

The Epiphany Blessing And Responsibility.

Text: Isa 60:1-6

1) What is the Epiphany Blessing?

Suggested Hymns:

2) What is the Epiphany Responsibility

559, 40, 232, 294, 46

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Isaiah 60:1-6, ¹ *Arise, shine; For your light has come! And the glory of the LORD is risen upon you.* ² *For behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, And deep darkness the people; But the LORD will arise over you, And His glory will be seen upon you.* ³ *The Gentiles shall come to your light, And kings to the brightness of your rising.*

⁴ *“Lift up your eyes all around, and see: They all gather together, they come to you; Your sons shall come from afar, And your daughters shall be nursed at your side.* ⁵ *Then you shall see and become radiant, And your heart shall swell with joy; Because the abundance of the sea shall be turned to you, The wealth of the Gentiles shall come to you.*

⁶ *The multitude of camels shall cover your land, The dromedaries of Midian and Ephah; All those from Sheba shall come; They shall bring gold and incense, And they shall proclaim the praises of the LORD.* (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Blessings are responsibilities. However, we often think of them as given to us merely for our own personal enjoyment and profit. So we think in our own selfish spirit and narrow vision. Then they become curses to ourselves and others. Used in this fashion, they produce moral and spiritual decay and involve us in guilt before God.

Blessings are given to us, as Paul says, *“for the profit of all.”*¹ Likewise nobility obligates. Nobility, great endowments, great gifts, put us under great obligations. The greater they are, the greater our responsibilities to God, to

ourselves, and to our neighbours. May the Lord bless our meditation as we consider the Epiphany blessing and responsibility.

1. What Is the Epiphany Blessing?

There is one gift that surpasses all others. This is Christ and His Gospel. In amazement Paul cries out, *“Thanks be to God for His unspeakable gift!”*² If only we had more of this wonder, love, and praise, regarding Christ, which Paul had. When Paul speaks of Christ and the things of Christ, it is always in superlatives. Ordinary language is insufficient. It is the *“unsearchable riches,”*³ *“the peace which surpasses all understanding,”*⁴ *“the love ... which passes knowledge,”*⁵ *“the glorious Gospel of the blessed God.”*⁶

Christ and His glory are also described to us in many striking similes and glorious images to express His character and His salvation. You are impressed by the inadequacy of human language to express *“the fullness of Him who fills all in all,”*⁷ the mystery of His being, the mystery of His character, the mystery of His redemption. Nothing is more expressive of what Jesus is in Himself, what He is to us, and what He is to all the world than that He declares Himself to be the *“Light of the World.”*⁸

Isaiah is clearly the greatest of all the Prophets. His book is the Old Testament Gospel. Our text is one of his most striking prophecies of Christ and His coming in the flesh. As a joyful gospeller he proclaims to Israel the glad tidings, *your light has come! And the glory of the LORD is risen upon you.* This message, 700 years later, humble shepherds heard from the lips of the Christmas angel.

Light, like life, in its essence is a mystery. We may experience its radiance and its warmth; but who can tell us what it is? So Christ is a great mystery, the greatest of all mysteries, God manifested in the flesh. *“God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God,”* are the expressions which the Nicene Creed uses relative to Jesus Christ.

There is also a mysterious purity about light. It cannot be adulterated. How expressive of the purity of Christ who knew no sin! Light is enlightening. It lightens up the darkness. So Christ sheds the true light on life’s most important problems.

Light is life-giving; there is healing in the rays of the sun. So people find in Christ - life, salvation, and healing. Light finally is expressive of joy, of gladness, the spirit of Christ's own being, and also that of every Christian. Where Jesus dwells, sorrow cannot abide permanently. *"Sorrow may endure for the night, but joy comes in the morning."*⁹

How pitiable is the state of the Gentile world, which does not know Christ and whose ear has never heard His Gospel! Isaiah writes in our text, ***For behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, And deep darkness the people.***" This is again figurative language. We know what darkness and deep darkness means. Here it is the symbol of spiritual decay, moral debasement, of gloom and doom.

Paul gives a more concrete and detailed picture of moral degeneracy and the spiritual perversity of the pagan world in the first chapter of his Epistle to the Romans. This was the fearful state of the pagan world at Christ's coming. In his description Paul had in mind more particularly the great Greek and Roman world. To what high culture and art and learning Greece had attained! It had the greatest minds the world has known. We still ponder the thoughts of its philosophers.

Its religion, however, was one of gross idolatry and superstition. Its very worship was gross and sensual. Marriage had no sanctity, and the most abominable sex vices were common practices. A faithful husband or wife was a rarity. Brutality was also a dominant feature. It was a world in which mercy was weakness, and humility reprehensible.

This deplorable spiritual and moral state in cultured Greece is undisputable evidence that education alone cannot save a nation from spiritual and moral and social degeneracy. Christ, only He, has this power; only His Gospel is the light that changes men spiritually and morally and saves.

2. What Is the Epiphany Responsibility?

Great blessings, as we have heard, involve also great responsibilities. Isaiah issues a stirring call to those to whom the light has come, and upon whom the glory of the Lord is risen. It is to arise, to shine. This is more urgent than ever. We still have the great heathen world: Africa, India, China, Japan, with their millions and millions living in heathen darkness and moral helplessness and spiritual hopelessness.

In our day a new factor confronts the Christian and the Church of Christ. A great part of the Christian world has dropped back into paganism and complacency. All the new political and economic philosophers have no use for God; they are hostile to Christianity in spirit, even when they declare they are not against it. This is evidenced by the lapse of the modern world into inhumanity, brutality, lawlessness, and sensuality, the sacrifice of all human values to material gain and political expediency, the denial of the sanctity of marriage, and of other holy relationships.

A moral degeneration and a spiritual hopelessness prevail that are tragic. Thank God, fearful as is this picture of spiritual conditions, Christ still has His elect, His chosen people, to whom He is the Light and their Salvation and whom He has transformed, who show the virtue of a Christ-like spirit and life through their faith and fellowship in Christ.

To these this call comes, "*Arise, shine!*" How eagerly we ought to respond to this call, and how actively we ought to fulfil this holy obligation! It involves man's highest welfare in this world; it involves his eternal state hereafter. It is more than a matter of life and death. It is a matter of God and eternity.

We must be more alive to our responsibility. We must be more zealous in discharging it. This our day demands. The harvest is great, and the labourers are few. The great world for the most part again lies in darkness, and the number of those who have Christ and His saving Gospel of the cross is small.

But we must not be depressed. Instead, we should find Isaiah's prophecy and its fulfilment most encouraging. Conditions were spiritually dark not only in idolatrous, heathen lands but also in Israel. The Jews even crucified their Saviour, this great gift of God, in their ignorance and darkness. But Christ, the Light of the world, took on in His death new glory, and the Gospel of the cross became the power of God unto salvation.

This stirring call had the encouragement of one of the most glorious prophecies. Isaiah with glowing colour and moving action pictures the coming of great numbers of nations, kings, and men of might and wealth and greatness — a scene and experience which filled the Prophet's heart with holy awe and joy.

Let me read Isaiah's glorious prophecy so that you may be thrilled and exalted with the great sense of colour and motion:

³ *The Gentiles shall come to your light, And kings to the brightness of your rising.* ⁴ *“Lift up your eyes all around, and see: They all gather together, they come to you; Your sons shall come from afar, And your daughters shall be nursed at your side.*

⁵ *Then you shall see and become radiant, And your heart shall swell with joy; Because the abundance of the sea shall be turned to you, The wealth of the Gentiles shall come to you.*

⁶ *The multitude of camels shall cover your land, The dromedaries of Midian and Ephah; All those from Sheba shall come; They shall bring gold and incense, And they shall proclaim the praises of the LORD.*

The fulfilment of this prophetic vision is a matter of history. Inauspiciously it begins its triumphant march with a few lowly men from the despised nation of the Jews. It gathers numbers and power as it marches on; meeting, and triumphing over, every form of opposition and enmity, suffering, dying, on it goes until it has conquered the Roman Empire, the mightiest nation the world has ever known, and supplants the pagan gods and goddesses with the Christ.

Over the Roman eagle there rises the cross of the despised Nazarene. A mighty Roman emperor kneels in humble faith as a penitent before Him and trusts in His grace and mercy to save him from eternal death and perdition.

All Europe heard Christ's Gospel of salvation, and since then the light and hope of Christ has dissipated darkness as the rising sun dispels the darkness of the night.

The Church has chosen this grand prophecy as the lesson for Epiphany Day. The Church saw, and saw rightly, in the coming of the Wise Men, the beginning of its fulfilment. It is generally held that these Wise Men were Gentiles. It marked the first manifestation of God's grace to the Gentile world and emphasised the universality of Christ's saviour-hood, that He was not only the Saviour of the Jews but of the despised Gentiles as well.

In a short time the Christian Church became practically a Gentile organisation. The Jew on the whole took an antagonistic attitude to Christ, as he does to this day. To the Gentile world this new revelation of God's grace in opening the door of salvation to them was and is a matter of great joy.

The Epiphany Festival became one of the great days of the Church. It is called the Festival of the Three Kings in Roman Catholic countries and is celebrated with pomp and pageantry. It is also spoken of as the Feast of Lights, in commemoration of this great prophecy.

This festival was celebrated long before our Western Christmas Festival was observed, which commemorates the manifestation of Christ to the Jews. All the great festivals of the Church are first of all feasts of thanksgiving.

So let us join with the Church on this feast day in giving thanks for God's grace and love, Christ's love and sacrifice, and the Holy Spirit's love and power in converting the Gentile as well as the Jew.

Let us thank God personally that in His mercy He has brought us, like the Wise Men, into His Kingdom of Grace, that through faith in Christ we have found pardon for our sins, fellowship with God, comfort, hope, a Christ-like spirit, and a godly life.

However, the great festivals of the Church are to be not only days of joyful thanksgiving; they are also to be days of new consecration to our task and responsibility. On this day it is most appropriate that we reconsecrate ourselves to our missionary tasks and responsibilities over against a world lying in hopeless darkness and in the power of sin and of Satan.

We must influence that world by shining as lights, by a true Christian faith and confession, and by holy Christian living. We also must, of course, do all we can to help the Church carry on its mission work in all its phases. Missionaries are our agents and our representatives. We do mission work by our prayers and by our financial aid. To what extent are you doing this, and carrying out your missionary obligations you are letting your light shine before men.

When the Prophet calls to those who love Christ and enjoy His salvation, "*Arise, shine!*" he is thinking more particularly of the influence and power of our faith in Christ, of the influence of our love and hope, of the purity and goodness of our lives, on our unbelieving fellow men.

We are mistaken if we think that the heathen world in the days of the Apostles was converted by the eloquence of a few preachers. It was rather accomplished by the living faith and the quiet witnessing of the individual Christians. This attracted the pagan and heathen like the burning bush attracted

Moses. Men and women wanted to know more about this new religion; it influenced them to seek the knowledge of Christ's saving Gospel.

What we need today are Christians who have the spirit of Christ and not the spirit of the people of the world. Then our words and our personal missionary efforts will have great weight for Christ and His cause.

Let us, by the grace of God, consecrate ourselves on this great festival to fulfilling our missionary obligation with new earnestness and a greater zeal — we to whom the light has come and upon whom the glory of the Lord is risen. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ 1 Corinthians 12:7

² 2 Cor 9:15

³ Ephesians 3:8

⁴ Philippians 4:7

⁵ Ephesians 3:19

⁶ 1 Timothy 1:11

⁷ Ephesians 1:23

⁸ John 8:12

⁹ cf Psalm 30:5