

Acts 9:31

Introduction

When we first started this series in Acts, we saw that Luke was ethnically a Gentile (Col. 4:10-14), but that before he was converted to Christianity, he was almost certainly a proselyte to Judaism (see sermon on Acts 1:1-11). Luke would have therefore shared with the Jews a devotion to the Scriptures, consisting of the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. What we call the “Old Testament” (Genesis – Malachi) would not yet have been known to them as the “Old Testament.” It was simply their “Bible”—the Scriptures in full. I bring this up to emphasize that the first converts to Christianity—whether Jews or Gentile proselytes—would have had an entirely different “relationship” to what we call the “Old Testament” than most Christians today. For them, the Law and the Prophets (including the Writings) was the world that they lived in (cf. Acts 17:2, 11; 24:14; 28:23). The Law and the Prophets embodied their religious heritage—and even (for the Jews) their ethnic and national heritage—as the covenant people of Yahweh. As a well-educated man and a man of means, Luke would probably have been more versed in the Law, and the Prophets than even the average Jew. That he was, in fact, intimately familiar with the Scriptures is obvious from the two volumes that he wrote. It would be difficult for us to overstate the difference between those first Christians’ approach to and familiarity with the “Old Testament” Scriptures and the approach of most Christians today. But if we were just as steeped in the Law and the Prophets as were those first Jewish disciples, our faith would be so much more substantive—so much more rooted and grounded, and therefore all the more characterized by both obedience and joy. Because we’re not steeped in the Law and the Prophets and because we’re not accustomed to seeing just how connected and interrelated our Old and New Testaments are, we’re often blinded to what’s actually being said by the New Testament writers. We see an example of this in our text this morning:

- Acts 9:31 — So the assembly throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria was having peace, being built up. And going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it was being multiplied.

I love how one commentator puts it: “This third large [section of Acts] closes... with a simple summary of the church’s growth. These summaries function like triumphant choral refrains in the book, as they ring out with joy over what God is doing” (Bock). But what, exactly, is it that God is doing? Luke begins this “triumphant choral refrain” with these words:

I. Acts 9:31a — So the assembly [*ekklesia*] throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria...

Nowhere else in the New Testament are Judea and Galilee and Samaria all mentioned together in the same place. Furthermore, nowhere else in Acts does Luke say anything at all about the origins and/or the growth of the assembly (or church) in Galilee. So why here? Notice how Luke references the “whole” or the “entirety” (*holos*) of Judea and Galilee and Samaria (“throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria”). We get the picture, then, that Luke sees these three geographical areas as together constituting a single “whole” and that this is precisely why he refers to all three together. Judea, Galilee and Samaria together correspond to the boundaries of

ancient Israel (Peterson; cf. Hort, quoted in Bruce). When we hear, “throughout *all Judea and Galilee and Samaria*,” then, we hear, “throughout the whole territory of ancient Israel.”

“So the *assembly* [*ekklesia*] throughout the whole territory of ancient Israel...” Remember that for those first Greek-speaking Jewish Christians, *ekklesia* (the word translated “church” in our New Testament) was everywhere in their “Old Testament” Scriptures (see sermon on Acts 4:32-5:11). It’s by the use of this Old Testament word for the “assembly” in our New Testament that we see the continuity between the old and the new—between the Old Covenant assembly and the New Covenant assembly; the Old Covenant Israel and the New Covenant Israel; or, if you prefer, the Old Covenant church and the New Covenant church. The New Covenant assembly is the eschatological and messianic fulfillment of the Old Covenant assembly (Mat. 16:18). With only one possible exception (20:28), everywhere else in Acts, the singular “assembly” always refers to the assembly in one specific place (e.g., the assembly in Jerusalem [8:1; 11:22; 15:4]; the assembly in Antioch [11:26; 13:1; 14:27; 15:3]; the assembly in Ephesus [20:17]). Whenever Luke wants to refer to the assembly spread out in different places, he refers to the assemblies, plural (“[Paul] was traveling through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the assemblies” [15:41; cf. 14:23; 16:5]. Except for here. Here Luke refers to the *singular* assembly throughout *all Judea and Galilee and Samaria*—in keeping with the fact that in the Law and the Prophets the assembly was always singular, representing the entirety of God’s covenant people throughout the whole land.

Can you see, now, the Scriptural (Law and Prophets) context for Luke’s words?—“So the assembly [*sing.*] throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria [the whole territory of ancient Israel]...” Luke is about to transition in chapter 10 to the mission to the Gentiles, but the first nine chapters of Acts have all been focused on the mission to Israel. What Luke is summarizing here in this “triumphant choral refrain” as he looks back and surveys the first nine chapters is the fulfillment of God’s promises to the Jewish people (“already”). And so he continues:

II. Acts 9:31b — So the assembly throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria **was having peace** [*eirene*]...

It might be easy for us to assume that this peace is the result of Saul’s conversion and the end of persecution (for a time). And yet Luke never explicitly makes this connection. It might be just as natural to assume that Luke was thinking of a peace that the assembly experienced already in the midst of persecution (cf. Bock). In the immediately following context, “peace” is connected with: “being built up and going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit.” Even if Luke does have in mind an outward, temporal peace because of the end of persecution, he sees this as representative of a more ultimate eschatological peace.

“Peace,” in the Old Testament (*shalom*), was a word that summed up the wholeness and the wellness and the fullness of God’s people. Peace was the absence of all the covenant curses (no divine judgments or condemnation) and the experience of all the covenant blessings. So the prayer that God commanded the priests to pray over the people was this:

➤ Numbers 6:24–26 — Yahweh bless you, and keep you; Yahweh make His face shine on you, and be gracious to you; Yahweh lift up His face on you, **and give you peace.**

Peace is the gift of God. For the Old Covenant people of Israel, this peace was represented typologically by the material and physical blessings of abundance and security in the land of Canaan (cf. Lev. 26:6), which helps us see that the peace of the individual was bound up with the peace of the entire covenant community. This is why the faithful Israelite prayed not just for his own peace, but for the peace of all God's people.

- Psalm 122:6-9 — **Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:** “May they prosper who love you. **May peace be within your walls**, and tranquility within your palaces.” For the sake of my brothers and my friends, I will now say, “**May peace be within you.**”
- Psalm 128:5-6 (cf. 125:1-5) — May Yahweh bless you from Zion... **Peace be upon Israel!**

Peace, then, is the wholeness, and the wellness, and the fullness of God's people all living together in right relationship with Him. But, of course, the great obstacle to this peace was our sin. And so Yahweh spoke through the prophet Jeremiah:

- Jeremiah 6:14 (cf. 23:17; 28:9; 13:10, 15-16) — [The false prophets] have healed the brokenness of My people superficially, saying, “Peace, peace,” but there is no peace.”

Instead of peace, God's people experienced the covenant curses because of their sin (judgment and condemnation). And so the true and lasting peace of God's people came to be associated with the coming of the Messiah and His kingdom in the last days (cf. Isa. 26:1-4, 12; 60:17; Hag. 2:9). The prophet Isaiah writes:

- Isaiah 9:6-7 (cf. Ps. 72:1-7) — For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; and the government will rest on His shoulders; and His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, **Prince of Peace**. There will be no end to the increase of His government or of **peace**, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness from then on and forevermore.

On the one hand, we have peace associated with the throne of Messiah and with the everlasting increase of His government. On the other hand, this same peace is associated with the sufferings and death of Yahweh's Servant.

- Isaiah 53:5 — But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our **peace** fell upon Him, And by His wounds we are healed.

In Luke's Gospel, when John was born, his father, Zechariah, was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying:

- Luke 1:76-79 — “And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go on before the Lord to make ready His ways, to give to His people the knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, with which the Sunrise from on high will visit us, to shine upon those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, **to direct our feet into the way of peace.**”

Also in Luke's Gospel, when the angels appeared to the shepherds, announcing the birth of Jesus, they were praising God and saying:

- Luke 2:14 (cf. 7:50; 8:48) — “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth **peace** among men with whom He is pleased.”

This “peace,” announced by the angels, is that eschatological, Messianic peace that was always the prayer of God's people. In Psalm 72, the people prayed and sang together:

- Psalm 72:1–7 — O God, give the king Your judgments, and Your righteousness to the king's son... **Let the mountains lift up peace to the people**, and the hills, in righteousness... May he come down like rain upon the mown grass, like showers that water the earth. May the righteous flourish in his days, and abundance of **peace** until the moon is no more.

This is the peace that Jesus, the Messianic Son of David, has accomplished for us (“already”). He has borne the whole covenant curse and now He reigns at God's right hand so that we might have peace—so that we might all live together in right relationship with God, experiencing His favor—blessing us, keeping us, making His face shine on us and being gracious to us. This isn't just *my* peace or *your* peace, this is *our* peace. This isn't just an individualistic, subjective feeling. My peace is the peace of all God's people; it's the experiential knowledge of His favor poured out upon us in Jesus.

When Luke says, here in chapter 9, “So the *assembly* [sing.] throughout *all Judea and Galilee and Samaria* [the ancient territory of Israel] **was having peace**,” can you hear, now, what he's saying? He's thinking of that eschatological, Messianic peace in the Prophets that was always the prayer of God's people—the peace that in these last days has come to us through Jesus Christ (cf. 10:36). Of course, Luke's emphasis here is on the fulfillment of God's promises to the Jewish people (“the assembly throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria”), but we know that this same “good news of peace” (10:36) is about to be proclaimed also to the Gentiles (cf. Acts 1:8).

III. Acts 9:31c — So the assembly throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria was having peace, **being built up** [*oikodomeo*]...

Again, we hear in these words the language and thought of Luke's “Old Testament” Scriptures. The Greek word for “built up” is used in the Old Testament for the “building up” (the establishing and strengthening) of Zion—and, by extension, for the “building up” of the people who dwell in Zion.

- Psalm 69:34–35 (cf. 102:16) — Let heaven and earth praise [Yahweh], the seas and everything that moves in them. For God will save Zion and **build [up]** the cities of Judah.
- Psalm 147:2 — Yahweh **builds up** Jerusalem; He gathers the outcasts of Israel.

And yet in the end, because of Old Covenant Israel's sin and faithlessness, they knew God not as the one who builds them up, but rather as the one who tears them down (cf. Ps. 28:5; 52:5). God says in Jeremiah 31 that He watched over the people of Israel “to uproot, to tear down, to pull down, to destroy, and to bring calamity” (Jer. 31:28). We especially see this tearing down of the

people represented in the tearing down of the walls and houses of Jerusalem. And so the people waited for that eschatological day when God would build them up again—when God would build up again the walls of Jerusalem (cf. Jer. 30:18; Ezek. 36:10, 33, 36). God spoke through the prophet Jeremiah:

- Jeremiah 33:7–8 — “I will return the fortunes of Judah and the fortunes of Israel **and will build them up** as they were at first. And I will cleanse them from all their iniquity by which they have sinned against Me...”

Notice how the building up of Israel is connected with the forgiveness of all their sins. It’s in connection with the making of a new covenant and the creation of a new covenant Israel (Jer. 31:33-34) that we read in Jeremiah 31:

- Jeremiah 31:4, 28 — “Again **I will build you, and you will be built up**, O virgin of Israel! Again you will take up your tambourines and go forth to the dances of those celebrating... [A]s I have watched over them to uproot, to tear down, to pull down, to destroy, and to bring calamity, so I will watch over them **to build up** and to plant,” declares Yahweh.”

We see in these passages that God is the eschatological builder and that only God is able to build up and strengthen and establish His people after He Himself has torn them down. And so we remember Jesus’ words to Peter:

- Matthew 16:18 (cf. 1 Pet. 2:4-5) — “[Y]ou are Peter, and upon this rock **I will build [up] My assembly [ekklesia]**; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.”

It’s in the light of all this, then, that we hear Luke’s words in Acts 9: “So the *assembly* [sing.] throughout *all Judea and Galilee and Samaria* [the ancient territory of Israel] was *having peace, being built up [by God]*...” The Old Covenant assembly, because of their faithlessness and wickedness, knew God as the one who tears down. But as the New Covenant assembly that we are, we know God only as the one who is building up Zion—who is strengthening and establishing us so that even the gates of Hades will never overpower us. We continue to see, then, that what Luke is summarizing here in this “triumphant choral refrain” is the eschatological fulfillment of God’s promises to the Jewish people (“already”)—a fulfillment in which we as Gentiles have come to share.

IV. Acts 9:31d — So the assembly throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria was having peace, being built up **and going on in the fear of the Lord...**

Over and over again in Luke’s copy of the Law, the Old Covenant assembly was commanded to fear Yahweh their God. We read in Deuteronomy chapter 10:

- Deuteronomy 10:12–13, 20 (cf. Deut. 4:10; 6:1-2, 13, 24; 8:6; 13:4; 14:23; 17:19; 28:58; 31:12-13; Lev. 19:14, 32; 25:17; 26:2; Josh. 4:24; 24:14; 1 Sam. 12:14, 24; 2 Kings 17:36, 39) — “So now, Israel, what does Yahweh your God require from you, but to **fear Yahweh your God**, to walk in all His ways and love Him, and to serve Yahweh your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of Yahweh and His statutes

which I am commanding you today for your good? ... **Yahweh your God you shall fear;** Him you shall serve, and to Him you shall cling, and by His name you shall swear.”

Notice how the one whom the people were to “fear” is identified as “*Yahweh your God*.” The one whom the people were to “fear” was the one who had revealed Himself to them by redeeming them from Egypt and entering into covenant with them at Mount Sinai. But this is precisely what the Old Covenant assembly failed to do. They didn’t fear the Lord, and so they had no peace (cf. Isa. 48:22). They didn’t fear the Lord, and so the Lord said that He would tear them down and not build them up (cf. Ps. 28:5). The prophet Isaiah writes:

- Isaiah 8:11–14 — For thus Yahweh spoke to me with a strong hand and disciplined me not to walk in the way of this people, saying, “...[Y]ou are not to fear what they fear, and you shall not tremble. It is Yahweh of hosts whom you should regard as holy. And He shall be your fear, and He shall be your cause of trembling. Then He shall become a sanctuary...”

In the end, it would only be an eschatological, New Covenant Israel that would truly walk in the fear of the Lord. The prophet Isaiah wrote of this future in Isaiah 33:

- Isaiah 33:5–6 (cf. 11:1-3) — Yahweh is exalted, for He dwells on high; He has filled Zion with justice and righteousness. And He will be the stability of your times, a wealth of salvation, wisdom, and knowledge; **the fear of Yahweh** is [Zion’s] treasure.

And so we come back again to Luke’s “triumphant choral refrain” summarizing the fulfillment (“already”!) of God’s promises to Israel—an Israel that we know is about to embrace even the Gentiles: “So the *assembly* throughout *all Judea and Galilee and Samaria* was *having peace*, being built up **and going on in the fear of the Lord**...” Here’s the fulfillment of the psalmist’s prayer:

- Psalm 85:8–9 — [Yahweh] will speak **peace** to His people, to His holy ones; but let them not turn back to folly. Surely His salvation is near to **those who fear Him**...
- Psalm 72:3, 5 (cf. 128:1, 6) — Let the mountains lift up **peace** to the people... Let them **fear You** while the sun endures, and as long as the moon, from generation to all generations.

By God’s grace, and through the blood of the New Covenant, we are an eschatological assembly characterized fundamentally by the fear of the Lord, so that having our sins forgiven, we now walk in His ways and love Him and serve Him with all our heart and with all our soul and keep His commandments and His statutes which He has commanded us for our good. This is the mighty work that God has done, and is still doing, and will finally complete in us.

V. Acts 9:31e — So the assembly throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria was having peace, being built up and going on in the fear of the Lord **and in the comfort [*paraklesis*] of the Holy Spirit**...

Most translations say, “the *encouragement* of the Holy Spirit,” but “encouragement” is far too weak a word and fails to root us in the language and thought of Luke’s “Old Testament” Scriptures. The book of Lamentations is a lament over the pouring out of God’s covenant curse

on Zion. Five times in the first chapter we read: “She has none to comfort her... she has no comforter... far from me is a comforter... there is no one to comfort her... there is no one to comfort me” (Lam. 1:2, 9, 16, 17, 21). The true comfort of God’s people, then, awaited the removal of the covenant curse in the last days.

In contrast with Lamentations, Isaiah 40-55 is known as “The Book of the Consolations of Israel”—or, for short, “The Book of Comfort” (cf. LXX, Isa. 40:11; 41:27; 49:10). Chapter 40 *begins* with these resounding words:

- Isaiah 40:1-2 — “**Comfort, O comfort** My people,” says your God. “Speak to the heart of Jerusalem; and call out to her, that her warfare has been fulfilled, that her iniquity has been removed, that she has received from the hand of Yahweh double for all her sins.”

Then, in chapter 49:

- Isaiah 49:13 (cf. Isa. 12:1) — Shout for joy, O heavens! And rejoice, O earth! Break forth into joyful shouting, O mountains! For Yahweh has **comforted** His people...

Then in chapter 51:

- Isaiah 51:3, 12 (cf. vv. 17-19; Zech. 1:16-17) — Indeed, Yahweh will **comfort** Zion; He will **comfort** all her waste places... joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and sound of a melody... “I, even I, am He who **comforts** you.”

Then in chapter 52:

- Isaiah 52:9 (cf. 54:11-14 [*with eirene and oikodomeo*]; 57:18-20 [*with eirene*]; 66:12-13 [*with eirene*]) — Break forth, shout joyfully together, **you waste places of Jerusalem**; for **Yahweh has comforted His people; He has redeemed Jerusalem.**

God’s comfort isn’t just what He says; it’s what He does. God’s comfort includes not only the taking away of all the covenant curses, but the replacing of those curses with His fullest benediction. God’s comfort includes not only the wiping away of our tears (due especially to His judgments on our sin), but the replacing of those tears with gladness and joy. In Isaiah 61, the “comfort” of Yahweh is giving us a headdress instead of ashes, the oil of rejoicing instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a spirit of fainting (Isa. 61:1-3; cf. Jer. 31:13). And so in Luke’s Gospel, we read in chapter 2:

- Luke 2:25-26 — And behold, there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, **waiting for the comfort of Israel**... And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ [the one through whom God would bring to His people all the eschatological comforts of His salvation].

These are the comforts that we've all now experienced and that God is daily ministering to us through Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit whom He has given to us. So Paul can write to the Thessalonians:

- 2 Thessalonians 2:16 — Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself and God our Father, who has loved us **and given us eternal comfort** and good hope by grace, **comfort your hearts...**

And Luke can write in his triumphant “choral refrain” summarizing the fulfillment of God’s promises to Israel in these last days:

VI. Acts 9:31f — So the *assembly* throughout *all Judea and Galilee and Samaria* was *having peace*, being *built up* and going on in the *fear of the Lord* **and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it was being multiplied [plethyno]**.

Remember how God said to Abraham: “I will *multiply* your offspring like the stars of heaven and like the sand from the shore of the sea” (LES; Gen. 17:1-4; 22:7); and to Isaac: “I will *multiply* your offspring like the stars of the heaven” (LES; Gen. 26:4, 24); and to Jacob: “I will make your offspring like the sand of the sea, which will not be counted because of the *multitude* of it” (LES; Gen. 32:12; 35:11; see sermon on Acts 4:32-5:11). But because of Israel’s sin, instead of being multiplied exceedingly, only a remnant was left (cf. Isa. 10:22; Jer. 6:9; 44:7; Ezek. 9:8; 11:13; Hag. 2:2; Zech. 8:6). God spoke through Isaiah the prophet:

- Isaiah 48:17–19 — If only you had paid attention to My commandments! Then your **peace** would have been like a river, and your righteousness like the waves of the sea. **Your seed would have been like the sand, and the offspring from your loins like its grains...**”

And so the true multiplying of God’s covenant people awaited the coming of the Messiah and His kingdom in the last days. God spoke through the prophet Ezekiel:

- Ezekiel 37:24–28 (cf. 34:25; Isa. 48:17-22) — “My servant David will be king over them, and they will all have one shepherd; and they will walk in My judgments and keep My statutes and do them [they will fear Me]... And I will cut a covenant of *peace* with them; it will be an everlasting covenant with them. And **I will give them the land and multiply them** and will set My sanctuary in their midst forever.”

It’s in this light, then, that we read in Acts chapter 9: “So the *assembly* [sing.] throughout *all Judea and Galilee and Samaria* [the ancient territory of Israel] was *having peace*, being *built up* [by God] and going on in the *fear of the Lord* and in the *comfort of the Holy Spirit*, it was *being multiplied [by God]*” (cf. Acts 5:14; 6:1, 7). Here is a truly thrilling summary of what we’ve seen throughout the first nine chapters of Acts.

Conclusion

In Luke’s “Old Testament” Scriptures there were two other “triumphant choral refrains” ringing out with joy over what God was doing. The first is in the book of Joshua.

- Joshua 21:43–45 — So Yahweh gave Israel all the land which He had sworn to give to their fathers, and they possessed it and lived in it. And Yahweh gave them rest on every side, according to all that He had sworn to their fathers, and no one of all their enemies stood before them; Yahweh gave all their enemies into their hand. Not one promise of the good promises which Yahweh had promised to the house of Israel failed; all came to pass.

The second of these “triumphant choral refrains” is in 1 Kings:

- 1 Kings 4:20–21, 24–25 (cf. 1 Chron. 22:9-10; Josh. 21:43-45) — **Judah and Israel were as numerous as the sand that is on the seashore in abundance; they were eating and drinking and being glad.** Now Solomon ruled over all the kingdoms from the River to the land of the Philistines and to the border of Egypt; they brought tribute and served Solomon all the days of his life... [A]nd [Solomon] had **peace** on all sides around about him. So **Judah and Israel lived in security, every man under his vine and his fig tree, from Dan even to Beersheba,** all the days of Solomon.

Both of these refrains, though, were only shadows and types pointing to that true eschatological work of God which Luke celebrates with his own triumphant choral refrain ringing out with joy over what God is doing. God has given us peace. God is building up Zion—strengthening and establishing us so that the gates of Hades will never overpower us. He has taught us the fear of the Lord. He has comforted us—giving us joy for our tears and gladness for our sorrow. And He is still multiplying the Messiah’s seed. In fulfillment of all His promises.

May this be our own triumphant choral refrain ringing out with joy over what God is doing.