

# Sunday 1st June 2025 - Living Prayer: Praying As Breathing

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Preacher: Matt Wallace

[ 0 : 00 ] We're starting a new series this morning called Living Prayer and it's on prayer, a series on which we'll be spending a few weeks. Because as you might imagine, prayer is a big topic. I mean, prayer is rightly seen as being central to spiritual life.

It's a staple of what it means to be a person of faith. It's a key part of what people of faith do when we gather together. I guess prayer, this word, is a catch-all kind of way of describing how we relate to and engage with God.

And it's therefore seen as a gift, the process by which little old us, little old me, can communicate with the God of the universe.

However, for all of its importance, for all of the privilege that comes with prayer, prayer can also be one of the most mysterious, one of the most perplexing, and I'd say at times one of the most difficult things that we're called to do.

It should be simple. It should be so natural for us, talking to the God who loves us. But I'm sure it's not just me who can find prayer pretty hard.

[ 1 : 19 ] You know, I get tongue-tied. I get incredibly self-conscious sometimes. I often feel completely inadequate when I start and I try to pray. And I'm someone who at times wonders if my words, if my thoughts are making even the blindest bit of difference to what I've got on my heart before God.

And yet, I wonder if perhaps that very tension with how we look at prayer, of being this precious but often sort of elusive gift, I wonder if that tension is perhaps to be expected.

Because the English word that we have for prayer, originally comes from the Latin word precarious. That's where prayer comes from.

That root meaning suggests that prayer is by its very nature precarious in Latin. We stick an O in precarious in English. Something which is, by nature, uncertain perhaps, a bit wobbly.

Somehow though, still there, still effective, still standing, still going. And with that in mind, I think that's why I was keen to call this series Living Prayer.

[ 2 : 33 ] Not living on a prayer, because that would give you a Bon Jovi earworm for the whole series. And we're halfway there already, I know. But living prayer, okay. Because however mysterious or frustrating we might sometimes find prayer.

Prayer is offered to us as a way of life, a way of living. The way, as I said, for us to communicate with and relate to and engage with God.

And so that's what we're going to hopefully be exploring in this series. It's what prayer is, how prayer works, and perhaps above all, how prayer can be the means by which our life with God can be nurtured and shared and shaped.

And we hope ultimately transformed. So what is prayer? It's a big question, isn't it? What is prayer? Well, in order to think about it and begin to perhaps ponder what it might be.

I want to begin by looking at a particular aspect of a time when the resurrected Jesus met with his disciples. It's a little verse from John's Gospel.

[ 3 : 43 ] When having greeted them on Easter Sunday afternoon or early evening, he says, Peace be with you. And then we're told that Jesus breathed on them and said, Receive the Holy Spirit.

A little verse. But it's quite a curious event, really. The risen Jesus breathing, you know, hurring on his disciples.

I mean, it's not a done thing, is it, really? I don't know in a room full of people if the last time you had someone breathe on you intentionally. Far too self-conscious about that.

Perhaps last night's curry might put us off that as well. And I'm not being funny, but Jesus has been dead for three days, so we have to assume that he'd had some Listerine or something going on. It's quite a brave step of anyone to make their breath prominent before other people.

But these practicalities and the social kind of hygiene aspects of breath aside, most importantly, it's clear that Jesus breathing on his disciples, over his disciples, is, as he says, his way of imparting God's Holy Spirit, his spirit to them.

[ 5 : 02 ] And this happens on Easter Sunday. It's kind of like a pre-Pentecost trailer, kind of taster of what was to come in a more widespread way after Jesus had ascended into heaven.

And we're told that the Holy Spirit at Pentecost comes not quite as breath, but as a rushing wind or like tongues of fire on the disciples. And we're going to be looking at the whole story and celebrating Pentecost next week.

So we'll unpack that event a bit more. But on this occasion, back to Easter Sunday, when the risen Jesus was still on earth and mixing in person with his disciples, I think it's worth unpacking why Jesus breathing his spirit onto, we might say effectively into his disciples.

Why might that be significant, particularly in light of prayer and how we relate to God? You see, why breath? Why breath as the way Jesus imparts his Holy Spirit to his disciples?

We've seen, through the rest of Jesus' life, other ways in which something of his spirit can be connecting to people. Why didn't Jesus say on this occasion, here, have some water, as he did to the woman at the well.

[ 6 : 18 ] As you drink this, know the living water of my spirit in you. Why didn't he offer them, as he did just a few days prior, some bread or some wine and say, eat this, drink this, know the sustenance, the physical sustenance of my spirit in you.

Well, then even perhaps just as the woman who was healed of bleeding experienced, why didn't he say, look, just touch the edge of my cloak and receive my spirit in the way that she did.

Why might breathing on his disciples here be significant? Well, I think we could suggest that it's Jesus' way of perhaps tying in with the way that God is described in Genesis 2 as breathing life into the first human, where in this kind of picture story, we're told that the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life.

You might say the kiss of life almost. And the man became a living being. Maybe Jesus is deliberately sort of associating his breath with the breath of God in creation.

And I'm sure there's something in that going on. Equally, maybe Jesus had with this breathing thing, maybe he had in mind a vision from the prophet Ezekiel, where Ezekiel is shown a valley of dry bones that God brings to life by breathing on them.

[ 7 : 49 ] God says through Ezekiel, he says, I will put my breath in you and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the Lord. So again, maybe Jesus breathing on his disciples at this point is in a similar vein so that they will come at spiritual life, if you like, knowing him as a resurrected Lord and Saviour.

Know, as it says in Ezekiel, that he is the Lord, that he is God. And again, I'm sure there's something in that association going on as well.

But my hunch is with Jesus breathing here. I think it's actually probably a lot simpler than that. In that the very act, if you like, of breathing is used by Jesus as a way of showing his disciples that being filled with God's Spirit is anything but a one-off or temporary experience.

Now, just as breathing in and out and in again is a continual, ongoing, every moment of everyday experience for us, so I suspect that Jesus breathing on his disciples is his way of saying, look, be filled and continue to be filled with my Spirit with every breath you take.

I'm no longer going to be with you in person, at least not for much longer, but receive my Spirit and know that I am with you in as close and in as ongoing a way as the very breath in your lungs.

[ 9 : 25 ] Indeed, as we may know, the Hebrew word for Spirit is ruach, and the Greek word for Spirit is pneuma. But both of these Hebrew and Greek words, yes, they can be translated as Spirit, but they can equally be translated as breath.

This sort of double meaning that's here throughout the Bible, New and Old Testament, conveys the idea that God's Spirit is as present with us as the breath in our lungs.

And so that, I would suggest, is the basis on which we'd do well to perhaps build our understanding of what prayer is. Yes, we can have intentional times of prayer, times where we pay special attention to God and are focused in our communication, and we'll be exploring what that might look

like as the series goes on.

But really, I think a life of prayer, living prayer, as we might say, is just that. It's a realization that every moment, every breath is taken in communion, in tandem with the Spirit of God.

You know, through the Spirit, through the breath in our lungs, God, the God of creation, if you like, is with us all the time. And that's what causes people like the psalmist in Psalm 139 to say, look, where can I go from your spirit?

[10:54] It's like the ultimate rhetorical question, because the answer is nowhere. You can't go anywhere from God's Spirit, because God's Spirit, God's breath, it's not just all around us, but it's in us.

It's your breath in our lungs, as we sometimes sing in our song. That means that every thought, every feeling, every hurt, every hope, every concern, God is with us in it.

He's fully aware of everything that we're experiencing. And again, as the psalmist says, before a word is on my tongue, you, Lord, know it completely.

It's not, I'd suggest, because God is ahead of us in time, but because God knows us so well, better than we know ourselves, that of course God will be aware of how we tick, and how we're likely to react, how we're likely to speak in any particular situation.

Now, that intimate knowledge that God has of us, that intimate awareness, that presence with us, I imagine if we're someone, perhaps we would say, we don't really know or trust God ourselves, that idea of God being with us in this way, that might freak us out a bit.

[12:17] It might make us feel embarrassed, perhaps ashamed, of what God is therefore aware of at times in our lives. But I think since God knows us in this way, knows it all, and still chooses to dwell with us in ways which are as close as our breath, I just think how mind-blowing, how overwhelming, how wondrous, if you like, is that.

If we can embrace the truth of God's loving presence with us, then every moment, every breath, can in effect become a prayer.

Every breath is a communication of gratitude and acknowledgement of that gift, reassurance that whatever we go through, whatever we do, whatever we get right, whatever we get wrong, God will never leave us nor forsake us as sure as there's breath in our lungs.

As I say, that I would suggest is the foundation of prayer on which Jesus calls us to build our lives. Where every breath, every inhale, if you like, is an opportunity to be inspired afresh by his spirit so that every exhale, every word we utter, every action we take, every thought we have, slowly but surely becomes more and more expressed as a living prayer of devotion and obedience to the presence of God's loving voice in our lives.

That's the theory, I think, at least. But what is that kind of understanding of prayer being this continual, constant thing? What does that kind of understanding of prayer look like and feel like in practice?

[14:10] How do we sort of embrace that idea of prayer being this constant, ongoing thing? We're going to hear from others as this series goes on over the next few weeks.

But I think for today, for me, in my own limited, tentative experience, I just want to share with you some of how I'm trying to put this idea, put this practice, if you like, into my life.

I'm sure there are many here, in fact, I know there are many here who are well ahead of me in terms of the prayer curve and the sort of prayer warrior kind of stuff. I feel quite a novice with this prayer stuff.

So feel free to ignore everything I'm about to say, as you can always ignore everything I'm about to say. But I know this idea of breathing as the ongoing indwelling of God's spirit in our lives.

Actually, that's been pretty key for me in my own faith journey with God. So, for example, in those times in my life when I become aware that I'm getting anxious or overwhelmed or nervous or angry, I try, it's my intention, I try for a start just to slow my breathing down and kind of become conscious of it.

[15:34] Often, you know, we breathe all the time, we're not aware of our breath, but my intent at times is to become aware of it, to become conscious of it. And if I can, if a cold or hay fever allows, I try and breathe in through my nose and then out through my mouth a few times.

And even that simple act that does help to calm me down in and of itself. If I'm sitting on my own when I'm concentrating, I'm breathing, I might close my eyes, or if I'm walking or driving, obviously I don't, but as I keep that sort of intentional breathing going, I just begin within that breath to focus in

particular on the breath in to me.

And as I'm breathing in, I just kind of quietly say in my head, hello God, like that. It's a shorthand way of mine, I think, of saying, you know, I'm being intentional here.

We're here again, aren't we God? I'm getting flustered, or whatever, and I need your help in this moment. And as I breathe in, I'm kind of asking in that action for God to be with me, you know, to fill me afresh with the spirit, to inhabit my thoughts and my feelings and all that I am.

And as I breathe in, and I'm imagining breathing in God's spirit, if I can, sometimes I might hold my hands out in a kind of receptive kind of way, but that doesn't matter too much for me.

[17:12] It's the breathing in which seems to do the trick, because it's like that breath sort of slowly filters around my body, if you like. And when I feel I've breathed in enough for the time being, sufficiently inflated, if you like, I then turn my thoughts to my breathing out, you know, my exhaling.

And just as I've been imagining breathing in more of God, so here I imagine breathing out anything that is not of God.

This could be anxious thoughts, it could be criticism of others that I'm thinking, it could be selfishness, it could be impatience, it could be a stinky temper that day, whatever it is.

It could just be the fact that I'm feeling hacked off or low and I don't know why. Whatever it is that's stealing my peace, my ability to be kind or trusting or whatever, I ask for God's help as I breathe out to get that out of me.

And so I breathe out, you know, less of that unhelpful stuff, please be gone. And as I breathe in, I'm asking more of you, more of your ways, God.

[18:27] And sometimes that's it, it can be a couple of minutes and something in me, hopefully, something works, God works in that. Other times though, especially if I'm continuing to struggle with something or I can't shake a thought or whatever, kind of press pause and then revisit the process a bit later and go through it again.

And often I find the need to repeat all that gives me a kind of stronger resolve to submit to God. So I'll often be saying to myself, come on, I've just done this, oh my God, do it again, okay, come on, come on God, work your stuff here, help me to move on, give me more of you and less of that, I want to get this cracked with you.

And then at other times, other days, perhaps when there's nothing specifically going on that I feel I need to exhale or overcome or I'm feeling pretty neutral on that day, I'll use that breathing in thing perhaps as a way of praying in qualities like say the fruit of the spirit from Galatians 5.

So on every couple of breaths in, I might say what more of your love, God? And I kind of breathe it in and hold it there. And I might breathe in again, more of your joy, please God, more of your peace. Sometimes though, as I'm praying these qualities in, I might feel a prompting to stop on one of them, particularly patience with me at the moment, that's the thing I struggle with sometimes.

[20:05] If I get snappy with Jerm or the kids or a random person in the Audi queue or whatever. So I'll dwell on patience for a while, breathing in my need for God's patience and breathing out, effectively confessing my impatience and a desire not to be so snappy or whatever.

But equally, this breathing in, breathing out thing, through the spirit and so on, I can pray for others in that way too. So I hold someone in my mind and as I breathe in, I'm asking God to say, fill them with his love, his joy and as I breathe out, I'm asking for God to help them put down or be freed from anything that's unhelpful for them.

So with Albie, who we just prayed for, God's operation coming this week, I might breathe in that he would have a knowledge of God's peace and I might breathe out asking that God's spirit would work just getting rid of anything in his body that's not going to be helpful for him, that kind of breathing and so on and so on.

Breathing in, breathing out. And in fact, if our breathing is about inspiration and expiration, then perhaps I wonder sometimes putting the two together could be described as conspiring, inspiring, expiring, conspiring with God, conspiring for how we and others might become more of the people God always intended us to be.

And what I've found, I think over recent months, perhaps over the years, the more I've practiced this kind of breath praying on an intentional basis, actually the more natural, the more I slip into it more quickly, almost like a spiritual muscle memory.

[21:52] So sometimes I find just one breath in and out can do the trick, it's sufficient to reset me with God. Not always, but sometimes, that's the hope. As I said, my experience in this is limited and I'm very much a work in progress, but at some level at least, I do sense it's helping me, I do sense

it's helping me, and I guess in describing that at some length, I guess I'm simply commending it as an idea and as a practice for your consideration too.

Indeed, I wonder if perhaps this breathing idea is what the apostle Paul meant in his letter to the Thessalonians when he tells them this, he says, rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

We might think of the idea of praying continually, praying without ceasing as some translations put it, might think that's just ridiculous. How do you pray continually?

And I guess if we think of prayer as all hands together, eyes closed on our knees or whatever, it is ridiculous. We can't pray like that all the time. But if prayer at its most foundational becomes as lived and as ongoing an experience as our breathing, which is continual, then who knows what levels of transformation God might be able to work in us.

If there's one thing you remember from this, I want to say, if we can breathe, we can pray. If we can breathe, we can pray. And that means that no matter how unqualified or inexperienced we might feel, a living prayer life is more than possible for us all.

[ 23 : 43 ] One final thought, one thing to perhaps close with for now on this living prayer concept. Because what I think I'm learning alongside this is that the more I pray in intentional ways, through this breathing technique or whatever, the more naturally God slowly becomes more a part of my inner dialogue, my thought processes.

As I said earlier, God knows our thoughts anyway. He knows exactly what I'm thinking, what you're thinking. So it's really quite a small step from having our own thoughts to acknowledging God's presence with us in those thoughts.

thoughts. And that can mean that our thought life, far from being about introspection or self-interest or thinking that we can think about things that God won't be aware of, actually instead it can grow into an ongoing conversation and interaction with God.

If you like, our thoughts become our prayers, enabling us to journey with God through the Spirit's presence with us every breath, every moment of every day.

That's the goal, perhaps, to know what it means to be a living prayer. And that's something that we're going to continue to explore as this series goes on.

[ 25 : 10 ] I'm just going to play a song, and it's called Living Prayer. And you might want to use these words just as a way of bookending perhaps what we've been thinking about as your own prayer.

Let's use this as a sort of devotion to God. And I ask that he might root in us anything that's helpful from today that we can take into our daily lives and become this idea of a living prayer with God. in this world I walk alone with no place to call my home but there's one who holds my hand the rugged road through barren lands the way is dark the road is steep but he's become my eyes to see strength to climb my griefs to bear the Savior lives inside me there in your love

I find relief of haven from my unbelief take my life and let me be a living prayer my God to Thee love in these trials of life I find another voice inside my mind he comforts me and bids me live inside the love the Father gives in your love

I find release a haven from my unbelief unbelief my life and let be a living friend my God to Thee take my life and let me be a living prayer my to Thee life and let be a living prayer to Thee God to Thee God to Thee God to Thee God to Thee