

## Pastoral Letter April 2014

### The Acts 9:31 experience

Following the time of great persecution for the church after the death of Stephen, there came eventually a season of blessed calm. It is recorded in the Acts of the Apostles in this way: 'So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up' (Acts 9:31). How welcome this will have been, and no doubt much thanksgiving was sent heavenwards to God. That is not all that this verse of Scripture tells us, however. It continues: 'And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied'.

We have here what we might call 'the Acts 9:31 experience'. It is highly desirable, and (not least in our own day) hugely necessary. Notice its twin components: 'the fear of the Lord' and 'the comfort of the Holy Spirit'. We cannot do without either – particularly if, like the early church, the work of Christ among us is to be built up and multiply.

What is '*the fear of the Lord*'? Where the children of God are concerned, it is not a terrifying fear. To be sure, the unbeliever has a real need to be terrified at the thought of God, and the prospect of standing before him Christ-less and helpless on the judgment day. But from this fear, the Christian has been delivered, for God's perfect love towards us in the Lord Jesus Christ has cast out that sort of fear. Neither is it a servile fear, which makes us go around cringing and skulking, wondering how God is going to punish us next. For he has made us his children, and Jesus calls us his friends.

So what is it? It consists fundamentally of two strands: an awesome sense and esteem of God's majesty and holiness; and a personal sense and realisation of the sweetness of his love to us poor sinners. It will affect the whole of lives, from one day to the next: our worship of God, our hatred of sin, our watching of our walk, our guarding of our tongues, our conducting of our families, our behaviour in the church – and everything else, in a thoroughly comprehensive way.

Linked with this is '*the comfort of the Holy Spirit*'. The two belong very much together. What is this second feature? It really amounts to nothing less than a glorious all-encompassing statement upon the doctrine of the person and work of the Holy Spirit. On what grounds? Because Jesus calls the Holy Spirit 'the Comforter'; and in no way is the Spirit's comfort felt more keenly than when he is testifying to us about the Lord Jesus.

Think it through a little. The Holy Spirit teaches us the Scriptures, which testify continually of Jesus. He reveals to us the love of Christ and assures us of our belonging to God. He applies God's promises to us (to use an old phrase, he 'realises' God's promises to us), showing how they belong to us – promises, for example, that God hears our prayers, that Jesus sympathizes with our weaknesses, that God's grace is all-sufficient and that he will never leave us or forsake us. He makes us more like our Saviour (in the great work of our sanctification). He equips us for, and keeps us safe in, the Christian battle. He aids us in the callings that have been given to us. And he reveals to us heaven and the eternal home we have there.

How much more than we do, do we need to walk (live, move, have our being) 'in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit'. This, not least, is a key way in which our almighty and gracious God builds up and multiplies his church. This is exactly what we need, to his praise and glory. *This* is the blessed Acts 9:31 experience!