

The Church Had Rest – Acts 9:26-31

By Pastor Jeff Alexander

Introduction

1. Before us is the second part of Paul's early ministry. The passage summarizes Paul's short stay in Jerusalem after escaping Damascus with his life.
2. Background considerations
 - a. Paul was unable to make contact with the disciples in Jerusalem at first because they distrusted him. However, Barnabas ("Son of Prophecy" — resulting in consolation or encouragement), a Levite from Cyprus and well respected in the church (Acts 4:36, 37), was used of God to introduce him to the believers. They were, no doubt, lying low because of the intense persecution against them.
 - b. According to Galatians 1:18-20, Paul was 3 years in Damascus before returning to Jerusalem, spending only 15 days with Peter, seeing none else but James, the Lord's half-brother. This appears to contradict Luke, who states that Barnabas brought him to the apostles (plural). There is no problem here if you understand that Luke uses the term *apostle* in the wider sense of a church leader, not specifically of the Twelve Apostles.
 - c. James is identified as the Lord's brother in order to distinguish him from James, the son of Zebedee, one of the Twelve (Galatians 1:19). He is called an apostle although he was not one of the Twelve. *Apostle* simply means "a sent one." There were Apostles and apostles. Barnabas is called an apostle in Acts 14:14.
3. Peter was associated with the church that met in Mary's house (Acts 12:12). Mary was the mother of John Mark, the cousin of Barnabas (Colossians 4:10), and a convert of Peter (1 Peter 5:13). This explains Barnabas's connection to Peter.
4. As in Damascus, Paul soon found himself in danger from the Jews. Luke informs us that he disputed with the Hellenistic Jews, probably for two reasons: (1) his companion Barnabas was a Hellenist; (2) the Judaistic Jews would not want to talk to him, regarding him as a traitor and deserter.
5. In order to avoid the death-threats against him, the disciples helped Paul return to Tarsus. It will be a few years until we encounter Paul again (Acts 13).
6. The main thrust of my message today deals with Luke's summary statement in verse 31. Many fail to grasp the significance of the words, making the unwarranted assumption that the churches had rest because the persecution subsided. Let us carefully examine this verse and learn the glorious truth that it teaches: the promised restoration of Israel that is the subject of the Old Testament prophets was fulfilled in the early days of the church's Jewish expansion.

I. The Common View

- A. The church was getting a reprieve.
 1. An example of what the commentaries say: "But this rest was owing not so much to the conversion of Saul, as probably to the Jews being engrossed with the emperor Caligula's

attempt to have his own image set up in the temple of Jerusalem”—*Jamison, Fausset, and Brown*

2. Two reasons for this common conclusion:

- a. A casual reading of the passage naturally lends itself to that conclusion. Paul was the major antagonist, and now he is a believer. He is also off the scene; so the Jews are no longer hunting him. The church, at least for a moment, has respite.
- b. Modern evangelical theology fails to grasp the greater issues underlying the historical/theological progress of the gospel. They simply miss the conversation because they do not understand it.

B. The fact is that the church was not getting a reprieve.

1. Persecution is the norm and should be expected (John 15:20; 16:33).
2. The continuing narrative of Acts shows that the opposition had not ceased in either frequency or intensity.
3. What Luke is describing here is the spiritual state of the church in the midst of the storm surrounding her.

II. The Condition of the Church

A. The church had *peace*.

1. *Peace* (or *rest*; the Greek expresses a condition of tranquility, harmony, and concord, corresponding to the Hebrew *shalom*) was realized in gospel restoration (Isaiah 26:1-3, 12; 52:7; 53:5; 54:10; 55:12; 57:17-19).
2. The term, *church* (singular), is used here in the Hebrew sense of the assembly of God's people, the theocratic nation governed by God's covenant (Acts 7:38). In Caesarea Philippi, Jesus announced, "I will build my church" (Matthew 16:18). By designating the church as His, Jesus differentiates it from the traditional Greek concept (a governing assembly) and also from the Hebrew idea (a literal nation). The New Covenant changes things. Note also that it is the "church *throughout* Judea, Galilee, and Samaria."
3. The peace that Jesus promised (John 16:33) is not freedom from trials but the New Covenant realization of restoration. It is not freedom from *circumstances* but the experience of the *condition* of a spiritual new creation, the *kingdom* of peace (Isaiah 9:7; Romans 14:17).

B. The church was being *edified*.

1. *Edification* (Greek: "to build") is the process of building up and refers both to external *numerical* growth and to internal *spiritual* growth.
 - a. The persecution utterly failed to stop the gospel; just the opposite, it furthered the progress of the church, growing it by multiplication.
 - b. The stress of trial and persecution also enables greater maturity in the saints (James 1:2-4).
2. The means of edification: "walking in (Greek: 'to pursue the journey one has entered')." Two items are mentioned that modify *walking* (Romans 14:19).

- a. *The fear of the Lord*, which is defined as the conscious conviction that the Lord is indeed the Lord and Master deserving of our whole devotion in knowledge, love, and faith. The unregenerate person is double-minded in his relationship to God. He will acknowledge the Lord when it benefits him, but he will ordinarily serve his own desires.
- b. *The comfort (paraklesis) of the Holy Spirit*, which means far more than mere comforting of one in distress. It refers to the governing work of the Spirit by teaching, exhorting, disciplining, helping, guiding, enabling, and encouraging.

C. The Big Picture

1. Everything promised in the Old Testament concerning promises to Israel and the restoration of the kingdom are fulfilled in Jesus Christ (Isaiah 9: 6, 7).
2. Isaiah 32 addresses the coming judgment of God upon Israel in the Babylonian captivity.
 - a. Verse 1 announces a king to rule in righteousness with the fruit of His reign outlined in following verses.
 - b. Verse 15 declares that the desolation remain “until the Spirit is poured upon us from on high.”
 - c. Verse 18: “My people will abide in a peaceful habitation, in secure dwellings, and in quiet resting places.” That is what Luke is addressing.
3. Isaiah 54:1-10—“Sing, O barren one, who did not bear; break forth into singing and cry aloud, you who have not been in labor! For the children of the desolate one [in her restoration] will be more than the children of her who is married,’ says the LORD.” Notice v. 10 in particular: “For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed,” says the LORD, who has compassion on you.”

Application

The multiplication of the church occurs when the world watches believers suffer but in a very different way from the unregenerate. They cannot understand the peace and tranquility, the joyful and delightful way that saints respond to terrible circumstances.

When professing Christians complain and chafe, carp and cry, the world pays no attention. Oh, that we may have the grace of God to honor His great name when we are called upon to suffer for His sake.