

The Conditions of Christian Health and Growth

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[0 : 00] Now, we're going to zoom in on Acts 9 verse 31, and we're just going to work our way through that text together during this time. Now the name of the sermon, the title, is the Conditions of Christian Health and Growth.

And I am aware that it's about as exciting as a manual for how to grow potatoes. But here's why I think we need this.

Because we assume that these conditions that we're in now are the conditions of fatigue and decay.

But God is saying to us this evening, I can work with this. Because we, the Christian church, we are a tree which absolutely thrives in the harshest of conditions because our roots go deep into the living waters of Christ himself.

So as the church, and deep in our hearts, we can thrive when all the world wants us to keep silent about Jesus. When we're tempted to divide and to point the finger, but we look to Jesus instead for unity.

[1 : 16] When we're confronted by our own prejudices, but we look to Jesus for reconciliation, we can thrive. In other words, Jesus is with us so we can face anything.

A friend of mine likes to say it this way, King Jesus is on his throne and everything is going his way. So let's go through Acts 9.31, just phrase by phrase, and kind of squeeze the gospel juice out of it together.

So starting with the first bit, let me read the whole verse and then we'll zoom in. 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.

So let's look at the phrase, the church. Now for Christians today and Christians throughout history, disunity and discord and division, they come as naturally to us as breathing.

We actually look for reasons to divide rather than reasons to come together. When left to ourselves, we're like a bunch of drowning people out together in the ocean where we kind of push down the heads of the people around us as we try to stay afloat because we all actually think that we have to push others down if we want to be lifted up.

[2 : 43] If that weren't so, why would we struggle so much with gossip and slander and that sort of pointed tribalism where it's all us and them and we point over at them and vilify them?

And of course, this is what sin does, sin always does this in us. All the way back at the beginning, Genesis chapter 3, God says to Adam, what have you done and what does Adam say?

No, it was the woman you gave me. Sin convinces us that we need to push other people down to be lifted up.

And when our failings are visible and when we fall short, we just feel the need to throw other people under the bus. Now at the church level, we do this too, but at the church level, we think that we have the monopoly on truth.

Every tradition struggles with that kind of temptation. Now accuracy matters, doctrine matters, and it accuracy matters more the more majestic the thing that you're talking about.

[3 : 49] So what we believe about God is really important. Don't get me wrong. But if we think that we've exhausted the knowledge of God, if we think we have a corner on that market, then we end up training ourselves to look at other gatherings of believers from other backgrounds and other ethnicities and other perspectives and tell them, we just don't need you.

You don't add anything to us. That's not working out very well for my home country right now.

Just like one eye saying to the other eye, I can see just fine without you. Thanks very much. Now of course, with just one eye, we can see accurately.

It's possible, but we can't see with depth and with perspective. We need both eyes for that. So disunity, division, discord, it's our gut impulse as fallen human beings.

But Jesus, the sinless Son of God, spilled his blood to create one new man. He died to bring one new people into existence made up of all peoples.

[5 : 06] That's how the new people of God works. John 17 is probably the most beautiful and deep prayer recorded in Scripture.

This is praying to the Father for us. And the heartbeat of that prayer is that we would be one, that we would have the same oneness that God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit have. So unity of the church matters. There's no accident that when Luke looks out, by the way, Luke wrote the book of Acts and the Gospel's Luke.

And when Luke looks out at Judea, Galilee, and Samaria, three different geographical regions, and he looks at all the little churches in different homes spread out throughout there, he says the church.

Definite article, the church singular. Not a church and not the churches, the church.

[6 : 14] Because this is Jesus' church. And when we entrust our causes and ourselves and our churches to the hands of Christ, what results is not fractioning and dividing.

Jesus unifies his church. And our unity matters because God is one. And Jesus is drawing us into the heart of the Trinity as it were, which is unified.

You can't get more unity than the Trinity has. But let's not mistake unity for glib agreement.

Jesus draws lines for his church. And we exist, we work, we operate within the boundaries that Jesus has set. Otherwise, Acts would not be full of examples of religious people trying to kill Christians.

Wishi washi people do not get targets on their backs. Glib agreement is ugly and shallow.

[7 : 17] But profound godly unity is beautiful and attractive. And it's a gift from Jesus.

So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria, and now we come to our next phrase, had peace.

Now if you're really on top of your ancient Israelite history, you'll know that Judea and Samaria have not had peace together for a very long time, many centuries.

It started as kind of an intense rivalry way back in the days of Solomon's son, Rehoboam, ended up as racism and hatred, real hatred, so that when Jesus tells the story of the good Samaritan, it's radical that the Samaritan would be the good person.

And so that when Jesus encounters a woman at the well, his disciples are surprised that he would even speak to a Samaritan.

[8 : 27] There was peace with Judea, backwater Galilee, and Samaria, and that kind of healing, that kind of peace. Well, that's how the gospel comes into our hearts.

That's how the gospel comes into our communities, into our cities, and into our nations, as Jesus comes in and he lays his hands on the wounds of our prejudices, and he begins to give us peace. There's a great line from Return of the King by J.R.R. Tolkien that says, the hands of the king are the hands of a healer. We will never have that kind of healing and peace with one another until we really see that Jesus bought us with his blood that kind of peace with God.

Because peace is costly. Someone's got to pay the bill. So you and I cannot pay the bill for others unless we really understand and apprehend the fact that Jesus had paid our unpayable bill with God.

So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace, and next phrase was being built up.

[9 : 51] One of the things I really enjoy about the Bible is it's kind of like standing out over a scenic mountain range. You can take in the whole view and admire the beauty all at once, or you can go exploring and kind of explore every nook and cranny and crevice.

And the Bible's nooks and crannies are just as rich and satisfying and important as the big picture view. Even grammar matters. So let's talk about grammar for just a second here.

The church was being built up. It doesn't say the church built itself up. This building didn't build itself. This is in the passive voice. The church was the recipient of God's gracious work of building them up.

Jesus is the architect, and the church is a construction project. Jesus is the builder, and we are the stones that he's putting together.

So now we're beginning to see how Jesus works with his church. He does his best work in the face of the greatest opposition. So we've seen that Jesus gives unity when our impulse is to divide, that Jesus gives peace where there's only animosity.

[11 : 05] And now we see that Jesus built his church when all the world is trying to tear it down. For this newly formed church, it was a day of trouble, of opposition, of death, death threats, persecution.

But Jesus is building his church. And at the end of the verse it says it did what? It multiplied. He's a good builder. Friends, who else can we turn to in our day of trouble?

When the world is trying to tear us down, when the enemy would set our hearts against our brothers and sisters, when our very understanding of morality is brought into question and we feel that we don't even know where to put our feet down, who could we turn to but Jesus?

Only he can grow us and grow his church and make it thrive under those sorts of conditions. So we've looked at three things that Jesus gives the church.

But the church's response, the church's participation in that is not inactive and placid. We do have work to do. So let's transition now for a moment and talk about what the church does.

[12 : 26] 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.

When the Bible talks about walking like this, it's talking about manner of life. It's talking about the way that you live your life.

So thinking, let's think about that for a minute together. They're not just thinking in the fear of the Lord. They're not just, so they did have good theology, but it's not just about good theology.

And they're not just feeling the fear of the Lord. At times they will certainly have a sense of the fear of the Lord. I imagine when the Spirit descended with tongues of flame at Pentecost, there was a sense of awe that came about here.

But they were walking in this reverent awe-inspired fear of the Lord. Now our hearts have a single serving capacity for this kind of fear.

[13 : 32] One fear ultimately will drive out another. So this is a weird illustration, but bear with me. Let's say that you're walking through the Amazon jungle and you're deathly afraid of bugs.

And as you're walking, all you can think about is just the buzzing and humming of all these insects that are out to get your blood and pass on some crazy disease. But then you hear the low rumble of a tiger.

How's your fear of the bugs now? The greater object of fear will drive out the lesser object. We don't really have room in our hearts to give the same level of attention to both.

Now the church had such a clear view of the power and majesty of God that there was no room to fear anything else.

We know this to be true about the early church. They faced down lions in the arena while singing psalms with smiles on their faces. What kind of people can do that?

[14 : 38] People who walk in the fear of the Lord. Friends, that's something to pray for. A bigger, clearer view of the power and majesty of God.

We would do well to devote some time praying for that, for our hearts, for our church. What couldn't God do with the church that had that kind of clarity and perspective?

So to walk in the fear of the Lord is to live our lives basically like God is who He says He is. It's to live like Jesus is real.

That church acted like Jesus was with them because He was. And they acted like Jesus was for them because He was.

And that's walking in the fear of the Lord. So ultimately, what can coronavirus do to us? It can take our health.

[15 : 41] It can take our health, but we're going to live forever. It can take away our ability to socialize, but we have a friend who's nearer, more intimate with us than any human could ever be.

The Holy Spirit is called the Spirit of Jesus because He is Christ with us. He brings the presence of Christ into our very internal experience.

So what can the world do to us? We can walk in the fear of the Lord when we realize that the one who can create and destroy a universe with a word looks you in the eye and says, I love you, and I'm for you, and I'll be with you.

And it's going to end really well. And then He puts His money where His mouth is and He dies for you. That's how we get fear of the Lord.

The prophet Isaiah says, the fear of the Lord is the treasure of Zion. It's treasure. It's precious. In chapter 33, he says that we walk in the fear of the Lord, and here's what God does with that fear.

[16:55] He says, quote, He will fill Zion with justice and righteousness, and He will be the stability of your times, abundance of salvation, wisdom, and knowledge.

So that leads us to the next section, the last section, in the comfort of the Holy Spirit.

So Acts is called Acts because of a very longstanding Christian tradition that titled this book The Acts of the Apostles. It's probably better that we think about the book in terms of the Acts of Jesus.

The book begins by recording the ascension of Jesus. He went into heaven, He sat down on the throne, and He began to rule and reign, and He said to His disciples, it's to your advantage that I go, because then I can send the Holy Spirit.

Now who among us actually believes that? I mean if we had the option right now of Jesus with us or Jesus in heaven and the Spirit with us, I think we'd all probably choose Jesus, but Jesus didn't think that way.

[18:10] Because we overlook the profound reality of who He really is, of who the Spirit really is. He's the Spirit of Jesus, and Jesus sent Him to us so that He could be with us in a more profound way than we ever could have imagined before.

So Jesus is more profoundly here now. He's more profoundly near to us than He ever could have been with His feet on the soil in the Middle East.

So through His Holy Spirit, Jesus comforts and encourages us, especially in the face of opposition and difficult times.

So when the disciples were small and they had no reason to expect real tremendous growth, you know, missionary work seemed ridiculous to a small gathering of people in an upper room, it's in that condition that the Holy Spirit fell on them with power.

Giving them the ability to speak in a multitude of other languages, and 3,000 people were added to their number that day, and the mission of the church began, and it took off.

[19:21] That's what the Holy Spirit does. When the disciples faced the threat of prison and order from the government to keep silent, they prayed and the ground shook, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they continued to speak the word of God with boldness.

Then we could go on and on and talk about how the Holy Spirit practically, in just the book of Acts alone, comforts and encourages the church.

But we can sum it up this way. Jesus comforts the church through His Holy Spirit. Let me rephrase that. The Holy Spirit comforts the church by making Jesus real to us.

He does that through the ordinary means of grace, through sermons, through prayer, through Scripture, through our very peace and unity together, through our strengthening as a body together. Jesus has made real to us, through us. The author J.I. Packer gives us a really helpful illustration, and you may have heard it before, but it never gets worn out for me.

[20:37] He likens the Holy Spirit to a floodlight. So if you go, imagine the Scottish National Gallery were not under construction perpetually, and you were to go and walk down there at night, and you would see these floodlights illuminating the building.

That's what the Spirit does to Jesus. His job, His work is to illuminate Jesus for us. He applies the life and death of Jesus to our life.

In such a way that in 2 Corinthians, Paul says that we share in Jesus' suffering and we share in His comfort through the Holy Spirit. Now, that kind of illumination, what am I talking about?

Well, don't you know the difference between knowing the gospel and knowing the gospel? Do you know what I mean?

It's the difference between hearing a message one day and being unmoved, although apprehend, like understanding it, and hearing it the next day and having your life, your world, changed and turned upside down from the inside out.

[21:45] Don't you know that experience? In the 18th century, Charles Wesley, who was one of the founders of the Methodist movement, brother to John Wesley, he wrote one of the most beautiful hymns, and he talks about this, about the wonder and awe and beauty of the Christian experience and the work of the Comforter.

He says, Long my imprisoned spirit lay, Fast bound in sin and nature's night, Thine eye defused a quickening ray, I woke, The dungeon flamed with light, My chains fell off, My heart was free, I rose, went forth, and followed thee.

That's the comfort of the Holy Spirit. It's the difference between our spirit laying imprisoned in darkness in the night of our souls and our dungeon flaming with light.

Our shackles falling off, the spirit illuminates Jesus and makes him real to us. If Jesus were so near to a struggling church then, he will be near to us now.

If there was so much comfort to be had in trying times, there's comfort to be had now, it's the same Jesus.

[23 : 09] So let's go to him now, and let's pray. Lord, I feel kind of like I have to sit down after reading this and letting it land on me by your grace, because when I read the conditions and acts, I don't see a church thriving.

I can't imagine that being the case, but it does, and we are testimony to your faithfulness to the church back then and to us now. Against all odds, Lord, we praise you for your strength and your power and your goodness.

We're sorry for thinking small thoughts of you or not thinking of you often enough, and we turn to you now and understand that if we are to have unity, if we are to have peace and reconciliation, if we are to be built up, if we're to multiply, it will be at your gracious hand as a gift, and we ask you for those things now.

Lord, give us unity in your church around the world. Soften our hearts toward our brothers and sisters. Help us to look for reasons to unite around the banner of Christ rather than to divide.

And Lord, help us day to day to walk in the fear of the Lord and thank you for the comforts that you bring to us through your spirit.

[24 : 38] We ask this for the glory of Christ. Amen.