

Act 9:31, Part I

Review

Back in November 2016, we began a series on the book of Acts.

Why the book of Acts? The reason was because I was challenged by a member of the lay leadership to think about the future of St. John's once it took possession of its permanent home here on Bristol Road. How should St. John's think about its future, now that it was about to stop being a tumbling tumbleweed?

Of course there are many excellent places in Scripture we could have gone — in fact, there are 66 excellent places! Nevertheless, I chose the book of Acts for the following reasons.

The books of Luke and Acts were written by the beloved physician, Luke. Though they comprise two letters, they are meant to be two parts of one story — two volumes in Luke's history.

Luke begins his gospel by saying to the “most excellent Theophilus” but he wished “to write an orderly account”, so that Theophilus “may have certainty regarding the things that [he has] been taught”.¹ In a similar vein, Luke begins the book of Acts this way. “In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when he was taken up”.²

After a small overlap between the end of Luke and the first few verses of Acts 1, Luke continues the story in the following 28 chapters. I have said that since the book of Acts is comprised of 28 chapters, we can consider the last 2000 years chapter 29 and the present in chapter 30.

There is a reason why I suggest this. We are part of a continuous chain, a sequence of people, deeds, natural events, and all sorts of other elements of history. Just because there is a large passage of time between the last chapter of Acts to our day does *not* mean that there is no relevance or connection. In Acts, we find the first concerns and actions of the early church after the ascension.

And as Solomon reminds us, people don't fundamentally change. "What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun."³ Certainly, neither does the Lord change: "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever".⁴

Since God does not change and human nature does not change, then what we learn about God and what we learn about human nature are just as applicable today as they were on the day in which the events in the book of Acts took place.

Introduction

Turn with me please to Acts 9:31.

"Can and Cannot Do"

There are some things in life that we can control; and some things we cannot control. Let me give you two simple analogies.

Let's say that St. John's has planned an outdoor event, such as the movie night we had this summer. It's intuitive to understand that there is a relationship between the number of people who might come and the weather. All other things being equal, if the weather is bad, people will not come. That means that since we cannot control the weather, we cannot control the number of people who might come.

Here's a different analogy about things that we can control. It's also intuitive to understand that there is a relationship between the number of people who will enter a building and whether the doors remain locked. If the doors remain locked – all other things being equal – the people will not come in. That is something that we can control, since we can control whether the doors are locked.

In other words, in certain situations there are things that we "can do" (control) and things that we "cannot do" or control.

As obvious as these things sound, sometimes we forget this simple analytical method. For example, how many of you wish that you could control the past? Don't you wish there were things that you could change about the past, do them over, or even erase them? And how about the future? Sure, we can plan and

prepare, but we cannot control the many other variables that will affect the outcome of tomorrow. In fact, an honest assessment would say that the only thing we can control is today – and even that is questionable!

Churches forget these things, too. Sometimes we try to control the things that we cannot, the things that belong to God. And sometimes the things that we can most control, we most ignore, perhaps because they require discipline, time, and effort.

Acts 9:31 presents us with two “can do” items and two “cannot do” items.

Summarizing Text

Acts 9:31 is a summarizing text. It provides a segue or transition from one period of time or set of circumstances to another. It’s the fifth such text in the book of Acts. The others are 2:41–47, 4:32–37, 5:12–16, and 6:7.

That 9:31 is a bridge between two sets of events is easy to see. In 9:30, the disciples are just barely able to get Saul/Paul out of Jerusalem. In 9:32, Luke switches to talking about the apostle Peter.

As with the other four summaries, Luke here gives a general sense of what’s going on in the larger world. He has been concentrating specifically on one person since chapter 7, Saul/Paul. Now Luke is setting him aside until 11. After being down in the weeds of Saul/Paul’s life, so to speak, Luke zooms back up to 10,000 feet to remind us that there is a church out there, where life has been happening all along.

Grammar Lesson

I ask your patience for a moment as we take a look at the grammatical structure of verse 31. It may not be easily apparent to you depending on the version you have, but there are two main verbs and two modifying clauses.

- The two verbs are “having peace” and “being multiplied”. “Having peace” is the first verb in the sentence. “Being multiplied” is the last verb in the sentence, right near the end, no matter where your translation might have put it.
- In between there are two modifiers – participles, for those who are curious – “being built up” and “going” or “walking”.

- There are also two prepositional phrases, both beginning with the word “in” in English, but we’re not going to deal with them until next week.

That’s the way the sentence is structured and there are purposes for it. Luke is telling us that there are circumstances going on around the church that are important for the church. It had peace and its numbers were being multiplied. Note that these are things that one cannot control. And while those external circumstances are going on, the church is doing some things. Namely, they are being built up and they are going. Note that these are things that the church can control and in Acts, does control.

1. “Can Do”s: have peace, be multiplied
2. “Can’t Do”s: be built up, go/walk

“Can’t Do”s

First, we look at the “can’t do” items.

Having Peace

The church had peace. Remember that since the execution of Stephen, “there arose ... a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria ...”.⁵

Now, the dust that had been stirred up by Paul’s passion for killing Christians had settled down a bit.

- Paul himself was no longer persecuting Christians up and down the eastern region of the Mediterranean.
- But he had been stirring up a different sort of trouble with his boldness in Damascus and Jerusalem as he preached and taught about Jesus.
- Still, those who sought to kill Paul could no longer find him, since Paul had been sent to his hometown of Tarsus in southern Turkey, a good month’s journey by foot or horseback.

It doesn’t mean that there is no pressure at all on the church. In fact, when Luke picks up the life of Saul/Paul again in chapter 11, he writes that because of the persecution after Stephen’s death, Christians had traveled to Lebanon, to the island of Cyprus, and even as far away as modern-day southern Turkey

(Antioch).⁶

This is a rare peace, too. In fact, maybe I should call it unique, since it's the only time in this book that I could find where it says that the church had peace. Even more, if we examine the promises of God regarding a godly life, it seems that external peace is not among those things that will characterize our lives.

“Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted”,⁷ Paul tells Timothy. And well ought Paul to know about that truth!

Even more, we have Jesus' own words: “A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you.”⁸

Other than prayer, there is very little, if anything, that we can do to ensure that the church will be at peace with the world.

Being Multiplied

The other thing that the early church could not control was multiplication. We know that the early church's initial growth was explosive just in the first 6 chapters.

- 3000 in Act 2:41
- daily conversions, 2:47
- 5000 men, 4:4
- multitudes of men and women, 5:14
- “The number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.” (6:7)

That was well over 10,000 new believers in just a few days! We also know that this fast growth actually caused problems in 6:1.

But here's the point: there is no evidence of a church growth campaign anywhere in the New Testament. Well, that's not exactly true; there are clearly church growth campaigns that we'll get to next week. But none of them look remotely like anything that we might recognize today.

“Multiplication” in Luke's writing is interesting, because it can refer to numbers: nickels and noses. The word can also refer to the results of the gospel being preached, as in 12:24: “the word of God increased and multiplied”. And we know theologically that conversion is a “God thing”. As Paul himself

wrote to the Corinthians:

“I planted, Apollos watered, but *God gave the growth*. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but *only God who gives the growth*. He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor. For we are God’s fellow workers. You are *God’s field, God’s building*.”⁹

Multiplication is something that God does. It is a “cannot do” for us.

Application/Conclusion

Now you might say at this point, “you just spent all this time telling us what we cannot do?” Remember what I said at the beginning.

Sometimes we forget the simple analytical method of distinguishing between what we can and cannot control. Churches forget these things, too. Sometimes we try to control the things that we cannot, the things that belong to God. And sometimes the things that we can most control, we most ignore, perhaps because they require discipline, time, and effort.

Consider Act 2:42–47.

“And they **devoted** themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed **were together** and **had all things in common**. And they were **selling their possessions** and belongings and **distributing the proceeds to all**, as any had need. And day by day, **attending the temple together** and **breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God** and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.”

- What if the early church had spent its time trying to get awe to come on every soul?
- What if they spent their time trying to get God to do wonders and signs through their hands? That didn't work very well for Simon the Magician in chapter 8, did it?
- What if they had worked on being in favor with all the people? We try to

do that every day, don't we? How good are we at it?

- And what if they had tried to usurp the Lord's prerogative and adding to their numbers, and tried to add to their own numbers day by day?

Our Own Peace?

The Lord grants peace to his church from time to time; there are times when the external pressures let up. The greater danger is thinking that we are at peace, when we are not. Twice in Jeremiah, God warns against false prophets who “have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying, ‘Peace, peace,’ when there is no peace.”¹⁰

Again, twice in Ezekiel, the same sort of warning and judgment is pronounced against God’s prophets: “My hand will be against the prophets ... precisely because they have misled my people, saying, ‘Peace,’ when there is no peace.”¹¹

Dare we look at the world around us and pretend that there is peace with God? But don’t be fooled. Even though the battle may wane, the war does not cease. It’s Peter’s somber warning that we “be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.”¹²

We can hide in our distractions, possessions, and our wealth and pretend to have peace. But even here, we fool ourselves, because Jesus makes it clear that the peace is leaves with us is his sort of peace, not ours. “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you.”¹³

I believe that St. John’s *bas* been granted a period of relative peace, after having been so long without a permanent home. Nevertheless, as we shall see next week, these moments of relative peace are to be used for preparation and action: for building up or edification, and for going on in our walk with the Lord.

Multiplication?

Jesus the master of Evangelism Implosion. “After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him. So Jesus said to the twelve, ‘Do you want to go away as well?’”¹⁴

What's valuable about recognizing that multiplication is God's business and not ours is that we use the correct metric for "church growth". Usually the metric of nickels and noses is used to determine the health of a church. But that's not the case. In fact, the sudden increase in numbers created a problem in Acts 6.

One of your lay leaders has pointed out that the health of the church is measured not by nickels and noses, but by character—and he was absolutely correct. All of this we will be looking at in greater depth next week.

Homework

In the mean time, here is your homework: are you trying to control the things that you cannot control?

"And he said to his disciples, "Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat, nor about your body, what you will put on. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? If then you are not able to do as small a thing as that, why are you anxious about the rest? Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass, which is alive in the field today, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you, O you of little faith! And do not seek what you are to eat and what you are to drink, nor be worried. For all the nations of the world seek after these things, and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, seek his kingdom, and these things will be added to you."¹⁵

¹ Luke 1:3-4.

² Acts 1:1-2.

³ Ecclesiastes 1:9.

⁴ Hebrews 13:8.

⁵ Acts 8:1.

⁶ Acts 11:19.

⁷ 2 Timothy 3:12.

⁸ John 15:20.

⁹ 1 Corinthians 3:6-9.

¹⁰ Jeremiah 6:14, 8:11.

¹¹ Ezekiel 13:9-11; see also 13:16.

¹² 1 Peter 5:8.

¹³ John 14:27.

¹⁴ John 6:66-67.

¹⁵ Luke 12:22-31.