

A Healthy and Thriving Church

Acts 9:31

Preached by Phil Kayser at DCC on 10-1-2006

The joke goes that a man was stranded all alone on a deserted island. Years later, he gets rescued. When the rescuers come ashore and greet him, they ask him what the three buildings are that he has built on a hill. And he said, “Well, the first one is my home. The second one is my church. And the third one is the church that I used to go to before my feelings got hurt.” Apparently he was having conversations between me, myself and I, and wasn’t able to even keep himself together.

But pastors have many similar church jokes that show the difficulty of maintaining healthy churches. Most people will acknowledge that there is no such thing as a perfect church, but their actions imply that that is exactly what they are looking for. But I think this verse would encourage us to pray for healthy and thriving churches, not necessarily perfect churches. The churches described in Acts were not perfect. We will see that even the churches described in this verse continued to have issues. But these churches were healthy and thriving. And I believe this passage is as close to a description of an ideal church as you can get.

I. Context to a healthy church (“Then”)

Luke begins the sentence by saying, “THEN.” It is literally “and therefore,” and some translations render it that way, but the idea of the Greek $\mu\acute{\epsilon}\nu\ \sigma\upsilon\upsilon\upsilon$ is to show a context. It indicates that this healthy church did not arise in a vacuum. It arose out of great tribulation. It was THEN, in the midst of all of these terrible things that are going on that the ideal church was functioning. Does that mean that one must have tribulation in order to be an ideal church? No. Not necessarily. After all, prophecy indicates that there will be a long period of time in which there will be an ideal church with no persecution. Right? But that word “Then” clues us in to three things:

First, it indicates that an ideal church *can* emerge from great tribulation by God’s grace. But it’s not automatic. Not everybody does. You see two people who go through the same trials, and one become bitter while the other becomes better. Why? Because the second one made good use of the trials by God’s grace. The same is true corporately of churches. It’s like the attempts that have been made over the past 150 years to produce artificial diamonds. Researchers knew that diamonds were carbon subjected to great pressure and heat beneath the surface of the earth. So these researchers tried over and over again to subject various forms of carbon to

great heat and pressure without any positive results. It was not until they introduced a catalyst – and the first catalyst was a form of iron, that the diamonds amazingly appeared. In the same way, apart from the catalyst of Christ’s grace in our lives, the context of tribulation does not produce character. So that word “then” indicates that it is possible to get through great tribulation and to be better for it.

Second, it indicates that these people weren’t being persecuted because they were bad. That’s what some people will automatically assume – “God is punishing me.” In this case, the very opposite is true. Paul says in 2 Timothy 3:12 “**all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.**” As long as there are God-haters around, there will be Christian haters. So that word “Then” indicates that we shouldn’t be surprised.

Third, it indicates that God can put a stop to persecution any time that He chooses. It was at the height of this persecution that – BOOM! – it stops. God never makes Christians face trials non-stop. And we can praise the Lord for this. He knows just how much pressure to give. 1 Peter 1:6 speaks of the fire they were going through as being **for a little while**. Maybe you have been going through some pressure and wondering if you can take much more. God puts pressure and heat on for a while, and then He lifts it. And the times that He lifts the pressure are just as important and valuable as the times of pressure are. Non-stop persecution can destroy people. But it takes people who have gone through the fire to really appreciate peace and prosperity and to make the most of it. Unfortunately, the churches in America have abused the peace, liberty and prosperity that we have had. And it looks like we are in the cycle that you see repeated in the book of Judges. So remember the context: healthy, vibrant churches do not arise in a vacuum.

II. The blessing of peace (“the churches... had peace”)

But let’s look at the five blessings that God pours out upon these churches that are ready and prepared to receive them. The first blessing is peace. **Then the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace...** Though the term “peace” can carry a wide range of meanings (such as success, comfort, wholeness), probably the absence of conflict and/or persecution was at the forefront here. And that is truly a blessing. I don’t pray for persecution. I pray for a holiness that can appreciate the blessing of peace.

But to me this shows the sovereignty of God at work. Commentaries point out that it wasn't Paul's conversion that stopped the persecution. Paul himself was being hounded to death. Instead, God was giving reprieve from persecution because now His purposes for the persecution were accomplished.

But how did the persecution stop? (And to me it is fascinating to see how Luke writes about this. It's almost as if it's not big deal for God to stop it if He wants.) In chapter 12 we see persecution resuming once again. We know that the Jewish leadership still had just as much hatred for the church as ever. The Jewish historian who lives at this time tells us how God orchestrated this. God brought so much change in AD 36-37 that the Jewish leaders dropped everything to focus on the new crisis events that were transpiring. And I'll give you just a small sampling: In AD 36, the Roman governor Vitellius succeeded Pontius Pilate, and as soon as he assumed office he deposed Caiaphas the high priest from office, and gave it to Jonathan. One year later Jonathan was replaced by Theophilus. So there was some turmoil in the Jewish leadership. Secondly, the Roman emperor Tiberius died and was succeeded by Caligula. Caligula played havoc with Israel. He gave his friend Herod Agrippa I the authority to reign as king in Palestine. And Agrippa was creating all kinds of new changes. To please Caligula, the leaders of Jamnia erected an altar of worship to Caligula as God. The Jews demolished it. This enraged Caligula who then ordered that an image of himself be placed in the temple in Jerusalem. Petronius, the governor of Syria mobilized half his army to enforce the order. Delegation after delegation went to Petronius mournfully begging him not to do it. He relented, which further enraged Caligula, who determined to bring an image of himself secretly into the temple. There were a lot of other political intrigues that went on that make for fascinating reading. But I can just see God keeping the Jewish leaders so busy that they didn't have time to mess with the Christians. As soon as they start thinking of raising the heat on the church again, God touches another hot spot that diverts their attention. Those leaders think that they are in charge, but they are pawns in His hand. As Proverbs 21:1 says, **the king's heart is in the hand of the Lord; like chanel of water, He turns it wherever He wants.** The point is, that God is sovereign. And that means that this peace is not a quirk of history or an accident. It is a gift of God. Can you see now why Psalm 127 says that we are to pray *to God* for the peace of Jerusalem, and why 1 Timothy 2:2 says that we are to pray *to God for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life...* God wants us to not only value

peace, but to see that He is the author of it, and that He rules in the affairs of kings as much as He rules in the affairs of the church.

But this peace implies not just absence of state persecution, but absence of church conflict and within individuals, the absence of inner turmoil. God can cause His peace to rule in our hearts. 1 Corinthians 7:15 says about the family that **God has called us to peace**. It doesn't automatically happen. Though it comes as a gift from God, we have a responsibility to pray for it, to pursue it and to walk in that peace. Paul's admonition to the Colossians is, **let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and be thankful**. We are to let it rule, and we are called to that peace in one body. And in context of Colossians 3:15 he shows us a number of ways in which that peace can rule and grow. Peace is one of the signs of a healthy family according to 1 Corinthians 7. It is one of the signs of a healthy church, according to Colossians 3. Let's pray and strive for the peace of God. Apart from God's blessing it cannot happen, but apart from our prayers and efforts it will not happen.

III. The blessing of edification (“and were edified”)

The second blessing is edification. Verse 31 says that these churches **had peace and were edified**. Edification literally means to build a house. 1 Peter 2:5 says, **you also, as living stones, are being built up** [that's the word “edified” – being built up] **a spiritual house**. And ultimately Christ is the builder of the church. He said, **I will build My church**, and the goal of this building is to be conformable to His image. Now if you examine all the passages on edification, you will find that it means to build someone up to be spiritually like Christ. And the only words that will do that are Biblical words. I read an article one time that tried to say that edification means to build a person's self-esteem. That is the exact opposite of what it means. Edification means to build someone up spiritually to be like Christ, to be rooted in Christ and to be grounded in Christ.

Now we have already seen that Christ is the ultimate edifier or builder of the church. But we do have a part to play. Just as we have a part to play in bringing peace to the church, Romans 14:19 says, **Therefore let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another**. We are to pursue the things that will edify other believers. How do we do that? It's by conforming our actions with Christ's actions and our words with His Words, and our methods and goals with Christ's methods and goals. Otherwise we are building our own house, we are not working as co-laborers with Christ in His building project. Even the officers of a church

(who are commanded to edify or build up the church) can only do that as they are speaking Christ's Words in His way.

Turn with me to Ephesians 4. This is one of several passages that speak of how to edify the church. It doesn't mention support groups, esteem groups, therapy sessions or methods of making people feel emotionally good. Instead, it's strangely old fashioned and out of date with today's mandates. Ephesians 4:7-16.

Ephesians 4:7 But to *each one of us* grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift.

The first thing we see is that everything flows from grace, and that grace doesn't flow from the session to the members. It is given to each member directly from Christ. Now God does give leaders in verse 11, but these leaders are not CEO's or CFO's. They are certainly not mediators or intermediaries. They are merely equippers. God does not envision the kind of centralized megachurches or centralized small churches that we have today that have 45 programs and every imaginable kind of age-segregated ministry. God starts by giving the grace to the members to minister. It's a grass roots ministry of building up or edifying. Verse 8.

Ephesians 4:8 Therefore He says:

*“When He ascended on high,
He led captivity captive,
And gave gifts to men.”*

And we will be seeing that the spiritual gifts are a part of this edification process. Verse 9.

Ephesians 4:9 (Now this, “*He ascended*” – what does it mean but that He also first descended into the lower parts of the earth?

Ephesians 4:10 He who descended is also the One who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things.)

Ephesians 4:11 ¶ And He Himself gave some *to be* apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers,

Who does He give these leaders to? It's to the church, right? Which implies that the church already exists, right? Can a church be edified without leaders? Yes it can. It may not be ideal, but Acts 14:23 indicates that there were churches in every city that didn't have leaders, into which elders were established. Again, this is not to say that leaders are unimportant. They are very important. It is simply to make the point that God starts with grace to each member and leaders are added.

I do want you to notice the historical and logical order of these leaders. He's already mentioned that the first two are foundational to the church in Ephesians 2:20. Let's look at that Scripture.

Ephesians 2:20 having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets [that's a key phrase. The words "having been built" are one Greek word, and it is exactly the same word as "edified." So you could translate it, having been edified on the foundation of the apostles and prophets. What was it that the church was building each other with? It was the Word of God given through the apostles and prophets. The apostles and prophets role was to give the New Testament Scriptures. And because they are not part of the later building project, but are part of the foundation, those offices passed away. They still speak to us. They still minister to us, but it is only through the Scripture. And we'll have these apostolic and prophetic Scriptures until the Second Coming. But what is significant about this is that all edification must be founded upon the Word of God and upon Jesus Christ. This does away with a large portion of the humanistic edification programs that go on in many churches. All edification must be (as verse 20 words it) "on the foundation of the apostles and prophets"], **Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone**, If you can't find it in the Word, it's not edification.

Ephesians 2:21 in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord,

Ephesians 2:22 in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.

So back to Ephesians 4:11 - The reason apostles and prophets come first is that they lay the foundation of the Word of God. And the interesting thing about the remaining offices of evangelist, pastor and teacher is that they are charged in Scripture never to go beyond that foundation. The only authority that we as pastors have is a Biblical authority and we must preach the Word, the whole Word and nothing but the Word. Back to Ephesians 4:12. Here's the purpose for the five offices.

Ephesians 4:12 for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, [So every saint has part in the work of ministry, and every saint is involved in this edifying of the body of Christ. And this ministry lasts till the Second Coming Verse 13]

Ephesians 4:13 till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; [There's the goal of all edification – it is to become like Christ. It's not to feel good. Some people think that any criticism is not edifying. But Paul in 2 Corinthians 13:10 said that his rebuke to them was **according to the authority which the Lord has given me for edification and not for destruction**. His goal was not to tear them down, but to build them up. And how did he do it? Through the Word of Christ. Anyway, going on to verse 14.]

Ephesians 4:14 that we should no longer be children [you can see that growth and maturity is a part of edification], **tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting,** [You can see that building up is closely related to doctrine. But this doctrine is practical, and so it must be lived out. Verse 15]

Ephesians 4:15 but, speaking the truth in love [there's the context of edifying – in love], **may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ—**

Ephesians 4:16 from whom the whole body, joined [there's gatherings] **and knit together by what every joint supplies** [there is mutual ministry], **according to the effective working by which every part does its share** [that means we all need one another for the church to really grow], **causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love.**

If any of those components are chopped off, the church becomes stunted. So if you want to know what an ideal church looks like in edification, read Ephesians 4. If we miss out on the means of grace – church attendance, communion, teaching, devotions, etc, or if we miss out on the equipping work of the leaders, or if we miss out on the mutual ministry of the saints, we will become stunted. We will still be a church, but we will be stunted.

The Japanese developed the Bonsai tree which is not allowed to reach it's full growth potential. I used to think that that they were just genetically modified dwarfs. But they are actually regular trees or shrubs that are kept from growing by pruning or tying off the tap root and some of its branch feeder roots, and then replanting the tree. By doing this the grower deliberately stunts the growth of not allowing the roots to spread out or grow deep. In this way, the tree can't take in enough of the soil's nutrients for normal growth. Satan does everything he can to die off the roots of a believer. If he can tie off the tap root of prayer, or the feeder roots of worship, devotions, mutual exhortation and fellowship, he will successfully stunt the Christian in his walk. A vibrant and growing church is a church where all of its members are being edified and edifying each other in the Scriptures and in God's grace.

IV. The blessing of liveliness (“walking”)

The next blessing mentioned in Acts 9:31 is the blessing of liveliness. It says, **And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, they were multiplied.** I want to focus on the phrase, “And walking.” Walking implies life. It implies that we are practicing what we

profess. One New Year's Day, in the Tournament of Roses parade, a beautiful float suddenly ran out of gas, and the whole parade was held up until a man could run and get a can of gas from a gas station. The amusing thing was this float represented the Standard Oil Company. Here was a company that provided gas to everyone, yet lacked it for its own car. And in the same way, Christians can make a profession of being "clothed with power" from on high (Luke 24:49) and yet come to a standstill because of laziness, sin or neglect. This word "walking" also implies strength and maturity. Babies can't walk. Nor can sick people or those who are about to die. Walking implies progress. They weren't standing still on the pathway of life. Some people are content with their past achievements, and they don't try to progress further or strive to climb new mountains. But there should never be a time in our Christian life when we sit still. This word "walking" also implies that you know your direction as well. You stand when you are not sure where to go. But most important in this context, it implies agreement with God. These churches weren't walking in their own strength, wisdom and honor, but were walking in the fear of the Lord and the comfort of the Holy Spirit. And I want to look at those two phrases, because both of them show the reality of God's presence in their consciousness and in their living.

V. The blessing of spirituality

A. Reverence ("walking in the fear of the Lord")

First, they were "walking in the fear of the Lord." I think I will spend a little more time on this phrase, because I think it is the one that is most lacking in the American church. There is very little fear of God before their eyes. Yet this verse makes the fear of God one of the signs of vitality and health.

There is a part in the movie *Jurassic Park*, when the world-class paleontologist Allen Grant, who has devoted his entire life to studying dinosaurs, suddenly comes face-to-face with a live one. Apparently he has an incredible adrenaline rush because it is quite a different thing to study the bones of dinosaurs and to encounter an actual one. And the same is true of Christianity. It's quite a different thing to know about God from a book, and to know God as a Person. It is impossible to know God for very long without beginning to develop a holy reverence for Him and a fear of ever crossing Him. For many people, spirituality means simply picking through the artifacts of faith that survive from a long time ago like a paleontologist, and piecing the information together, and coming up with doctrines. That can be

quite exciting in its own right. But it takes the consciousness of God's being with you to develop a healthy fear. And one of the marks of these churches is that they walked in the fear of the Lord. They saw the miracles. They saw God acting in their midst.

If you defy God, I guarantee you that you have no fear of Him. If you persevere in willfull sin, I can guarantee you that you have no fear of God. It ought to give you the heebeegeebies to ever defy God. It's like a little kid running up to the edge of the Grand Canyon with no fear because he doesn't understand the danger. Several times during my life I have had the opportunity to look over the edge of a cliff. And when I came close to the edge a sensation of fear began to develop. Now it was because I already had a healthy fear of falling 500 feet and a respect for life that this began to happen. But the closer I got, the more that sensation grew. Now I think all of you would recognize that that is a wonderful kind of a thing to have. It is a fear that is consistent with a sound mind and only those who did not have a sound mind would jump off the cliff to see if they could fly. That is utterly different from the word "fear" in 2 Timothy 1:7 which says, **For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.** If you look up the meaning of *that* Greek word in a dictionary you will see that it means "cowardice." God has not given us cowardice. But a person without the fear of the Lord definitely has an unsound mind.

Out in Ethiopia I had between 17 and 20 beehives. We had three different varieties of bees. Some were tame like the Italian ones. Others were a bit more aggressive. And all but one of my beehives were built African style where the bees would be in a six foot long woven bamboo basket covered in waterproofed leaves. You'll never guess what the Ethiopians waterproofed them with - It was cow dung. It worked great. When you smeared that stuff on the bamboo basket it made a swell hive. And then you'd smoke it out with special herbs to make it an attractive smell for the bees. But one of my hives (the only one that was an American stacked box style) attracted a swarm of the notorious African killer bees. These bees would with little or no provocation swarm all over a person, sometimes covering an animal or a person so thickly you couldn't see the person's skin, and kill them. One time that beehive chased every person and animal off our station and it took us hours to get the animals back. And my parents were kind of ticked off at me. My mom and dad made me kill them that night with sulfer, and my dad (who was really the bee expert) showed me how. Surprisingly, even though we came at night they came out to attack us. And I have some fun stories of adventures that I had with those bees. I don't know how many times I have been stung by bees. One time I forgot to tie

off my pant legs and the bees swarmed up my legs stinging as they went. That was the first time I had ever danced in my life. And the Smiths (the missionaries on the other side of the compound) were laughing at me through the window. When I took off my pants at home, they were thickly covered with stingers. I don't know how many hundred stingers I counted. So, I had a healthy respect for these bees. But I loved them. And when I had my hat and screen and my clothes tied on securely, I enjoyed working with them. I came boldly to them. I was in absolutely no danger from them. But if I tried to approach them without my beesuit, it was all over. I mean, I was scared to death of these bees when I didn't have my bee suit on. I sometimes felt an adrenaline rush even when I was fully suited up because you couldn't even see through the netting, and you could smell the bee venom as they tried to sting through the clothes. But boy did they produce the honey. They were wonderful. And with the exception of the killer bees, if you didn't mess with them, they didn't mess with you. And even if you did mess with them, you didn't need to fear anything if you were clothed rightly.

And even though that is not a perfect illustration, that is sort of how it is with God. He loves us, and we love Him. He has permitted us to come boldly into His presence when we are clothed in the righteous clothes of Christ. But if we don't suit up in Christ, watch out. The times that Scripture mentions people coming face to face with God, they always fall on their faces in fear. Daniel was so weak that he couldn't stand up - and that was just an angel that he saw. To treat God as one of the boys that we slap on the back, or one of the girls is blasphemous. To rebel against Him is even more foolish. But when a Christian defies Him or willfully sins against God, it is like coming to Him with our pant legs not tied off.

To use another analogy. Children can cuddle in their father's lap and experience fellowship when they are in right relationship with dad. But when they rebel against dad, and he brings out the rubber hose, there is fear and trembling. Right? And even when they are not in trouble, they would fear crossing him. But that reverence does not translate into lack of love. When rightly related they are all over dad and have fun with dad. A lot more fun than I had with my bees. The love, the boldness of approach are in context of a healthy fear. And that is exactly how the book of Hebrews ties boldness and fear together. Three times Hebrews tells us we can have boldness with God, but those passages say that we must come boldly with fear and reverence and awe. Let me read you three of the eight passages where Hebrews commands us to fear God.

He tells believers in Hebrews 10: **The Lord will judge His people.** [So we are not talking about pagans. We are talking about believers; people

who can come boldly to God and ask for mercy. And it says, "The Lord will judge His people."] **It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.** Fearful for who? He is talking about believers who are judged, and believers who can fall into the hands of the living God. Our God is so holy that you don't mess around with Him. There is a modern theology that says that God never gets angry with believers. That is absolutely false. Did He not get angry with Moses? (Ex. 4:14) Does he not tell "saints" in Psalm 30:5 that "His anger is but for a moment, His favor is for life"? Anger can be motivated from paternal love.

Hebrews 11 speaks of Noah moved with godly fear. It moved Him, it motivated Him. Fear of God is a tremendous motivator for holiness.

Hebrews 12:28 **Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear.** He indicates that *grace* enables us to have this fear (it's not inconsistent with fear). And he indicates that we need to fear since there is an acceptable and an unacceptable way of serving Him. But he doesn't end there. Let me read the whole section: **Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. For our God is a consuming fire.**

One of the books that I have recommended to a number of you is the book, *When People are Big and God is Small* by Ed Welch. This book shows how the fear of the Lord is at the heart of Christianity, and how the fear of God is a remedy for every other form of fear, lack of esteem, lack of confidence, pride, etc. The God of most Christians is far too small, and consequently we fear man because men are big in our sight. We feel like we have to perform for them, look good in their eyes. When people are bigger than God in our eyes we tend to feel very little shame before God and much shame before others. It's a marvelous book.

But the Scripture not only says that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Prov. 9:10), but the Scriptures also link the fear of God with victory over enemies (1 Sam. 11:7; 2 Chron. 14:14; 17:10), loyalty of heart (2 Chron 19:9), hatred for evil (Prov. 8:13), tremendous confidence (Prov. 14:26). That passage says, **In the fear of the LORD there is strong confidence...** Wow! There is the remedy for timidity! Why would it give you confidence? Because God is so big in your eyes, that HE can handle any problem that life might throw at you. That's why the next phrase says, **His children will have a place of refuge.** But if your God is not worth fearing, why would He be a refuge when you've got fearful people chasing you? It says, **"In the fear of the LORD there is strong confidence."** The

Scripture links the fear of the Lord with satisfaction in life (Prov. 19:23), riches, honor and life (Prov. 22:4) and many other things that the human heart longs for. No wonder John Murray says, “the fear of God is the soul of godliness.”

Acts 19:17 says, **fear fell on them all...** If we do not have the fear of the Lord, we are setting ourselves up for a fall into sins we never dreamed of falling into because Scripture says, **by the fear of the LORD one departs from evil.** (Prov. 16:6). The fear of the Lord will keep your eyes from wandering where they ought not, because it is focused on what God sees, not just what other people see. The fear of the Lord will keep us pure on the internet because it focuses on pleasing God and it fears displeasing Him. Even if you know that you can't be caught, the fear of the Lord will keep you from cheating. The fear of the Lord is an essential ingredient in being an overcomer. The command in Revelation to those who desire to be overcomers is “**Fear God and give glory to Him**” (Rev. 14:7). There must be a God-centeredness about our life and a healthy respect for His judgments that keeps us from displeasing Him.

Do you have the fear of the Lord? It is one of the marks of an overcomer. And in this verse, it is one of the marks of a healthy and vibrant church. The fear of the Lord shows that we aren't just spiritual paleontologists digging up ancient artifacts. Those aren't scary. Doctrine by itself doesn't give us an adrenaline rush. And if your definition of fear has no adrenaline ever associated with it, you have a faulty definition. Thirty times the Bible connects fear and trembling together. So God doesn't just want us to be spiritual paleontologists. Instead, we have a relationship with the God of this universe; the God of holiness and the God of goodness.

B. Intimacy (“walking... in the comfort of the Holy Spirit”)

And it's His goodness that the next phrase focuses on. They were also walking **in the comfort of the Holy Spirit.** Notice first that the comfort of the Holy Spirit is totally compatible with the fear of the Lord. In fact, I would say that the fear of the Lord is a precondition to intimacy with the Lord. Why? Because when we walk in the realization that we don't ever want to cross Him, we don't need discipline. And we are in a situation where God delights in being intimate with us and when we are delighted in God. This is why Psalm 25:14 says, **The secret of the LORD is with those who fear Him, and He will show them His covenant.** “The secret of the Lord” – there's intimacy, “is with those who fear Him, and He will show them His covenant.” He's going to take them into new levels of intimacy that a child

with no fear will never experience. The child who is always having to be disciplined because of rebellion is missing out on all the opportunities to sit down with his parent on the sofa to share heart to heart, and to laugh about the good times, and to hear things he might not otherwise hear. Yes, he'll have some times of intimacy, but he's missing out on so much. But God brings the discipline to teach him to fear the Lord and then to be able to enter into the comfort of the Holy Spirit.

The churches in America miss intimacy with God so much that they are constantly writing about it and preaching it. But I can tell that they have a counterfeit intimacy because they know nothing of the fear of the Lord. Those two go hand in hand. And the reason is that when you have a constant awareness of God's presence with you, then all of His attributes will become real to you and will minister to you. That's true spirituality. It's not an emotional high from thinking about a doctrine. Doctrines gives us the highs and joys that paleontologists get. I don't put those down at all. I like the joys of doctrine (of spiritual paleontology) – it's wonderful. But the fear of the Lord and the comfort of the Holy Spirit are a long step beyond paleontology. It comes from a relationship with a Personal God.

VI. The blessing of church growth (“and were multiplied”)

Can you see why the last blessing almost automatically followed? The verse says, **they were multiplied**. Now I'm not denying that false churches can grow too. The unbelieving Jewish churches had grown. Islam is growing. Cults can grow. But it is not a healthy sign when a church does not grow year after year.

What do we do with this text? First, let's evaluate our lives to see if there are any areas in which we do not live up to God's ideal. We can do this as individuals and we can do this as a church. It's always good for a church to do periodic self-evaluation.

Second, let's pray this verse. Let's pray that God would help us to grow in the midst of pains and persecutions and to be holy enough that we can be trusted with continued peace and prosperity. Let's pray that God would give us not only peace, but a liveliness about our faith that would enable us to progress and to move forward. Let's pray that God would give us such a sense of His presence that we constantly live in the fear of the Lord and the comfort of the Holy Spirit. And let's pray that God would cause our church to grow. We can't afford to plant new churches right now, but I do have some ideas of how we can be a multi site church without needing to grow huge in one location, preaching at different posts. But in

any case, let's pray this verse to God and claim His grace to make this verse describe us.

Third, let's each one be a part of the process of building or edifying each other and not leave that up to the pastors. Let's live out the body life of Ephesians 4.

I think we will see a difference if we will do those three things: 1) self-evaluation, 2) praying the verse and 3) edifying each other. May the Lord bless and prosper this church to His glory. Amen.

Children of God, I charge you to edify or build up one another by seeking the Lord's peace for this church and encouraging each other to walk in the fear of the Lord and the comfort of the Holy Spirit. Amen.