

Walking in Fear & Comfort

The Book of Acts: The Spirit Moving / Acts 9:23-31 / August 17, 2025

Introduction:

If you were to describe a healthy church, what kinds of words would you use? Maybe you would describe it in more relational terms, such as “community-focused,” “friendly,” “warm,” or “welcoming.” Maybe you would use words that emphasized more spiritual aspects like “growing,” “Bible-believing,” “fruit-bearing,” or “disciple-making.” According to a survey from Pew Research Center in 2016, the most important key factors for why Americans choose the congregations they do are the quality of sermons, leaders who are welcoming, and the style of worship services. But in Acts 9:31, Luke writes for us another summary statement on the condition of the early church so far in the book of Acts. And this description is not a list of programs or personalities—it’s a spiritual posture. He says:

Acts 9:31

³¹ 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.

Two phrases stand out in his description: “the fear of the Lord” which is a deep, awe-filled reverence for our holy and righteous God; and “the comfort of the Holy Spirit” which is the strengthening and encouragement that comes from the indwelling of God’s Spirit in the hearts of those who believe. From the outside, this looks like a contradiction. How can fear and comfort coexist in harmony with one another, let alone be a way that Luke identifies as a sign of spiritual growth that leads to the multiplication of the Church? But fear without comfort makes you anxious and rigid. Comfort without fear makes you careless and casual. So when the two walk hand in hand, the church is healthy and fruitful, obedient to the Lord that it fears but, at the same time, also comforted by Him. His description could be summarized this way: “A healthy church walks in awe of God’s holiness and rests in the Spirit’s presence.” So, how has this summary verse been portrayed so far? If you turned back to Chapter 8, you would see the evangelist Philip going to potentially hostile territories to spread the Gospel. First, he went to Samaria, where he may have been met by Samaritans who disliked the Jews, but instead, many people were converted to Christianity. Then, the Lord tells him to go out to the desert. Instead of dying from dehydration, he ends up baptizing the Ethiopian Eunuch. Saul truly experiences the fear of the Lord when Christ appears to him on the road to Damascus, but is comforted when he repents and believes in the gospel of Jesus, receiving the Holy Spirit. At the same time, Ananias, was told by the Lord to take Saul in, a rabid persecutor of the Church, and is shown that Saul had been turned into a disciple by the Lord Himself. Again, Saul goes and preaches the gospel in the synagogue of Damascus, a place hostile to the Christian message, the end result being “²² But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ.” If you haven’t seen the pattern yet, here it is: God calls His people to do something or go somewhere that is potentially dangerous, and they obey because they fear Him. But despite opposition, harsh environments, or potential danger, the Lord comforts His people through the power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, after all, is the one who softens the unbelieving hearts of the people in Samaria or guides the Ethiopian Eunuch, a court official, to his queen to get baptized. It is the Holy Spirit that made Saul no longer a threat to Christians so that Ananias could minister to him freely, and it is the Spirit that strengthened Saul to proclaim Christ boldly in the Damascus synagogue. Which brings us to today’s passage, where Luke shows us more fearful situations that are stepped into by fearing the Lord rather than man, followed by comfort through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Acts 9:23-25

Saul Escapes from Damascus

²³ *When many days had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him,* ²⁴ *but their plot became known to Saul. They were watching the gates day and night in order to kill him,* ²⁵ *but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket.*

First, we need to take into account Saul's recalling of events. In the book of Galatians 1:18, Paul makes clear that he resided in Damascus for 3 years before leaving for Jerusalem, while Luke's account merely says that "many days had passed." Furthermore, in 2 Corinthians 11:32-33, Paul says that it is the governor of Damascus who had plotted to arrest him. I don't think that Luke's exclusion of these details is meant to confuse us or give a false account of what happened. Rather, Luke's emphasis in these passages was more about the radical conversion of Saul from a violent opponent to one of its greatest missionaries. He's boldly preaching Jesus in the synagogues. But instead of applause, he gets assassination plots. There is an important lesson here for us that we need to pay attention to, especially because we live in a country where practicing our faith isn't frowned upon. It is the lesson that faithfulness to Jesus will draw resistance. Jesus Himself warned His disciples and warns us in John 15:20:

John 15:20

²⁰ *Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours.*

Opposition, then, isn't always a sign you're doing something wrong because it may be a sign you're doing something right. We would be wise not to allow ourselves to be tempted into thinking that the path of least resistance is always the best path. Whether that be in our individual walk or corporately as a Church body. We would also be wise to examine ourselves when everything is going smoothly all the time. Maybe that means being bolder in your witness of sharing your faith with others. Or maybe it means standing up for what is right, even if it means you may lose friends. Whatever it means for you, we should expect resistance as Christians. That doesn't mean you should go out looking for it, but that resistance naturally comes when we live faithfully to Jesus. This truth shouldn't make you fearful, though. Instead, let that truth deepen your dependence on God, not your fear of people. Also, we don't need to fear people because of the comfort that can come from other faithful, Holy Spirit-filled people. See how Saul's disciples (those who accepted the message of Jesus) helped him escape opposition? It's a beautiful thing to see the body of Christ working together in unity to provide shelter from a storm. The comfort that comes from the Holy Spirit can be an internal experience, to be sure, but it can also come from other believers who are moved to provide what is needed in times of trouble and hardship. If you know someone in this Church who is going through a hard time, how can you provide comfort to them? Unfortunately, though, sometimes opposition can arise from the very people who should be offering comfort.

Acts 9:26-28

Saul in Jerusalem

²⁶ *And when he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples. And they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple.* ²⁷ *But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus.* ²⁸ *So he went in and out among them at Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord.*

Imagine this moment—Saul had been the church's enemy for quite some time. At one time, he approved of the martyrdom of Stephen, barged into people's homes, and dragged believers to prison, and now he walks into the gathering saying, "Hi, I'm with you guys now." They're reasonably cautious because they

aren't yet sure if his conversion is real or just a ruse to round up some Jesus followers. And think of what might've been going through Saul's mind at that time. He's walking into the company of people who could have easily rejected him or tried to tarnish his new reputation as a believer. Thankfully, Saul found an advocate in Barnabas.

Acts 9:27

²⁷ But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus.

Barnabas, the "son of encouragement," vouches for Saul. He bridges the gap of distrust by standing up for Saul and relaying the truth of what had taken place. As Paul recounts the episode in Galatians 2, the apostles proceeded to recognize the grace that was given to him in conversion and that God had placed a ministry to the Gentiles upon his shoulders. It was the Spirit of truth within them that recognized that Saul had truly repented and believed the true Gospel. And because of that Spirit testifying that Saul was indeed a child of God, it was with one accord that they also acknowledged his ministry.

Acts 9:28

²⁸ So he went in and out among them at Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord.

And with the apostles verifying Saul's ministry, what does he do? He goes out preaching boldly in the name of the Lord to the people of Jerusalem, the place where he was once known as a great persecutor of the Church! The Holy Spirit, again, comes alongside Saul and gives him an unwavering heart of faithfulness in a place that could be hostile toward him. Imagine being an old Pharisee friend of Saul. You'd known him for years, maybe worked next to him during the great persecution of Acts 8... And now he's preaching to crowds the very message that he used to revile. Surely, fresh opposition is right around the corner.

Acts 9:29-30

²⁹ And he spoke and disputed against the Hellenists. But they were seeking to kill him. ³⁰ And when the brothers learned this, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.

Saul is fearless in proclaiming Christ, but danger follows him again, this time from the Hellenists. In general, Hellenists are individuals who embraced Greek culture, language, and customs, often without being ethnically Greek. Specifically, the term often referred to non-Greeks, particularly Jews, who adopted Greek ways. You would think that a man who had a ministry to the Gentiles would have better luck with Gentile-minded Jews, but it would seem that they, too, sought to kill him because of the message that he proclaimed. Again, we see other believers (Holy Spirit-filled Christians) offering comfort and support as they whisked Saul away to safety. The believers send him off to Tarsus, not because Saul is retreating in fear, but because they are acting with Spirit-led wisdom. Courage in Christ doesn't mean recklessness; it means being bold while trusting God's plans despite ongoing hardship. We wouldn't have these stories of Paul had he allowed fear to dictate his actions. At this point, Luke takes a step back here and gives us a summary of what was happening with the church as a whole:

Acts 9:31

³¹ 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.

Notice that peace came to the church, but not because all persecution had stopped. We've already seen that Saul's life was being threatened, and believers in Jerusalem were still viewed with suspicion by

outsiders. So what does Luke mean when he says the church had peace? He's pointing to a deeper peace, a peace that came from being anchored in Christ and strengthened by the Spirit, even in the midst of hostility. Luke also says the church was "being built up." That's the language of edification, of God constructing something strong and lasting in His people. But then he tells us how this happened: they were walking in two things at the same time—the fear of the Lord and the comfort of the Holy Spirit. The "fear of the Lord" isn't talking about being terrified of God as though He were out to destroy us. For the believer, this fear is reverence. It's awe. It's taking God seriously. It's the opposite of a casual, take-it-or-leave-it kind of faith. To fear the Lord is to know that He is holy, that He is mighty, and that He is worthy of our obedience. This kind of fear keeps us from drifting into complacency. That's why Scripture tells us that "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and knowledge," because outside of that fear, we would be like a ship with no anchor or sails, going wherever the storms of life take us. At the same time, Luke says the church was walking in "the comfort of the Holy Spirit." That word "comfort" can also mean encouragement, strengthening, or consolation. It's the Spirit reminding us that we belong to God, that we are not abandoned, that Christ is with us in the fire. The Spirit is the one who comes alongside us when opposition is fierce and says, "Take heart. You are mine." And it's when these two things come together, the fear of the Lord and the comfort of the Spirit, that the church multiplies. If you only have fear without comfort, your faith becomes anxious and joyless. If you only have comfort without fear, your faith becomes careless and shallow. But when both are present, you find a faith that is steady, serious about God's holiness, and yet deeply assured of God's love. That's the kind of faith that grows. That's the kind of church that multiplies. But let's pause here for a moment, because the truth is, not everyone is walking in this balance. If you came here today not knowing Christ as your savior, then the "fear of the Lord" is not reverence for you—it's judgment. God is holy and just, and our sin separates us from Him. Scripture says that "the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). Left to ourselves, we don't have peace with God; we have His righteous wrath. But here's the good news: the Holy Spirit, through the Apostle Paul, goes on to say, "but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." Jesus Christ took that judgment upon Himself at the cross. He bore the penalty that we deserved so that we could be forgiven and reconciled to God. And He rose from the dead to give us new life by His Spirit. When you repent of your sins and trust in Jesus, you move from fearing God's condemnation to revering Him as your loving Father. You move from the hopelessness of spiritual death to the Spirit's comfort in new and everlasting life. So what do we take away from this passage? The early church didn't grow because life was easy for them. They grew because they walked in a posture of deep reverence before God and a dependence upon His Spirit. Church, we need the same today just as much as they needed it long ago. We need Christians who will be willing to stand up for what is good and righteous and true, even when our knees shake from fear. We need men and women of the faith who fear God more than any mere human being, and we need believers who understand that the God they serve will be with them always, providing exactly what is needed to accomplish His will. So, do you live with a holy reverence for God, or do you sometimes treat Him casually, like an afterthought? Do you lean into the Spirit's comfort when trials press in, whether it be the feeling of comfort or through the ministry of others, or do you try to shoulder the weight of life on your own? And most importantly, have you come to Christ at all, so that you can know this peace and walk in this balance? The fear of the Lord should keep us grounded in His holiness, reminding us that sin is serious and obedience matters. The comfort of the Spirit should keep us from despair, reminding us that God's presence is with us and His promises never fail. And when we walk in both of these realities, reverence and rest, awe and assurance, then we too will find that God Himself is more than enough to build His church and strengthen His people. So let's walk in the fear of the Lord. Let's rest in the comfort of the Holy Spirit. And let's trust that when we do, God will continue to do what He has always done—multiply His church and glorify His name.