

“Become an optometrist!” 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 witnesses of Christ, the ambassadors of reconciliation, God's chosen people, royal priesthood, holy nation... the Scripture clearly speaks very highly of who you are and what great responsibilities are entrusted to us.

To be God's instruments, His mouths, His feet, His hands as He builds His eternal Kingdom, as He gathers His beloved Bride from all four corners of the world. It's almost frightening what He invites us to participate in. And exhilarating as well.

But how to go about it? Are you ready and well equipped for those great responsibilities? Are we? Today's reading from the book of Acts – Paul's road to Damascus experience - provides some helpful insights.

But first, let's talk about Paul. 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 supreme to the gentiles.

Let me ask you this – what kind of person was Paul? 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.”** (Acts 26:10-11) Was Paul 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? What’s going on?

For a while we have been learning in our Bible Classes 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, understand and interpret everything, this world and our lives.

Those “glasses” are made up of different ideas that we have gradually acquired during our lifetime. These virtual “glasses” determine how we understand and respond to this world, and most of the time we are not even aware of 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 a rather dramatic change of Paul’s virtual “glasses”.

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

That 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, about repentance and forgiveness.

What’s the point?! 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! Imagine that! At once Paul had lost both – his eyesight 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, so blameless, 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. To Paul’s utter shock.

“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” That was indeed the 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 terrified and 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. In the blinding light of the Lord Jesus Paul 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, all of it, Jesus Christ... instead of striking Paul down, had laid down His own life, so that Paul the persecutor of the Church could be forgiven and live.

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 how we make ourselves known to the community, what message our web page sends, what about exteriors and interiors of our buildings, how to make our congregation as welcoming and accessible as possible.

We must reflect on how we greet and treat those strangers who walk through our doors, on the reverence we show to the Lord. Can people recognize us as Jesus’ disciples from how we love one another; how well do we do that? We should reflect on those things, but on their own, they will not 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 according to our fallen nature.

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 beautiful, more interested in each one of us, than we could ever 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 learn and understand well what our Christians “glasses” are like. The more we understand how beautiful God’s truth is, the better we can articulate it, the more passionate we will become in our desire to share it with others.

Then we need to be clear – everyone has their own “glasses”. They may be better or worse, but unless they show the true God as He is – as loving and gracious God, and unless they show who we all are – foolish and arrogant sinners, and unless they show what Jesus has done for us and offers to us, those “glasses” are worthless, leading our fellow human beings into eternal death and they 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. Especially if they are someone we love and cherish dearly.

The new “glasses” that we are sent to offer are incredible. Through them you see God, who values you so much that He identifies with you. 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, to you, they do it to the Triune God. He takes it personally.

Through Christian glasses we see God who welcomes sinners. Yes, that’s what He does. Not good people, but sinners. Whoever you are, whatever you have done, or have failed to do, this reminds you – Jesus welcomes sinners. Just like me, just like you.

Through Christian glasses we see God, who also sends us to 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 you.

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 God has used one of His people, one of us, to help someone 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 gladly learn and try to understand them better, so that we can share this beauty and goodness with those who still see the true God and themselves through deadly distorted lenses.

I pray that the Lord bless each one of us that we too have our opportunities to speak those powerful words: **“Brother, sister, the Lord Jesus ... sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.”** For this is what you are called and sent to do. Amen.