

Is the glass half-empty or half-full? What do you think? Are you optimistic? Or are you pessimistic? You might say, "That depends on what is in the glass." I find that for me the glass is half-full for some things. But other times, it's half-empty. Here are some quotes about it:

- An optimist stays up until midnight to see the New Year in. A pessimist stays up to make sure the old year leaves ~ Bill Vaughan
- It's better to be an optimist who is sometimes wrong than a pessimist who is always right ~ (unknown)
- The nice part about being a pessimist is that you are constantly being either proven right or pleasantly surprised ~ George Will
- It doesn't hurt to be optimistic. You can always cry later. ~ Lucimar Santos De Lima
- ~ An optimist is a person who sees only the lights in the picture, whereas a pessimist sees only the shadows. An idealist, however, is one who sees the light and the shadows, but in addition sees something else: the possibility of changing the picture, of making the lights prevail over the shadows. ~ Felix Adler (ethicist)

I wonder how Saul viewed his encounter with Jesus. Last Sunday we left Saul blind and hungry in a motel room in Damascus. He had been struck blind when on the Damascus Road, his pocket full of warrants against the Christians who so enraged him. Jesus Christ himself appeared on that road to him and spoke to him, then sent him on his way into Damascus where he was to wait for further instructions.

Saul was there for three days, not eating or drinking or able to see. When you lose a sense, other senses are heightened. Saul's sense of hearing was most likely intensified. There he was, listening and dialoguing in prayer.

The Lord was at work, accomplishing his plan. While all this was going on with Saul, a local believer named Ananias had a vision and the Lord spoke to him, instructing him to go heal Saul. Ananias was a pessimist. Listen to the story:

READ Acts 9:10-14

Ananias believed people don't change. When you believe people can't change, that's a sign of pessimism. Ananias was fearful of God's instructions because Ananias was pessimistic about the chance that Saul could change, even with the Lord's help. He believed God was directing him to walk into a hornet's nest.

Well, I wondered what I would have thought, had I been in Ananias's shoes. Would I be optimistic or pessimistic? Honestly, I too would have doubted that something really transforming could have happened to Saul. So I went online to take an optimism test. I wanted to know which I am, because some days I see the glass as half empty and other days as half full. So I took the test. At the end of the test, I found a little note which read, "If you want the whole report, enter your credit card number here." I'm too much of a pessimist to pay for potentially bad information! So I didn't buy it.

But the Lord heard Ananias' concern and entered into a conversation with him about it, in prayer. I hope we notice something about prayer. When you have doubts or questions or just need to protest something, prayer is a good place to go. Jesus Christ is just as close as the calling of his name, and Ananias let God know his doubts.

The Lord replied to Ananias, "Let's not be pessimistic here. I have plans." Listen to the conversation. READ Acts 9:15-18

God would use Saul to share the good news with a multitude of people. It was no small task – from politicians to foreigners, and also his own people, who were as hostile as Saul had been. Saul knew what it was to be hostile. Saul would understand those who persecute him because of the name of Jesus. He had been trapped there himself, persecuting Christians. Saul now knew, though, what it's like to be set free. He was a perfect candidate for this job.

Did you ever think of that? If you consider yourself a terrible person, you are a perfect candidate to be a witness to the power of Jesus Christ? Can you believe that? Scripture says it, right here. Jesus takes us just as we are and by his power transforms us out of our sin and then even uses us.

Listen to what Paul wrote in Galatians – "Jesus gave himself for our sins to set us free from this present evil age" (1:4).

Paul tells us right up front in Galatians that sin is the tragedy that has caused this "present evil age."

Do you think the world is a more evil place now that it was before? We may think it is worse, but in Paul's time, he referred to it as this "present evil age." Sin has been a problem for a long time. We would all prefer not to sin, but we see sin all around us. Sin is powerful. It can overcome us all at times, and we can seem helpless to do anything about it. Do you have any regrets over sin? Then you know the struggle is real.

Jesus Christ was sent to set us free from this "present evil age." Cling to that marvelous gift. Do you have a loved one you are concerned about? No matter how bad it is, trust Jesus. Paul knew what it was to succumb to evil. He knew what it was like to be enraged against others and against God. Yet Jesus Christ changed him and he was set free completely.

Others know what it's like to be set free from evil; set free from hostility toward God. I read about a man named Danny Velasco. His testimony is in this book.<sup>1</sup> It's entitled "A Desperate Man." Danny was a successful hairdresser and makeup artist for models in New York City. Yet he describes himself as having two people inside, one full of energy and ambition, and another afraid and insecure. He solved the intense internal struggle with valium at first, then added alcohol, then an addiction to heroin. He had these massive swings from euphoria to devastating lows.

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<sup>1</sup>Jim Cymbala, *Breakthrough Prayer* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 35-42.

One day, one of the models began to talk to him about God. At first, he thought she was just a religious fanatic. It took a long time for her words to sink in, and it took losing his career due to drugs. Listen to him tell his story. (audio below)

Is this a promise that all our problems are instantly solved? No. But Danny was set free and given a desire to get better. He left that hospital and entered a rehab program. He gained weight and his body began to heal. He devoured the Bible like a man starved with spiritual hunger, particularly stories about Jesus, who had set him free. Today he is a powerful witness to how the Lord uses "hopeless cases" like Danny and Saul to show the world His grace and power.

Ananias changed too! After talking it over with God, he reversed his fear. He stopped being a pessimist, who didn't think people could change. He went to Saul and called him brother. That's the power of God, who gave courage to Ananias, and opened his heart.

The power of God does many things. God not only opens hearts, God heals us through one another, just as Saul was healed through Ananias. The power of God was strong enough to set Saul free from the power of sin.

Jesus is in the business of rescue, of setting people free. That's what the book of Galatians is all about – being set free. That's what we will begin to explore next week.

Is this glass half empty or half full? Jesus wants to give you an optimistic point of view through his eyes. People can change.

AMEN