

Breath Prayer

Prayer of the Heart

Christians have been praying breath prayers for more than 1600 years. But despite its longevity, the practice of breath prayer is relatively unknown in Protestant circles. It may feel like a foreign practice, even mystical, but its sole purpose is cultivating a constant awareness of God's presence in our lives. It seeks to put into practice Paul's teaching in 1 Thessalonians 5:17 to "pray without ceasing."

The Eastern Orthodox Church refers to breath prayer as "prayer of the heart," because a consistent rhythm of this practice will take the simple prayer beyond a rational, conscious prayer and embed it in our hearts. The prayer can become an unending refrain running in the background of your mind, like a constant soundtrack to your everyday life.

Breath prayer is a fairly simple discipline. It is the repeating of a short prayer over and over aloud or silently. We set aside time each day to focus on the prayer, repeating it a number of times, and then we return to the prayer, repeating it three or four, in the middle of our everyday life.

There are different breath prayers, but they all follow the same two-part pattern. They begin with the name of God. This orients our prayer toward God's presence with us. And they end with an appeal to what we need from God. Because we are internalizing these prayers, a good breath prayer often comes directly from scripture.

Pray without ceasing
1 Thessalonians 5:17

Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.
Romans 12:12

To be a Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing
Martin Luther

The prayer of the heart is no longer something we do but who we are... The prayer of the heart is the prayer of adoption.
Father Stephen Tsichlis

You should bind the prayer to your breathing... so that every breath may carry the remembrance of God.
Theophan the Recluse

The first and most basic thing we can and must do is to keep God before our minds.
Dallas Willard

Resources

The Jesus Prayer by Frederica Mathews-Green

Prayer by Richard Foster

Prayer of the Heart by George Maloney

The Way of the Pilgrim by Anonymous

Praying a Breath Prayer

To begin practicing the discipline of breath prayer, you will need to choose a prayer. The classics, like the Jesus Prayer or the prayer of Saint Cassian, are a great place to begin. You can also choose a new breath prayer. Begin with a promise of God from scripture. Consider these questions:

What obstacles keep you from walking with God in every moment of your life?

- Is it fear? Perhaps you want to use Philippians 4:16.
- Is it a desire for more things? Perhaps you want to use Psalm 23:1.
- Is it reconciliation and unity? Perhaps you want to use John 17:21.

What do you need most from God?

- Is it a clearer understanding of his love? Perhaps you want to use Romans 8:38-39.
- Is at greater awareness of God's presence? Perhaps you want to use Psalm 139:7-12.
- Is it ears to hear his voice? Perhaps you want to use 1 Samuel 3:10.

Once you have chosen the scriptural promise, you need to choose a name of God. Often there is a name in the passage. If not, choose a name that either connects with the promise or a name to which you have a particular connection. A few options are:

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|----------------|--------------|
| - Abba | - Jehovah |
| - Jesus Christ | - Creator |
| - Lamb of God | - Son of God |

Now find a quiet place.

Take a few deep breaths to slow your mind and still your body.

Practice the prayer now.

Repeat it. Slowly. Intentionally. Recite the prayer focusing on the name of God and the words of the promise. Continue repeating it for five to fifteen minutes.

Prepare for the day.

Now, decide when you will repeat the prayer throughout the day. You will not need to pray for an extended time; just a quiet repetition of three or four prayers will do. Will you pray at a particular time, or will you pray it whenever it comes to mind in the midst of life? This repetition will help to weave the prayer into your everyday life. Continue with this practice daily, reciting the prayer at a set aside time and throughout your day. Continue to focus in all times on the presence of God as you pray.

Possible Breath Prayers

Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner.

The Jesus Prayer

O God, make speed to save me.

O Lord, make haste to help me.

Earliest known breath prayer from St. Cassian

Christ Jesus, bring peace beyond understanding.

From Philippians 4:7

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

From Psalm 23:1

Holy Father, nothing can separate me from your love.

From Romans 8:38-39

Holy Spirit, wherever I go you are with me.

From Psalm 139:7-12

Speak Lord, your servant is listening.

From 1 Samuel 3:10