

Scripture: Acts 9:31-43

Text: Acts 9:31

Message: In Praise of God's Power
June 3, 2018; Bethel CRC, Brockville, ON
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You and I are members of an invincible Church. We are part of a Church that is unconquerable. The gates of hell cannot prevail against the Church (see Matthew 16:18). Prevail means to get the better of, to overcome. Nobody will ever overcome or overpower the Church of Jesus Christ. Not because we have thick walls or large moats, like a castle. Not because we have big armies or lots of money or really smart people running it. But because Jesus Christ, the Lord of the Church, is Lord over all. By his death and resurrection he has won the victory over the greatest enemy, Satan himself. And you and I, as believers in Christ, are part of his invincible Church.

I'm not just talking about this congregation or this building, which we call Bethel Church. We are just one tiny part of the Church of Jesus Christ. It's possible that someday this church will close its doors and the building will be sold to serve some other purpose. But that does not mean that the Church of Jesus Christ has failed. Jesus is Lord of all, and he expresses his presence and purpose on earth through his people gathered together in his Church, in all times and places.

The book of Acts is another part of God's Grand Story telling of God's relationship with his people. It tells of the beginning of the Church after Easter and Pentecost.

What we read in Acts 9:31 is something like a "progress report." These are given periodically in the book of Acts. It updates us on the status and progress of the early church. It shows us how the church was growing.

From its sudden beginning in Jerusalem on Pentecost, the church has now expanded to all of Judea, the southern region of Palestine. It has also expanded to Galilee in the north, as well as to Samaria which made up central Palestine. There was severe opposition and persecution that sent the followers of Jesus away from their central location in Jerusalem. As they scattered, they spread the message about Jesus. Many people believed. The church grew in all the regions, to every part of the country.

Now the church enjoyed a time of peace or rest. Up to now, and especially in this time of peace, it was *strengthened*. This word comes from the root word that means to build a

house. It is written in such a way that it should be understood as something that is ongoing, not just something that had happened in the past. The church at peace was continually being built up; it was continually being made strong and stronger.

It was also encouraged by the Holy Spirit. The word '*encouraged*' is used to translate the original word, *parakleseis*. This is the title that Jesus gave to the Holy Spirit (see John 14:26, 16:7). The Holy Spirit will come as the Paraclete, the Comforter, the Counselor. The Spirit will come as the one to assure God's people of the constant presence of the Lord. He will come as the one to guide God's people into all truth.

In this "progress report" we are told that the Spirit is doing just what Jesus said he would. The church at peace is being encouraged by the Holy Spirit. Despite opposition and even persecution, the church does not give up. It gives witness to Jesus, the Saviour, with a confidence and power that comes from the Spirit's presence and work.

The result is a strong church, as well as a growing church. With the confidence that the Holy Spirit gives, the people give testimony to their faith and others come to believe as well.

That is the Church that you and I are a part of, the Church of Jesus Christ in all times and all places. Today, in word and sacrament we are reminded of our identity as children of God, saved by the body and blood of Jesus Christ. As we celebrate the sacrament, we are reminded of our union with Christ and with one another. We are many different members, yet joined together in one body, the body of Christ. Another word for that body is the church, those called by Jesus to be his disciples.

There are times when we may have our doubts about the great strength of the church. We might look around at the empty pews and wonder about how mighty we really are. What impact are we making on our community?

We may be at peace, even enjoying a time of peace, but is it a false sense of security? Is our peace only the result of lazy or scared Christians? Are we at peace because we are not living the story of Jesus clearly, or not proclaiming the gospel powerfully or directly enough?

It is easy to dwell on our weaknesses. But that only blinds us to the great strength that we actually have, even if we are not making use of it. Instead of looking at the empty pews, look at the people sitting around you. Instead of pointing an accusing finger at all sorts of possible reasons for what we may see as weaknesses, let us look at our *actual* identity. It is far better to go forward from the position of who we *really are*, than from an attitude of what

you or I think we *should be*.

We *are* the church of Jesus Christ. Therefore he is both Head and Lord of this church. His power and strength is at our disposal. We are a church that has the Holy Spirit among us, as we celebrated with Pentecost just 2 weeks ago. Therefore we have the *paracletis*, the encouragement of the Holy Spirit. We have the Lord working among us by his Spirit to strengthen us. "You will receive power to be my witnesses." The power from the Lord gives us strength.

What we find in the next verses, to the end of chapter 9, is the evidence of the power of Christ through the Spirit at work in the ministry of Peter. As Peter travelled about the country he most likely taught and preached. He also revealed the power of God through miracles of healing.

These stories remind us that in the early church there was also sickness and death, as we still experience today. Jesus has shown his power over sin and death through his own death and resurrection. But the complete victory is not yet here. Things are not the way they are supposed to be. But God is at work and this new power is on the loose.

The result of this display of power through Peter was that many people believed in the Lord. These miracles point us to the reason for the existence of the church. Not that we must do miracles, but the followers of Jesus are on this earth to be witnesses to Jesus Christ and to bring people to know the hope and life which he brings. These miracles also remind us of how we are able to do so—in the life-changing power of Jesus' name.

Live and serve in this confidence. Our own salvation is certain. Our identity as God's people is sure. By faith in Jesus Christ, we are saved. The payment for our sin has been made once for all. We belong to God! We have the assurance of his blessings.

The Spirit is living in us and working among us. See his power at work in your life. See how the Spirit is leading you. There are not coincidences—we are at the right place at the right time as we follow the leading of the Holy Spirit.

See how the Spirit is strengthening you. This may be in your personal growth in faith, or in your growing confidence to testify to others of God's love. Evidence of the Spirit's power does not have to be in some great miracle that you do. He also works in the quiet, little things. Take notice; give the Spirit credit.

See how the Spirit is leading our church. See the Spirit changing lives, renewing faith,

bringing freedom from addiction, hope to overcome fear. See the Spirit inspiring members for service and giving.

So whether it's through The Big Give, or giving quilts to Ronald McDonald house in Ottawa, or going on a SERVE Project in London in July, or through helping the Sheila and Jonathan or Alice or Janne or Mary or through Bible translations and the work of the Macleans with Wycliffe, or through the offering to ministry shares, or through personal conversation or volunteering your time, or a meal shared with your neighbour, or greeting the cashier, the Spirit is working, strengthening, encouraging Christ's church.

Seek that encouragement through prayer and meditation on the word of God. Let the Lord speak to you of his power and might and his victory over sin. Be reminded of the fact that Jesus Christ is Lord, and those who follow him will share in his victory. Remember who you are and who we are— the invincible church; because the power of God is at work within us. Praise God for His power!

Amen.