

The Church is strengthened

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[0 : 00] I'd like us to turn to the second passage of scripture we read, the book of Acts chapter 9. And I'd like us to look particularly at this passage, but particularly with our focus on the last verse that we read, verse 31 of Acts chapter 9.

So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up, and walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied.

This passage could actually be used as a formula, a template for any church of God, any congregation of God's people, to receive direction from God as to how they should prosper.

And we find that not long after the conversion of Saul, that what happened was he went out and preached to those who needed to hear the gospel, the Jews particularly.

And it's very interesting that when he came to Jerusalem, he attempted, we read in verse 26, to join the disciples, and they were all afraid of him.

[1 : 26] Of course, it was because of what he had been doing to the church of the Lord before God met him, before the Lord Jesus met him on the road to Damascus.

He had been, as we read earlier on in verse 21, all who heard him were amazed and said, Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called upon his name?

And that is what Saul was doing, persecuting the church. He was a man of violence, and he would stop at nothing to imprison those who were the Lord's people at that early stage of the church.

But God dealt with him miraculously, and he used him and chose him as a vessel for himself, to be the bearer of the name of the Lord.

He continued to proclaim the gospel, and he was subject to suffering as a result of a stand for Jesus in the midst of an anti-Christian environment.

[2 : 36] And that's not unlike what those of us who are the Lords have to stand up in the midst of in the day in which we are living. Whether we're aware of it or not, we are living in an anti-Christian environment.

Some people call it a post-Christian environment. But we're thankful that God has and continues to have the remnant of his own people in whatever locality.

And that's what is promised to God's people, to the church of God, the New Testament church. And even from the Old Testament scriptures, we have that assurance.

They shall leave fear while sun and moon do last through ages all. The church will continue, and the church will multiply until the coming of the Lord.

There was real danger in Paul's experience. There was real danger because there was animosity against the gospel.

[3 : 43] But there was protection for God's people there as well. It wasn't that they were immune to the dangers that were in their providence that God had allowed to happen for them.

But in God's providence and purpose in it all, this is the way in which he was going to bring his church forward and grow at these early stages of the New Testament church.

And that is the way it continues. The church, down through its history, has flourished in the midst of suffering and persecution. And there is nothing different to that, even to this day.

But then we find that the gospel is having, here in the context of this passage, it's having its effect. We read at the beginning of verse 31 there, so the church threw out all Judea and Galilee and Samaria.

Now that was very localized at the time. But it's as though a stone had been thrown into a large pond of water and the ripples had begun to spread out.

[5 : 01] And this was how the church was going to continue to spread. And not only that, but to grow in numbers as well. And we read in this verse, and I want to take a few things out of it, as I suggested early on, that the verse can be used as a formula for any church in its early days or as it continues to serve the Lord and to worship God, whether as a congregation or as a scattered community in any part of whichever land.

And what one commentator says is that the characteristics we have mentioned here in verse 31 of Acts 9 are the characteristics of a church that is flourishing, that is ongoing.

And we have to ask ourselves and see how much of these characteristics actually belong to our church, to our congregation, whichever one you and I belong to.

And one commentator calls it very much a description of a living church, a church that is alive and that is healthy in a spiritual sense.

Now, there is always the danger of looking for the ideal church. There is no church on earth that is ideal. We all have our faults and failures.

[6 : 41] There is no place for perfectionism when it comes to the church. The church won't be perfect until it is taken away to glory.

The church militant is a church that is full of faults and full of cracks and full of weaknesses. But because the church, according to God's promises, is indwelt by his spirit, then the fruit of God's spirit will be seen to be pervading in some form, to some degree, amongst that particular church.

I just want to look at this verse. And there are five brief points I want to bring out of it by way of bringing to our attention those characteristics that are spoken of here.

The writer of the book of Acts was Luke, and he is very incisive in some of the things that he brings out in order for us to learn about the work of the Spirit of God, and particularly at that time as an example for us.

And of course, the letters of Paul teach us much about how the church ought to conduct its affairs and what should be going on within it. Let us not make any excuse of our own weaknesses when things aren't going right.

[8 : 12] We are inclined to say, oh well, that's the way God planned it. That's not our business. God's plans are his business. Let us seek to follow the template of Scripture in seeking to be like the church that God, the Lord Jesus Christ, wants it to be.

And I believe that Christ wants his church to have these characteristics that are listed for us here. First of all, there is the characteristic of peace.

Look at what it says there. So the church throughout all Judea and Samaria had peace. Now, we could spend all evening talking about that one word, but I just want to say a few things about it.

There was a time of peace being enjoyed generally by God's people. It was at an early stage of the church. It wasn't that they didn't have opposition from without.

And of course, as we read through the book of Acts, we find Paul and his companions constantly coming up against opposition, and particularly from the Jews.

[9 : 24] Here we have a time of peace being enjoyed. This is how other translations cited. They had a time of peace.

It wasn't as if there wasn't any disagreement or anything like that, but deep down there was peace, and that peace of God, peace had come from above.

It was the fruit of the finished work of Christ, who had made peace with God, and by his Spirit who had brought that peace to be experienced by his people.

We can understand it as peace as opposed to turmoil and opposition. That's a wonderful thing to experience within any church, within any small church, any congregation.

And I know from my own experience, I've experienced it within fellowships with which I've been associated, times of turmoil and perplexity.

[10 : 29] And it goes without saying that you yourselves have historically experienced that. And here we have to see why this peace was in place, if you like.

We find that the church was at peace because of the proclamation of the gospel, because of God's Spirit working through his people and creating a sense of brotherhood and sisterhood amongst them.

And what we read earlier on in the book of Acts is how the work of the Holy Spirit had caused these people to share everything. And at the end of chapter 4, for example, now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul.

No one said anything of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. And with great power, the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus and great grace was upon them all.

Note again, the emphasis on the resurrection is brought out there. It is as a result of the resurrection and the ascension of Christ that the Holy Spirit was to come down.

[11 : 46] But of course, that was following the work of atonement, the cross and the sacrificial death of Christ. There was joy in their experience.

Some commentator, I remember, defined joy, peace as joy at rest.

There was joy in their experience at all levels, in their relationship with God and with their environment, animate and inanimate.

And that's something that happens when our eyes are opened and when we are following the Lord in obedience to his will. There is a peace that comes that talks about the good will of God in our lives.

There's a deep peace. It's not that maybe everything is going, as we might say, without any hiccups whatsoever, but there is a prosperity that we cannot otherwise have without this peace of God in our lives.

[12 : 55] That is what is being echoed for us in the chapter we read in 2 Chronicles, in the reign of Solomon, where Solomon was so blessed by God and there was this peace that reigned and prosperity.

The word that is normally used for all of that is shalom. This richness of life, this satisfaction. You remember how Paul calls on his readers to be content with whatever we have.

We're so often complaining and we're not at peace with ourselves because we're grumbling, just as the children of Israel were on the wilderness journey. God was blessing them with so many things and yet they still grumbled and poor Moses had to bear the brunt of their complaints.

But when there's prosperity and that prosperity, that peace has been won for us. And it's an amazing thing, this word peace and the prosperity that arises from it, how much it is.

It talks about the wholeness that gospel salvation brings amongst God's people, where there is enjoyment of fellowship and there is also a peace between themselves that they want to share with others that don't yet have peace at a vertical level with God in their lives, nor is there peace amongst them.

[14 : 29] We don't have to look very far in our present day and age in our society to find some dysfunction between human beings, whether in families or in a community.

And that is because God is absent and the principles of the gospel are absent from these places. Peace is a God-given gift.

Real peace is absent where sin is allowed to have its course. And that's the way it will be in your life and in mine. If I allow sin to take its place in my life, if I allow sin to have its course, then my peace will go.

My peace with God will certainly go and my peace with others will be compromised. So peace and joy are inseparable.

And here we have that the church was experiencing this peace. And what a wonderful thing it is to strive for that peace. This is what Jesus said to his disciples before he left.

[15 : 40] My peace I leave with you. Not as the world gives, but it's peace from above. A peace that speaks of the reconciliation to God that Christ has made for us through his sacrifice, his death, his resurrection, and all his finished work.

There's much more I could say on this subject. But let's move on to another characteristic that's brought before us. We read that the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up.

That phrase can be summarized by the word strengthened. The church was strengthened or edified. It was built up.

The original language word speaks of a continuous construction or edifying coming into the life of the church of God at the time.

They were being fed and what they were being fed with was the bread of life in the person of Christ through the preaching of the word. And there is no church that will be strengthened unless the bread of life is broken amongst them through the preaching of the word week by week, Lord's day by Lord's day.

[17 : 08] This is what nourishes a church, a congregation. The church was being built. The ministry of the Holy Spirit was evident in its life at this time and it's as though they were being fed high protein food, you might call it, which we need in our human bodies to upbuild our muscles and so on.

And they were being given very strong nourishment in the sense that the spirit of Christ was taking of what was Christ through the apostle and particularly here through Paul.

It's an amazing thing that this strength was being, it was being continued and there was a foundation, it was like a building being built.

That is a metaphor often used in the word of God with regard to the church of Christ when he himself said, on this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

The Lord God by his spirit was at work nurturing his flock and they were being nurtured through the teaching of the gospel, the bread of life.

[18 : 31] They were like being prepared as athletes are prepared to run races and athlete needs to be nourished by particular kinds of energetic food and so the young Christians as they were at that time the church was young they were being fed and given spiritual energy and so must we so must you and I and this is where we find our food in the word of God.

sometimes we often take for granted that we have an open Bible to enjoy we take it for granted that we can come to church without any hindrance every Lord's day but what use are we making of these things while we have them we mustn't ever take them for granted the church was being built and of course with every edifice there's a word that comes from being built up nourished every edifice every building has to be built on a sure foundation and that foundation was already laid for us in the finished work of Christ so the church is like a house being built brick by brick block by block on a foundation and no other foundation but Christ will do for us as we are built up nourished from above the Holy

Spirit was now transfusing as it were the benefits of the finished work of Christ into the lives of those believers they were under the care of the great shepherd who had promised not to leave them as orphans they were being fed as lambs and as sheep and those who were weak were being strengthened by those who were stronger and those who were needing to be cared for or to be restored to the flock were being brought back to the flock the strays were being restored and so the church was being built up and thirdly we read this the church throughout all Judea and Galilee Samaria had peace and was being built up and walking in the fear of the

Lord this is godliness that is being spoken of it's also being spoken of as walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit there are two things that are tied together in that sentence that part of the last sentence in this verse walking in the fear of the Lord this is godliness and that is what any church surely be characterized by again we could spend quite a long time speaking about this but time doesn't allow us I want to speak about this encouragement that we have here walking in the fear of the Lord and the comfort of the Holy Spirit the comfort of the Holy Spirit they were encouraged to keep on going on it's interesting that the original language word here is a word perhaps that we're familiar with where

God is speaking of the paraclete who was to accompany them on the way again going back to what Jesus had said to his disciples that he wouldn't leave them as orphans but that they would send the comforter the paraclete the Holy Spirit one who would stand with them and by them and of course the spirit would be revealing to them the love of God the Father and of the Lord Jesus Christ so the Holy Spirit came he's the one who was to stand beside them and speaks on one's behalf in a comforting way he points us to the Lord Jesus Christ does he not that's what he did for the early church and that's what he continues to do now to encourage them by taking of the promises of Christ the promises that are yes and amen in the Lord Jesus Christ sometimes regardless of circumstances sometimes circumstances make life difficult for us but what we have to do as the writer to the Hebrews puts it is that we have to look to Jesus keep our eye on

[23 : 44] Jesus whom the Holy Spirit encourages us to do and spotlights for us to him and to him alone be all the glory and on him and on him alone must our focus be don't give up they were to be encouraged and we find that theme of keeping on keeping on being used by Paul in his letters to the various churches and we find that this encouragement can only come from above there are many things that can encourage us in the church when we see others being born again into the family of God when we see people making moves as it were positive moves showing an interest in the things of grace but our primary encouragement has to come from his word of promise and God will send these other means of encouragement for us to see that his promises are faithful promises that he will add to the number as many as will believe that his work will continue and as the Lord's people continue in peace and being built up their prayers will be heard and as

God wills and allows those whom God has marked out will come he will open their hearts and he will draw them to himself the results are important for us but our primary encouragement must come from the promise of God who promises these things because the church has to walk by faith not by sight the things we see in a positive way are encouraging for us but our first and foremost trust has to be in the written word of God it's the word that brings life the life of encouragement to us and the encouragement of the church then at that time would have been a mutual encouragement encouragement and that's what God wants us to be mutual encouragers in the way of salvation when God is at work in a church in a fellowship there will be a mutual supporting even in the midst of difficulties and pressures and the

New Testament record bears witness to that and no less at this early stage of the New Testament church encouragement going back to the godliness that is spoken of here we find that it's translated walking in the fear of the Lord here is a balance for us sometimes the Lord's people find themselves as it were on the Mount of Transfiguration in experience but other times they find themselves quite low in spirit and it's not that that is because anything that God has deliberately or in any way maliciously done for their lives but sometimes when the people of God are really walking in the fear of God they're aware of their own weakness and sin and walking in the fear of

God makes them aware of their dependence on God for everything that they are and everything that they have this is what Paul's own testimony was later on when he wrote to the Corinthian church speaking to the Corinthians that it was by the grace of God that he was what he was by the grace of God I am what I am and none of us can stand on a soapbox and make anything of ourselves walking in the fear of the Lord speaks of humility and speaking it speaks of dependence on the Lord and we find there that walking in the fear of the Lord is a characteristic it's not the same as it's not a slavish fear or anything but it's a fear of offending God of doing that which is not pleasing to God remember what the

Lord Jesus himself said I do always those things which please you and that is the pattern which is people are expected to follow as well in spite of their sinfulness in spite of their consciousness of failure they are asked to be holy as he is holy and godliness is not something that is an external thing it's an inward thing which has its external effects external fruit godliness is not about what you and I wear or the way we have our faces perhaps when things aren't going well for us it's difficult for us sometimes to smile when things aren't going well for us but godliness is something that speaks of having an attitude which the lord jesus christ had and it's summed up for us particularly in paul's letter to the philippians and the second chapter in his humility which is an echo of what he did in john chapter 13 when he washed the disciples feet taking upon himself the form of a slave so here we have this godliness and it's a godliness that is winsome jesus himself was winsome to those who are most in need and our godliness must be a winsome godliness and only god himself can create that godliness or if you like christ likeness in our lives and our prayer should be that we should be walking in the fear of the lord in order to bring upon ourselves by god's grace something of the pattern of the lord jesus christ as he related to others who were in need and as he did was what was sometimes outwith the parameters of acceptable actions look at this fellow this fellow receives sinners to him and he eats with them as well you know there is such a great need in our society my dear friends that those of us who believe in the lord jesus christ need to rub shoulders with such more and more that is our responsibility and we ask that god would do his work as we seek faithfully to do our work walking in the fear of the lord and in the comfort of the holy spirit so there's peace and there's encouragement there's godliness and there is this growth this strengthening and lastly and briefly it multiplied these last two words in verse 31 it multiplied you know sometimes we think we can't do anything to multiply the church no we can't convert anybody that's god's work but we can live lives faithful to god that will influence those around us in society and god will bring into his own fold those whom he shall save this is a characteristic of the church and that is what god's people want to happen in their prayer that jesus taught us is it not a case of your kingdom come your will be done that god's kingdom might come in its not only in its

[32 : 24] influence but in its numbers as well now this text makes it perfectly clear that numerical growth was something to be desired it multiplied and this in itself was an encouragement to the people but that should be a desire not purely because of multiplication it's very good to have a big congregation and all of that but truly our chief desire in terms of multiplication should be that men and women and boys and girls be brought into the fold of christ that sinners might be saved that men and women would come to know jesus as their savior so the text makes it clear purely in the context that there was a multiplication of numbers there is there is also a multiplication of the size of the church the strength the multiplication in its strength as well and it was growing in every aspect if you like and we have to ask ourselves in terms of these characteristics how does this match up with how we are doing and what hindrances are we putting in

God's way it's very easy for us to say well we can't resist the grace of God no we can't but we can put stumbling blocks in the path of the advance of the gospel there is growth in maturity and grace as well as in numbers there is individual growth and corporate growth of the fruit of the spirit surely that is a given when the church of God grows addition to any living entity usually indicates that the entity is functioning naturally those of you who rear sheep and you have newborn lambs perhaps at this time of year there is something far wrong when you see a lamb that is not maturing that is not being nourished perhaps that is being turned down by its mother so we ought to be concerned where there is a lack of growth in our

Christian children of babes in Christ and also in our numbers Lord hear us we pray and add to our numbers such as are to be saved is that not what we pray for when we ask for God to add to his flock well sad to say numerical expansion is all that matters to some churches that's all that some churches are interested in but let's be interested in numerical expansion for a good reason let's be interested not in filling pews and seats in church not just to add to the size of the congregation but to bring those who are saved by grace to bring in those who are disciples of Christ babes in Christ though they might be but let us look for spiritual conversions and so multiply the number in our congregations let us look for growth in numbers for the right motives and reasons and that has to come first and foremost through the preaching of the gospel and this part of this island has seen much

God God oriented preaching down through the years and we pray that God will once again bring someone who will proclaim the riches of Christ to this community from this pulpit and continue the work of up building strengthening and encouraging and bringing the peace of God into the church so that God's people will walk in humility in the fear of the Lord and with a love for the Lord Jesus Christ Amen it's thank you