

**“The Last Person You Want to See”**

Acts 9:1-19

*Sermon Series: Living Outside the Box*

*Week 7. Living Outside Yourself*

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Can you see and still be blind?

The Soviet Union dissolved. The Iron Curtain rusted away. The Berlin Wall is broken up into a million souvenirs. Even the Bamboo Curtain of China is parting. Yet one stubborn symbol of the Cold War still stands: the DMZ – the Demilitarized Zone. This heavily guarded border runs along the Demarcation Line between North and South Korea. Though the Korean conflict officially ended 57 years ago, constant suspicion and threats of attack persist. In the communist north, leader Kim Il-sung was worshipped as a god. His son and successor Kim Jong-il is praised like the son of god. Some North Koreans are so devoted to them 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 successfully infiltrated the South and came within 300 meters of the Blue House, the President’s home, when they encountered South Korean guards. A violent gun battle erupted. 29 North Korean commandos and 34 South Korean guards were killed. Amazingly Kim Shin-jo survived and surrendered.

They arrested and interrogated him for a year. Though he could see, Kim Shin-jo was blind – blinded by hate for the President and the way of life he represented. But a surprising change came when Kim Shin-jo met probably the last person he would want 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, and then married and raised a family. It was a step he did not take lightly. In fact, he paid a terrible price. In the South he was often shunned. In the North, his parents were publicly executed and the rest of his family was purged. The pain was too much for Kim Shin-Jo. He considered ending it all.

Then came his wife’s birthday and she asked for a single gift, “Please come to church with me.” When he did, it seemed at first like a communist party meeting. But then he realized they weren’t worshipping the old North Korean leader and his son but the one True God and His Son. In time, the former terrorist and assassin became a preacher of the Gospel. As a minister, Kim Shin-jo has preached at 3,000 Korean churches and 180 churches in the United States, Canada and Australia. Reflecting back over the last 42 years, 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. I got my second chance. And I'm thankful for that.<sup>1</sup>

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 his vision may have been 20/20, Saul was blind – spiritually blind. He couldn't see God, though he did not know it. In fact, Saul was convinced he could see God better than anyone else. He was driven to persecute 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 is stoning 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" (8:3). Again in chapter 9, "Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples" (v. 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 highly religious believers - 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 your husband, wife, child, parent or sibling 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 deep intimate relationship with Jesus? Is that person you? One of the toughest boxes to get out of is the box of SELF. You must start to live outside yourself. 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 in to 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 that, 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 your 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).

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

Saul was a student of Gamaliel, one of the wisest Rabbis in history. He graduated magna cum laude from Jerusalem Theological Seminary. But I find that intelligence sometimes blinds people from seeing God. Natural science has made incredible discoveries and offered wonderful blessings to humanity. But whenever I hear a skeptic say, “Science proves there is no God” or “If you can’t prove it scientifically, it doesn’t exist” then I know that intelligence has closed a mind and shut the eyes. The best scientists are humble enough to admit the scientific method has its 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**. It seems strange, but someone 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 came to religion, Saul said he was perfect. He was earning his way into heaven. He didn’t need God’s help. He was completely independent. He could do it himself. But Saul’s righteousness made him *self*-righteous. He persecuted whoever did not believe as he did. He claimed he was doing it for God. But Saul was so blind he couldn’t see God. He didn’t even realize he was actually persecuting God.

Then came the day for Saul’s “I” surgery. While on a mission to root out heretic Christians in Damascus, Saul had an unexpected appointment with the Eye Doctor, the Great Physician. A flashing light seared his eyes and knocked him and his companions to the ground. A rumbling like thunder reverberated around them. And when they helped Saul up, he opened his eyes but could not see. In the coming years, Saul would tell the story over and over of how God blinded him so he could see Jesus. First, God performed surgery and removed Saul’s “I”s – inheritance, ignorance and independence – and then gave 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 was a symbolic death. Just as Jesus was in the tomb three days between the Cross and Resurrection, so Saul endured three days of darkness and silence. It was his own personal tomb. Later he would write,

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. That is the only way to be cured. Selfishness, pride, egotism, lust, hatred and any 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 was Saul doing during those three days of darkness? Praying. Jesus said 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 in reality, 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 learned when you touch one of Jesus' followers you are touching Jesus. Later he would call the Church the Body of Christ. The word "corps" comes from the Latin word "corpus" which means body. Last week I participated in two Veteran's Day ceremonies. At one of them, the guest speaker mentioned the Normandy Cemetery were rows upon rows of crosses mark the graves of our fallen soldiers just above Omaha Beach. Lisa and I were there on D-Day two years ago. Standing among those thousands of graves, all aligned in perfect formation, I was moved by how vital it is for every member of every corps to work together and do one's part. The life of every man in that invasion depended on his neighbor. Truly, they were a "band of brothers." Saul learned he needed to join the corps to see Jesus. You can't see Him if you are not part of the Body of Christ.

**Receive the Counselor.** After three days of darkness, Jesus sent Ananias to Saul saying,

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. In the

book of Acts, the only time people receive the Holy Spirit is when believers are gathered together. 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. Sometimes it takes a blinding light. Sometimes it just takes a rake, a corsage and a tray of lasagna.

Last Sunday, Woodside left the building. We went outside the box and served the community in the name of Jesus Christ. In fact God made sure we couldn’t come in the building by having the Lower Makefield Police block off our parking lot. You were His hands and feet and the results were absolutely miraculous.

- 18 projects
- 270+ participants
- 150 meals made for Aid for Friends
- 150+ lunches made and distributed in-person to the homeless
- 100+ corsages made and delivered to nursing home residents
- Worship services for nursing home residents and people in addiction recovery.
- Stories read to children on the pediatric floor of a hospital
- Visits to hospice residents.
- Our roads and parks cleaned up, neighbors’ homes fixed up
- 5 million leaves raked (or so it seemed)
- 4 SUVs filled with collected food
- 55 pizzas devoured by hungry Woodsiders on Sunday evening
- Countless crafts made, stories shared and hands held
- Hundreds of lives touched and people changed.

But numbers do not tell the whole story. Here are some comments we heard:

"The neighbors were so happy. What a blessing!"

"Powerful" . . . "Awesome" . . . "Eye-opening" . . . "Emotional"

"My heart is so full of joy!"

"I can't believe your church is doing this. This kind of thing just doesn't happen."

A single mom we helped had a neighbor asked her, "How did you get all these people to come work on your house on a Sunday morning? Is the court requiring them to do community service?" The neighbor couldn't imagine any organization coming out to help someone just because they needed it.

Our Senior Highs went down to Love Park near City Hall in Philadelphia and handed out sandwiches to the homeless. When Lizz Burgess and Claire Ziemer handed a lunch to a homeless woman she said, "One of the problems I've seen with churches is that they stay too internal. They don't go outside the box enough."

One of the projects I attended actually took me to someone else's church building. At Calvary Full Gospel Church in Fallsington we led a worship service for members of a ministry called Addictions Victorious – a Christ-centered twelve step group that helps people find freedom from any kind of addiction. Billy, the leader of the ministry, was amazed that a church would come out and do such a thing. "This is what the church is supposed to be doing," he said. Some of the men and women who filled the pews were from recovery houses. One of them, in Kensington, is called "The Last Stop" and that's literally what it is. There is even a coffin on the front lawn with a sign and two arrows – one pointing to the coffin and the other pointing to the house. It reads, "Pick your last stop." I played guitar but the people of Woodside gave the testimonies and preached the Word and, at the end, led an altar call for anyone who wanted to give their lives to Jesus Christ and receive the healing power of the Holy Spirit. Many came forward for prayer. Four people in recovery gave their lives to Jesus.

One of them was Sam. Like Saul in the Bible, his eyes were blinded by anger. He had a tough childhood and believed his parents never wanted him to be born. He suffered physical and verbal abuse. His father died when he was young and Sam was forced to become the breadwinner for the family. It's not hard to see how this home life could create an addictive personality. Sam struggled with his demons for years but found hope and help through his church about five or six years ago. Then his home burned down. With no insurance and deep financial problems, Sam started to lose his faith. He felt God and the church had let him down. He didn't stop going to meetings but he was very angry at God and he wasn't quiet about it.

But last Sunday, the Spirit moved him to get up, go forward, and let God's people lay hands on him and pray for him. He committed his life anew to Jesus Christ. Like Saul, Sam once was lost, but now is found, was blind but now he sees.

Keep answering the call Woodside, so more eyes can see.

