

“Scales off your eyes!” Acts 9:1-20

“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. Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone 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. 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 the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul, for behold, he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.” But Ananias answered, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem. And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name.” But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him 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, “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 regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized; and taking food, he was strengthened.

For some days he was with the disciples at Damascus. And immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, “He is the Son of God.”

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

How are Christians different from other people? What makes us different? What makes someone a disciple of Jesus? Here are some suggestions. Perhaps, we are Christians if we come from Christian families, if our parents or grandparents were Christians. Perhaps, we are Christians if we know Biblical stories, or if we know the Commandments. By the way, do we know them?

Or perhaps, we are Christians for we are good and moral people, we don't do bad things, we only do good things. Or maybe because we attend the Services at the Church? Or maybe someone is a Christian if they believe there is a god. Or even better, if they believe that there is that God who created everything, or that Jesus really lived.

It is important to get this straight, for how could we carry on the Great Commission to make disciples for Jesus from all the nations, if we don't know what makes anyone Jesus' disciple. Do we need to teach people how to be nice?

Do we just need to check whether they believe there is God and that's enough? Or perhaps, we need to demand that they attend Services at our churches and that will make them disciple of Jesus. What do you think, is any of these answers any good?

I don't think so... See, Saul, whom we better know as Paul the apostle, he excelled in all of these. He came from a believing family, with a really good pedigree. And he certainly knew his Bible, the Old Testament.

Probably much, much better than any of us will ever know it. And when it comes to good and virtuous and moral living, to attending the Services, keeping Sabbaths, and leading exemplary life, Saul was blameless, and he certainly knew that Jesus lived; as he was chasing Jesus' disciples all over the place.

Besides, Saul wasn't some lukewarm believer who just believed that there is a god somewhere, but it didn't really change anything in his life. No! Saul had devoted his life serving his God, with incredible passion and commitment.

But then came the Damascus Road experience... The Risen Lord Jesus Christ invaded Saul's life – unexpectedly, forcefully, traumatically, irreversibly. In an instant Saul's life was turned upside down. It is interesting – when Ananias laid his hands on Saul, “immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight.”

This is a really good description of what happened to Saul, and what happens to us, as Jesus intervenes our lives. “Something like scales fell off his eyes...”. It was said about Saul's physical eyes, but the same was true also on another, even deeper level.

On how Saul begun to see the answers to the two of the most important questions in our lives. Do you know what they are? **Who is God, and who am I?** What happened with Saul on that day, it was like scales falling off his eyes and for the first time He saw God for who He truly is and he saw himself for who he truly was.

This is what changed everything for Saul. The true answers to these two questions: **who is God and who am I?** This is what made Him a Christian. This is what makes us Christians, when we encounter the Triune God and when He reveals us the truth about who He is and who we are.

Let's reflect on this a bit more. For this is so, so important. **Who is God, what is He like and who are we?** Let's reflect first on who is God and what is He like? Let's leave aside for a while those who deliberately choose to believe there is no God. They are free to believe whatever they wish. Of those who believe that there is something higher, how do they usually think about this something or someone higher?

There are two things that shape our natural understanding about God. First, as the Holy Spirit has recorded it for us – what can be known about God through our natural abilities – His power – it is revealed to us, we have no excuse.

Second, we all have the Law of God written on our hearts. We all have this strange phenomenon, our conscience, which often speaks against us, accusing us, making us feel guilty for what we have or haven't done. It tells us on a deep, deep level that we all will be held accountable.

Now, put these two together and what sorts of picture of God can we get? God as... all-powerful Judge. God who will hold us accountable. God who demands and punishes. That is how we picture God according to our natural knowledge.

Why would it matter? Because how we think about our God shapes everything in our lives. How will we try to live if we think about God as the Ultimate Judge? What sort of relationships we will have with such God?

Probably not much of relationships, more like an attempt of neutral coexistence. Trying to keep a safe distance. Unless something bad happens and we need to plea for His help and mercy. There may be a bit of fear, a bit of uneasiness, a bit of guilt. If this is how we think about our God, that will also shape our understanding of worship.

We will worship to do “the right thing”, to tick all the boxes. It will also shape our motivation, why we may strive to lead good lives – to appease Him and hopefully to gain His favour. It will shape how we see sufferings, challenges and trials in our lives; likely as God's punishment for we haven't been good enough.

How is it to live in the shadow of coming judgment day, having your fate in the hands of all-powerful judging God? Not fun if we take this at least somewhat seriously. It makes sense not to be overly interested in such God.

And if it is possible to ignore such deity, because “the science says so”, of whatever other excuse we may find, why not? It seems we are better off without such god than with him. And this is exactly what our society is doing, and also many who are close and dear to our heart, our family members, our friends.

But then... the true God shows up! When that happens, we are almost blinded by what is revealed to us. “Who are you?!” That was Saul's outcry. “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” When the true God shows up, He is nothing like our natural knowledge made us believe. He shatters all our false ideas with blinding divine beauty.

He comes to you, He invades your life, He speaks to your heart: “My beloved, it was me who formed you in your mother's womb. I have known you since the beginning. I have watched you grow. I have been your protector.

I have provided for you the world to live in, the people who will care for you, the network of creation that will provide for all your needs. I did all of that for you. I know that there is a sickness in your heart, that has turned you away from me.

I know that we have been separated. But I have never given up on you. What I did give up, was my heavenly glory, I humbled myself so that I can come closer to you. Now I have come to heal your sickness, to tear down the wall that separates us.

I give you myself, I pour out my blood for you, so that you can receive a new heart. Living and healthy heart. I invite you to be with me, let me love you, let me bless you, let me care for you, let me be your God! You can call me Father, for this is who I am. You can call me your brother Jesus, for this is who I am, and you can call me any time, for my ear is always open for you. Always.”

This is how the true God comes to us. His burning affection disarms all our defences. His love and commitment finally satisfy the deep longings of our hearts. His Spirit indwells in us and embraces us in the divine fellowship with the Triune God, and this fellowship is like nothing else. If we have this God, we have everything.

If we know God like this, if we are blessed to experience Him like this, then there is nothing that we want more than being with Him, spending time with Him, listening to Him, conversing with Him, responding to His love and trying to bring Him joy.

If this is how we know Him, our lives are beautiful, joyful, hopeful, meaningful, secure, rich, abundant, and we can't wait to see the day when our God will embrace us in His New Heavens and New Earth. To know God as He is, it changes everything.

This is what happened to Saul. **But also, he was given the answer to the other question – who am I?** He learned the truth about himself. How do we usually think about ourselves? Because we have this thing, our conscience, because we sense we will be held accountable, we want to be good.

We all want to be good. You know the feeling... And we want to think about ourselves as good. We try to do what we believe is good, and when we fail, or when our hearts crave for something else, we try to change the criteria for what is good, and we try to explain our actions in such a way that our goodness remains intact.

“That wasn't such a big deal. That wasn't my fault. That person, or circumstances made me do that. I am good.” You know how quick we are to justify ourselves, to put blame somewhere else. We all do this. We are true professionals. Born experts.

Saul could make a long list of credentials to show how good he was. And we could say that he was indeed a good and moral person. More people like he was, and the world would be much better place. But after Jesus invaded his life, everything changed.

The direct experience of Jesus' presence shed light on who he truly was. There was nothing good in him, he just tried hard to be good. He didn't have a choice. The Judgment Day was coming. He had to convince that judging God that he was okay.

But now, the gracious and merciful God had spoken to Saul, He had shone into his life. The season of pretending to be good and holy was over. Saul realized that all of that had been toiling in vain, falsehood, theatre. This God knew his very heart, all the hidden secrets, shameful passions and desires, all were out in open.

He couldn't explain them away. And he didn't have to. For this Jesus had come to embrace him as he was. He was loved as he was. He was accepted as he was. He didn't have to match certain criteria before he could hope for God's favour.

This encounter with Jesus had made Saul acutely aware that he was much more sinful, much more dangerous, capable of much greater evil than he had thought, but also that He is loved beyond all expectations, passionately and unconditionally by the most beautiful, most attractive person, by Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

That experience changed Saul from within. He didn't care anymore about putting on good show for others or even for himself, what he did care – about being grateful and faithful to this amazing God, who had done so much for him.

And you know, the same is true for you. When Jesus Christ comes into your life, the same happens. When you are loved by someone so incredibly beautiful and good, loved unconditionally, loved even when you keep failing him, it changes us.

That is exactly how you are loved! When we realize that our God looks at us, He looks at you and says: "You are so good in my eyes, so precious!" Then our hearts are changed. We don't need to show to others that we are good, not even to ourselves.

What we care for then – is to respond to the love and grace of this God, to learn how to please Him and to live for Him as He lives for you. This is what makes us, Christians, different. We know exactly who we are, what we are capable of on our own, but we also rejoice knowing that we are forgiven, accepted, loved and cherished by the Triune God, whom we can call our God. Nothing is going to change His attitude toward us.

And that changes everything. Now, how are we to make the disciples from all nations? When we proclaim this to others, when we let the light of Jesus shine in their lives, so that they can learn from the lips of the Triune God, who He is and who we are to Him.

This most beautiful truth changes everything. It did it for Paul. It did it for you and me. May our gracious Lord help us and bless us that through us, though you and me, it happens to many others as well.

Amen.