

# ***God of Wonders: Breath***

*This is the third message in a seven part series in which we're looking at God through the lens of powerful Biblical metaphors. All messages in the series are available on [www.GrowWithSecond.org](http://www.GrowWithSecond.org).*

**A Sermon Preached by  
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**March 27, 2011**

*In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.*

*Genesis 1:1-10*

*In the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens, ... then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.*

*Genesis 2:4,7*

*The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."*

*John 3:8*

*When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit.*

*John 20:22*

*When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.*

*Acts 2:1-2*

Would you please get comfortable? Wake up the person next to you and say, “Hey, we’re about to do something cool, you don’t want to miss this.” I’d like you to take a few deep breaths. Don’t force them. You’re going to breathe anyway. Just let them happen naturally. If it helps to close your eyes, go ahead and do that. If you’re afraid someone’s going to steal your purse if your eyes are closed, just focus on the cross up front as you gently, naturally, breathe... in and out. Inhale... Exhale.... Inhale.... Exhale... Inhale.... Exhale... Keep breathing. Think about the air in your lungs, picture the blood picking up the oxygen there and spreading it to every other part of your body. Gently keep breathing. And when you are ready, open your eyes.

Today we’re thinking about God as air, breath, or wind. The Bible uses these and similar words to describe God. Of course God isn’t these things and these things are not god: we don’t worship air or wind. But looking at these elements closely can help us understand what the Bible wants to tell us about God.

Think about the qualities of air. Air is abundant, everywhere, free (at least for now), invisible (most days), taken for granted, shared, and home (at least for birds).

In what ways is God like the air around us? God is abundant. The Bible tells us that there is always enough of God; there’s no shortage of God’s love; we’ll never run out of God’s grace. God is everywhere. The fancy word we use for this in the church is “omnipresent.” There is no place on earth that God is not. There are no God free zones. Name the place -- Asia, Africa, Antarctica – God is there, ready and available without anyone even inviting him in. No place is more holy – more filled with God’s presence -- than any other. No place is “Godforsaken.” And because of this no person has more – or less -- access to God than any other person on the planet. Not Presbyterians, not Jews, not atheists, not Muslims. We all have exactly the same access to God.

Like air, God is invisible. We can only see God through what God *does*, not through what God *is*. People wonder how Christians can believe in a God that they’ve never seen. But we’ve felt what God *does*; we’ve experienced him working in our lives. We can’t see air either, but we can see the impact of wind when it moves around us.

And God is free. Can you imagine how much air would cost if *someone else* provided it besides God? Nothing would be more expensive. God's grace is like that. How much would you give for the breath of life, for the key to eternal life? The amazing thing is what was so costly to God comes so freely to us. Perhaps that's why, like air, we take God for granted sometimes. We believe that God always was and always will be. And we're right. But taking God for granted isn't necessarily a good thing. Just like we can harm our relationship with the environment when we assume that it will always be there, so we can destroy our relationship with God when we assume that *it* will always be there, even if we don't put any effort into it.

And did you ever notice that air is shared. As one person pointed out to me the other day, every breath of air has been in somebody's lungs at some point before; there's only one big bag of air that we all breathe. Trees clean it up, but it's the same air. We share God, too. God is not anyone's personal private possession. No person or denomination has a corner on God. God is bigger than all that.

And just like we might say that air is home for birds, and water is home for fish, so God is *our* home, *our* environment. As Luke said, "In him we live and move and have our being" [Acts 17:28]. God's presence enfolds and surrounds us, like a spiritual womb. Wherever we go, God is.

So God is in some ways like air: abundant, everywhere, invisible, free, taken for granted, shared, and our home.

Now let's think about God as wind. What kinds of attributes or qualities do you associate with wind? Wind can be powerful, *destructive* even. Put your hand out the window the next time you're cruising down the highway at 65 miles an hour. Wind blowing at that speed is strong enough to blow over a brick chimney and down trees. Go a few miles per hour faster and you'd feel the equivalent of an F-1 tornado. Wind like that can blast a mobile home off its foundation and roll it over like toy. F-5 tornados can knock whole homes off foundations and throw cars as far as a football field. Those winds clock at over 300 miles an hour.

In the Bible God is sometimes described as a gentle breeze; more often he is compared to a violent wind. The same author who inspired the song that goes, "And he will rise you up on eagles wings, bear you on the breath of dawn..." wrote

*See, the Lord has one who is mighty and strong; like a storm of hail, a destroying tempest, like a storm of mighty, overflowing waters; with his hand he will hurl them down to the earth.*

*Isaiah 28:2*

If you grew up in the Midwest you know what to do when the tornado alarm sounds, you start running, fast, and then brace yourself because there is a power the likes of which you have never seen on its way. So it is with God. Invite God into your life and you are messing with a power that is unmatched on the planet. We don't even have words to describe all that God can do.

Sometimes God can be destructive, shattering stereotypes and crushing oppressors. God's power can be scary sometimes. But God's power can also be creative. Remember how the wind from God that swept over the face of the waters during Creation [Genesis 1:2] And consider how the wind can produce energy with a windmill. If we could fully tap into the power of the wind we would have enough energy to heat and light our world forever. Think about how wind can create fascinating sandscapes in the desert or at the beach. In the same way God can shape our lives slowly over time and energize us without us having to do much at all.

Wind is unpredictable. So is God. Even with the aid of advanced instruments, we are unable to predict accurately which way the wind is *going* to blow. We can only know which way it is blowing right now. We use a weather vane or a wind sock to tell us. Wind directions change so quickly.

So it is with God. As John said, "The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." [John 3:8] There can be variations in prevailing winds; just because God has always moved in a certain direction in our lives in the past, doesn't mean God always will. God may have something new in mind of for us – a new direction, a new challenge, a new relationship. If we want to fly like a kite on God's wind, we will want to pay attention to which way the wind is blowing. If we want to sail fast and true, we will need to adjust our sails from time to time. Doing things the same way you always have – praying the same prayers, singing the same songs, practicing the same devotions, won't have the same effect forever. Winds change. God moves. Are you moving with him? We need spiritual weather vanes to help us see God's new direction in our life. Prayer

can help us sense God's new movements. So can conversations with pastors, spiritual guides, and faithful friends.

God is powerful, creative, and unpredictable, just like the wind.

But I like to think of God as breath. We can only go a few minutes without air before irreversible damage sets in. Oxygen is necessary for life. Consider how God gave Adam the breath of life [Genesis 2:7], and how God gives us the breath of life. [Job 33:4]. Without God's breath, Adam was just a fancy mud pie – some dirt and water mixed together. Without God's breath, we would be a squishy bag of bones or Ezekiel's dry bones [Ezekiel 37:1-14]

We cannot *not* breathe. Whales are voluntary breathers; humans don't even have to think about it. 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year, we are hard wired to take in God. God knows how much every human needs air and him. After a few minutes something inside us overrides even our firmest resolve and we have to take a breath. It's like that with God, too, I think for many of us. We can try to walk away, we can try to stay mad at God, we can try to live without him, but then something inside kicks in and says, "Take a breath, Dude. Look at what's happening. Look at your life." And then we start over.

There's probably nothing more personal than breathing. It's oxygen going deep into our lungs and then travelling to every part of our body thanks to our bloodstream. So it is with God. With each breath we take God's Spirit, God's breath, deep inside us. If in the Lord's Supper we take God's body and blood into our stomachs, than in breathing we take God's breath deep into our lungs. Either way the experience of communion can be profound.

The Hebrew name for God is Yahweh. [Exodus 3:13] No one really knows how to pronounce this name because for centuries it was deemed so holy that no one dared to speak it. Instead of the full name they just wrote the four main letters, YHWH, and when they came across these letters in the Torah, they said, "Lord" instead. Then someone noticed that in English, "Yahweh," means "I am." Or something close to it. God's name is like life or being itself. And they noticed, too, that if you listen carefully to your own breath going in and out of our bodies it's not much of a stretch to hear, "Yahweh," "Yah-weh." If everything that breathes praises the lord, then maybe, with every breath we are saying God's name.

Do it with me. Our first breath – “Yah-weh.” Our last breath before we see God’s face – “Yah-weh.” All the anxious, thrilling, peaceful breaths in between – “Yah-weh.” God’s name is on our lips every moment.

In Hebrew there is just one word for wind, spirit, and breath: *ruach*. Say it with me... *ruach*. Greek uses just one word for these things, too: *pneuma*. Each time a translator sees *ruach* or *pneuma* in the Bible, he or she has to choose an English word – breath, spirit, or wind to translate it. When you see air, wind, breath in the Bible, think Holy Spirit, think God, and you just might find new meaning in that passage.

Looked at this way it’s so easy to see that God is as gentle as a spring breeze, as powerful as a tornado, as abundant as air and as close as the breath inside you right now. Amen.

*Dear Friend,*

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