

SOME THOUGHTS ON BREATH PRAYER

Breath Prayer as a way to meditate on a short Bible verse while slowly breathing in and out.

Breathing a prayer to God is a simple way of using your body to engage your mind on the Word of God. Whispering the words of Scripture as you are breathing in and out, slowly and deeply, over and over, can help you to “abide” in Christ (John 15:4,5,9). This is a special way to *Abide in Prayer*.

Richard Foster in his book, *Prayer*, refers to this kind of meditative prayer as “prayer of the heart” (p. 141). Quiet, reflective prayers are a way to overcome the mind’s tendency to wander and get distracted. It’s a way to increase your consciousness and appreciation of God’s presence. It’s a way to “*let the word of Christ dwell in your richly*” (Col. 3:16).

A Breath Prayer Example

You may be unsure exactly what a Breath Prayer is. One example of a kind of Breath Prayer use is “**The Lord is my Shepherd... I shall not want.**” Here is one way I do this:

- Breathe in slowly and deeply as you whisper or think: “The Lord is my Shepherd...”
- Hold your breath and your consciousness of God’s presence...
- And then exhale as you whisper or think: “...I shall not want.”

Are Breath Prayers Biblical?

Using a Breath Prayer may be new to you. Perhaps you’re wondering, *Why focus on our breathing? Is this Biblical?*

This is not a New Age or Eastern meditation approach to reach Nirvana or emptiness. It’s an ancient way of connecting with the Lord Jesus Christ by renewing our mind and heart on Scripture.

Breath Prayers help us draw closer to the Lord Jesus Christ and thereby to overcome worry, fear, low self-esteem, compulsive behavior, or anger. This simple practice can make for a delightful time of meditating on Scripture and then throughout the day you can use your Bible phrase as a little arrow prayer that you shoot up as often as you can remember, which helps you to learn to follow Paul’s teaching to “*pray without ceasing*” (1 Thess. 5:17).

To meditate deeply on Scripture is to “*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly*” (Col. 3:16). We take God’s Word from our mind down, down, down into our heart so that our will is formed by it. *Breath Prayer* meditations on Scripture help us to become as the branch that abides in the Christ-Vine to bear fruit *naturally* (John 15:1-7).

Prayers Jesus Breathed

Jesus said his words are spirit and life (Jn 6:63). There's resurrection power in the Word of God!

When Jesus was being crucified on the cross his last breath was a prayer to his Abba, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Jesus in Luke 23:46, NKJV).

Then after Jesus rose from the dead and before he left earth to ascend back into heaven he appeared to his disciples and he breathed on them saying, "Receive the Holy Spirit" (John 20:22b, NIV). Jesus breathed his prayer for his disciples. He breathed his Word of life in them. He breathed the Holy Spirit into their souls.

God's Breath of Life

Jesus breathing the Holy Spirit into his disciples recalls the creation story when the Lord breathed his Spirit into Adam's dust-formed body and he became a living soul (Gen. 2:7).

The Biblical languages link Spirit and breath. Both the Hebrew word "*ruah*" and the Greek word "*pneuma*" are translated as either "breath" or "spirit" (God's Spirit or our spirit). To breathe is to be alive! And the spirit is the will, the essence of life.

The Psalmist's Way of Prayer

We see quiet, reflective prayer used in the Hebrew Psalter, our prayer book. This ought to assure us that contemplative prayer is Biblical. In the Psalms we have many short prayers repeated over and over like "His love endures forever" or "Lord, have mercy."

We also see the Psalmist breathe a prayer, in a way, when he offers words like, "My life is a breath" (Psalm 39:5, 11; 144:4, paraphrase). And the book of Psalms closes with the words: "Let everything that has breath praise the Lord" (Psalm 150:6).

And 71 times in the Psalms the Psalmist literally pauses to invite us to take a breath with him. He does this by inserting the word, "*Selah*." The *Selaha*s were added to the Psalms after they were written. "*Selah*" probably means, "***Pause to reflect and pray.***" Right in the middle of the Psalm – as it was being read or sung! – a sacred space was made to be still and quiet in prayer before the Lord.

The Desert Fathers and Mothers

About three centuries after Christ men and women known as the Desert Fathers and Mothers went out into the Egyptian desert to pray and meditate on God's Word. This was after the years of intense persecution when many Christians were martyred. These monks and nuns were separating themselves from the worldliness in the church, which was increasingly adapting to and being accepted by Roman culture.

The Desert Fathers and Mothers lived in cells or huts made of reeds and practiced austere and rigorous spiritual disciplines like silence, solitude, simplicity, fasting, penance, and obedience to an elder. Their asceticism was their "internal martyrdom" that purged their souls of sin and worldliness and led them into lives of intimacy with the Lord and ministry to others. Their testimony to the transforming life of Christ was so powerful that

thousands of people traveled to visit them in the desert to receive spiritual direction or healing.

One of the beautiful things that emerged from the disciplined life of the Desert Fathers and Mothers was their soul-full practice of Breath Prayers. They contemplated on Christ's presence in quiet solitude, meditating on short, one breath prayers. Often they did this while sitting outside their cells and weaving baskets from reeds.

They breathed in God's Word slowly and deeply. Gently, they repeated their prayer, over and over, letting it descend with their minds into their hearts, to form their will in the image of Christ.

They would breathe their prayer before going to sleep at night until it prayed itself within their souls while they slept. Then when they awoke in the morning the prayer was still on their lips!

The Jesus Prayer

The Desert Fathers and Mothers prayed the Psalms every day. They regularly prayed the whole Psalter in sequence. And they picked up one of the most common prayers of the Psalmist: "Lord, have mercy" ("*Kyrie Eleison*" in Greek).

Jesus put this prayer on the lips of the tax collector in his parable. The tax collector and not the Pharisee was made right with God after he beat his breast in repentance and humility and cried out, "God, have mercy on me a sinner" (Luke 18:13).

The Desert Fathers developed this into a Breath Prayer that became known as the "Jesus Prayer": "*Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.*" (Sometimes this is expanded further as, "*Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner.*")

Using our Bodies in Prayer

Breathing a prayer is simply a *bodily expression* of worship that assists us in engaging our whole self in prayer and devotion to the Lord Jesus Christ. Our bodies are temples for the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19). It's in our bodies and with our bodies that we pray and fellowship with God.

The Psalmist prays using his body. Sitting quietly, falling on his face, kneeling, standing, raising his hands, or dancing are all helpful postures for prayer used by the Psalmist. Being intentional about offering our body as a living sacrifice to God helps us to renew our mind and engage our heart, using Scripture to help us worship the Lord (Rom. 12:1-2).

Deep Breathing

Meditating on Scripture with a Breath Prayer, can be combined with deep breathing. Letting the rhythm of relaxed breathing be an expression of prayer helps us to slow down our praying so that we connect with God deep in heart.

Maybe you've tried deep breathing as a relaxation exercise? This is a proven way to

reduce anxiety and worry, but what I'm referring to is much more than a psychological technique – *it's a mind and heart interaction with the Living God!*

To learn **how to do a Breath Prayer** it's best to settle down in a quiet place where there are no distractions and then get still before God. (Later, once you get the hang of this, you can do your Breath Prayer by “shooting up” a short prayer anytime as you're going about your day – getting ready in the morning, driving in the car, before a meeting, or while waiting in line. This will help you to practice God's presence.)

To begin, slow down your breathing (and your heart rate!) by breathing in deep... Holding your breath... And then slowly exhaling...

Think of it as if you're breathing in God's Spirit with the oxygen in the air (the Holy Spirit *is* all around you and inside of you)...

Then as you hold your breath you hold your sense of the indwelling Holy Spirit...

And then you're breathing out your anxieties sins with the carbon dioxide so that you can live freely in God's loving presence and power...

Alternatively, you can think of your exhaling as a releasing of control to God, submitting all your activities and agendas to him as your Lord.

Or you can use your breathing out as an expression of sharing God's loving presence with others.

To practice breathing in God's Word deeply and slowly try using God's word to the Psalmist in Psalm 46:10 as a Breath Prayer: **“Be still and know that I am God.”**

Breathe in slowly as deep as you can while you whisper or think: “Be still and know that I am God”... (It takes a long breath that fills up your lungs!) Hold your breath... Then exhale and repeat...

Personalized Breath Prayers

Another way to do a Breath Prayer is to develop your own personalized prayer that helps you to connect deeply with God in whatever way you need it the most at that time.

To do this, start by selecting a favorite name for God. (In the Biblical conception the names of God represent God's character and invoke his power, as indicated in Genesis 4:26, Jeremiah 10:6, Proverbs 18:10, John 16:23-24, Acts 4:10.) For instance, you could call on God as Creator, Yahweh, Lord Almighty, the I AM, Father, Jesus, Spirit, Potter, Good Shepherd, Living Water, or Bread of Life.

Then pick a word or phrase that describes what your heart longs for from God. It's important that you take some time to settle on your personal Breath Prayer. Be still before God and ask him to reveal himself to you and to show you what you most need from him.

Abba, I Belong to You

Years ago Brennan Manning developed a very special personalized Breath Prayer that

has brought the healing love of the Father to countless wounded people. He tells the story of how the Breath Prayer that God gave him healed his heart. Since being abused and abandoned by his alcoholic father as a boy he had suffered from crippling shame, insecurity, and addiction. But breathing in and out his contemplative prayer helped him to develop a secure identity as the beloved child of his Abba Father.

Brennan's Breath Prayer is "**Abba, I belong to you**" (See his book, *Abba's Child*).

This Breath Prayer is a seven-syllable prayer that perfectly synchronizes with your breathing. As you breathe in you pray with a whisper, "Ab-ba..." Hold your breath as you imagine yourself a child in your Heavenly Papa's lap. He smiles at you and you smile back. Then as you breathe out pray softly, "I belong to you."

Some Breath Prayers from the Bible:

- **Listen to God** → "Speak Lord, for your servant hears..." (1 Sam. 3:9 & 10, NKJV).
- **Psalms 23** → "The Lord is my Shepherd... I shall not want" (Psa. 23:1, KJV).
- **Submit to Father God** → "Father... into your hands I commit my spirit" (Psal. 31:5 & Luke 23:46).
- **Cease Striving** → "Know that Jesus is Lord... Cease striving" (Based on Psa. 46:10, NASB).
- **Rest in Christ** → "In Christ alone my soul finds rest... Selah" (Based on Psal. 62:1, 5).
- **Center on Jesus** → "Jesus, be the center..." (Based on Matt. 17:6-8, MSG, and Matt. 21:9, NLT).
- **Abba Prayer** → "Abba, I belong to you..." (Brennan Manning's prayer based on Rom. 8:15).
- **Trust the Spirit's Guidance** → "Live by the Spirit... Keep in step with the Spirit" (Gal. 5:25).
- **Humble yourself in Intercession** → "In Christ's humility... Consider others better than yourselves" (Phil. 2:3).