

Can You See Jesus?

☞ ...binding, blinding unbelief (vv.1-9)

† joyful eyes of new life... (vv.10-19a)

In the name of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, dearly redeemed family of God:

The Lord's Apostle James tells highly religious church people: *"Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires."* (James 1:19f NIV84) John the Apostle writes: *"Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him."* (1 John 3:15) The religious zealot before us today was *"breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples."* Saul of Tarsus should have known better. He studied under Gamaliel, one of the most famous Jewish rabbis. Saul should have known Moses' law forbids murder and oppression. He should have known the prophets like Isaiah in Chapter 53. The Suffering Servant of the LORD was prophesied to be crushed under God's wrath in our place for our transgressions, then rise again. Sadly, some of the most dangerous people are the most religious. They don't realize that they are most dangerous to themselves. It all depends on what our eyes can see. So are you a problem? Or are you a blessing? It comes down to this: **Can You See Jesus?**

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Before He suffered and died, rose and ascended into heaven, Jesus predicted the world would hate His disciples as it hated Him. *"If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you."* (John 15:19) But did anyone really expect such anger against Jesus since they said He was dead?

The first Christian martyr was a lay member of their church council. While executioners were stoning Stephen to death, a young Saul of Tarsus was *"giving approval to his death."* Saul went after Christians so violently that *"everyone but the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.... Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house he dragged off men and women and put them in prison."* (Acts 8:1-3) Years later he would confess he was *"a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man...."* (1Timothy 1:13) *"Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. In my obsession against them, I even went to foreign cities to persecute them."* (Acts 26:11) When we first see Saul here today, he's going to Damascus with authority to arrest and imprison men and women worshiping Jesus as the Christ.

So what got Saul so angry? Why this vehemence against Jesus who only did good all His life and was supposedly dead? Jesus taught His followers not only to love one another, but to love their enemies? Why Saul's **binding, blinding unbelief**? How could anyone be so blind?

Years ago I ran across a puzzling prophecy in Isaiah: *"Who is blind but my servant, and deaf like the messenger I send? Who is blind like the one committed to me, blind like the servant of the Lord?"* (Isaiah 42:19 NIV84) The context shows God was talking about His own chosen nation of Israel to whom He had given Moses and the prophets. But they paid no attention and fell into angry unbelief against the Lord's servants. I so wish this were not true of you and me. We get stuck in our own opinions, like monster truck tires that keep dropping into the ruts of spiritual blindness. Maybe not persecuting Christians, but our thoughtless comments sometimes discourage our lay leaders and pastors. We fail to encourage the downhearted because we're blind to the needs of others and God's goodness to us.

Sometimes people wonder why I am so grateful for God's blessings through the Wisconsin Synod, as if I think they're always right. Just the opposite. It has impressed me about WELS pastors and professors since I was a seventh grader when we joined: They accept correction from God's Word, but stand steady against legalistic human opinion. As a young teenager I repeated what my biological father

said about WELS errors. My WELS pastor took me aside and kindly told me, “If we know about errors, then it is our responsibility to correct them from God’s Word.” I could not come up with any at the time, but I’ve seen errors over the years. One of our Seminary professors even spoke of admonition from Christians outside our church body. He said according to Scripture they were right; we were leaning too far the wrong way, out of balance. When a couple of our laymen told me about a problem with a Twin Cities WELS group going contrary to Scripture, we went together. And you know what? They listened to us and made corrections. Self-discipline is a miracle of God’s grace which we all need.

Saul’s **binding, blinding unbelief** needed God’s grace. *As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” “Who are you, Lord?” Saul asked. “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” he replied. “Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.”* Three days of physical blindness helped Saul see how blind he was inside his stubborn, sinful soul.

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Behold the loving kindness and tender mercy of God! The power that put Saul on the ground and blinded him could have pulverized him, sent him to hell, got rid of him. No fair minded person would object if such a violent man got what he deserved. But God shows His strength mostly in being gracious and kind. God was determined to replace Saul’s **binding, blinding unbelief** with **joyful eyes of new life**. And in order to convert Saul, God would use a trembling disciple who did not want to go.

Be honest. Would you want Ananias’ assignment to go and baptize Saul? Wouldn’t you object too and tell the Lord the bad things the man was doing to His people? Ananias tried, but the Lord Jesus had a plan. He told Ananias, *“Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.”* God made Saul the persecutor into Paul the greatest missionary to the Gentiles. Later on Paul tells again how the scales fell off his eyes and how he received the Holy Spirit’s washing of rebirth and renewal in Baptism. Who could have imagined how Paul’s **joyful eyes of new life** would bless us?

The Holy Spirit inspired Paul to write thirteen letters of the New Testament. We still study them today from Romans through Philemon. God’s Word in Paul’s pen has powered missions the world over.

Think of God’s grace to Robert Thomas in our most recent issue of *Forward in Christ*.¹ He was only twenty-seven when he died trying to bring the Gospel to Korea. A few years earlier he had just arrived in Shanghai, China, when his young bride died along with their unborn child. Robert Thomas spent the next couple years working as a customs officer to learn Chinese and Korean. While America was fighting her Civil War, Korea was killing off Christians. 8,000 Korean Roman Catholics were slaughtered in 1863. But God’s grace through Paul was powering Robert Thomas too. He boarded an uninvited, illegal trading ship for Korea. It ran aground on a muddy river bottom. The Koreans attacked, but the ship’s crew held them off for two weeks with guns and cannons. Finally the ship caught fire, and swimming sailors were slaughtered in the water. They caught Robert Thomas on shore still carrying his Bible. As he cried, “Jesus, Jesus!” they beheaded him. One of his executioners papered his home with pages from Thomas’ Bible. People came from all around to read his walls. His nephew became a pastor. Now 30% of South Korea is Christian, sending more missionaries than any country but the US.

Joyful eyes of new life keep looking at Christ on the cross where His holy, precious blood washed away all our sins of blindness and unbelief. We see the empty tomb that declares God is completely satisfied with Christ’s sacrifice in our place. **Joyful eyes of new life** love how God helps us be slow to speak and eager to listen to correction from God’s Word. We cannot be content just sending others to spread God’s Word. We can’t help doing it ourselves. Now we are the ones asking everyone, **“Can You See Jesus?** Let me show you by word and deed His grace and glory.” Amen.

¹ “Grace from Beginning to End,” by Daniel A. Witte. *Forward in Christ*, April 2013, pp.12f.