

Scripture Reading:

Acts 9:22 “But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who dwelt in Damascus, proving that this Jesus is the Christ. 23 Now after many days were past, the Jews plotted to kill him. 24 But their plot became known to Saul. And they watched the gates day and night, to kill him. 25 Then the disciples took him by night and let him down through the wall in a large basket. 26 And when Saul had come to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, and did not believe that he was a disciple. 27 But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. And he declared to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that He had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus. 28 So he was with them at Jerusalem, coming in and going out. 29 And he spoke boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus & disputed against the Hellenists, but they attempted to kill him. 30 When the brethren found out, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him out to Tarsus. 31 Then the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and were edified. And walking in the fear of the Lord & in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, they were multiplied.”

"Peace Returns to Jerusalem"

Last week we looked at Saul's return to Jerusalem & how he was sent back to his home town of Tarsus . Some years later Barnabas will find him there at the end of chapter eleven after the Holy Spirit began to bless the Gentiles in Antioch.

- After Peter's arrest and the death of Herod, Luke's orderly account here in Acts will focus exclusively on the work of God's chosen vessel to the Gentiles!

I want to touch on a few more details about Saul's conversion and early work before we move on, but our main focus this morning will be with verse 31 of our text:

- “Then the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and were edified. And walking in the fear of the Lord & in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, they were multiplied.”

This is a beautiful picture of the early Church and will give us several lessons and challenges for today. But first a little clean-up from the past few weeks... One aspect of Saul's early journeys we did not discuss was his decision on not one but two occasions to flee imminent persecution and death.

- As we saw with the Saints who scattered after the murder of Stephen, there is a time to flee.
- Does this mean we should always flee?
- Obviously from the life of Paul as it is revealed in the rest of Acts and his other writings this was not the case: Paul was often arrested and beaten!

So how do we know when it is time to flee or time to take our lumps?

This requires the Wisdom of God's Word and the guidance of the Spirit who has been sent as our Comforter! You cannot expect to have one without the other...

- You cannot think that you can study to the point where you are smart enough to figure out what to do in every situation

I can guarantee you that if you have such an attitude, God will likely put you somewhere to test such wisdom and send you back to His loving and guiding arms.

On the other hand, you cannot just drift through life trusting that God will show you what to do if things get tough:

- **What God will probably show you is just how foolish it is to NOT be prepared for tough situations and send you back to His Word.**

Saul had no problem knowing that he should leave Jerusalem, even though he was sure that was where he should minister because Jesus clearly said GO! It appears that it was other Saints in Damascus who insisted on Saul leaving via that basket and we are not told if they were wise enough to see that God's chosen vessel was not to be killed early or if the Holy Spirit gave them a direct command as well.

- **The bottom line is that we must study to show ourselves approved and we must be sensitive to the leading that Jesus gives us through His Spirit.**

We should also note in these accounts how God so often uses other faithful Saints to help advance the work of His Kingdom...

- **First there was faithful Ananias who brought the good news to Saul and lifted the scales from his eyes.**
- **In Jerusalem we find faithful Barnabas going out on a limb to help Saul, believing that he had been truly converted!**

This is likely the same Barnabas who sold property and brought the proceeds to the Apostles when there was need in the young Church and we will see Barnabas seek Saul out again when it is time to minister to the Gentiles in Antioch.

- **We must also remember the other players whose names we do not know, like those who lowered the basket in Damascus or took Saul down to Caesarea.**

And we can add to these their faithful parents who raised them and the others in those times who served them with instruction & training or with food & housing!

- **As we have often stressed, God is in control of all things, but He chooses to use ordinary means to accomplish His extraordinary ends.**

And one last detail to consider is just why the disciples were so afraid of Saul when he returned to Jerusalem if it had been 3 years since he left?

- **Surely they would have heard about his conversion and faithful preaching and studies?**

I think the answer to that is to simply remember what Luke told us at the beginning of chapter eight: 1 "Now Saul was consenting to [Stephan's] death. At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. ... As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison."

To try and grasp the picture here we would have to think of God dramatically converting someone like Joseph Stalin or Pol Pot:

- **Would those whom these wicked men had persecuted come running right out into the streets celebrating these conversions?**

More likely they would be very cautious, just as these disciples in Jerusalem were being even after a number of years.

- **This was Saul of Tarsus who has returned to Jerusalem: The Saul who had “made havoc of the church!”**

And this havoc stands in stark contrast with the peace and edification we see in verse 31 where we will focus this morning.

- **Saul has been received thanks to the faithfulness of Barnabas and sent off to safety when he himself was threatened.**

At this point Luke tells us, “Then the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and were edified. And walking in the fear of the Lord & in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, they were multiplied.”

- **Here we see the divine provision of the Church and the blessings of obedience once again going hand in hand.**

Luke has given us a series of status reports on the church as he explains to his friend Theophilus how the disciples obeyed and carried out the command of Jesus to be His witnesses in Jerusalem, in all of Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

- **After the Spirit is poured out at Pentecost and Peter gives his first sermon Luke tells us...**

2:44 “Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, 45 and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need. 46 So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, 47 praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.”

- **After the first persecution of John & Peter for healing the man at the Temple Luke reports that...**

4:33 “And with great power the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And great grace was upon them all. 34 Nor was there anyone among them who lacked; for all who were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of the things that were sold, 35 and laid them at the apostles' feet; and they distributed to each as anyone had need.”

- **And all along this journey Luke writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit has also given us updates on the growth of the Church:**

After Pentecost Luke reports...

2:41 “Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them.”

- **After Peter and John are arrested for preaching at the Temple, we read...**

4:4 “However, many of those who heard the word believed; and the number of the men came to be about five thousand.”

- **After the discipline of Ananias and Sapphira Luke reports that...**

5:14 “believers were increasingly added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women,...”

- **After the first crisis in the Church was solved by appointing seven men to wait on the needy widows, we again read...**

6:7 “Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith.”

- **These blessings were not restricted to Jerusalem as we see after the Apostles went to Samaria to help Phillip...**

8:25 “So when they had testified and preached the word of the Lord, they returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel in many villages of the Samaritans.”

- **And now Luke tells us that the Churches in all Judea, Galilee and Samaria are multiplying.**

There is a lot of talk today about church growth: How to plant new churches and how to grow older churches... And this is a good thing! However, I would add a word of caution that our good friend Pastor Jim West often gives...“it is easy to build a crowd, but it is hard work to build a church.”

- **Yes, we all want lots of large churches that are at peace, being edified and multiplying!**

As we look around the American church scene today we certainly see some places where there is a lot of growth!

- **But how often do we see what is described by Luke here in Acts where they are of one mind and are meeting each other’s needs?**

I think we are seeing some improvement in the area of meeting material needs today as our nation has faced very tough economic times. We have seen it here at Church of the King and in talking with other pastors this week in our region I think more and more churches are paying attention here. This took tough times just like Saul’s persecution which sent the disciples out to Judea and Samaria to obey the command of Jesus to be His witnesses. We don’t pray for tough times or bad situations, but it is often through such things that God brings the answers to our prayers for things like peace or church growth

- **We need to step back and see what God has done in a few short years here in the early church...**

The Church in Jerusalem is faithful in carrying out the obligations to meet each other’s needs by appointing Stephen and the other six to care for the needs of the Saints... As we just read, after this, things were going very well with the word of God growing, the number of disciples multiplying and even a great many priests being converted. It is at this point that God decides it is time for Stephen to be martyred and for Saul to begin his rage against the Church.

- **Please notice that these events took place when the Saints were being faithful, NOT when they had fallen into great sin!**
- **I think it is not out of bounds for us to ask WHY?**

I think we can point to two very good reasons: One that we have already studied and another given in our text this morning. Two great things have happened:

- **God’s appointed vessel to be the Apostle to the Gentiles has been converted as he traveled to Damascus to persecute the Christians!**

This we have considered at great length over the past few weeks!

- **The second thing that has happened is that God has expanded and improved the Church!**
- **Now we not only have a faithful church in Jerusalem, we have faithful churches in Judea, Galilee and Samaria as well.**

We have been given some details about what happened in Samaria and next week will consider Peter’s work in Judea but overall we do not know many details and nothing about Galilee!

- **The Spirit does give us the result and that is the lesson and challenge for us today...**

Listen again to verse 31 and consider its application to Church of the King and the other churches in the Sacramento region: 31 “Then the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and were edified. And walking in the fear of the Lord & in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, they were multiplied.”

The Church, the Bride of Jesus, the Body of Christ is made up of churches and they are spoken of here collectively as is proper! The Spirit has come to glorify the Son by empowering and growing the Church, His Bride, and this is done through the local churches. As Paul teaches in Ephesians, we have one God, one faith and one baptism and we are called on to grow up into the maturity that is Christ.

- A BIG calling and once again we should note that it is impossible from a human standpoint!

And yet this is what God desires and I would challenge you with some homework this week to read through the Book of Ephesians again with this concept of the Church in mind.

- We are saved and joined with Christ individually, but we serve as part of the Body!
- We must not focus on one and neglect the other!

We cannot even imagine the Spirit being able to say that the churches throughout Sacramento, Grass Valley and Georgetown had peace and were edified, walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit as they saw great growth... And yet this is the Spirit’s desire and we must trust that He will get His work of Glorifying the Son done, as we will shortly pray, “on earth as it is in heaven.”

Let me conclude with two thoughts:

First, we do not know how God will choose to accomplish these ends. Perhaps as He did with the Church at Jerusalem we need to have a period of persecution to move us along. This has often been God’s means in the past: I have often shared the relevance of the Prophet Habakkuk for today: He lived at a time where Israel was very similar to America with lots of churches and lots of wickedness going hand in hand and this was the Prophet’s burden:

The book opens with his crying out to God, “O Jehovah, how long shall I cry, And You will not hear? Even cry out to You, "Violence!" And You will not save. 3 Why do You show me iniquity, And cause me to see trouble? For plundering and violence are before me; There is strife, and contention arises.”

- Certainly this is a burden and cry that could be lifted up by Christians who try to live faithfully in America today.

The prophet wants to know how long it is going to be before God straightens things out in the Church so things can be better...

- He gets an answer he did not expect: The Babylonians are coming! The Lord said to his prophet:

“5 "Look among the nations and watch-- Be utterly astounded! For I will work a work in your days Which you would not believe, though it were told you. 6 For indeed I am raising up the Chaldeans, A bitter and hasty nation Which marches through the breadth of the earth, To possess dwelling places that are not theirs.”

- I do not have time to exegete the entire book, so it can be your Old Testament homework!
- The prophet cannot believe that God could even look at the wicked Babylonians but is willing to submit to God’s will and plan.

God explains that He can and will use the Babylonians to discipline His people and that they will also be judged in due time for their wickedness as well. Habakkuk is overwhelmed by the images that God gives him about the coming judgments and concludes with words that remind us not to focus merely on our circumstances when seeking God's will for our lives or the health of our Churches... Remembering that they lived in an agricultural nation, listen to the comfort the prophet finds in God: "17 Though the fig tree may not blossom, Nor fruit be on the vines; Though the labor of the olive may fail, And the fields yield no food; Though the flock may be cut off from the fold, And there be no herd in the stalls-- 18 Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation. 19 The Lord God is my strength; He will make my feet like deer's feet, And He will make me walk on my high hills."

There is a second thought that I want to leave you with as we consider how verse 31 applies today: There is once again a lesson about obedience for us to learn:

- We really like the parts about the churches being at peace and being edified & being multiplied!

BUT sandwiched in between is our obligation which is easy to forget: "Walking in the fear of the Lord, & in the comfort of the Holy Spirit"

These concepts seem totally contradictory to our modern minds: "Finding comfort in someone I am afraid of makes no sense." However, this is the secret to a contented Christian life... "Walking in the fear of the Lord" does NOT mean that we are afraid of God, but that we rightly respect who He is and the power He holds.

Consider this human example: I have a proper fear of the local police: They have guns and can arrest people. However, I am glad to have them protecting me and my family from evil doers! I am not afraid of them, unless I am doing something wrong!

You can see a similar relationship with parents and children! They have a proper fear of their parents as those who are bigger, wiser and more powerful. They are glad to have such love and care to provide for them and bring them through the perils of childhood. They can also be afraid of those same parents when the rod comes out after they have disobeyed! This quickly is taken away when they realize that even here the parent is showing true love for the child and we see those wails of dread quickly dissolve into the loving embrace and forgiveness of the parent.

Luke reminds us that it is much the same with our heavenly Father:

- We walk properly in fear of our righteous and Holy God, knowing the comfort of the Holy Spirit who is properly preparing the Bride.

Finally, there is a lesson about seeing the big picture:

- The church at Jerusalem was so disrupted by the persecution of Saul that they still feared him almost three years later.
- They would not have thought, WOW this is great!

As they were going through these trials it would have been difficult to understand why it was happening.

- Yet God used this time to expand the church and now we see peace, edification, faithful obedience and growth in Judea, Galilee and Samaria as a result.
- God is good.

We must remember this as we seek to understand what is going on in our nation & ponder what God is doing. We can look at a bigger picture with the benefit of almost 2,000 years of watching how the Kingdom has gone to the world... And we could honestly be concerned:

- **After just a thousand years the Kingdom was split in two!**
- **Just five hundred years later we saw a much needed Reformation of the Western Church which has now left us in a thousand pieces.**
- **This cannot be good if we are trying to accomplish what Paul commanded in Ephesians four!**

But alas, we too must trust that God knows what He is doing and that in fact, despite all our sins and shortcomings, the Spirit of God is bringing the Bride of Jesus to maturity as He fills the earth with His Kingdom.

We may not be able to understand how all of this is going to work out anymore than those early Saints could see how the death of Stephen and rage of Saul were advancing the Kingdom in those early days!

Our job is not to run the whole show, or even to be able to see how all the details will fit together.

Rather our calling is to be those faithful Saints who serve the King of Kings just as Ananias, Barnabas and all those other Saints did in the early church...

Always trusting God for the results!

Communion Meditation: Psalm 23

“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. 2 He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters. 3 He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness For His name's sake. 4 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; For You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me. 5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; My cup runs over. 6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me All the days of my life; And I will dwell in the house of the Lord Forever.”