

Acts 9:21-31

The Fear of the Lord

Today, we pick up in Acts 9:21-31. Last week, we studied Saul's encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus and then his amazing conversion. In today's verses, we will look again at how his new life unfolds, witnessing the transformation of Saul the Pharisee into Paul the Apostle. We touched on verse 20 last week, but let's read it again to recall the context.

²⁰ Immediately he preached the Christ in the synagogues, that He is the Son of God.

Soon after his sight was restored, Saul began hanging out with the other Christians and then began preaching. He was excited and wanted the whole world to know about Jesus.

²¹ Then all who heard were amazed, and said, "Is this not he who destroyed those who called on this name in Jerusalem, and has come here for that purpose, so that he might bring them bound to the chief priests?"

People were amazed at Saul, in a sense questioning his divine call. They were only seeing the man who had once been an enemy of Jesus (and all who followed him), but now preached in his name.

Notice in verse 22, the word "but." How does it contrast with the previous two verses?

²² But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who dwelt in Damascus, proving that this Jesus is the Christ.

Regardless of what people thought about Saul, the power of Christ in him was becoming more evident.

It doesn't matter what people think of us. When we know who we are in Christ and who we have inside us, it doesn't matter what people say about us,

or even if they doubt our sincerity. **We keep moving forward.** We keep growing in Christ. Maybe, prior to Christ, our previous character was questionable. Maybe people knew the old us and find it hard to believe we have changed. That's okay. Keep moving upward in Christ. Stay consistent. Keep growing. Ultimately, it will be our **transformed life** that will preach louder than any words we could speak with our lips.

Saul Escapes Death

²³ Now after many days were past, the Jews plotted to kill him. ²⁴ But their plot became known to Saul. And they watched the gates day and night, to kill him. ²⁵ Then the disciples took him by night and let him down through the wall in a large basket.

(slide Paul Basket) Damascus, like many cities of that time, had houses built directly into or against the city wall. The upper stories of such houses often had windows or doors that opened directly outward over the city fortifications. This was a common feature, not a structural anomaly.

But why didn't **God make him invisible**, or transport him to another location as he did with Phillip?

Probably for many reasons, of which the Bible doesn't specify. I guess, **one could suppose** that by allowing other disciples to assist in his escape, God was continuing to **unify the church**. Possibly. However, we must be aware that there is a **"hiddenness,"** even a mystery, in the way God operates in the New Covenant and today: He is present, but He often works through the **ordinary efforts of believers**. He works through things like prayer, the fellowship, wisdom, trust, and faith. If he just snapped his fingers every time we needed to be bailed out of something, we'd never learn to walk by trust and faith, or to be good stewards, or even help one another. We'd never learn to use wisdom and discernment; we'd just be **expecting God to do everything** for us. But that's not his way. Often, instead of solving our dilemmas instantly, he gives us grace but also waits to see how much we trust him.

Saul at Jerusalem

26 And when Saul had come to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, and did not believe that he was a disciple.

These disciples are probably those other than the Apostles at this point. Paul was trying to join Christian groups, but they weren't taking any chances. They didn't know what had happened to him or that he had become a follower of Jesus.

The Bible says not to lay hands on someone too quickly — that is, to confer authority, or make them teachers too quickly, especially without knowing what is really in their heart.

1 Tim. 5:22 Do not lay hands on anyone hastily, nor share in other people's sins; keep yourself pure.

We can love them, but it's a good idea to wait to see someone's character before blindly trusting them, especially when it comes to leadership or in positions of authority. There are wolves out there. Again, this is why we wait six months before bringing someone into church membership as one of the family. Anyone can be on their best behavior for six months, but by the sixth month, their true nature is usually revealed.

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

Good ole Barnabas, Son of Encouragement. He was trusted and vouched for Saul. Evidently, he had either been in Damascus and witnessed Saul personally or knew someone who had. He now brought Saul to the Apostles. If they accepted him, then the other Christians around Jerusalem would as well.

28 So he was with them at Jerusalem, coming in and going out. 29 And he spoke boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus and disputed against the Hellenists, but they attempted to kill him. 30 When the brethren found out, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him out to Tarsus.

So, as Paul began to debate with the Hellenists ---the same group responsible for Stephen's death, they couldn't refute him. So, they did what they did before: they tried to silence him. Don't fear when people try to silence you through violence, mockery, or rumors. When people can't fight the truth, they fight **against the person speaking it. Expect it.** Persecution lets you know you're doing what God has called you to do.

31 Then the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and were edified. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, they were multiplied.

If you have ever wondered what prompts church growth, we are told right here. It is the fear of the Lord and the comfort of the Holy Spirit. What is that?

When a community holds the awe of God in one hand and the intimate, empowering presence of the Holy Spirit in the other, they exist in a state of alignment that allows the Holy Spirit to move freely, resulting in the natural growth and strengthening of the Body of Christ.

But the 25-dollar question is, what is the fear of the Lord?

The fear of the Lord is the recognition of God's absolute holiness, sovereignty, and authority.

The "**fear of the Lord**" is not about being terrified that God is going to jump out from behind a corner and strike you dead when we mess up, or the type of fear you might have of being mugged while walking down an alley.

Now, understand that God is also not some chump to be taken lightly, either.

Hebrews 10:31 *It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God.*

Hebrews 12:28-29 ²⁸ *Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we ^[1]may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear.* ²⁹ *For our God is a consuming fire.*

So, think of **fear of the Lord** more like the deepest kind of respect and awe you can imagine, mixed with the healthy realization of who is in charge. It breaks down into **three simple ideas that begin with the letter H:**

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1. **He is- we're not:** It is the recognition that God is God and we are not. It's like standing at the edge of the Grand Canyon. We realize how small we are and how massive and holy He is.
2. **A "Humble" Heart:** Someone who fears the Lord lives with a constant, quiet awareness that God sees everything. It's not that you're hiding from Him, but that you want to be the kind of person He's proud of. It's the difference between acting a certain way because you're scared of getting a ticket from a cop, and acting a certain way because you genuinely love your father and don't want to disappoint him.
3. **Hating What He Hates:** If you truly respect someone, you respect their values. Fearing the Lord means you take His standards seriously. When you see something that breaks God's heart—like pride, dishonesty, or evil—you don't think it's cool or funny. You recognize that it runs contrary to the reality He set up.

Fear of the Lord is the **balance between knowing that God** is perfectly loving and kind, and simultaneously acknowledging that He is the King of the universe. It is a posture of the heart that says, **"I take You seriously, I trust Your rules, and I am in total awe of the fact that You even care about me."**

When we have this kind of fear, we stop worrying about what other people think of us. Why would we worry about a co-worker, a peer, or a bully when we are already living in the **“fear”** (the ultimate respect) of the One who holds the keys to eternity? **Everything else looks small by comparison.**

So, the church grew as they walked in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort (peace and leading) of the Holy Spirit.

Takeaways

There are many things we could take away from these verses we’ve looked at today. Nevertheless, I would like to finish by talking about the most important one: **the fear of the Lord**, because it governs our everyday life, our evangelistic zeal, and even the flow of the Holy Spirit's power in our lives.

Get back the Fear. How do we do this? (slide)

Losing our sense of awe for God usually happens because we’ve become too familiar, too comfortable, or too distracted by the world's noise. It’s like living near a massive waterfall; eventually, you stop hearing the roar because it’s just background noise.

- a. **Return to the “Grandeur” of Scripture:** We often treat the Bible as a **self-help manual** rather than a revelation of the Almighty. Stop **reading it for tips** and start reading it to understand who God is. Read the book of Job, the Psalms (especially those describing His creative power), and the book of Revelation. Focus on the passages that describe the sheer weight of His holiness and might. You need to see God as the King, not just your “buddy.”
- b. **Practice “The Pause”:** We rush through life, including our prayers. Start your prayers by acknowledging that you are entering the presence of the Creator of the universe. Don’t start with a **shopping list of requests**. Start by just

acknowledging His awesomeness. A few moments of silent reflection on the majesty of God before you say a single word changes your entire posture.

- c. **Observe the Created Order:** Romans 1:20 tells us that God’s eternal power and divine nature are clearly seen in what He has made. Take time to look at creation—not as a secular observer, but as a believer. Look at the complexity of biology, the vastness of the stars, or the detailed design of the human eye. When you realize the intellectual and physical power required to bring that into being, it humbles you. **Intellectual pride** dies when you contemplate the scale of God’s work.
- d. **Confess Your Casualness:** Be honest with God. Tell Him, “I’ve become **too casual with You**. I’ve lost my sense of wonder. I’ve treated you **like a sidekick** instead of the King.” Confession is the primary way we clear the “spiritual blindness” that prevents us from seeing clearly. The moment we humble ourselves to admit we’ve lost the fear, that humility itself creates the right environment for that fear to return.
- e. **Study His Holiness:** Most people today talk about God as if He were purely a warm feeling. But the Bible describes Him as a “**consuming fire**,” as we talked about earlier. Research what “**holiness**” actually means in the biblical sense—it means He is “**set apart**,” absolutely pure, and though we are made in His image, is a completely different being than you or me. When we realize that we are a finite, sinful creature standing before an infinite, perfectly pure Being, the “fear” returns naturally. It is the only rational response to perfection.
- f. **Stop Trying to “Define” Him:** We often try to **explain away the parts** of God we find uncomfortable—His judgment, His demands, His sovereignty. By doing this, we create a “God of our own making,” which is a small, manageable god—**and you can’t fear a god you’ve designed yourself**. Accept the parts of

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Him that you don't fully understand. That "mystery"—the fact that He is beyond your control, and even comprehension—is a massive part of what triggers the fear of the Lord. i.e., how has he always existed? I don't know or need to understand. The inability to answer that question makes him even more awesome.

Ultimately, the fear of the Lord is **a gift** given to those who are willing to admit they are small. If you want the fear of the Lord to grow in your heart and mind, stop acting like the center of your own universe and start looking at the One who actually is.