

2023 Theme - Focus On What Matters

Sermon Series - The Book of Acts/God's Plan for His Church

Sermon Title - Praying for a Repeat!

Sermon Text - Acts 9:19b-31

Sermon Presenter - Pastor Larry

Introduction:

“At the glorious cross of Jesus we trade our death for His life!” Powerful words. Jesus gave His all for you. His life on this earth was no picnic! He was relentlessly sought by the authorities. They wanted Him silenced and out of the way. He was causing trouble for the religious elite of His day. But He knew that would be the case before He left the safety of heaven and came here to give His life so yours could be saved! And when the church continued sharing His message after His death, resurrection and ascension back to heaven, the same religious elite came after His followers. But even in the face of death, they didn't back down and as result the church still lives today! Thank You Jesus. And I pray we will continue what began in the New Testament Church until Jesus comes again. I guess you could say I'm praying for a repeat! Pray with me!

The New Testament Church sure went through some tough times. Especially when Saul of Tarsus was leading the persecution of the Church. Families were being separated and Moms and Dads were being imprisoned. But God had plans for His church that Saul and all the powers of darkness would not be able to thwart! You might remember what Jesus had told Peter in Matthew 16:18...

Matthew 16:18b...I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.

And the plans Jesus had for His church, surprisingly enough, did not include having Saul taken out, but changing Saul's heart! As Jay shared with us two weeks ago, Saul had an amazing conversion experience. It was unexpected! No one would have ever thought Saul would ever change. You might remember this description of Saul from the passage Jay preached on...

Acts 9:1 Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest

Acts 9:2 and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.

But Saul is miraculously saved and he became better known as Paul and yes we're talking about Paul the Apostle who wrote much of our New Testament! Again, no one would have thought that Saul would change until he did, but some still had a hard time believing it. Listen to what happened immediately after his conversion...

Acts 9:19 ... Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus.

Acts 9:20 At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God.

Acts 9:21 All those who heard him were astonished and asked, “Isn’t he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn’t he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?”

Acts 9:22 Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Messiah.

Acts 9:23 After many days had gone by, there was a conspiracy among the Jews to kill him, Acts 9:24 but Saul learned of their plan. Day and night they kept close watch on the city gates in order to kill him.

Acts 9:25 But his followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall.

Acts 9:26 When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple.

Acts 9:27 But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus.

Acts 9:28 So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord.

Acts 9:29 He talked and debated with the Hellenistic Jews, but they tried to kill him.

Acts 9:30 When the believers learned of this, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.

Acts 9:31 Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.

Today we’re going to concentrate on verse 31. There’s some really important lessons to learn from this verse. But I want to first make this important observation about the verses we just read leading up to verse 31: God will take care of His church. He has great plans for His church! And in our text, the one whom the church had once feared, Saul of Tarsus, God miraculously used to bring encouragement and hope to the church.

But before this happened, **Paul had it rough!** The Christians didn’t believe him and the Jews wanted to kill him. However, Paul eventually convinces the Christian community that he has really been transformed by Christ! As a result they helped him escape the religious leaders who wanted to kill him. They then sent him back to where he was from, Tarsus, no short trip. According to Oxford Academic Online, “Tarsus, the capital of the ancient province of Cilicia, is located near the eastern Mediterranean coast of Turkey. Situated today 10 miles inland from the sea...” It was close to 350 miles from Jerusalem. So evidently he would travel by boat, because they went down to Caesarea to send him off, which was on Israel’s Mediterranean coast.

Paul would go on to share his faith with Jews, Gentiles, Kings, business leaders, prison guards, fellow prisoners and with anyone who would listen to his message. He loved to share the story of his conversion. Paul wrote 13 of the 27 books of the New Testament! Paul’s conversion was so powerful that it sustained him through some of the worst persecution imaginable. Jay read to

us the Scripture where Paul talks about all the suffering he had been through for the cause of Christ! The hunter had become the hunted!

I guess you could say that Paul's conversion was controversial to say the least! Conversion is still controversial today! Your friends who don't go to church may ridicule you, put you down and make fun of you. They may even call you a fanatic. A crazy Christian. Closed minded. Brainwashed. Etc. But listen to what Peter tells us...

1 Pet 4:3 For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do--living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry.

1 Pet 4:4 They think it strange that you do not plunge with them into the same flood of dissipation, and they heap abuse on you.

The Holman Bible Dictionary describes DISSIPATION as: Deceptive desires leading to a life-style without discipline resulting in the dizzy hangovers of drunkenness.

So the world just doesn't understand when a person like Paul or even someone like you and me turn our lives over to Jesus and walk away from the things that once controlled us. For Paul, he walked away from the power, the prestige, the position, and the pity he once found by persecuting the followers of Jesus.

Oswald Chambers had this to say about the conversion of Paul and the purpose for which God called him based on Acts 26:16....

"I have appeared unto thee for this purpose." Acts 26:16

Chambers says...

"The vision Paul had on the road to Damascus was no passing emotion, but a vision that had very clear and emphatic directions for him, and he says, 'I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision.' Our Lord said, in effect, to Paul - Your whole life is to be overmastered by Me; you are to have no end, no aim, and no purpose but Mine...When we are born again...the great thing is to learn not to be disobedient to the vision, not to say that it cannot be attained. It is not sufficient to know that God has redeemed the world, and to know that the Holy Spirit can make all that Jesus did effectual in me; I must have the basis of a personal relationship to Him. Paul was not given a message or a doctrine to proclaim, he was brought into a vivid, personal, overmastering relationship to Jesus Christ. Verse 16 is immensely commanding - "to make thee a minister and a witness." There is nothing there apart from the personal relationship. Paul was devoted to a Person not to a cause. He was absolutely Jesus Christ's, he saw nothing else, he lived for nothing else. "For I determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ, and Him crucified."

He had a message and a doctrine to proclaim but it flowed out of a personal relationship with Jesus! That's so powerful! And now I want us to look at what happened with the New Testament Church after Paul's very powerful and genuine conversion. We discover this in verse 31...

Acts 9:31 Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace...

1. I'm praying for a repeat: A Time of Peace

The New Testament church had had some extremely difficult times, but they enjoyed a time of peace! Our church struggled to find a place to meet when we first started, we started in our home, then the Old Towne Soda shop, Oak Harbor Golf Club, North Shore community center on Carr Drive, the gymnastics building on Carey street for two years, and then we built out the space in the old factory outlet mall, then came Katrina, and we were once again homeless as a church. But God eventually provided this wonderful place. I shared about that miracle last week. But then came Ida and the damage from that and of course we've had other trials and tribulations down through our 23 years of existence. But wow, how God has provided and helped us through our tough times. I don't think it wrong for us to ask God to help us enjoy a time of peace like the New Testament Church. Amen? Amen! So I'm praying for...

Peace from troubles

The Psalmist wrote these powerful words...

Psa 29:9 The voice of the LORD twists the oaks and strips the forests bare. And in his temple all cry, "Glory!"

Psa 29:10 The LORD sits enthroned over the flood; the LORD is enthroned as King forever.

Psa 29:11 The LORD gives strength to his people; the LORD blesses his people with peace.

This reminds me of what Jesus told His disciples...

John 16:33 "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

So in this world we are going to have trials and tribulations, but we can have peace when storms are on the way, we can have peace in the storm, we can have peace in spite of the storms, and we can have peace in the aftermath of the storms, because God is faithful. Storms do not indicate that God has abandoned us, rather they are another opportunity for God to show His faithfulness to never leave us or forsake us! Listen to these words from Barnes' notes on the Bible...

[The LORD will bless his people with peace] They have nothing to fear in the tempest and storm; nothing to fear from anything. He will bless them with peace IN the tempest; He will bless them with peace through that power by which He controls the tempest. Let them, therefore, not fear in the storm, however fiercely it may rage; let them not be afraid in any of the troubles and

trials of life. IN the storm, and IN those troubles and trials, he can make the mind calm; BEYOND those storms and those troubles he can give them eternal peace in a world where no "angry tempest blows."

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So we know that in Glory the storms will no longer blow, but in the meantime don't forget...

Psa 29:10 The LORD sits enthroned over the flood; the LORD is enthroned as King forever.

In other words, He is still in control and He takes the worst the world has to give and makes good come out of it, but we have to trust Him to do that, regardless of how we feel: discouraged, dismayed, downhearted, downtrodden. You see we don't walk by our emotions or our feelings, we walk by faith, and as you start walking by faith in spite of the circumstances you'll discover that the feelings of hope and peace will return! It's not easy when you're in the midst of the storm, but if you stay faithful God will get you through! We've had our struggles as a church down through the years, but God got us through and He continues to bless us and He's not going to stop now.

The New Testament Church had a time of trouble due to persecution. However, God granted them a time of peace. A break in the storms so they could recover, recharge and rekindle their fire for The Lord. And of course, there's not only the natural storms, there's the man-made storms, but James gives us this wisdom to deal with these storms...

James 3:17 But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.

James 3:18 Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.

And then we find these amazing words in Romans 12:9-21...

Romans 12:9 Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.

Romans 12:10 Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves.

Romans 12:11 Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord.

Romans 12:12 Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.

Romans 12:13 Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

Romans 12:14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.

Romans 12:15 Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.

Romans 12:16 Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

Romans 12:17 Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone.

Romans 12:18 If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

Romans 12:19 Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord.

Romans 12:20 On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."

Romans 12:21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

I believe the heaping of burning coals on our enemies head is not about being spiteful, but it is the fact that when we return good for evil, they will burn with conviction! And when we implement these principles into our lives, and our relationships, we will find the ability to implement Paul's instructions to us in Philippians...

Philippians 4:6 Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.

Philippians 4:7 And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Let's pray for a repeat of that time of peace! Here's another amazing truth from verse 31 and one in which I am...

2. Praying for a repeat: A Time of Strength Through The Holy Spirit

Our text says...

Acts 9:31 Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened...

The church was strengthened by the Holy Spirit. They depended on the Lord for their strength. Even great persecution had not caused them to lose their faith. They knew He was with them for they had experienced the promised gift of the Holy Spirit. Jesus had put it this way...

John 14:15 "If you love me, you will obey what I command.

John 14:16 And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever—

John 14:17 the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for He lives with you and will be in you.

What can you face when you know the Spirit of Almighty God is present in your life? The Psalmist put it this way...

Psa 28:7 The LORD is my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in him, and I am helped. My heart leaps for joy and I will give thanks to him in song.

Psa 28:8 The LORD is the strength of his people, a fortress of salvation for his anointed one.

Psa 28:9 Save your people and bless your inheritance; be their shepherd and carry them forever.

I've ministered to families with unimaginable loss. One family years ago, as people came by to share their condolences, the family shared with each one how God was their peace and their strength. Sure they cried, sure they were struggling, sure they had questions, but the bottom line was this: They had a blessed hope in the midst of the storms and were experiencing the reality that sometimes the Shepherd carries the sheep.

Isaiah 40:11 He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.

Let's pray for a repeat of this kind of strength in each of our lives no matter what we face in this old world! Here's another amazing truth from verse 31 and one in which I am...

3. Praying for a repeat: A Time of Encouragement Through The Holy Spirit

Our text says...

Acts 9:31 Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit...

The people of the New Testament Church received not only strength from the Holy Spirit but also encouragement. How does He do that? One way is through...

The Word of God!

Paul tells us this in Romans...

Rom 15:4 For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.

Rom 15:5 May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus,

Rom 15:6 so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Another way The Holy Spirit may encourage us is...

Through a brother or sister in Christ

1 Cor 14:3 But everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort.

And Paul wrote to Philemon these words...

Philemon 1:4 I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers,
Philemon 1:5 because I hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints.
Philemon 1:6 I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ.
Philemon 1:7 Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints.

Paul was encouraged by Philemon because Philemon had been busy encouraging and refreshing the hearts of the saints! Don't we all need encouragement sometimes and isn't it wonderful when that happens. I dealt with some discouraging things on Thursday morning and guess what happened that afternoon. My first cousin David, who is a dear brother in Christ and who I haven't heard from in a while, called me. He was at work, he's a mechanic at a dealership and didn't have but just a few minutes, but said the Lord put me on his heart and he wanted to call and encourage me. God knows what we need and if we trust Him in the down times, He'll send us the encouragement we need. But remember this, if you get bitter because of the hard things you're going through, you may shut yourself off from the very brothers and sisters in Christ whom God has sent your way to encourage you. In fact God's Word tells us this...

Hebrews 12:15 See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.

Let's pray for a repeat of this kind of encouragement in each of our lives no matter what we face in this old world! Here's another amazing truth from verse 31 and one in which I am...

4. Praying for a repeat: A Time of Growth

Acts 9:31 Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.

Remember this from earlier in the Book of Acts?

Acts 2:46 Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts,
Acts 2:47 praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.
God gave the increase!

Our goals, our purpose, our mission, our vision, must never be focused on numbers! If numbers become our focus we will not remain in God's will. When numbers become your focus, you become concerned with success in the world's eyes, and competition with others. Churches should cooperate to reach the world, not compete to reach the world. Our focus should be on serving God and ministering to people. If we do these two things, He will give the increase.

There is nothing wrong with planning for the growth God is bringing, we just must be sure our motives are pure in everything we do! If we achieve our vision...

“To raise up a healthy church that will impact the North Shore and ultimately the world with the life changing message of Jesus Christ!”

Healthy things grow! If we are a healthy church, doing our mission of...

Transforming Worship, People and the World

...and never forgetting our purpose...

To see the One who gave His life for us exalted and the ones He gave His life for transformed

...then growth will come naturally! And this leads to one other thing that I did not want to skip and for which I am...

5. Praying for a repeat: A Time of Right Living

Acts 9:31 Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.

Living in the fear of the Lord did not mean that the people were living in fear of God's retribution or anger, but that they were living with a respectful fear and reverence for The Lord! As a result, the people lived what they believed. They lived lives of integrity, honesty, kindness, and benevolence. Paul talked about this kind of living when he shared with the Thessalonians these words...

1 Th 2:8 We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us.

1 Th 2:9 Surely you remember, brothers, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you.

1 Th 2:10 You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed.

1 Th 2:11 For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children,

1 Th 2:12 encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.

1 Th 2:13 And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe.

How do we live this way? If you are willing to walk by faith and trust what Jesus did on the cross for you, God will Equip you. God will Work in you. God will Encourage you. God will Strengthen

you and He will give you peace even in the midst of life's hardships. I want to end the message by encouraging you with three passages of Scripture found in Hebrews, 2 Thessalonians, and 1 Peter. They are powerful and would be good passages to commit to memory...

Heb 13:20 May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep,

Heb 13:21 equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

2 Th 2:15 So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter.

2 Th 2:16 May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope,

2 Th 2:17 encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.

1 Peter 5:6 Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time.

1 Peter 5:7 Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.

1 Peter 5:8 Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.

1 Peter 5:9 Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings.

1 Peter 5:10 And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast.

1 Peter 5:11 To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen.

Let's pray!