

“The Last Person You Want to See”

Acts 9:1-19

Sermon Series: Cliff Notes on the Bible Week 16. The Conversion of Paul

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Can you see and still be blind?

Some North Koreans are so blindly devoted to their Supreme Leader they would do anything to spread communism. Kim Shin-jo was even willing to die. In January, 1968, Kim Shin-jo led a strike force of 31 North Koreans into South Korea. He had one mission – to cut the throat of Park Chung-hee the President of South Korea. The assassins infiltrated the South and came within 300 meters of the President’s home, when a violent gun battle erupted with South Korean guards. 29 North Korean commandos and 34 South Korean guards were killed. Amazingly Kim Shin-jo survived and surrendered.

Though he could see, Kim Shin-jo was blind – blinded by hate for the President and the South Korean way of life. But a surprising change came when Kim Shin-jo met probably the last person he wanted to see – a South Korean army general. A friendship developed between them. The South Korean government eventually released Kim Shin-jo. Over the next three decades he became a citizen, married and raised a family. For this he paid a terrible price. In the South he was often shunned. In the North, his parents were publicly executed. The pain was so great Kim Shin-jo considered ending it all.

Then on his wife’s birthday, she asked for a single gift, “Please come to church with me.” When he did, it seemed at first like a communist party rally. But instead of worshipping the Supreme North Korean leader and his son they praised God the Father and His Son. In time, the former terrorist and assassin became a preacher of the Gospel. As a minister, Kim Shin-jo preached at 3,000 Korean churches and 180 churches in the United States, Canada and Australia. Kim Shin-jo says,

I tried to kill the president. I was the enemy. But the South Korean people showed me sympathy and forgiveness. I was touched and moved. On the day I was arrested, Kim Shin Jo died. I was reborn. And I'm thankful for that.¹

Let me introduce you to another violent man who was turned around. Like Kim Shin-jo he was on a mission to attack the enemies of his people. His name is Saul. And while he was convinced he could see God better than anyone else, Saul didn’t know he was blind – spiritually blind. He persecuted those who didn’t believe as he did. “I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And that is just what I did.” (Acts 26:9-10). He first walks onto the stage of the book of Acts as a mob stones Stephen to death (Acts 7:58-8:3). Inspired by this attack, “Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house he dragged off men and women and put them in prison” (Acts 8:3). Again in chapter 9, “Saul was still breathing

¹ "South Korean pastor is also a trained killer," CNN Religion blog (8-9-2010).

out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples" (Acts 9:1). Saul was filled with faith – blind faith. He couldn't see God. Why?

Why don't we see Jesus? What prevents people - atheists, agnostics, even religious practioners - from seeing the Lord? Have you ever tried to tell someone the Good News about Jesus, and they just refuse to believe it? Have you ever invited someone to church or shared your faith with family or friends, and they just can't accept Him? Have you ever met a religious person who goes through all the church motions, but is missing that intimate relationship with Jesus? Is that person you? Why don't we see Jesus? The problem is not with our eyes. We have an "I" problem. First God Must Perform Surgery on Our "I"s. Saul needed an operation on three "I"s.

First Saul was blinded by his **Family Inheritance**. He thought he could inherit his way into salvation. Saul once boasted,

"You know my pedigree: a legitimate birth, circumcised on the eighth day; an Israelite from the elite tribe of Benjamin" (Philippians 3:4-5 The Message).

There are a lot of people who think being born into a Christian family, a Christian culture or a Christian nation makes them a Christian. As Nicky Gumble says, "Being born in a Christian nation doesn't make you a Christian any more than being born in a McDonalds makes you a hamburger." Neither does having Christian parents make you a Christian. You can't inherit faith. And you can't depend on your parents' or spouse's faith. You must have your own relationship with Jesus.

Saul's second "I" problem was **Intellectual Ignorance**. He thought he could learn his way into God's good graces. Saul was proud that

Under Gamaliel I was thoroughly trained in the law of our fathers and was just as zealous for God as any of you are today" Acts 22:3 NIV

Saul was a student of Gamaliel, one of the wisest Rabbis in history. Saul graduated magna cum laude from Jerusalem Theological Seminary. But intelligence sometimes blinds people from seeing God. Natural science has made incredible discoveries and offers wonderful blessings to humanity. But when a skeptic says, "Science proves there is no God" then "intelligence" has closed the mind and shut the eyes. The wisest scientists are humble enough to admit science has limits. It can uncover the mysteries of creation. It can't introduce you to the Creator. Only God can reveal Himself to you. Don't let your intelligence lead you to ignorance.

Saul's final "I" problem is the toughest to solve: **Religious Independence**. You can follow all the religious rules, rituals and rites and still not see God. Saul bragged,

According to the strictest sect of our religion, I lived as a Pharisee. Acts 26:5

As for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless. Philippians 3:6

When it comes to religion, Saul says he is perfect. He is earning his way into heaven. He doesn't need God's help. He is completely independent. He can do it himself. But Saul's righteousness makes him *self-righteous*. He persecutes whoever does not believe as he does. He claims he is doing it for God. But Saul is so blind he can't see God. He doesn't even realize he is actually persecuting God.

Then came the day for Saul's "I" surgery. While on a mission to root out heretic Christians in Damascus, Saul has an unexpected appointment with the Eye Doctor, the Great Physician. A flashing light sears his eyes and knocks him and his companions to the ground. A rumbling like thunder reverberates around them. And when they help Saul up, he opens his eyes but cannot see. In the coming years, Saul will tell the story over and over of how God blinded him so he could see Jesus. First, God performs surgery and removes Saul's "I"s – inheritance, ignorance and independence – and then gives him 5 "C"s. To See Jesus, We Need 5 "C"s.

Cease to Be – A Spiritual Death. The Bible says – “For three days (Saul) was blind” (Acts 9:9 NIV). Why? It is a symbolic death. Just as Jesus was in the tomb three days between the Cross and Resurrection, so Saul endures three days of darkness and silence. It is his own personal tomb. Later he writes,

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.
Galatians 2:20

Kim Shin-jo said the day he was captured the old Kim Shin-jo died and a new one was born. To see Jesus, we must first admit we need Jesus. We recognize there is sin in our lives. You can't negotiate, compromise or cooperate with sin. The only way to deal with it is to kill it. Antibiotics, radiation and chemotherapy kill infections and diseases. This is the way to be cured. Selfishness, pride, lust, hatred and all other sin must cease to be. But you and I can't kill it. Only Jesus can. He is the only cure for sin. Only He can heal us.

Consult Your Physician. If you want to see Jesus, there is no substitute for prayer. What does Saul do during those three days of darkness? Pray. Jesus says to Ananias “Go to a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying.” (Acts 9:11). Once, after I had eye surgery, I had to wear an eye patch. I thought it would be cool to preach with an eye patch. I could be “Dead Eye Doug – The Preaching Pirate of the Presbytery.” I followed the doctor's directions, kept the eye patch on for three hours, put the antibiotic in my eye for seven days and made a follow-up visit the next week. Now my eye is fine. You and I need to continually consult the Great Physician through prayer. If you are not seeing Jesus working in your life, check your prayer life. The more you close your eyes in prayer, the more you will see Him when you open them.

Join the Corps – the Body of Christ. When the blinding light flashed around Saul a voice asked him,

“Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” “Who are you, Lord?” Saul asked. “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.” Acts 9:4-5

Saul thought he was attacking a group of heretics. But he was persecuting God. That was a big “Uh-Oh” for Saul. Imagine how Hitler will feel when he discovers that the Judge of the Living and the Dead who sits on the throne is Jewish. That gives you a taste of the terror that seared through Saul’s soul.

Saul learns when you touch one of Jesus’ followers you are touching Jesus. Later he will call the Church the Body of Christ. The word “corps” comes from the Latin word “corpus” which means body. When every part of the Body of Christ works together, we can do wonders. Helen Hughes from our Team in the Dominican Republic reports:

The team started working Sunday afternoon. We've dug the foundation for one house, poured concrete floors in two houses, designed and prepped the foundation for a sidewalk on the mission house property, began construction on a wall in the community center and one team member has done parenting classes and youth leadership training for the community. All that in only 2 days! We are a mighty team and are working hard with many people, including children, in the community. We thank Woodside for all your prayers and support!

Saul learned he needed to join the corps to see Jesus. If you join the corps and become part of the Body of Christ, you will do the work of Jesus.

Receive the Counselor. After 3 days of darkness, Jesus sent Ananias to Saul. Brother Saul (Jesus) has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit. Acts 9:17

Jesus called the Holy Spirit “the Comforter” and “the Counselor.” He literally meant, ‘I’m going to give you Someone to stand beside you, to live in you and to give you strength.’ Among the many things the Holy Spirit does, there are two essential roles: the Spirit helps you to understand the Word of God and to speak the Word of God. Jesus said, “Where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them” (Matthew 18:20 NIV). We feel Jesus and see Jesus through the Holy Spirit. Growth groups are one of the best ways for the Holy Spirit to reveal Jesus.

Finally **Answer the Call.** You’d think Saul would be the last person Jesus would choose. Ananias thought so. This terrorist was the last person Ananias wanted to see.

But the Lord said to Ananias, “Go! This man is my chosen instrument” Acts 9:15

And like the general who befriended Kim Shin-jo, Ananias went to Saul. After Ananias laid hands on Saul and prayed for him, scales fell from his eyes and he could see. After his baptism, Saul immediately answered God’s call to preach about Jesus. And the world was never the same again. This final “C” is crucial. If Saul sat back, prayed, hung out with believers in the Body of Christ and enjoyed the Holy Spirit, he would have wasted all those blessings. But Saul answered Jesus’ call. And because he did, Saul became Paul – the greatest preacher of all time and the author of most of our New Testament. You must do something with all these gifts.

Brothers and sisters, God wants you to see Jesus. He is giving you all 5 “C” s. You must have all five. And the deeper you go into each one, the more you will see Jesus. If God has opened your eyes Woodside, then you must answer His call.

Charlie answered the call. He was not a Presbyterian. Charlie was a twenty-five year old Mennonite agitator when God sent him to pastor the tiny Woodside Chapel. For thirty-six years Princeton seminary students pastored this tiny church. By 1946 things slowly began to change. That was the year Charles Brackbill, Jr. arrived.

Charlie loved the people here and they loved him back. He called himself an agitator – in a good way. He couldn’t understand why this chapel wasn’t a full-fledged Presbyterian Church. “Someday,” he said, “there might be a town at this crossroads.” Charlie Brackbill convinced the Presbytery of Philadelphia to charter the Woodside Presbyterian Church. It happened on Sunday evening, April 28, 1946 with eighty charter members. “I was the itch, the agitator” that helped the tiny seedling of Woodside grow.

Charlie left in 1948. He became a Presbyterian pastor and a pioneer of religious broadcasting in the exploding field of television. When I interviewed Charlie at his home, he shared with me the key to his amazing sixty-year ministry:

I was not afraid to challenge the system. I had a vision and was able to motivate others. My frustration was waiting for people to catch up. The crowd would say, “We never did it that way before. Why do we have to change?” I would say, “Why not?” It’s rare today to find someone in the PCUSA asking, “Why not...?”

I wish Charlie Brackbill could be here today. He went to be with the Lord on February 19, 2017. I know he would be overjoyed to see what you’ve become. But Charlie would not be surprised because, from the very beginning, he knew when other churches say, “Why?” Woodside says, “Why not?” Today, the day we celebrate our 80th Birthday, is a great day to ask, “Why not?” As we look to the future, let’s ask, “Why not be the Church Jesus wants us to be?”

A church led by seminary students? Other say, “Why?” Woodside says, “Why Not?”
A church with a Christian preschool? Other say, “Why?” Woodside says, “Why not?”
A church with multiple styles of worship? Others, “Why?” Woodside says, “Why not?”
A church with multiple Growth Groups? Others say, “Why?” Woodside says, “Why not?”
A church with multiple mission trips? Others say, “Why?” You say, “Why not?”
A church that leaves the building to serve multiple mission causes? Others say, “Why?”

You say, “Why not?”

A church that hosts the homeless, feeds the hungry, helps the addicted, visits the prisoners, comforts the grieving, builds homes for the poor? Others say, “Why?” You say, “Why not?”

The more we say “Why not?” the more people will be able to say the words of that old Gospel song: “I once was lost, but now I’m found. Was blind, but now I see.”
May it be so.
Amen.