

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I mentioned Acts 9:31 in the introduction to my sermon on March 21. It has stuck in my head for the last several weeks for a number of reasons. I'd like to have you think about what it says and then consider with me what it means for us at River Hills Community Church. Here is my translation of the verse:

“Therefore, the church throughout all of Judea and Galilee and Samaria was having peace. While being built up and living in the fear of the Lord and the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it was multiplying.”

This is a summary by Luke of the condition of the church in the land of Israel, sometime in the decade after the death and resurrection of Jesus. The church being at peace refers to the fact that the persecution that began with the stoning of Stephen in chapters 7-8 has ended. The reason it ended was because the primary instigator of the persecution, Saul of Tarsus, became a Christian and the apostle to the Gentiles, renamed Paul. But the striking feature of this verse is the second sentence. Four things characterize all of the local churches that make up the regional church in Israel.

First, they are all being built up. In what way are they being built up? In Acts 20:32 Paul says this to the elders in Ephesus, “Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace which is able to build you up and to give you an inheritance among all the saints.” The word of God, as it was taught in these churches was causing the faith of the Christians to grow. Through the teaching of God's word the church was growing in its confidence that God, through Christ, would do what he promised and that what he promised was better than the whole universe. To be built up in your faith means that you increasingly deny yourself the pleasures of sin and of this world because of the greater pleasure you have discovered in Christ.

Second, the church was living in a state of fearing the Lord. A sense of the holiness and justice of God characterized each of the local churches in this region. They were not giddy or superficial in their worship but had a deep sense of God's just wrath against sinners. They regularly were gripped by fear of God in his terrible holiness, as they saw their own sinfulness. They were full of awe and reverence for this God who is a consuming fire.

Third, the church was continually experiencing the comforting work of the Holy Spirit. In the midst of their terror at the God who declared, “Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law”, the Holy Spirit was reminding them that Jesus took on that curse for his people. The Holy Spirit, whom was sent into the world to glorify Jesus to his people, continually brought to mind the work of Christ, which satisfies the just anger of God against sinners. Their comfort was the comfort given by the Holy Spirit that promises like Romans 8:1 applied to them, “There is therefore, now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”

Fourth, these churches were multiplying. In other words, the natural result of being a church that is being built up in the faith, living in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit is that other sinners join with you in the process. What Luke is not doing is giving a recipe for church growth. You don't seek to be built up in the faith, live in the fear of God and the comfort

of the Holy Spirit, so that you will multiply. You grow in your faith because God, as he reveals himself through his word is found to be trustworthy. You fear God because you see his justice and your sinfulness and grow to know how much you deserve hell. The Holy Spirit comforts you because the salvation promised in Christ is the only comfort to be had by a sinner who is terrified of God's holiness. What Luke is expressing is that churches that are characterized by these things are churches to which those whom God is drawing to Christ are attracted.

I have been asking myself several questions personally as a result of this verse. I would encourage you to ask yourself these questions. Am I being built up in my faith by the Word of God? Am I growing in the fear of the Lord? Am I being comforted by the Holy Spirit's ministry of glorifying Christ to me as a Savior for sinners? What do I fear? From what or whom do I receive comfort in my fears? I have also been using this verse to form my prayers for my family and for our church. I am eager for us to be a church where men, women and children are built up in their faith and growing in their fear of the Lord and comfort of the Holy Spirit and therefore a place where Jesus' sheep can hear his voice.

In the Mercy of Christ,