

Epiphany Breakout

✦ **Sincere faith in action** (vv.5-7)

✦ **On the wings of prayer** (vv.8,9a)

In the name of Jesus, our Epiphany light, dear shining Christians:

Scientists look for a “break through.” In hard economic times you just want “a break.” In sports a runner shakes tackles and “breaks away” down field too fast for anyone to catch him. Maybe some of you guys dreamed of a “break away” like that. Or maybe your memories are more like mine. A blocked pass drops into your arms. You try to run but it’s like a bad dream where your legs won’t move. One man to beat, the quarterback. Every fake only slows you down. Tackled! Well, the crowd loved it anyway.

Hearing a text like this, we’re spiritually inclined to try to help ourselves like that teenage athlete in the commercial. His “breakout” is right in the middle of his forehead. Everyone sees it but him. It keeps growing all the way to the awards ceremony. It gets so gross he crosses it with bandages. Finally the narrator says, “Take steroids and you’ll be an asterisk.” In our spiritually bankrupt society, how can we break away from our worries? We need an **Epiphany Breakout**. And God wants...

✦ **Sincere faith in action** (vv.5-7)

Religion on steroids is nothing new. God’s people tried by fasting to set things right, but kept getting nowhere fast. A few verses before our text they’re frustrated with God: **“Why have we fasted, and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?”** (58:3) Aren’t we like Job complaining to God? “I’m trying as hard as I can. Why don’t you bless me? I give up precious time to go to church. I study my Bible. I say my prayers. Why do I still wake up worried?”

God commanded the Israelites only once a year to fast on the Day of Atonement. (Leviticus 16:29) But that was to deny themselves work in order to worship and focus on the forgiveness of sins. Instead they added more fasts and ended up quarreling. Finally the LORD breaks through: **“Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for a man to humble himself? Is it only for bowing one’s head like a reed and for lying on sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD?”**

You can’t see it coming. Demanding of ourselves what God has not commanded only leads to the sin of worry. God does not command you to be financially successful. Why do you demand it of yourself? You are not required to do half of your daily activities. Why don’t you focus on God’s Word instead of your own works. God helps us with questions: **“Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter – when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?”**

Should we take an oath of poverty and spend every moment caring for the poor? You know what happened to Martin Luther as an Augustinian monk. Years later he recalled: *Fast bound in Satan’s chains I lay; Death brooded darkly o’er me. Sin was my torment night and day; In sin my mother bore me. Yet deep and deeper still I fell; Life had become a living hell, So firmly sin possessed me.* (CW 377:2)

Something just as painful happened to one of the sisters in Calcutta, India, serving the poorest of the poor for fifty years. In her letters published after her death Mother Teresa confessed, “There is such terrible darkness within me, as if everything was dead. It has been like this more or less from the time I started ‘the work.’”¹ Martin Luther and Mother Teresa looked in their hearts and found an empty pantry.

¹ “To the world, a life of devotion; in her soul, a struggle to believe,” by Helen Kennedy, *New York Daily News*. Excerpts of letters by Mother Teresa nearly 50 years until her death. Article reprinted in *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Aug. 2007, pp. 1A, 4A.

It was like the rich young man who found no peace in keeping God's commandments. His conscience still hurt so bad that he asked Jesus, "**What do I still lack?**" (Matthew 19:20) Can our good works come between us and God? Yes, because God says, "**There is no one who does good, not even one.**" (Romans 3:12 NIV) And when we assume otherwise, we worry because we think we deserve better from God and cannot figure out why He does not bless us. God wants **Sincere faith in action**. That means trusting God's Word instead of our works. Mother Teresa felt as if God abandoned her. She could find no comfort or peace in her own works even though they helped thousands. Nor can we. We shrivel up like grapes turned to raisins as sin turns us in on ourselves. Until we despair of our own righteousness and come as beggars to our God, frenzied activity is like a bad dream running nowhere fast. Faith is a gift of God given through His Word and sacraments. And **Sincere faith in action** is really God's work in us. This I love about Jesus. He works in us. Christ is our **Epiphany Breakout**...

✠ On the wings of prayer (vv.8,9a)

Did Jesus *loose the chains of injustice*? Yes, when He let Himself be bound by God's justice for all our sins. Jesus did *untie the cords of the yoke* and *set the oppressed free* from Satan tying up guilty consciences in works. Jesus not only shared *food with the hungry*, He fed 5,000 men, plus women and children with a little boy's lunch. Can He make your paycheck stretch too? Jesus invites, "**Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.**" (Matthew 11:28-30) By Baptism the dear Holy Spirit clothed our nakedness. God our Father cannot *turn away*, from His *own flesh and blood* since He gave His Son into death for us all. No matter how loudly your heart may lie, God promises, "**Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.**" So "**keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have.**" (Hebrews 13:5 NIV)

The LORD's blessings of "**light,**" "**healing,**" "**righteousness**" and "**glory**" do not depend on what we do. Right in the middle of these chapters of Isaiah 58-60, it says, "**The LORD looked and was displeased that there was no justice. He saw that there was no one, he was appalled that there was no one to intervene; so his own arm worked salvation for him, and his own righteousness sustained him. He put on righteousness as his breastplate, and the helmet of salvation on his head; he put on the garments of vengeance and wrapped himself in zeal as in a cloak.**" (Isaiah 59:15-17 NIV) "**While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.**" (Romans 5:8 NIV) Christ died for our worries too. He knows how badly we need His help. Christ alone is the answer. He is "**the LORD our Righteousness.**" (Jeremiah 23:6; 33:16)

In repentant tears, feeling our personal poverty, our helplessness to rid ourselves of worry and to care for those around us, Jesus is our **Epiphany Breakout**. We might better translate the last couple verses of our text: "**At that time right in the middle of your weakness, your Light breaks forth like the dawn, and your Healing quickly appears; at that time your Righteousness goes before you, and the Glory of the LORD is your rear guard.**" Christ before and Christ behind us – our Light, our Healing, our Rightness with God, our Glory. "**At that time you keep calling, and the LORD answers; you keep crying, and he keeps assuring: Look! Here I AM to help and comfort you**" – **On the wings of prayer**.

In my Confirmation prayer book, Thursday morning of the "First Week," is this paragraph:

*Whether my pathway leads to hilltops fair and high or through the sunless valleys where the shadows lie, it matters little. For I know that Thou art with me and that underneath are the everlasting arms. Where Thou does lead me I shall gladly go. Oh, guide me unerringly on life's uncertain pathway here to my heavenly homeland there. In Jesus' name.*²

So close your eyes and go to sleep. Trust His righteousness and forgiveness. Freed by the love of Jesus from that sin of worry, let your peaceful slumbers glorify your God. And then, come the morning light, turn outward and be a blessing to everyone you meet. In Jesus' precious name. Amen.

² *May Prayer Book*. Saint Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 1957. Eighth printing, 1967. p. 10.

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