

## Breath of Life

The act breathing has taken prominence over the last few months. “I can’t breathe” has been the cry of those who struggle with Covid-19 as the virus mercilessly destroyed their lungs. It has also been the cry of those who suffer from police brutality stemming from systemic racism in the US, and a tagline for those who are protesting for justice and reforms against racial and social discrimination across the world.

Breathing is synonymous with living. We hardly take notice of this basic function of living until it is being threatened. Breathing, being an automatic response in our body which we do unconsciously and involuntarily, is the most important mechanism that God has given to us. Breathing is our first action on the day we are born and our final act on the day that we die.

Breathing also plays a central role in Scripture. It was with God's act of breathing into the first human that brought him to life. “Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being” (Gen 2:7 NIV). In 2 Timothy, Paul describes God’s Word as “God-breathed.” The words for “spirit” in Hebrew (*ruach*) and Greek (*pneuma*)—the two languages in which the Bible was originally written—can also mean “breath.” The breath of God is not only essential to our physical existence but our spiritual nourishment too.

Therefore, this God-given gift can also be used as an avenue to connect to God. We can allow the rhythm of our relaxed breathing be an expression of prayer. The Desert Fathers and Mothers (3rd Century AD) practiced Breath Prayers as a way to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17). Breath prayers are short and simple prayers of petition that can be spoken in one breath. This practice was considered foundational to contemplation and a way to cultivate silence and attention. Short excerpts of Scripture would be prayed by breathing in with the first part of the text, and breathing out with the next. They would breathe slowly, deeply and repeatedly, allowing their prayers to descend with their minds into their hearts, forming their will in the image of Christ. Focusing on Scriptures not only prevented their minds and thoughts from wandering, but it also “let the word of Christ dwell in them richly” (Colossians 3:16).

Breath prayers have shown to benefit us physiologically as it relaxes our bodies that are overwhelmed by stress, anxiety and worry. This simple way of praying offers us an avenue to respond to stress by turning our attention from the stressors to the presence of God and reaching out to him in grace. In this stressful season of constant changes and uncertainties, we can be easily overtaken by many stressors in our lives. Our breaths can be an avenue to turn us back to God.

I recall a particularly stressful time in graduate school when crunch time meant endless hours of working on the computer reading, researching and writing. It was easy to be overwhelmed by the workload and lose sight of God. A wise professor taught us how to keep our focus on God by encouraging us to give the first 3 breaths to God each time we opened our laptops to begin our work.

As I breathe, I remember that my life is a gift from God.

As I breathe, I trust that the God who gave me life will also provide for my needs.

As I breathe, I become aware that God is present with me in the moment, and will help me with the work that he has given me to do. I seek God's wisdom, guidance and help.

This modified breath prayer has helped me through many stressful seasons. The next time you become aware of your breathing, may it also turn you to God in prayer. May this simple act of breathing point you back to the source of life who freely gives peace and comfort during these stressful times.



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## **The Spiritual Practice of Breath Prayers:**

There are two fundamental expressions of breath prayers - the first which is more formal and liturgical, and the second which is more conversational and spontaneous.

### **1. Breath Prayer based on Scriptures:**

The Desert Fathers developed the "Jesus Prayer" based on the tax collector's prayer for mercy in Luke 18:13. The simple words of "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me" (or sometimes the expanded version "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner") is one of the most common breath prayers.

#### **Practice:**

1. Choose a bible phrase that helps you to articulate what you might need to focus in the moment.
2. Take a minute or two to sit quietly and connect with the Lord. Take a few slow, deep breaths and allow your breathing to fall into a relaxed rhythm.
3. Breathe in as you pray the first half of a Bible phrase... Breathe out as you pray the second half.

Example: Breath Prayer on Psalm 23:1

Breathe in slowly and deeply as you pray and consider "The Lord is my Shepherd..."

Hold your breath and your consciousness of God's presence ...

And then breathe out as you pray "...I shall not want."

Repeat this prayer according to the rhythm of your breathing.

Other bible phrases that can be used include:

Inhale: Be still, Exhale: and know that I am God (Psalm 46:10)

Inhale: Speak Lord, Exhale: for your servant is listening (1 Samuel 3:9)

Inhale: Nothing can separate me, Exhale: from the love of God (Romans 8:38-39)

Inhale: Your grace, Exhale: is enough for me (2 Cor 12:9)

Inhale: There is no fear Exhale: in your Love (1 John 4:18)

Inhale: I will not be afraid, Exhale: for You are with me (Psalm 23:4b)

Inhale: You are our refuge Exhale: and our strength (Psalm 46:1)

Inhale: I find rest, Exhale: in Your shelter (Psalm 91:1)

Inhale: Peace of Christ, Exhale: guard my heart and mind (Philippians 4:7)

Inhale: My Soul finds rest, Exhale: in God alone (Ps 62:1)

### **2. Spontaneous Breath Prayers**

We are invited to pray a simple, intimate prayer of heartfelt desire to God. This practice includes a simple one-sentence prayer that begins with the biblical name of God that is meaningful for you; followed with a word or phrase expressing your deep God-given desire.

#### **Practice:**

1. Find some uninterrupted time, sit in silence, ponder the nearness of God.
2. Think about a name or image of God that is dear to you (Blessed savior, Abba, Immanuel, Holy Father, Gracious Lord etc). God can be addressed in a personal way that is closed and intimate.
3. Ask God to show you your desire or a present need (Peace, strength, faith, understanding etc)
4. Put your breath prayer together staying within what is comfortable to say in one breath (7-8 syllables)
5. Breathe in, calling on a biblical name or image of God.
6. Breathe out, voicing the deep desire or need of your heart. Offer God that desire as you exhale.

Examples:

Father, teach me your gentleness

Jesus, let me receive your grace;

Gracious master, remove my fear;

Holy Spirit, reveal my sin;

Lord, I belong to you

Sources:

1. Adele A. Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices that transforms us* (InterVarsity Press, 2005)
2. Richard Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home* (HarperCollins, 2002)
3. [www.soulshpherd.org](http://www.soulshpherd.org)