

“AWAKE, AWAKE; DEPART, DEPART”

If you are a Christian, then you have been set free from the domain of darkness and brought into the kingdom of light. As Paul says in his letter to the Ephesians, “at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord.” Christians belong to the light, but we live in a world that is still engulfed by the darkness that once held us. This is why Paul’s next words in Ephesians 5 are an exhortation for us to “Walk as children of light... Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness” [Eph. 5:8-11] Similarly, he writes in Romans 13, “the hour has come for you to wake from sleep... The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.” [Rom. 13:11, 12] Paul writes such things because he knows that even though we have been brought into the light of Christ, we face the constant threat of being swallowed up by the darkness of this evil age. To use a slightly different metaphor, we are easily lulled into a state of spiritual slumber. The Bible combats this threat by calling us to live according to what we already are as his redeemed people. This is what this passage is about. It tells us that *God summons us to enter into our redeemed identity, to rejoice in his salvation, and to be spiritually distinct from the world.* In this sermon, we will study this passage under three

headings that correspond to its three sections: beautiful garments; beautiful messengers; and spiritual separation.

### **Beautiful Garments**

In the first part of this passage, God's people are summoned to wake up and put on their beautiful garments. The cry, "Awake, awake," echoes the words that were spoken by the people of Israel back in chapter 51, where they cried out to God for help saying, "Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the LORD." They said that because it seemed to them that God had forgotten them and left them in their state of bondage. But notice how God responds to this here in chapter 52. He says that they are actually the ones who have fallen asleep. They have forgotten who they are. They have forgotten what God has promised to do for them.

This is something that speaks to each one of us. When we find ourselves struggling under a particular burden or temptation, it can sometimes seem as though God has forgotten us. But these verses tell us that when that happens we are the ones who need to wake up. We need to take hold of the new identity and new hope that we have been given in Christ.

This is what the Lord means when he says “put on your strength” and “put on your beautiful garments.” He is not talking about strength and beauty that we have in ourselves. As it says later in the book of Isaiah, “all our righteous deeds are like a *polluted* garment.” [Isa. 64:6] Even our best works are riddled with sin. The only righteousness we can have that is truly righteous in God’s sight is a righteousness that comes to us from the outside. This is true of the righteousness that is credited to us at our justification, and it is also true of the righteousness that is imparted to us in our sanctification. When God tells us to put on our strength and our beautiful garments, he is telling us to live into the new identity that we already have by virtue of our union with Jesus Christ.

We can see this by looking at other passages that use the same imagery, such as Revelation 19, where it reads, “Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; it was granted to her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure -- for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.” In that passage, the beautiful garments of fine linen are symbolic of the believer’s sanctification. But notice that it says that it was *granted* to Christ’s Bride (which is the church) to clothe herself with these garments. Her righteous deeds are not done by her own strength, but by virtue of the new life that she has in Christ.

Similarly, in Ephesians 2, after emphasizing that we have been saved by grace through faith, Paul says that “we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” God saves us so that we can do the good works that he has prepared for us to do. He predestined us in order that we might be conformed to the image of his Son. We are no longer slaves to sin but slaves to righteousness. We need to lay hold of these promises by faith and live according to what we already are in Christ. As Paul says in Romans 13, “put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.” This is what Isaiah is talking about in the first two verses of our passage.

In verse 3 of our passage in Isaiah, the Lord says of his people Israel, “You were sold for nothing, and you shall be redeemed without money.” By saying that they were sold for nothing, he means that the nations that took Israel into captivity -- first Egypt and Assyria, then Babylon -- did not have any rightful claim over her. Those nations were merely God’s instruments to carry out his purposes for Israel. And by saying that he will redeem Israel without money, the Lord is alluding to what will be more fully explained in the next chapter of Isaiah’s prophecy: the price that will be paid for their redemption is the precious blood of Christ.

In verses 4-6, God makes it clear that he redeems his people for the sake of his glory. The thing that spurs him to action is the fact that his name is despised. He does not save us because he owes us anything. He saves us to display his character as the covenant-keeping God.

### **Beautiful Messengers**

This brings us to the second part of our passage, where Isaiah talks about beautiful messengers. He writes, "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news." The image being used here is that of a runner who brings news of a great victory. Before the advent of modern communication technologies, people relied on human messengers to bring news of what was going on in the wider world. Imagine yourself living in a small village in the ancient world, waiting to hear the outcome of a battle that was being fought miles away, a battle for your freedom. After waiting and waiting for what seems like an eternity, you finally spot a runner coming down from the distant hills. You can tell that he is near exhaustion, having run so long and so hard. But as he spots you and your fellow villagers, he begins shouting and leaping for joy, and you know right then the outcome of the battle. You know

that your freedom has been won. How beautiful the feet of such a messenger would be to you. That is what Isaiah is talking about in these verses.

Of course, the thing that makes such a messenger beautiful is not anything about the messenger himself, but the message of good news that he brings. And so it is with the church's preaching of the gospel. As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4:7, "we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us." The preaching of the gospel is the announcement of the victory that Christ has won for us. And it is a message that is received with great joy by those who have felt the crushing weight of their bondage to sin. This is what Isaiah means when he says, "The voice of your watchmen -- they lift up their voice; together they sing for joy; for eye to eye they see the return of the LORD to Zion." When we look to Christ in faith, the oppressive weight that is brought about by our sin and guilt is lifted, and our hearts overflow with gratitude.

In verse 9, God's people are instructed to "Break forth together into singing" in response to this great salvation. Have you ever wondered why Christians respond to the gospel with song? The reason why we sing is because this is the only proper way for us to enter into such a glorious benefit, a benefit that we have not at all earned by our works. Singing is the way we express our heartfelt

gratitude to God for the grace that he has poured out upon us in Christ our Savior. The preaching of sound doctrine always produces sincere doxology among those who receive that doctrine in faith.

### **Spiritual Separation**

In the last part of our passage, the focus is on the theme of spiritual separation from the world. God's people are told, "Depart, depart, go out from there; touch no unclean thing." This echoes the twofold summons to "Awake" in verse 1 and it draws upon the imagery of Israel's exodus from Egypt. It points not only to Israel's deliverance from their exile in Babylon, but also to the church's deliverance from this present evil age. This is made clear by how Isaiah's words are echoed in Revelation 18, where the church is given this exhortation regarding spiritual Babylon: "Come out of her, my people, lest you take part in her sins, lest you share in her plagues."

In this present age, the church's separation from the world is not physical but spiritual. Paul makes this point in 1 Corinthians 6, where he writes, "I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people -- not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world." And Jesus says

something similar in John 17 when he prays, “I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one.” Such passages make it clear that the church will not be physically separated from the world until Christ returns. Until then, we are to live in the world as those who belong to Christ. As the saying goes, we are called to be ‘in the world but not of it.’

This principle of spiritual separation from the world is extremely important. And it is one that Christians today need to be reminded of. I say this because there is a widespread tendency among contemporary Christians to think that the way to win converts and keep their children in the faith is to make the Christian faith conform to whatever is popular in the culture. This is not a biblical approach to evangelism and Christian nurture. The church should not carry out its work of making disciples by trying to convince people that the church is not really all that different than the world! Yet this is exactly what many Christians are doing. In their zeal to make the gospel more appealing to the people of this culture, they fail to exercise discernment about the various aspects of this culture. As Ken Myers notes,

“The widespread desire to be... ‘culturally engaged’ is often a distraction from the church’s mission, not because it takes culture

too seriously, but because it has not paid close enough attention to the actual state of our culture...If Christians were *really* culturally engaged, *really* serious about recognizing meaning in forms of cultural expression, they would be much more reluctant to embrace certain cultural trends." ["Waiting for Epimenedes," *Touchstone* (Jl/Ag 09) 9-11.]

We need to remember that the church is by its very nature distinct from the world. That is what the name "church" means. The Greek word for church is *ekklesia*, a word whose etymology means 'called out of.' We have been called out of the world. We are not to be like the world. Christians are to avoid becoming entangled in the world's pagan culture. It's true that we are called to live in the world, but we are called to do so as those who are different from the world. This is the only way we can function as salt and light in the world.

It is hard to be different. No one wants to be looked upon as an oddity. But the fact of the matter is that if you belong to Jesus Christ you already are an oddity in the eyes of the world. You have been given beautiful garments to wear, but the world is so blind that it looks at those garments and scoffs that they are hopelessly out of fashion. You have been given strength in Christ, but the world

is so mixed up that it actually calls your strength weakness. Don't let the world make you ashamed of who you are in Christ. You do not have anything to fear from the world. Your God is with you. In Isaiah's words, "the LORD will go before you, and the God of Israel will be your rear guard." And as Jesus promised when he gave the church its great commission, "And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."