

The Fullness of the Spirit

John Tucker, Milford Baptist Church, 4 December 2005

Introduction

I'm going to start by asking you to do something. Would you sit up straight and take a deep breath, the deepest breath you've taken all day. Isn't it funny how something that simple can make you relax and feel just a little more alive? It's an amazing thing, breathing. People in certain fields like singing, or some sports like swimming, spend a lot of time learning just to breathe right. Apparently, most of us are pretty sloppy in our breathing. If a swimmer or singer wants to excel, they have to practice their breathing.

The truth is that breathing is pretty important for all of us. If you don't breathe, what happens? You die. Just this week I read a story about a guy who is walking along the beach with his girlfriend. She was, as it happens, a blonde. She was wearing headphones and listening to some tape. Her boy friend was frustrated with this because he feels like she's always wearing her Walkman, and never pays any attention to him. So he finally says to her, "Take it off." But she shakes her head. So he reaches over and pulls it off and throws it on the sand. About a minute later she keels over dead. When the paramedics come one of them picks up the Walkman and listens to the tape that is still playing. It's saying, "Breathe out and breathe in." Quite seriously, if we don't get rid of the toxic elements like carbon dioxide that our bodies produce, and if we don't constantly receive fresh oxygen, we'd die. That's the secret of life: Breathe out and breathe in.

The breath of life

We're finishing today a series on the Holy Spirit. It's interesting that in the Bible – in the original biblical languages – the word used for Spirit is often the same word that's used for breath. In Hebrew, it's the word *ruach*. Wind or breath. So in Genesis 2:7, when you read about the very first time a human being breathed, the writer says, "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." Why does God do it that way? This is kind of mouth-to-mouth. Why doesn't God just snap his fingers or say the word? It would have been much more hygienic. Apparently the writer of Genesis wants us to understand that God's desire is not just that this man's body be filled with oxygen, but that it become a living being filled with God's own breath, God's own Spirit, God's own life.

In the Old Testament, wherever the Spirit is present, there is life. So in Psalm 104:29, for example, where the writer is talking about creation and all living things, he says, "When you take away their breath – their *ruach* – they die and return to dust. When you send your Spirit – again the word is *ruach* – they are created, and you renew the face of the earth." This is the Spirit at work. So it's no accident that even in English when we see a creature – a horse for instance – which has a fierce sense of life, we'll call it a "spirited" creature, wild and untamed, filled with energy and power. Sometimes we'll talk about "spirited" child – a child of high-spirits, wild and untamed – and we're drawn to that (especially when it's somebody else's child). We admire people who are full of life and vitality. But from the beginning, this "aliveness" is a gift of the Spirit of God. So that's why in the New Testament, in Romans 8:2, the Holy Spirit is called "the Spirit of life." It's the Spirit who breathes life. Human beings – you and I – were created to live in dependence on the Spirit of God and so be fully alive. For a while, that's what happened. Living in dependence on the Holy Spirit was as automatic as breathing – being filled with spiritual life. But then, Paul says later in Romans chapter 8, sin came. We took the Walkman off. We forgot how to breathe. And the result was spiritual death.

The source of strength

But when you read through the Old Testament you see that the Holy Spirit did not give up on the human race. At certain key times the Spirit of God would come on particular individuals and breathe life into them – give them capacities beyond their own limited abilities, so that they could perform great deeds to advance God's redemptive purposes. For example, the Spirit would sometimes breathe great wisdom and insight into somebody. David says in 2 Samuel 23:2: "The Spirit of the Lord spoke through

me; his word was on my tongue." David is about to die as he speaks these words. He's the king of Israel, and these are his last words to his people. They're going to remember these words. It would be devastating if, at a moment like this, David were to say the wrong thing. So he stops for a moment. Breathes out his anxiety, and breathes in the Spirit's wisdom and guidance, and speaks words that are just right.

Sometimes the Spirit would come upon individuals to give them supernatural strength. In Judges 15:14 Samson is facing his enemies, the Philistines, and this is what the text says, "The Spirit of the Lord came upon him in power, and he grabbed the jawbone of a donkey and struck down a thousand men."

On other occasions the Spirit would come upon a person to give them certain gifts. In Exodus 31, for example, God is giving Moses instructions about how to construct a tent called the tabernacle. And this is what he says, "See, I have chosen Bezalel, son of Uri ... and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with skill, and ability and knowledge in all kinds of crafts." God appoints Bezalel to oversee the construction project and his Spirit gives him the practical abilities that he'll need to get the job done. Building. Carpentry. (My wife is probably praying that the Spirit will fill me with just a little bit of this.)

But as you trace the story you realise that the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament was limited. His coming on somebody's life was often temporary. In 1 Samuel 16 it says that because Saul disobeyed God the Spirit of the Lord departed from him. Also, in the Old Testament, the Spirit came only on a select few individuals, like Moses, not on everybody. In Numbers 11 there is a story about how the Spirit comes on a couple of older guys, Eldad and Medad, and as a result they start prophesying. Joshua, who is Moses' 2IC, isn't happy about this. Moses is the one on whom the Spirit is supposed to rest. So Joshua says to his boss, "Stop them." This is what Moses says, "Are you jealous for my sake? I wish that all the Lord's people were prophets and that the Lord would put his Spirit on them." This became a kind of hope or dream. The people of Israel prayed that one day God might pour out his Spirit on everybody. And God promised them that one day it would be so.

The promise of Pentecost

In Ezekiel 37 God paints a picture of his people as a valley of dry bones. Dead bones. And he says to Ezekiel, "Can these bones live?" Ezekiel says, "I don't know." And so God turns to the bones and says (verse 6), "I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life." Verse 14: "I will put my Spirit in you and you will live." God says, in other words, "The day is coming when I will pour out my Spirit on all my people. Not just on a few, and not just for a time, but on everyone of my people for every moment of their lives." That was the dream of God's people. And that is what happened in human history on the day of Pentecost. Turn with me to John 20:21. Just after his resurrection, and in a kind of foreshadowing of Pentecost, Jesus visits his disciples who are hiding behind locked doors, and he says this: "'Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.' And with that, he breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'" He breathed on them. Now what Old Testament passages does that remind you of? The word that John uses here to say that Jesus "breathed" on them is very rare. It's used only once in the New Testament. Here. But it was used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament in Genesis 2, where God breathed into a lump of clay and it became a living being. It was also used in Ezekiel 37 where God breathes into a bunch of dry bones and brings them to life again. John wants us to understand that what God once did to a lump of clay, and what God once did to some dry bones, God will do for us – has done for us. Jesus says to his followers, to us, "As the Father sent me, so I am sending you, but you can't go in your own power. That would never work. Receive the Spirit." He breathes on them, and they were filled with his supernatural life and power.

Now in light of this, what a tragic thing it would be to ignore the presence of the Holy Spirit, or to take him for granted. In a very real sense, the whole reason why Jesus came was to fulfil this promise of the Spirit. To baptise us with his Spirit. We talk here at Milford about being people who "honour God by expressing his love and helping other people to become fully devoted followers of Jesus too." It's the Spirit who gives us the power to do that. It's the Spirit who guides us and strengthens us and gifts us to live like Jesus and to continue his mission in this world. Can these bones live? Yes, they can. But we need to learn to breathe spiritually.

Learning to breathe

What do I mean by that? One more verse. Turn to Ephesians 5:18. Paul says, "Do not get drunk on wine – don't be "under the influence" of wine – which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit." Paul is not saying here that we need to pursue a particular experience or some special encounter with the Spirit. If you've given your life to Jesus, he's poured his Spirit into your heart. You have the Spirit, all of him. The question is this: Does he have all of you? Are you "under the influence" of the Spirit? Are you letting him control you and direct you? That means breathing out everything we know to be unholy and unclean. Carbon dioxide is not the only toxic substance I produce. There are other things inside me like selfish ambition, fear of what people think of me, a greedy discontent with what I have. I need to exhale them, confess them, if I want to be filled with his life and love and wisdom and power.

What's really interesting about this phrase, "be filled with the Spirit," is that it's in the present tense. It should read, "keep on being filled with the Spirit." It's a continuous, ongoing process. Every moment of every day the Spirit is with you, offering to guide you and strengthen you, if you'll just let him. But we tend to forget that. Tomorrow, or this week, there will be times when you are confused and don't know what to do, or you're anxious and worried about something. Just stop in the moment and pray, "God, fill me, give me the guidance and ability and love that only your Spirit can bring." Breathe it in. Tomorrow and the next day, when you get flustered or frustrated, tempted or tired, lonely or afraid, just remember to stop and breathe. Just remember that the same God who once ago knelt down with a little lump of clay and breathed into it, the same God who, in the person of Jesus Christ, breathed on his followers who were filled with fear and filled them with life, is present with you in the person of the Holy Spirit, and longs for nothing more than to breathe life into you if you'll let him. Breathe out and breathe in.

Questions

1. Discuss this statement, "Wherever the Spirit of God is fully present, there is a deep, electric, mysterious sense of being fully alive."
2. Does every Christian have the Spirit? See Joel 2:28, 1 Cor 12:13.
3. What in your view is the proof of the Spirit's indwelling? See Gal 5:22-23 and Eph 5:18-21.
4. What is the difference between being "baptised" by the Spirit and "filled" with the Spirit? Does it matter?
5. D.L Moody once said, "I believe firmly that the moment our hearts are emptied of pride and selfishness and ambition and everything that is contrary to God's law, the Holy Spirit will fill every corner of our hearts. But if we are full of pride and conceit and ambition and the world, there is no room for the Spirit of God. We must be emptied before we can be filled." The Bible seems to teach the same thing (Acts 5:32). Do you need to be emptied of anything?
6. How is your "spiritual breathing"? When in the course of last week could you have paused and breathed in the Spirit's wisdom or power?
7. Ephesians 5:18 says literally, "Keep on being filled with the Spirit." How could you put that into practice this coming week? See Acts 11:1-13.

Acknowledgement

In preparing this sermon I have drawn heavily from a message by John Ortberg, delivered at Willow Creek Community Church, 13 September 2000.

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