

THE EPIPHANY OF OUR LORD

The Light of Victory in the Darkness of Defeat

Isaiah 60:1-6 (NIV)

¹ "Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you. ² See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the LORD rises upon you and his glory appears over you. ³ Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. ⁴ "Lift up your eyes and look about you: All assemble and come to you; your sons come from afar, and your daughters are carried on the hip. ⁵ Then you will look and be radiant, your heart will throb and swell with joy; the wealth on the seas will be brought to you, to you the riches of the nations will come. ⁶ Herds of camels will cover your land, young camels of Midian and Ephah. And all from Sheba will come, bearing gold and incense and proclaiming the praise of the LORD.

Did you know that the best batting average of all time for a baseball career is .366, done by Ty Cobb. What that number means is that about 37% of the time when Ty Cobb went up to bat, he scored a hit and got on base. So, about one out of every three at bats, he was successful. The majority of the time, 63% of his at bats, were failures. There is no way you would pass a class if your test and quiz averages was 37%. Yet, this is the best career record for a baseball player. Or look at the NFL as the playoffs are just starting. The best quarterback percentage of completed passes for the current season is 69.5%. The best career percentage is 66%. That's a D rating in the school system, failing if you went to the school I went to where anything below 70% was a "F." Yet these people are not considered mediocre or failures. They are considered among the greatest, top of the class.

Try translating those percentages into battles of a war. How many battles do you lose before you lose the war? I don't know that there is a definitive answer. We've heard of wars where one side won every major conflict but still lost the war. Then, of course, the opposite is true that some wars have been won with very few, if any, of the major battles being won by that side. How much failing can you do before you lose? Our Bible reading for today has something to say on that topic.

One of the very interesting aspects of the book of Isaiah is that Isaiah prophesies not only about the battles and victories and losses during the time when he lived, but he also prophesies about battles and their outcome some 150 years into the future, looking beyond his lifetime. At this point in his book, Isaiah has proclaimed that there would be a crushing defeat for the Jewish people. It would take place in 586 B.C. The capital city of Jerusalem would be destroyed. The walls would be ripped down. The palace and the temple would be ransacked and leveled. The king would be deposed. The Jews would be taken from their homeland.

In the chapters preceding, Isaiah speaks for God explaining why this defeat would take place. The Jews would have their home destroyed and their king deposed because they were giving mere lip service to God. Outwardly, they observed God's commands, meaning that they offered sacrifices as they were supposed to, but their hearts were not into it. They weren't sorry for their sins. They just went through the motions of worship. They abused people. They didn't show love to their neighbors. They let them go hungry. There were no repercussions for their actions. There was no justice. Their sins had separated them from God, and God was justly punishing them for their crimes.

Now, not every single Jew was unfaithful in this way. That's actually what makes this coming defeat even worse. The faithful Jews, the ones who looked to God to still bring the offspring of the woman, the descendant from David's line who would rule over all the nations and establish peace upon the earth, now their hope would be taken away with a seemingly final defeat. A descendant of David would no longer sit on the throne in Jerusalem. David's dynasty would be smashed like the palace. Who would give them victory now? Who would save them? Who would fight for them? How could God possibly still have an offspring of David rule over the nations and bring the peace of victory?

The destruction of David's kingly line would be much further reaching than just taking away the hope of the Jewish people. The entire world would feel the effects. This descendant was supposed to rule over all the nations. The defeat and destruction of Jerusalem and the cutting off of kings from David's line meant that now "darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples." (verse 2a) The battle, the siege of Jerusalem, was lost. Their hope was lost. The world lived in the darkness of utter defeat.

Do you feel defeated as a Christian? Is your conversion rate lower than 1,000, lower than 100%? Do you feel darkness cover your life as you ponder that conversation you had with a family member over Christmas where you were not able to adequately defend your beliefs, not on your toes for that witty comeback to win that point of contention in Christ's favor? Do you feel like you have lost simply because you did not take the opportunity to have that conversation, let it go for another year? Do you have lingering thoughts as you try to go to bed at night that you tried as hard as you could to train your child in the way they should go, to raise

them to be Christians, yet they have still walked away from the Christian faith? Do you feel the thick darkness as you are seemingly surrounded by atheists, as if you are the last Christian soldier standing and the war for the souls of this earth is quickly declining to complete and total defeat?

Is your darkness more about your personal struggle on the Christian walk of life? Are you dogged by guilt as you recount the battles that you have lost against temptation? Do you try and succeed and win for a while – winning for Christ, but then it all comes down in a crashing, resounding defeat plunging you back into a darkness of spiritual despair? Are you feeling trapped in the darkness of defeat?

To you, God says through Isaiah, “Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you.” (verse 1) The glory of the LORD has come to your rescue.

The glory of the LORD is a kind of proper term, especially in the Old Testament. You may remember some of the showing of the glory of the LORD. It was the pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night that went before God’s people, the Israelites, as he led them out of their Egyptian slavery and to the Promised Land. It was this same glory of the LORD that filled the tabernacle, their tenting place of worship in the Old Testament, showing God’s presence among his people. The glory of the LORD visibly displays the presence of the Savior-God and announces some significant aspect of his plan of salvation.

What significant aspect is given here in Isaiah? “Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn... All assemble and come to you; your sons come from afar, and your daughters are carried on the hip...Herd of camels will cover your land, young camels of Midian and Ephah. And all from Sheba will come, bearing gold and incense and proclaiming the praise of the LORD.” (verses 3, 4, & 6) In the darkness of defeat, in the loss of the hope of victory, Isaiah says that the glory of the LORD is still coming. The glory of the LORD rises upon you. (Verse 2b) You will not remain in defeat. The promised offspring is still coming, and he will draw all nations in to worship him as their light of victory in this dark world.

Without people doing anything, without contributing in any way, that glory of the LORD has come. Think of what happened when the angels came to announce Jesus’ birth to the shepherds. The glory of the Lord shone around them. His salvation had come in the form of a baby. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. God acted. He brought the light of victory to losers in darkness through a child.

You may feel defeated when people don’t believe as you do, who aren’t convinced when you try to show them the victory won for all by Jesus Christ, when you don’t even get to have that conversation, when children that you raised in the way they should go do not stay on that one and only path of Jesus Christ for salvation. You and I, we don’t have a perfect average, a 100% conversion rate. But it’s not about percentages for the win.

The victory, the win, is not on us. It is on God. His victory comes as the glory of the LORD. Nations have come to the light of Jesus and kings to the brightness of his dawn. The first fulfillment is right here with the wisemen, the Magi. They went searching for Jesus. When they found him, they presented him with gold and the two types of incense: frankincense and myrrh, giving this Jesus, born the King of the Jews, born of the line of David, the exact gifts that Isaiah said that they would give.

So many more have come to his light as well. Countless people have come to believe that that little boy born in Bethlehem is their Savior from sin. Kings, presidents, world leaders have come to call Christ their King, their victory over the darkness of sin. In fact, we are a fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy. The glory of the LORD has risen upon us and saved us from our defeats, our failures. This is why we gather week in and week out to adore our King, to present our gifts to him, whether they be monetary gifts like the wisemen or gifts of our time and of our talents. None of you have to be here today. Instead, you come and are encouraged at the others who have also experienced the glory of the LORD. Your heart can throb and swell with joy seeing that these people around you have come because the glory of the LORD has given them victory.

You and I do not have perfect conversion rates when it comes to showing people the glory of the LORD. However, for every seeming loss we sustain, we are comforted and encouraged by the fact that the glory of the LORD has indeed risen upon us. Because our Lord Jesus Christ has come, we have the light of victory that dispels the darkness of defeat. Jesus has come. His glory is here. Come, let us adore him in the light of his victory. Amen.