

Reflection Questions

Reflect on each of these questions. Spend time discussing them with your group or journaling them on your own.

1. When in your life have you felt that you were being sustained by God's love and grace?
2. What phrases might you use in a breath prayer? Why?
3. In what ways might a breath prayer be helpful to you during the course of the day?



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The Evangelical Covenant Church

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Breathe In, Breathe Out: Breath Itself is a Gift from God

A Devotional for Individuals and Small
Groups

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SCRIPTURE: Acts 17:24-28

The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath, and everything else. From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from anyone of us. For in him we live and move and have our being.



It happened almost without effort - a perfectly natural response to her new environment. Though the hard work of bringing forth new life was certainly evident to all in the room, our granddaughter's first intake of breath was seemingly effortless.

In. Out. In. Out. Breathing is about the most natural thing we do. From the first moment of our arrival in this world, we take air into our lungs and then let it out without even thinking about it. Breath is gift from God - fundamental to life itself. And yet I've often taken it for granted. I am rarely even conscious of this gift that sustains my life.

In a similar fashion God's presence, in and around me, is gift that sustains me. Not only has God created us, but we are sustained by the love and grace of God. Do I take that for granted as well? Throughout my life I've known of God's gifts of love and grace. But I didn't really think much about it. That truth did not permeate my being.

There was a season early in my adult life when I was desperate for more of God. During that time, I read the classics of the Christian faith. I devoured life stories of those who were also seeking God with heart, soul, mind and strength. One of those books was *The Way of a Pilgrim*. First published in 1884, it tells the story of an anonymous Christ-follower who was also desperate for a deeper relationship with Jesus.

While seeking God, this pilgrim's journey brought him to a wise spiritual guide who taught the prayer practice called *Jesus Prayer* or *breath prayer*. This practice offers a means of prayer without ceasing, which the apostle Paul encourages in 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18.

When consistently practiced, breath prayer has had the effect of increasing my awareness of Christ's presence both in and around me. It has caused me to remain more consciously aware of the fact that it is in God that I live and move and have my being.

In *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: practices that transform us*, Adele Ahlberg Calhoun puts it this

way. "Breathing is an unconscious thing. And breath prayer reminds us that just as we can't live on one breath of air, we can't live on one breath of God. God is the oxygen of our soul, and we need to breathe him in all day long."

In breath prayer, words are linked to the rhythm of breathing. A short phrase is chosen to express our desire to God. The form of breath prayer known as the Jesus prayer is based on phrases from Luke chapter 18. With an intake of air, one prays "Jesus, son of David," and during the letting go of air we complete the prayer, "have mercy on me, a sinner." Another form of this prayer could be expressed, "Lord, Jesus Christ...have mercy on me."

Such a breath prayer offers a means of praying not just with our minds but also with our bodies. With continued repetition, the prayer might even begin to unconsciously pray itself within us. Early Christians would make a habit of repeating a breath prayer as they went to sleep, and find that the words were still linked with their breathing upon awakening.



Numerous phrases might be fruitfully used in this type of prayer. Scripture offers many phrases that express desires of the heart. The main idea is that the phrase be short enough to match your breathing rhythm. Here are a few examples.

- "Healing God...make me whole."
- "Good Shepherd...be my guide."
- "Holy Spirit...teach me your ways."
- "Yahweh...hear my prayer."
- "Make me...an instrument of your peace."

Children can also be taught this simple form of prayer. Ask a child what names he or she uses to talk to God. Discuss together current prayer concerns and offer help to form them into a short phrase that can be prayed in this way. As parent, grandparent or friend, you could be praying the same breath prayer throughout the day on the child's behalf.

Breath itself is a gift from God. Why not use that gift as a means of communicating with the God whose love and grace sustains us moment by moment and day by day?



PRAYER: Sustaining God, increase our awareness of your love and grace so that we might more faithfully receive it from you and extend it to others. Amen.