

Act 9:31, Part II

Introduction

We all know that our homes require constant work. Without continual maintenance, things begin to fail, the lawn becomes unkempt, leaks happen, electrical faults interrupt our daily lives. Instead of improving and building upon the place we call home, it can fall into disarray, or even become unlivable.

Our souls are much like buildings. In this life, they are under construction and in need of constant maintenance. But sometimes they can look more like abandoned construction sites than homes. If you were to think of your walk with God as a house, how would you describe its condition?

- A completed palace, with everything in place and well-kept? That's only for heaven.

- Flattened and destroyed, an abandoned waste site?

- Foundation in place, but otherwise construction has stopped?

- Under constant construction and maintenance?

Today, I want you to be built up in our most holy faith.

Review

Last week, we began looking at 9:31 by observing that it a summarizing text in Acts. This is the fifth time that Luke briefly rises up above individual stories and circumstances and gives us a 30,000 foot view of what's going on. In this case, Luke is setting aside the story about Saul/Paul for a time and he is getting ready to talk about the apostle Peter in verse 32.

I also pointed out that the grammatical structure of verse 31 is important for us to understand its meaning. There are two main verbs which provide book ends for this long sentence. The two main verbs are these.

- “were having peace”
- “were multiplying”

All the other action in the sentence fits in between these two words. Luke is describing for us the environment in which the church of Judea, Galilee, and Samaria found itself.

And we also observed last week that these two environmental conditions, external circumstances, were things which the church could not control. The church could not create peace with the culture around it by its own power. Nor could the church multiply under its own power. I spent the rest of last week’s sermon talking about the importance of understanding the things that we cannot control, the “cannot do”s.

This week, we are going to look at the two things that the early church did control. Those things are represented by two participles, what some grammarians call verbal nouns.

- “being built up”
- “going”

These are the “can do”s of the faith and we will take a brief look at these today.

Being Built Up

The Lord had granted to the believers in Judea, Galilee, and Samaria a time of relative peace. The persecution they had experienced prior during the period before and after Paul’s conversion was not as intense and focused as during that time.

What were these Christians doing during this time? They were not sitting still. They were being diligent and using the time that the Lord was giving them as effectively as possible. They were “*making the best use of the time ...*”¹

They were building up their faith, adding to the foundations which had been put in place by the work of God’s Spirit at their conversation.

What is it?

What does it mean to be built up?

Originally the word signified the literal construction of the building, or rebuilding something that had been broken down. That’s why I’m using the analogy of your heart as God’s home.

It was also used allegorically, such as when Jesus spoke of a spiritual building.

*“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock.”*²

However, by the time we get to Acts 9, the word begins to take on the spiritual meaning which we find in the rest of Scripture. Interestingly enough, it will become a word of which Paul is particularly fond.

No longer is the word used to speak of literal or spiritual houses in the form of parables or an analogy. It increasingly takes on the direct meaning of being built up in maturity in the faith, “to increase the potential of someone or something, with [the] focus [being] upon the process involved—‘to strengthen, to make more able.’”³

How is it done?

¹ Ephesians 5:15–16.

² Matthew 7:24–25.

³ See Louw-Nida, entry 74.15.

And how is this building up being done? That's a question that was answered by Luke back in chapter 2. Our forebears built up their faith by paying attention to the "can do"s of the faith. Let's think about what that means.

“Can do”s of the Faith

What are the “can do”s of the faith? That's something that Luke has already laid out in quite some detail in the first summarizing text in Acts, 2:42 ff. [Walk thru ...]

“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.”⁴

- Devotion, persistent and constant attention and effort
- Learning
- Fellowship
- Hospitality
- Piety
- Generosity
- Thankfulness
- Praise

Those are the “can do”s of the faith. They paid close attention to the teaching of the apostles, which was nothing less or more than the teaching of Christ being repeated and applied.

Note that part of being built up included building up others! Time together as believers, eating meals. Worship together, being corporately built up. Caring for the needs of each other, as those needs arose.

Actually, all of this is simply practical applications of the summary of the law: to love God with all and our neighbors as ourselves.

Application

My brothers and sisters, what are we doing with our lives? My dear friends, my own family in Christ, are we being built up and building up others? Are our preoccupations the same as those early believers?

In the same way that the word “build up” evokes the idea of constructing a building, so also, being built up in the faith requires planning, diligence, and a good foundation.

“For we are God’s fellow workers. You are God’s field, God’s building. According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.”⁵

Growing in the Lord as a matter of discipline. It does not happen by accident. It is not something that just slips upon you. It must be pursued.

Is it possible that our pursuits of “ok” things that end up leaving us flat, that those things are distracting us from the things that are worth pursuing? Do our lives reflect the ideas you are hearing today?

- Devotion, persistent and constant attention and effort
- Learning
- Fellowship

⁴ 2:42–47.

⁵ 1 Corinthians 3:9–11.

- Hospitality
- Piety
- Generosity
- Thankfulness
- Praise

I don't desire to offend anyone, but if we make an honest assessment of our lives at this moment, are we building up, ignoring maintenance, or most terribly, actually tearing down? It's not my intention to offend you, but let me ask a few practical questions.

- What were the topics of conversation this morning, as you greeted each other? Sports, or your souls?
- When is the last time you prayed with your spouse? It's not hard. All you have to say is, "why don't we pray about that right now?"
- When you have the choice between 15 minutes of Bible reading and prayer, or 3 hours of television, which are you more likely to choose?
- When is the last time you confessed a offense to a brother or sister and asked forgiveness?
- When you speak, do you think about how to encourage, edify—build up—the other person? Or were you more interested in putting them down?
- Can you say the books of the Bible? How do you expect to find your way around that mysterious book, if you can't find the books?
- Do you know the 10 commandments at least well enough to paraphrase them, in any order? How do you expect to keep them?
- Speaking of the 10 commandments, what does the Lord's day mean to you? Is it Saturday₂ with a little religion thrown in? Do you stay up all night on

Saturday, so that Sunday is a fog? Or is it the day that the Lord himself designed into creation for the purposes of bodily rest and spiritual exercise?

- When you walk out of this place today, will you be concerned about true biblical fellowship, encouraging each other, perhaps someone you haven't met yet? Or will you go back to your sports discussion from earlier.

Notice that much of what constitutes true religion are things done mutually, together. This business of building up and edification is not just an individualistic matter. "Church growth" is "you growth" and vice versa.

Pastor Phil has talked in the past about about the need for true discipleship, for growth deeply, before we hope to grow broadly. Remember that Luke is writing about what's happening in the churches altogether. Every part of us needs each other to build up and be built up.

My beloved family. The goal isn't to offend you. It is to make you self-aware.

And know this; it's our purpose to help establish and grow you in the faith.

*"And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for **building up** the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it **builds itself up** in love."*⁶

⁶ Ephesians 4:11-16.

My dear fellow believers, if I leave no other legacy behind than this, I will be satisfied: that St. John's grew deeper, was raised up higher, and was built up in its love for God and love for each other.

Conclusion

In 1951, wrote a valuable little essay called "My Heart, Christ's Home", in which he conducts a survey of the condition of his spiritual house. He wrote:

"The body of the believer would be the temple of the living God and the human heart would be the home of Jesus Christ. It is difficult for me to think of a higher privilege than to make Christ a home in my heart, to welcome, to serve, to please, to fellowship with him there."

I have reprinted that essay for you and I encourage you to use this Lord's Day to do a spiritual inventory.

Ignoring the "can do"s of the faith is fatal to the Christian, just as obsessing over the "cannot do"s is. I asked at the beginning, "if you were to think of your walk with God as a house, how would you describe its condition?"

An honest inventory is always appropriate. I'm begging you to set aside distractions. Come to the water of life, so that you'll no longer thirst. Come to the bread of heaven, so that you'll no longer be hungry. Come, buy and eat, without cost; because the price has already been paid. Love the Father's words. Love the Father's children. Love the Father's worship. Love the Father!

"We know of no other way by which to keep the love of the world out of our heart, than to keep in our hearts the love of God—and no other way by which to keep our hearts in the love of God, than building ourselves up on our most holy faith. That denial of the world which is not possible to him that dissents from the Gospel testimony, is possible even as all things are possible, to him that believeth. To try this without faith, is to work without the right tool of the right instrument.

But faith worketh by love; and the way of expelling from the heart the love which transgresseth the law, is to admit into its receptacles the love which fulfilleth the law.”⁷

⁷ From “The Expulsive Power of a New Affection”, Thomas Chalmers (1780-1847).