What does Paul mean by Scripture being God-breathed?

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Preacher: Dr. Olav Slaymaker

[0:00] Thank you for that gracious welcome. It's a thrill to be back. So many years of inspiration from Learners' Exchange have not fallen on totally dry ground.

Indeed, when Alexandra asked me, what are you going to be talking about this time? I gave her two options. And the first one was a summary and review of the two dozen presentations that I had given to Learners' Exchange in the last 30 years.
And the other was the question of the God-breathedness of the Scriptures. And it was a great affront to my ego when she chose the latter.
But perhaps we will be able to get to lunch relatively easily with this topic.
It turns out that there was obviously some purpose in the selection of this topic. It's not a topic that I've ever thought about carefully, which is curious, as it is such a basic thing.
[1:21] Why do we sing, breathe on me breath of God? Why do we look for mystery in our relationship with God?

God speaks. He has spoken. And yet, it seems that the best definition of the authority of Scripture is that what we find in 2 Timothy, namely, the theopnoustos, or that's my only Greek, or the God-breathed nature of Scripture.
And indeed, there is, from what I would call, I would call this talk a meditation, rather than an academic disquisition.
It's a meditation because I realize I haven't spent enough time thinking about the power of the breath of God. And I know in many ways it's a metaphor, but in other senses it's it's a very direct sense of a relationship between the believer and our Lord.
So I've been very much helped in meditating on the topic by three books. And I'm not asking you to read them now.
[3:01] You'll be very familiar with The Joyful Exiles by Jim Houston. which is a complicated book, but one which grows on one after a while.

This book of sonnets by Malcolm Geit. And as many of you will know, I am not a sonneteer, but it has insights which are profound.
And I found them very helpful. And a third one, which I think is, in my view, the most outstanding book that has recently appeared, called The Spirit of Early Evangelicalism by Bruce Heinmarsh, who you know.
And this is a remarkable it's subtitled True Religion in a Modern World, but really, in a way, it is the revival of the spirit of early evangelicalism.
It's exciting in the context of so much negative press with respect to the use of the term evangelical. It reminds us of the true spirit of early evangelicalism, which is something to be reminded of and be excited about.
[4:26] You have one handout, I believe, which gives an outline of what I'm planning to do. And there's also a handout that contains two of the sonnets on which I wish to comment.

So, what do the people in this group understand by the term God-breathed? Has anyone here listened to a sermon on the God-breathedness of Scripture?
Has anyone got some experience associated with the sense of the presence of God through the breathing into the text?
Seems to me it implies the way in which there's so much to be learned that we don't normally take into account, that we take for granted.

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And I think the God-breathedness of the text in many ways short-circuits the academic discussions about the authority of Scripture.
[5:50] Because if it is indeed God-breathed, as I believe it to be, then the discussion about literalism and other aspects of debate fall away.

the more one reads and meditates on the Scriptures, the more profound they become. And graduating from my teenage years to the present, my teenage years, the object of the exercise was to find out how accurate this book was.
Where was it inadequate? and so on. The sort of critical teenage person trying to find out what's the authority of Scripture.
But more and more as one gets older, I'm sure you've noticed, the profound nature of the revelation in the Scriptures becomes obvious.
So one topic, the metaphor of God's breath, the nature of God's breath, the starting point of my thoughts is to draw attention to the scarcity of Scripture references to the adjective God breathe.
[7:26] In the original Greek, only the following reference, I think is directly relevant. To Timothy 3, verse 16, all Scripture is God breathed, is inspired by God, is useful for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.

righteousness. But the second point, after the point of the scarcity of Scripture reference, is to look at the adjective and its meaning in Genesis chapter 2, verse 7, in which the verse is quite specific, that God breathed into Adam's nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being.
The power of God's breath is center of the stage in the very first book of the Bible, and the power of the Scriptures through its God-breathedness is emphasized right at the end of the Scriptures in 2 Timothy.
So that there are these two very direct references stages, but in themselves extraordinarily important, and marking interesting stages in the emergence of truly human persons, when God breathed into Adam's nostrils the breath of life, and so important in relation to our understanding of God- breathedness in the Scriptures.
So the sense that life, spiritual life, are both undergirded by this sense of God-breathedness.
[9:23] But of course we don't have to stop at these direct references. There are also numerous contextual and related concepts that help to deepen our understanding of ways in which God communicates with his people.

and I want to just read one page from Jim Houston's book, The Joyful Exiles, just to remind us of some of the substance of the related concepts.
Jim talks at length about hiddenness, the hiddenness of the hidden life in Christ. And he talks about the seven qualities of this godly silence.
And you'll forgive me if I read these seven points because I think they're expressed better than I could do. first of all, as part of this hiddenness and godly silence, we recognize God's presence even in affliction.
Secondly, once we have gained some understanding of God's holiness, we obey the injunction to be silent before the sovereign Lord. thirdly, with further experience of God's grace, we rest submissively and peacefully in him, never blaming him for our afflictions, and declaring, I know, O Lord, that your laws are righteous.
[11:07] Fourthly, the conviction grows that in all things God works for the good of those who love him. This helps us in deepest trust to leave the outcome wholly in his hands.

Fifthly, we are constantly reminded that it is not God's character to afflict unnecessarily. It remains his strange work. Sixthly, it becomes easier to listen to God's command, be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him.
And finally, such wise and trusting silence before God becomes saturated with his presence so that willingly we surrender and resign ourselves into God's gracious hands, murmuring, Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.
These seven qualities of godly silence provide context for the way in which God breathes into the scriptures and into the granting of true life.
And it seems to me that in that set of comments that Jim Houston makes, the connection between the god-breathedness of scripture and the awe with which we need to come when we speak about the scriptures or when we read the scriptures.

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[12:47] You are all saturated in Bible studies in this church. God has blessed you with so many opportunities for delving into the scriptures.

scriptures. I'm just at the beginning of a Bible study at the new church that Margaret and I live adjacent to and the rector of that church has been running a lonely Bible study waiting for someone to volunteer from the congregation.
So guess who? But the excitement of opening the scriptures for the first time is quite remarkable. And, you know, this is an evidence of the life that is actually breathed into the scriptures. And that when people get the opportunity just to get a nudge, that this suddenly becomes the central part of their Christian life.
So I think that's really the empirical evidence of the way in which God has breathed life not only into us as living beings, but into his word, which helps us to grow.
[14:18] we can think of a whole range of scriptures, and I have listed in my references only a small fraction of them.

If you look at the outline, there's a set of references. They're not all Regent College books. The first list is a list of the scriptural references that seem to me to gather strength to the argument of the importance of understanding and getting some sense of the breath of the hidden life.
And all of this seems to me under the general heading of the way in which Hebrews refers to. Long ago, God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways, and in these last days he has spoken to us by his son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the world.
He is the reflection of God's glory, the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. And later on in Hebrews, the word of God is quick and powerful and sharper than any two-edged sword, a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.
[15:57] So all these are scriptures that are well known to us, but it seems to me they come together under the umbrella of the God breathedness of scripture, that all the individual verses that we hang on to as we study and reflect on the word are actually a part of the mystery of how God interfaces with us and his people.

So what do we understand about our dependence on the breath of God?
Again, I refer to the fact that when we sing this hymn, Breathe on me, breath of God, fill me with life anew, breathe on me, breath of God, until my heart is pure, breathe on me, breath of God, until I am wholly thine, and breathe on me, breath of God, so shall I never die.
But this hymn is an expression of our sense of the mystery of God's breath. The reason that I wanted to draw your attention to Bruce Pynemarsh's book is that he seems to have captured the essence of this thought.
It's a quote from the Wesleys, and it says simply, the scriptures invite a trembling awe.
[17:50] And I want to repeat that because it seems to me such a profound statement. The scriptures invite a trembling awe.

Many of us have sensed this in a physical way when invited for the first time to read the scriptures in public. we literally shake, not just because of our nervousness at standing up in front of our friends, but because of the sense of the obligation and responsibility that we have to make clear what the scriptures say.
And I want at this point simply to refer to the second sonnet on your hymn sheet, which is entitled The Lectern.
Some of us had the privilege of lunching with Malcolm Geith this summer. You see this long list of items, very small print.
I was trying to be conservationist, but I knew that if I put it on a two-sided thing, you would lose it.
[19:26] On the lower half of this handout, the context, well, it's called the lectern.

the context is Malcolm Geith in his church, the one that he was before he became chaplain at Girton College, St.
Edwards, I guess, he asked one of the senior members of his congregation to read the scriptures for the first time.
and he said he's one of the most spiritual of the members of his congregation. He was terrified. He was terrified for very good reasons, that he was suddenly conscious of the responsibility that he had to read clearly and in accordance with what God had breathed into the pages.

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So, Malcolm was wonderful in his empathy for this gentleman, and he decided he needed to write a sonnet about the event, and it goes as follows.
[20:46] Some rise on eagle's wings. This one is plain, plain English workmanship in solid oak. Age gracefully, it says, go with the grain.

You walk towards an ever-open book, open as every life to every light, open to shade and shadow, day and night, the changeless witness of your changing pain.
Be still, the lectern says, stand here and read. Here are your mysteries, your love and fear, and running through them all the slender thread of God's strange grace, red as these ribbons, red as your own blood when reading reads you here, and pierces joint and marrow.
so you stand, the lectern still beneath your trembling hand. It's a lovely sonnet.
I hope you get the sense of the... Well, you don't have to imagine an old gentleman. You can see one. And this gentleman was just so encouraged and inspired by the experience.
[22:17] That's the life God has breathed into, not only the scriptures, but into his people through the scriptures. So I say again, the scriptures invite a trembling awe.

I do think, without wanting to over-labor it, that this is really one of the most exciting books that has appeared recently. And when I say that, I'm conscious of the fact that Regent College is producing a library of books every week.
And I think even our most distinguished scholars in this group have difficulty keeping up with the production, and I'm not in any way trying to belittle the others.
It's simply that this one, it seems that just that phrase, actually the clause, that the scriptures invite a trembling awe, sums up what my meditation on this topic has led to.
Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. I'mouch. Thank you. I'mouch. Thank you. I'mouch.
In their various hymnodies, which Bruce Hindmarsh lists in great scholarly detail, they include a couple of other important points.
[23:52] Firstly, thy creatures all thy breath receive. This is directly from the Wesleys. By thy inspiring they live, without thy inspiration they die.

At all in forming breath thou art, who dost continued life impart. That's the way in which the breath of God continues to infuse life.
And beyond our utmost thought and reason's proudest flight, we comprehend him not, nor grasp the infinite, but worship in the mystic three, in one God to all eternity.
That's from Charles Wesley's Hymns on the Trinity, which was published in 1767. These, it seems to me, are all contextual insights into the importance of the breath of God in the scriptures.
Perhaps it is this awe, and the way in which the word awesome has been butchered by contemporary generation, including my grandchildren.
[25:22] For whom everything trivial is awesome. But the awesomeness of God, something that perhaps we have lost sight of.

I was in Greece recently, and I attended a Greek Orthodox church, and of course the ceremony and the incense and so on fill the atmosphere, and some people start choking.
But that's just an essential point. The point is that everything is being focused on the awesomeness of the presence of God.
And you have to be startled by the sense of how seriously the whole liturgy and the organization of the church and so on is focused on the awe in the presence of God.
I know there are problems, but there are problems everywhere. And I think we tend to underestimate or underemphasize the awesomeness with which God is present.
[26:39] The second sonnet on that same page is...

Sorry, the second one is on top and the first one is on the bottom. As Alexandra overstated my ability as a teacher, I should have had the first one on top.
Malcolm Geith's sonnet, which is intended to be associated with the twelfth station of the cross on Good Friday, when Jesus dies, simply reinforces the matter of the breath of God.
Every line, virtually, talks about the breath of Jesus. I read...
The dark nails pierce him, and the sky turns black. We watch him as he labors to draw breath. He takes our breath away to give it back, return to its birth through his slow death.
[27:53] We hear him struggle, breathing through the pain, who once breathed out his spirit on the deep, who formed us when we mixed the dust with rain, and drew us into consciousness from sleep.

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His spirit and his life he breathes in all, mantles his whole world in his one atmosphere. And now he comes to breathe beneath the pall of our pollutions, draw our injured air to cleanse it and renew. His final breath breathes and bears us through the gates of death. I haven't seen a more remarkable description of Jesus' death, but emphasizing simply the question of the breath of God, which is actually being expelled or inspired at that point.
So again, it seems to me in that sonnet, the scriptures invite a trembling awe.
They do focus upon the mystery of the atonement that is the central core of our faith.
[29:35] And so, in a way, we move from the breath of God inspiring the first human, fully human being through the breath of God inhabiting the scriptures to the breath of God being expressed at the cross.

And it seems to me that the combination of the breath of God and the awe with which we need to respond is a reminder.
It certainly was a reminder to me as I meditated on these thoughts. So I don't wish to prolong discussion.
You may say you haven't got very far in your meditation. And in a sense, it's true. But it's a long way further than I had reached before the request came to address this special group.
So, in conclusion, although the term is infrequently used, as in Genesis and in 2 Timothy, God's breath is a rich metaphor of his life-giving activity, which is expressed equally richly in references to Jesus' and the Holy Spirit's communication of that breath.
[31:13] There's a sense of awe and mystery that accompanies any reference to God's breath as a mysterious way in which God communicates with his people. Because as a people we are so busy and distracted, we often miss the still small voice of God who wishes to redirect our priorities and to transform our lives.

In the ongoing debates about the authority of Scripture, the word God breathes should be decisive for the believer.
There is, I believe, and as I hope to have shown through these references, a strong connection between the God-breathed nature of the Scriptures and the awe that the Scriptures invoke as we approach, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them.
the Scriptures invite a trembling awe. I would appreciate not only your insights and sharing at this point, but also would ask for your prayers for the development of Bible studies at the Church in St. Lawrence in Coquitlam and for the growth of the sense of the centrality of the Scriptures, which I guess in many churches has been lost.
Thank you.

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