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**Difficulty Breathing**

We are all painfully familiar with the plaintive words of George Floyd, as he lay dying on the street of Minneapolis: “I can’t breathe.”

Their echo has been seized as the slogan of police reform advocates, as well as anti-oppression protesters. They are, indeed, three emotionally evocative words with which every person can relate.

I’ll never forget the Christmas our family spent in Mexico. I had a lingering respiratory illness, but I didn’t want to scuttle our plans. “I can lie around the house in Mexico just as easily as in San Rafael,” I reasoned. So, off we went.

Feeling better after several days of rest, I suggested to my boys to go snorkeling (one of my favorite adventures). A steady breeze made the water a little choppy, but it was still warm and clear, so in we waded.

I strapped on my mask and ducked my head under the water, but I had difficulty drawing even my first breath. Thinking my snorkel might be plugged with water I blew hard to clear it, but it didn’t help. I couldn’t catch a breath. Beginning to panic a little, I broke the surface of the water and ripped the mask and snorkel from my head and tried to draw a deep breath. But even then, I was unable to breathe! My lungs were just too congested.

Fortunately, my son, Peter, was still standing in the water, about twenty feet from me, and he saw my struggle. He called Steve, and they quickly arrived at my side and hoisted me out of the water and held me up until I could catch a breath. We concluded it was not the right time for snorkeling, and they supported me on their shoulders until we reached the shore.

**Necessity of Breath**

Breath is absolutely necessary for life. You can live for weeks without any food at all. You can live for days without any water at all. But you can only live for minutes without air.

Through the air you breathe, oxygen is carried by your blood to every cell in your body. It helps to build new cells (Did you know that your body needs to replace about 700 billion cells every day?). Oxygen helps to kill bacteria and defend against viruses, and to generate energy for your body.

When the first man, Adam, was created from the dust of the earth, God breathed into him the breath of life, “and he became a living person.”

That was the activity of the life-giving Breath of God, also known as the Holy Spirit. (The Old Testament Hebrew *ruach* may be translated as breath, wind, or spirit; so, also, the New Testament Greek word *pneuma*.) On this, both Old and New Testaments agree: the Holy Spirit is the life-giving breath of God for our bodies and our souls.

**Breath of God**

Not only was the breath of God necessary for human life to begin physically (as in Genesis 2), but it is equally necessary for human life to begin again spiritually.

As Jesus spoke with Nicodemus, a teacher and leader among the Jews in Jerusalem, He revealed this insight:

*John 3:7 The Holy Spirit gives birth to spiritual life. So don’t be surprised when I say, ‘You must be born again.’*

Later, He told His disciples:

*John 16:7I tell you the truth, it is to your advantage that I go away; for if I don’t go away, the [Holy Spirit] will not come to you. However, if I do go, I will send Him to you.*

*John 20:22 Then Jesus breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”*

Jesus warned us: *“Apart from Me you can do nothing [to serve or honor the Father],”* echoing the words of the prophet Zechariah (*“‘You won’t succeed by might or by power, but by My Spirit,’ says the Lord of Heaven’s Armies.”).*

“You can do nothing.”

“Not by might, nor by power.”

*I can do nothing worthy of the Kingdom of God, apart from the Holy Spirit.*

To live and to act “by the Holy Spirit” means to follow His lead, to act under His control—not my own.

**Lack of Oxygen**

When blood oxygen falls below an optimal level, every physiological system begins to suffer. Symptoms will vary, based on underlying preconditions, but common results include confusion or euphoria, restlessness, headache, difficulty breathing, dizziness, fainting, loss of coordination, imbalance, elevated blood pressure, and visual disturbances.

Similarly, as the Spirit’s stimulating control diminishes—due to self-will, disobedience, rebellion, or simple neglect—our spiritual acuity begins to spiral downward, with such signs as confusion, irritability, rudeness, anti-social withdrawal, self-preserving lies, inconsiderate behavior, arrogant boasting, or wanton sin.

Throughout the history of the church, Spirit-deprived Christians have brought shame to the name of Christ and stained the work of the Gospel—God’s children, acting as if there is no God.

I belong to a Facebook group of Assemblies of God credentialed ministers (more than just pastors). Last week, the atmosphere on our page was becoming antagonistically toxic, as ministers argued with each other about the correctness of wearing masks or meeting in church buildings or singing together in worship. They even mocked and demonized one another! I couldn’t take it; it mirrored the behaviors of worldly people who do not have the Holy Spirit.

I composed a lengthy post, explaining how it broke my heart to witness the unrelenting feuding attitudes and unloving comments among us. I asked, “If the work of the Gospel truly depends on such things (as masks and church buildings), how did the Early Church survive (let alone thrive) under the scrutiny of legalistic Jews and the military oppression of Rome?”

I continued, “Neither civic leaders nor their health orders can divide, or halt, the Church of our Lord Jesus. We do that ourselves when we ‘bite and devour’ one another.

“The New Testament has been written for believers, not the heathen, so that we might learn to live like believers and no longer like the heathen. Our weaknesses and susceptibility to sin, as members of the human race, are ever with us, and can only be curbed by our surrender to the Spirit of Jesus. But I hear the sound of war drums beating here. It should not be so.”

I concluded with this plea: “Brothers and sisters, let us love one another as Christ has loved us. Hold each other in highest regard, for we are those who have turned our backs on the world—its ways and its allures—to follow Jesus the Christ. If we don’t love one another, we are not His Church.”

It’s the challenge of the ages: Let the Church BE the Church!

Because there is no alternative; there is no Plan B. If we don’t actually live like Jesus, who will?

Church membership cannot substitute for the new birth.

Right doctrine cannot substitute for Spirit-fullness.

Legalistic policing of behaviors is not the same as loving one another in Jesus’ name.

**Revive Us, O Lord!**

Church, we need revival! It’s not just “them”; it’s US!

WE can do better. We can do more to bring honor to His name.

We need revival—not of church structure or programs, but of our hearts, for we have been living on insufficient “oxygen.” We have become dull of hearing, neglecting God’s Word, and consumed with ourselves—our feelings, our imaginations, our desires, our fears.

Revive us, O Lord!

Captivate our hearts!

Capture our minds' attention!

Consume our self-centeredness!

Crush our timidity!

Catapult our compassion!

Breathe your life again into us.

Put Your words in our mouths.

Ignite our hearts with Christian love!

In a crisis such as we have in our world today, solutions require leadership. Not just by those elected and paid to serve, but also by those who simply care enough to serve.

In this season, if you are not taking initiative to lead those around you—whether your family or your peers—then you are not bringing solution; you are part of the problem.

We are the people of God. We cannot simply sit back and wait for the storm to pass. If it is not God’s time to still the wind and the waves, then we can bail water, and make sure our neighbors have what they need. Who doesn’t need encouragement in these days? Who doesn’t need kindness?

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And if you agree to take the lead and help bring solutions, you must begin with yourself. Are you yourself under the Spirit's control? Or, are you doing your own thing? Because if He is not in charge, then you are adding to the problem.

My superintendent reminded me yesterday to be careful to manage my emotions—I need to put down some, and stir up others. If we are to be under the Holy Spirit’s control, we must master our anger at people, and stir up our passion for Christ. We must master our fear and frustration, and stir up His joy and peace.

In the physical absence of Jesus, we are the light of this world—a City set upon a hill. We need to let our light so shine, that people will see our acts of faithfulness, kindness, and goodness, and glorify the God we serve.

We are the salt of the earth—the flavor of Jesus in the barrenness of the mundane, the everyday routine. Season the world around you with the flavor of heaven—God’s amazing love.

If all of this sounds good and right to you, then listen closely to this: you cannot do this on your own—not even if we try to do it together. We MUST have the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit working in and through us. We must be stimulated and controlled by Him.

Self-control is a fruit of the Spirit—something He naturally produces through our obedience. Remember, unlike the world, Christian self-control is not control BY self, but the control OF self BY the Holy Spirit.

He wants to help us control our emotions, our imaginations, our words, and our actions. Apart from Him, these are the very motions of our inner and outer world that will take our breath away, that will lead us into trouble and darkness.

Emotions, imaginations, words, and actions—these are useful and effective tools for life, for advancement, for success, for community-building—but they are only tools, which means you must USE them properly, and not be used by them.

The tools you keep in your toolbox don’t tell you what to make or how to make repairs. You decide what you want to fix or build, and then choose the right tools for the task.

So, don’t let your emotions or your imaginations dictate how you live your life. Make the Lord Jesus Christ your Shepherd, and let the Holy Spirit be your Inspiration.

As Paul put it in his letter to the church in Ephesus:

*Ephesians 4:26“Don’t sin by letting anger control you.” Don’t let the sun go down while you are still angry, 27for anger gives a foothold to the devil.*

*28If you are a thief, quit stealing. Instead, use your hands for good hard work, and then give generously to others in need. 29Don’t use foul or abusive language. Let everything you say be good and helpful, so that your words will be an encouragement to those who hear them.*

*30And do not bring sorrow to God’s Holy Spirit by the way you live. Remember, He has identified you as His own, guaranteeing that you will be saved on the day of redemption.*

*31Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words, and slander, as well as all types of evil behavior. 32Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you.*

To do this, you need to filter your emotions through the presence of God in prayer and contemplation. Get alone with Him, or get with other praying believers. And as you pray, don’t contemplate “your navel” or your own ideas—contemplate our wondrous Savior. Think of His character, His works, His miracles. Ponder His awesome greatness!

Waiting on the Lord is not passive, not inactive; it is a forward motion that leads to understanding and solutions. It is the highway to holiness. It is the pathway to revival.

Revive us, O Lord!

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Capture our minds' attention!

Consume our self-centeredness!

Crush our timidity!

Catapult our compassion!

Breathe your life again into us.

Put Your words in our mouths.

Ignite our hearts with Christian love!

So that we can truly breathe again!