (mine and Erin's). It was a new idea to me. I had always seen Erin as part of my life, but always in a compartmentalized way. Things like *my ministry* should be separate from my marriage. Pastor Ed convinced me otherwise.

As we revised our wedding vows (contrary to what most people do, we made them more formal and traditional), the full implications of marriage came into focus. “What God has joined together, let no man tear asunder.” God was *really* going to join the two of us together. We would compliment each other, making up for the other's weaknesses. We would teach each other things and share every experience—happy, sad, or mundane.

As we stood at the altar of the Lutheran church before those two mismatched men of the cloth, I prayed the most earnest prayer of thanks in my life. We exchanged vows and rings and, in true high church fashion, Reverend Teich put our hands together and placed his over ours. He declared that we were man and wife now—one flesh—and made the sign of the cross. I could feel something supernatural binding our hands and lives together and, when we let go so I could kiss my new bride, it encompassed our whole beings. God had joined us together and, ever since, He has revealed more and more of what it means to be one flesh.

By joining Erin and I together, God has opened a whole new door through which He reveals Himself and shows me how to be more like Jesus. We continually encourage and challenge each other ideas with what *our ministry* can contribute to the Kingdom.

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<sup>6</sup> I once attended a contemporary service, where we sang for thirty minutes about, “come, let **us** worship,” “**I** just want to worship you,” “here **I** am to worship.” Unfortunately, **I** was still waiting for the worship to begin when the service ended.

### *From Evidentialist to Presuppositionalist*

This is not meant to be an academic paper. So what is a word like “presuppositionalist” doing here? It belongs here because it is a huge part of my spiritual formation. I’ve been blessed and cursed with a mind that works tirelessly in modernist categories. While in college, I memorized all of the logical fallacies from Geisler’s *Come, Let Us Reason* and all of the exegetical fallacies from D.A. Carson’s book of the same name. Woe to anyone who dared employ a fallacy in my presence.

Given my penchant for rationalism, I’ve always been impressed by man’s attempts to prove God with logic. Anselm’s ontological proof, Aquinas’ argument of infinite regress, the brilliantly played arguments of Peter Kreeft, and even the investigative reporting of Lee Strobel. Throughout my years as a cocky Christian, I have never backed down from a debate about God’s existence and the veracity of the Bible. I firmly believed (and still do) that the Bible is irrefutable and that God’s existence is a logical necessity. Yet, I always walked away from such encounters frustrated. Almost no non-Christian saw the obvious truth of such arguments. At least, if they did, they wouldn’t admit it.

I knew the problem had to do with Romans 1. These people knew deep down that God exists; they just needed someone to show them in a logical way what they already knew. My assumption was that the proof for God was “evidence that demands a verdict” and, if they could just be objective for a minute, they would arrive at the correct verdict.

Then a seminary professor of mine, Dr. Wittmer, explained the content of Romans 1 to me in very simple language: unbelievers know that God is real because they see His work (creation). But they have an *agenda*...so they distort, pervert, and suppress this knowledge. They’ll *never* reach the right verdict. No amount of argument, logic, or reasoning can break through this agenda. Instead of arguing, we need to presuppose God’s existence and speak to people from our shared knowledge that God is real.

It doesn’t always “work.” But then again, arguing has almost never worked for me. I know of no one who was argued into the Kingdom until he or she cried, “Uncle! I give! I admit that you were right and I was wrong!” When you start an argument, people put up all their defenses. When you share with people what God has done for them, they are more likely to listen.

This epiphany was important to me on a deeper level as well. I realized that I had been holding onto my “evidentialist” views of proving God’s existence for my own benefit. I had needed to reinforce my belief with a web of arguments and reasoning that would keep me from doubting it again, as I had years earlier. But as I came to terms with the true content of Romans 1, I realized that I don’t need to prove God to myself; He’s proved Himself to me over and over again. I can presuppose that He exists, that He is who the Scriptures say He is. What a freeing realization that was! I know that God is

real and faithful—everyone does. I don't need proof; I just need to let go of my agenda and let Him speak to me..

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And He does speak to me...through His Word, through life experiences, in prayer, and through other people. I do stumble, backtrack, and make wrong turns, but His voice is always there, leading me down the narrow path Christward until I reach the finish line.