

“New “glasses” for Paul” 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 to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

The Lord willing this may be a significant year for us, as we all together prayerfully try to discern how our Lord wants to use us where He has placed us. As we reflected on it last Sunday, one of the main responsibilities of the Church is to be Jesus’ witnesses, to tell the world what He has done. That is the Great Commission entrusted to us. Today’s reading provides a few more helpful insights.

About Saul... obviously he was a very passionate person, both before he became a Christian and after. This may be one of the reasons why Jesus had chosen Paul to be His missionary to gentiles.

Let me ask you this – what kind of person was Saul? Luke writes that he was **“breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord...”** He was persecuting the followers of Jesus, our brothers and sisters.

As he himself later remembers he **“punished [Jesus’ disciples] ... and in raging fury against them persecuted them even to foreign cities.”** (Act 26:10-11) Was Saul a bad person? What do you think?

But then, remember how Paul, reflecting on his former life wrote to Philippians: **“As to the law, [I was] a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.”** (Phi 3:5-6)

It sounds like Paul wasn’t just good before his conversion, he was almost blameless according to the law. It was only after he became a Christian when he said that he was “the foremost of sinners”, and that there was nothing good in him. Was he good before and became bad after becoming a Christian?

You may recall that we have spoken about worldviews, about the way we see and perceive this world. I like to use the metaphor of “glasses”. Meaning, we all have something like invisible “glasses” through which we see everything.

Those “glasses” are made up of different ideas that we have gradually acquired during our lifetime. These our virtual “glasses” determine how we understand and respond to this world, an most of time we are not even aware to them.

I propose that the best way to understand what happened with Paul, and from this we will draw further lessons, is to describe this event on the road to Damascus as rather dramatic a change of Paul’s virtual “glasses”.

Paul was a faithful Jew. He was passionate about serving his God, almost blameless following the laws given by his God. His God should have been pleased with him. This is how Paul saw his life before that event.

This is how his “glasses” made him see himself, his God and this life. Now think about this – you would know many among your relatives or friends who are just like Paul was. They have their “glasses” and they see themselves as decent people.

They may do good things. They may be almost blameless according to their own standards. And God, if there is one, should be happy with them. They struggle to understand, what is this fuss about Jesus, and repentance and forgiveness. Why?!

That is how they see this world, and most of them don’t even realize that they wear certain invisible and distorted “glasses”. They are just like Paul was before this life-changing, or should we say “glasses”- changing event.

What happened with Paul, happened very quickly. **“Now as he approached Damascus, 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.” [...] Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing.” Wow!

At once Paul had lost both – his eye-sight and his virtual “glasses”. It is difficult to imagine how hard the next three days were for Paul. The ground had just collapsed under him. His old “glasses”, in which he felt so confident, were shattered in pieces.

Gradually during the next few days, they were gently replaced with new ones. Through the old ones Paul saw his God as the Lawgiver; God gives His laws and we are to keep them. And Paul saw himself as almost a perfect servant of his God.

Suddenly it was revealed to Paul, that his old “glasses” had distorted how he saw God and how he saw himself. The heavenly being, whose presence had blinded Paul, had revealed His name to Him.

“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” That was indeed true God. The true God had indeed come as one of us, as Jesus from Nazareth, had died and risen from the dead, and now He reigned supremely.

He wasn't that God-Lawgiver, who only expected outwardly obedience to some rules. This God was God of grace, who **“[had] emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant... He [had] humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”** (Phi 2:6-8)

It was true. Jesus had given His life for Paul. When Paul was still His enemy. When he was still persecuting and putting to death Jesus' brothers and sisters... How heart-struck could Paul have felt discovering this?

And what about himself? He had thought he was blameless. Now he learned he had been persecuting and putting to death those whom Jesus loved. He had discovered what he would not have otherwise believed.

That there was nothing good in him. The more shocking was the fact that the only person who truly knew his heart, Jesus Christ... instead of destroying Paul, had sacrificed Himself, so that Paul the persecutor of the Church could have a new life.

New “glasses”. That is what it takes for someone to become a Christian. Of course, we should do everything we can to remove any obstacles for people to come to Jesus, we should make that path as easy as possible.

We should consider our Service times, how to make them as accessible as possible, our music, how to make it as beautiful as possible, our exteriors and interiors, how to make them as welcoming as possible, the food and drinks that we serve, our attitudes, everything we do, we certainly should do all of that, as soon as we can, but... on their own, those things won't make anyone Christian.

What people really need are new “glasses”. They need new “glasses” through which they could see themselves as God sees them, that there is nothing good in them. Then they need to see who the true God is.

That He is more loving, more gracious, more forgiving, more holy, more powerful, more attractive, more interested in each one of us, than we could imagine, and that He is the One whom we all long for in the depth of our hearts.

This is where we as Christians come in. First, we need to understand what our “glasses” are like. The more we understand how beautiful God’s truth is the more passionate we will become in our desire to share it with others.

Then we need to be clear – everyone has their “glasses”. They may be better or worse, but unless they can see the true God as He is – as loving and gracious God, and unless they can see who we all are – foolish and arrogant sinners, and unless they can see what Jesus has done for them and offers to them, their “glasses” are worthless and need to be changed.

For Paul it took just a few days. For everyone else it will take much, much longer. It will take our time, our thoughts, our learning, our prayers, our efforts, but – there is nothing more joyful than to see a repentant sinner joining God’s family.

The new “glasses” that we are sent to offer are incredible. Through them you see God, who values us so much that He identifies with us. When Jesus appeared to Paul, remember what He asked: **“Why do you persecute ... me?!”**

Paul wasn’t persecuting Jesus, but Christians. But for our God you are so important, that He identifies with you, with the body of Christ. What someone does to the Christ’s Church and His followers, they do to God.

Through these glasses we see God who welcomes sinners. Whatever you have done, or have failed to do, this reminds you – Jesus welcomes us, sinners. Through these glasses we see God, who sends us welcome every repentant sinner.

As Paul was hanging between heaven and earth, Jesus sent Ananias to welcome Paul into God’s family. Remember, how Ananias greeted Paul? With the most unlikely of greetings for a persecutor like Saul.

“Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus ... sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” “Brother!” This is how our God receives every sinful human being. This is how He has welcomed us, each one of us.

Whenever someone is brought into God’s family, it is always only by God’s grace, only as the work of the Holy Spirit, and only because someone has helped them to obtain these new “glasses”.

I pray that we all not only would be grateful for our new God’s given “glasses”, but also would try to understand them better, so that we can share them with those who still see the true God and themselves through distorted lenses.

So that one day you too may speak to them these words: **“Brother, sister, the Lord Jesus ... sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.”** Amen.