



The Spirit Giveth Life

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Words like reality, encounter, relevance, and experience dominate modern jargon and pound relentlessly on the consciousness of 20th-century man. Men seek, as never before, to extract the most out of the gift of life. They sweep from one ideology to another, groping for a key that will unlock the secret of life. Against this background of endless search and seeming despair, the Scriptures declare, “The spirit giveth life” (2 Corinthians 3:6).

The word Spirit, referring to the Spirit of God, or the Holy Spirit, is found repeatedly in the Bible. The Hebrew word in the Old Testament is ruach, meaning “breath” or “wind.”¹ In the New Testament the Greek word is pneuma, again carrying with it the idea of wind or breath.² The Septuagint uniformly uses pneuma as a translation of ruach, suggesting the compatibility of the two terms.

How did the Bible writers arrive at a concept of God that would make these descriptive words appropriate? Because all Scripture is given by inspiration of God it is evident God guided them in using analogous figures to convey truth. Since human breath is the invisible part of man representing his life, energy, and vitality, it was an easy thing for them to think of God in like fashion. That part of God, invisible but dynamic and vital, could best be described as breath and wind. A.B. Davidson is helpful here:

“The original meaning of spirit is breath. This was the sign of life, or was the principle of life. The term expresses the fullness of vital power, and all the activities of vital energy, whether ... emotional, or intellectual, or moral, — whether temporary or permanent.”³

E.Y. Mullins suggests, “The Spirit was God in action, particularly when the action was specific, with a view to accomplishing some particular end or purpose of God.”⁴

The Spirit is seen often as coming upon a man to energize him for God’s service. The Scriptures readily attest to this understanding of the word Spirit as it relates to God’s activity.

Genesis 1:2 might be translated: “And the breath [ruach] of God hovered [rachaph] over the face of the waters.” The Spirit here is seen in His creative power. In the next chapter we read: “And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed [naphach] into his nostrils the breath [neshamah] of life; and man became a living soul.” While another Hebrew word is used, the sense is the same. God is seen here in His animating and life-giving power. That the creative “breath” of Genesis 1:2 and the animating “breath” of Genesis 2:7 are parallel is not the least untenable.

Another color is added to the Bible picture of the word Spirit in Ezekiel 37. Looking across the valley of dry bones, Ezekiel asked the question: “Can these bones live?” To demonstrate an answer to Ezekiel’s question, the Lord asked him to prophesy to the four winds: “O breath [ruach] ... breathe [naphach] upon these slain, that they may live.” Then came the miracle: “and the breath [ruach] came into them, and they lived.” Again the writer has chosen the word ruach. God is seen as employing his breath [ruach] to bring life.

The New Testament concept of Spirit, relating to God’s Spirit, or the Holy Spirit, is a refinement and application of the word as it is used in the Old Testament. The Old Testament writers understood the work and activity of the Spirit, while

the New Testament writers understood in addition the person of the Spirit. In the Old Testament the Spirit is spoken of as being grieved and vexed, but it is not until the New Testament era that the concept of personality is developed.

Jesus spoke of a comforter — the person of the Holy Spirit. He said to His disciples in John 14:16: “I will pray the Father and he shall give you another Comforter [parakletos] ... even the Spirit [pneuma] of truth.” In the same sequence of thought several chapters later Jesus said: “Receive ye the Holy Ghost [pneuma]” (John 20:22). It is interesting to note the similarity between the manner of giving and the thing given. Jesus breathed on them His Spirit, or His breath, or His divine, energizing, life-giving power. However, the fullness of this divine impartation was not to be theirs until the Day of Pentecost. Jesus said in Luke 24:49, “Behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you: but tarry ye in the city of Jerusalem, until ye be endued with power from on high.”

An event from the life of Jesus serves to illustrate further the New Testament concept of the Holy Spirit as the life-giving agent. Jesus instructed Nicodemus that he must of necessity be born again. Then to clarify the meaning, Jesus explained: “Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again. The wind [pneuma] bloweth [pneo] where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, and canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit [pneumatos]” (John 3:7,8). The play on words cannot be missed. Jesus here reveals something of the nature and work of the Holy Spirit. Pneo is the simple verb form meaning “to blow.”⁵ Pneuma is the nominative form meaning “wind” or “breath,”⁶ and pneumatos is the genitive singular form with the same meaning. How is a man converted or born again? The answer here is clear. The redemptive power of the Spirit, that divine breath of God, is imparted to the human soul in saving grace.

Perhaps the most dynamic illustration of the Spirit’s activity is found in an analysis of the events accompanying the outpouring of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. Acts 2 sketches the story: “And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as a rushing mighty wind [pnoe], and it filled all the house where they were sitting. ... And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost [pneumatos].” The two words, translated here by “wind” and “Ghost” are both derivatives of the elemental verb form pneo, which was noted before. Again, there must be significance to the proximity of these words. Luke, whose joy it was to record the activities of Pentecost, is careful to tell us that one of the physical signs accompanying the outpouring of the Holy Spirit was wind, or breath.

Since the Word of God is our source of authority and is itself of life-giving quality, it is interesting to observe the relationship between this Word of God and the activity of the Holy Spirit. In 2 Timothy 3:16 we read: “All scripture is given by inspiration [theopneustos] of God.” Bauer gives the meaning of theopneustos as “inspired by God.”⁷ Warfield says: “The Greek word in this passage ... very distinctly does not mean ‘inspired of God.’” He goes on to explain that theopneustos carries with it the idea “God-breathed.”⁸ An analysis of this compound Greek form would lead us to agree with Warfield. Here the Word of God then is described as the out-breathing of God. The Bible is endued with and was produced by the divine breath of God. That is, the Holy Spirit energized and vitalized the biblical writers in such a way that they produced the message of God in written form.

The Book of Acts has been appropriately entitled, “The Acts of the Holy Spirit.” It is a book of action. It records history in the making. It is full of life, vigor, and vitality. Its pages tell of miracles of divine guidance and the supernatural intervention of God’s Spirit in the lives of men. The men of this book move in a new dimension. They are motivated by a special power. Pentecost marks and makes the difference.

An impetuous Peter steps out of a life of mediocrity into a life of victory and power. Saul of Tarsus arises from the dust of the Damascus road challenged and empowered to evangelize the world. The members of the Early Church, motivated by something much greater than themselves, evangelize one city after another.

What accounts for this? The answer lies in the nature and work of the Holy Spirit. The men of Acts were inbreathed and empowered by the Holy Spirit. The spirit within them had come in contact with the divine Spirit. The breath within them had come in contact with a divine breath. They moved and spoke by divine inspiration.

One last thought must be a part of our study. John the Baptist said: “I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance: but he that cometh after me is mightier than I ... he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost [pneuma], and with fire” (Matthew 3:11). The companion verse to this is found in Acts 2:4: “And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost

[pneuma], and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit [pneuma] gave them utterance.” In chapters 10 and 19, a like phenomenon took place. As the Spirit touched men — the very breath of God — their entire beings were made to respond to its power.

Jesus anticipated this experience when He spoke of the Spirit as soon to be uniquely within the disciples (John 14:16,17). That Jesus was looking forward to Pentecost seems wholly consistent with the biblical concept of the Spirit as the indwelling and motivating power of God. The experience of Pentecost was dynamic. It marked the flow of a new surge of divine power. Men now did for God what they could not have done before. They now possessed a key that unlocked for them the secret to the abundant, Spirit-filled life.

The Pentecostal experience is for today. When men, with hungry hearts, yield themselves to the Holy Spirit, they may expect the same inflow of divine breath and energizing power. The Spirit that hovered over the chaotic waters, the Spirit that quickened the dry bones in Ezekiel’s valley, the Spirit that inspired the Bible writers, the Spirit that filled the early believers still imparts life today.

Endnotes

1. Frances Brown, S.R. Driver, and C.H. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (London: Oxford Press, 1952), 924.
2. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, trans. and adapted from Walter Bauer, *Griechisch-Deutsches Woerterbuch zu den Schriften des Neuen Testaments* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), 680.
3. A.B. Davidson, *The Theology of the Old Testament* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1923), 118–119.
4. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, Edited by James Orr, Vol. III (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1957), 1406.
5. Arndt and Gingrich, 685.
6. *Ibid.*, 680.
7. *Ibid.*, 357.
8. Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, Ed. Samuel G. Craig (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1948), 132–134.

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