

Epiphany

Is Epiphany both helpful and Scriptural too?

Epiphany, just like Advent and Christmas, fixes "our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen," **2 Corinthians 4:18**, so that "we do not lose heart," **verse 16**. But lose heart we will if our eyes can only see what we see around us, because our eyes are designed to see reality, the obvious reality being that "outwardly we are wasting away." Whether it's our physical bodies or the universe as a whole, the same observable rule applies: it's all in a state of decay, just as Paul wrote in Romans 8:20-21.

It's bound to happen at some point in our lives, then, that our "hearts will be weighed down," **Luke 21:34**, as the reality of what our eyes see hits home. It's then that the "anxieties of life" can take over, filling our vision with depressing images of our bodies ageing and our lives diminishing, which in turn threaten to envelop us in an overwhelming darkness as we seriously begin to wonder what the point of this life is, other than simply staying afloat in the futile whirlpool we find ourselves in, of never-improving conditions in the world, and ourselves just getting frailer. And for Christians it can be just as depressing, because after many years of being Christian what have we got to show for it? Have we changed much? Is the world a better place because of us? Are people flocking to our church because of what they see in us? Has a light shone so bright in us that people are dazzled by what they see?! No? Then what was the point of us being Christian if it hasn't made that much difference to anything? Discouraging at times, isn't it?

Yes, it is - and both Luke and Paul knew it - that we humans easily lose heart when we see ourselves as we really are, or our world as it really is. Luke's immediate advice was, "be careful" (verse 34), because he knew the typical ways we humans react to reality when it hits us. We either blind ourselves to the problems or we're overwhelmed by them, and neither way is helpful.

Ignoring the problem, for instance, means a lost opportunity "to escape all that is about to happen," **verse 36**, in the same way that ignoring a pain means a lost opportunity to prevent serious physical problems later. Allowing our problems to overwhelm us, on the other hand, can lead to "drunkenness," **verse 34**. We'll do anything to lessen the pain, but the pain will always be there. Neither way is helpful, therefore, in dealing with the actual pain. A much better way, according to Luke the physician, was face reality, be honest, and think about what can be done to stop the pain, and maybe even prevent it happening at all.

And toward that end, Paul offered a radical solution. He said, “get your eyes off what you see and focus instead on what you can’t see.” It seems like an odd solution, to see what’s not seeable, but he gives us a clue as to what he’s getting at in **verse 4** (back in 2 Corinthians). Realize, he writes, that **“The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ.”** There are clearly TWO levels on which we “see” things, then. On one level we see only what the “god of this age” allows us to see, or we can see above and beyond that to “the light of the gospel.” There is a “mind’s eye” thinking, therefore, that can lift us above what we see around us to the very real world that exists beyond it.

It’s like knowing the sun is still shining on a cloudy day. You can’t see it but you know it’s there. Satan would like us to think the clouds are all that exist, and there’s no sun shining above them, but what WE “see” as Christians - even on the darkest day, when the clouds of misery, pain and suffering press in on us like a suffocating fog - is “the light of the gospel.” It’s still up there above the clouds, shining as bright as ever, invincible and everlasting. And even though we can’t see it with our eyes, we know it’s there.

That’s because **“God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ made his light shine in our hearts,”** **verse 6**. What God has done for us is give us glasses that can see through the fog, like night vision goggles that can “see” through pitch-black darkness. But that’s what God has wanted for every human being from the time he said, **“Let there be light”** on the first day of Creation in Genesis 1:3. It has always been his intent from the moment he brought our world into being to **“give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God.”** He wants us having eyes that see above and beyond the clouds of this world to the brilliant spectacle of his world.

And to help us lift our eyes to that level, and to equip us with glasses to see it, God came up with a creation where his **“invisible qualities - his eternal power and divine nature - have been clearly seen,”** (Romans 1:20). Every night sky, especially on a cloudless winter’s night, equips the human eye with the ability to see “not (only) what is seen, but what is unseen (too).” We can see above what’s happening on our own little planet to the vast universe beyond that speaks of other mighty powers at work.

For most people, however, even the exquisite universe is not enough to **“turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God”** (Acts 26:18), but God has something even **more** glorious than the universe to get our eyes off the seen to the unseen. It is **“the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ,”** **verse 4**. It’s **“in the face of Christ,”** **verse 6**, that he’s equipped us with the perfect glasses for piercing through the gloom of what we see around us to the unseen glories of God above. And that was the great “epiphany” that struck home to Paul, when for the first time he REALLY “saw” God. It was in that human face of Christ. Suddenly, the unseen glory of God came into sharp focus in Jesus Christ.

And a hundred or so years after Paul, the same epiphany happened to the Church when God “made his light shine in (their) hearts” and **they** could see his glory in the HUMAN Jesus too. That’s why the Incarnation and the Nativity suddenly took on huge importance as they realized it was in the HUMAN Jesus that they could see God. It was like suddenly having night vision! In the gloom of a world that couldn’t see God at all, **they** could now **clearly** see him. Where “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him,” (1 Corinthians 2:9), **their** eyes, ears and minds **could** conceive it. They could see it all very clearly in why Jesus had been born as a human being.

And why **was** Jesus born as a human being? To reveal God (John 17:6, 26). He was a walking, talking epiphany of God - in the true religious sense of the word “epiphany,” which means “the manifestation of the divine” or “the appearance of the invisible in visible form.” That’s why Paul could tell Christians in **verse 18** to “fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen,” because the unseen God **could** now be seen in the human Jesus. And that’s why Jesus’ human birth became so important in the early Church - and why it was called “Epiphany” too - because his birth **really was** an epiphany. He was **literally** doing what the word meant - making the invisible visible.

So the Church came up with a date for celebrating the birth of Jesus. To begin with, it seems, from what few records we have from that time, January 6th was chosen, based on the calculations of Clement of Alexandria in the late 2nd century, who came up with January 6, 2 BC, as the date of Jesus’ birth. January 6th also coincided very nicely in Alexandria with the birth date of Aeon, the pagan god of time and eternity, born from the virgin goddess Kore, creating a wonderful opportunity for Christians to use the day to shed light on who the **true** God of time and eternity was - **and** to point out that Jesus had also been born from a virgin to make the REAL God visible. Even the words the Egyptian heathen used in their celebration of Aeon’s birth were tailor-made for the Christian gospel: “The virgin has given birth to a child! The light grows!” - an exact description of **Jesus’** birth, and the light HE had come to shine on God!

The date of Christ’s birth was then shifted by the Western arm of the Church to December 25th in 336 AD, leaving the Eastern arm of the Church still celebrating his birth on January 6th. There were now two dates for celebrating Christ’s birth, 12 days apart. In time the Eastern Church also switched to December 25th, and then made the 12 day gap between December 25th and the evening of January 5th into a time of celebration too, and then topped **that** off by making January 6th more important than Christmas! For the Eastern Church the 12 days of Christmas were now a lead-in, or a build-up, to January 6th, when something even greater was being revealed about God through Jesus.

The timing was perfect too, because the Church in the 4th century really **was** discovering something greater about God through Jesus.

They knew already that Jesus was the perfect epiphany, or manifestation, of God. But if Jesus could reveal God so perfectly, what did that make **Jesus himself** into? Was HE “God” as well? But how could that be? Jesus was a human being they could see and touch. Clearly what they needed, then, was **another** epiphany - but this time a manifestation, or revelation, of who **Jesus** was.

And it came in Jesus’ baptism. Fortunately, the Church’s attention was already focused on Jesus’ baptism, because in their attempts to calculate the date of Jesus’ birth they came up with January 6th for the date of his baptism too. His birth and baptism were both celebrated, therefore, on January 6th. And calling that date “Epiphany” also worked out rather well, because it was celebrating Jesus’ baptism on Epiphany that gave them with the epiphany they were seeking on “who Jesus was” too.

It was all there in **John 1:31**, when John the Baptist told his listeners that “**the reason I came baptizing with water was that he (Jesus) might be revealed to Israel.**” There’s the clue. Jesus had been revealed for who he was at the time of John’s baptisms. It was through John the Baptist, therefore, that God had provided the night-vision goggles to “see” Christ. How? Here it is in John’s own words, in **verses 32-34**: “**I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, ‘The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.’ I have seen and testify that this is the Son of God.**”

John suddenly understood who Jesus was because **he’d** been given a clue too. The Spirit would come down like a dove and rest on Jesus. That was the clue. It then happened exactly as predicted - but with one amazing revelation attached to it, **Matthew 3:16-17** - “**As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.’**”

Can you imagine being John? He watched the Spirit descend and alight on Jesus, but then this voice spoke identifying Jesus as his Son. What? You mean the human being John had just baptized was in fact the “Son of God,” and God was Jesus’ Father?! It was the mother of all epiphanies, because God was now revealing himself through Jesus as a relationship of Father and Son. He was also revealing himself as a Triune God made up of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, because all three had taken part in the baptism. He was also revealing that Jesus was part of that Triune God **even as a human being**. Jesus the human was still “the Son of God,” so he was both human and divine at the same time.

The unseen was becoming more and more seen, and the invisible more and more visible, first through Jesus’ birth and now through his baptism. In his birth they could see God in the human Jesus, but in his baptism they could see that Jesus was also divine.

As the Church began to recognize the importance of both these epiphanies they separated them into two celebrations. The birth of Jesus - that had given them the eyes to see the unseen God in the human form of Jesus - was celebrated on December 25. The baptism of Jesus - that had given them the night-vision goggles to see Jesus as being both human and divine - was celebrated on January 6th.

It created a few changes because previous calculations had dated the visit of the Magi to Jesus on December 25th, but it was clear - in the gifts that the Magi had brought to Jesus and the **worship** they'd offered to him (Matthew 2:2, 11) - that the focus of their visit was **not** on God revealing himself through the human Jesus but on the human Jesus being divine. So the Magi's visit was switched from December 25th to Epiphany on January 6th, which coincided very nicely with Jesus being revealed as the divine Son of God at his baptism, which had also been dated on January 6th.

Other revelations of Jesus being divine were also attached to January 6th, like the wedding at Cana where Jesus performed his first miracle of changing water into wine, because the miracle "**revealed his glory,**" **John 2:11**. And that was the key, because the revealing of his glory was "**the light of the gospel.**" The eye-opening epiphany that gives us the eyes to see the unseen, that makes the invisible visible and provides us with the night-vision glasses to see through Satan's inky blackness to the sunny world of God above - is the "**the glory of Christ,**" as we read back in 2 Corinthians 4:4. And what is "the glory" of Christ? That "**(he) is the image of God**" (same verse). That's the epiphany, that Jesus the human being was made of exactly the same stuff as God. Split a plank down the middle and the two halves look exactly the same. Such was Jesus Christ. He was the mirror-image of God, and to get that point across was now the most important part of Jesus' ministry, starting with his baptism.

And why was it so important to reveal his glory through all the events and miracles he would perform from this point on? Because the **result** he was after was "**his disciples putting their faith in him,**" **John 2:11**. This was what his ministry was for, to open the eyes of his disciples to who he was to give them an epiphany so bright and sparkingly clear that they'd lift their eyes off the seen to the unseen - from seeing him only as a human to seeing him also as the Son of God with all the power of God himself residing in him - SO THAT they would put all their trust in him.

ALL the miracles he did were designed for that purpose - the feeding of the 5,000, the calming of the storm on the Sea of Galilee, the resurrection of Lazarus, the nets bursting with fish in John 21:4-7 - they were all meant for just one purpose, to create an epiphany in the minds and hearts of his disciples as to who he was. Everything he said and did came down to his disciples being able to answer ONE question: "**Who do you say I am?**" **Matthew 16:15**. And when Peter said, "**You are the Christ, the Son of the living God,**" **verse 16**, Jesus replied in **verse 17**, "**Blessed are you ... for this (epiphany) was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven.**"

The Father's great purpose too, then, is to reveal Jesus as his Son, because when that epiphany bursts like a firework in a human mind and heart, it does what God intends it to do: it makes rocks out of us so solid that the "the gates of Hades" - or the worst that the devil can throw at us - cannot shake or shift us, **verse 18**.

And why aren't we shaken? Because, **verse 19**, Jesus has given his Church "the keys of the kingdom of heaven" which unlocked the understanding of who he is. He's the great Son of God, King of God's kingdom and Head of the Church, against whom the gates of hell cannot prevail. And what he's doing now through the Spirit shining "the light of the gospel" through the Church, starting with Peter, is enabling ALL humanity to burst through Satan's blindness and see Jesus for the glorious being he is, so that we all, eventually, trust him with our lives and our hopes and dreams forever.

Epiphany takes on huge significance, therefore, as to Jesus' purpose for his Church. Through the Church God is loosening up the keys of the kingdom of heaven to everyone, so that all people can see the unseen world above, where Jesus, the Son of God, as both human and divine, is drawing all humanity into the same glorious relationship that he and the Father share.

What people need more than anything, then, to lift their eyes off the heart-breaking, frustrating, hope-sapping reality of living in this world to the unseen world where Jesus has us all hidden away with him - with all the power, wisdom and love he needs to make us ALL into sons of God - is seeing "the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ."

Paul understood very clearly, then, why God had revealed his unseen world to him, and he tells us why in **Galatians 1:15-16**. "But when God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me," the REASON God did that for Paul was "SO THAT I might preach him among the Gentiles." And why among the Gentiles? Because the keys to the kingdom of heaven - to the unseen glory of God above - were now available to everyone. "The mystery made known to me by revelation," **Ephesians 3:3** and **6** - "is that through the gospel the Gentiles (which includes all of us too, remember) are ... sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus."

EVERYONE can now see who Jesus is and what he's up to, so that they too will "put their faith in him" (John 2:11). Because that's what the "light of the gospel" is all about, and why Jesus performed all those miracles, and why he "baptizes with the Holy Spirit" (John 1:33). It's all to reveal "God's secret wisdom" (1 Corinthians 2:7), that through Jesus the mighty Son of God we are all being "brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God" (Romans 8:21).

And Epiphany was designed to fix our eyes on that, so that no matter what we see happening to us or to the world around us "we do not lose heart."