

The Breath Of Life

Genesis 2:7 — Septuagint (LXX) — Literal translation.

και επλασεν ο θεος τον ανθρωπον χουν λαβων απο της και ενεφουασεν
And God shaped the man dust taking from the earth and he breathed
εις το προσωπον αυτου **πνοην ζωης** και εγενετο ο ανθρωπος εις ψυχην ζωσαν.
into his face **breath of life** and became the man a living being.

The “breath of life” is the “spirit” of life that God put in man, or at least that is what man has come to believe; and, seemingly, rightly so. All that “man” can claim as essentially being him is his earthly origin from the dust of this earth. What he “became” depends upon God. He has not been changed into a divine spirit, he only has this divine spirit dwelling in him at the pleasure of God. It may be withdrawn, and the man sinks back to what he originally was. With the withdrawal of the breath of life, which is a necessity, is connected the ceasing to be of that living being (soul, creature, person) which only the indwelling of this divine spirit causes man to be. Man is then no longer a living being, but the lifeless figure he was when God created him from the dust of the earth. He is dust, and dust only. He no longer has the breath of life or “spirit” animating him, he is no longer a living being. The object of life for a purpose is gone, and God does not even think it worth while to preserve the figure, or the organization, however man thinks it beautiful and perfect. The organization is destroyed: the man crumbles into its dust. The death of man produced by the withdrawal of the breath of life is followed by the destruction and dissolution of his former form and shape.

The above is just a general sketch of man. Of his body we do not feel the need at this time to expound upon. But of the “breath of life” which God breathed into man, and of the consequence that entailed in him, we would like to say more. The true understanding of human nature will be found of utmost consequence in our understanding of many theological questions. As a false understanding of it has led to many grave theological errors, so the true understanding of it will enable us to see truth, and separate us from falsehood.

We will now look at what we see Scripture has to say about this “spirit” within us. We will try to establish the identity of this “breath” or “wind”, which is the basic meaning of the Latin term “spirit” we all find ourselves using. This “spirit”, many times spoken of as man’s spirit, and sometimes spoken of as God’s spirit, has many other uses as we will find out in our study. Its more frequent mention as a part of the human make-up will enable us to better understand all that God intended us to understand about it.

The first mention of this “breath of life” is found in Genesis 2:7 (see above quote from the Greek Septuagint, commonly called the LXX, which 70 Hebrew Scholars translated into Greek from the Hebrew Scriptures around 285 BC). In it we read of its being given directly from God Himself into the face (or nose) of man, making man an animated creature. From its mention in this verse we infer it to be a direct emanation from God.

We will now consider some of the verses in passages in which it is spoken of in the Old Testament. But first, we must draw to your attention the fact that you will not apparently find all the places we refer to justifying our findings in most translations. This, however, is only apparent, and comes from the Hebrew word translated “breath” in Genesis 2:7, and which we therefore consider an emanation from God Himself. The term “pnoen” occurs 24 times in the OT. The reason is that the term is not always translated “breath” in most versions of the Bible. It is, in some cases, translated “spirit”. We can only assure you that all our references are to passages where the Hebrew word translated “breath” as in Gen. 2:7 occurs. We do not think that we will be guilty in any instance of an oversight in this respect, as we have gone over the Scriptures very carefully, or at least over the Greek Septuagint translation of the Hebrew — verifying the Hebrew terms with the Greek terms to the best of our ability. Any Hebrew scholar can in any case correct us, and we will quickly acknowledge any oversight that we may have unwittingly made.

NOTE: In a search for a definition of the Hebrew, Greek and Latin term “spirit” we have not found a single definition that would describe the use of that term in the whole of the Bible. There are also no useful definitions that we have been able to find in the writings of ancient writers all the way back before the Septuagint was written. Sure, there have been definitions given in dictionaries and Lexicons, but they do not do justice, nor explain the ambiguities in their definitions. Therefore, neither can we actually give a definition to the term “spirit” in this work. We are compelled to let the Scripture say what it will, and let you decide if the meaning we put on it seems correct.

Before going on further, let’s see what various Lexicons and/or dictionaries have to tell us about the word “spirit” — but be aware that the term “spirit” in our English language is simply the transliteration of the Latin term “spiritus”.

“Spirit. — The term is applied to God as defining His nature generally (John 4:24), and also as describing one element in that nature, His self-consciousness (I Cor. 2:11). It expresses not only God’s immateriality, but also His transcendence of limitations of time and space. In the phrases ‘spirit of God’, the ‘spirit of the Lord’, the ‘spirit of Truth’, the third person in the Godhead is described.... The term is applied to personal powers of evil other than man (Matt. 10:1, 12:45; Luke 4:33, 7:21; I Tim. 4:1, cf., Eph. 6:12), as well as personal powers of good (Heb. 1:14), and to human beings after death, either damned (I pet. 3:19) or blessed (Heb. 12:233). It is used also as personifying an influence (I John 4:6, Eph. 2:2, Rom. 8:15)....” “...yet ‘spirit’ expresses the direct dependence of the life in man, isolating itself from, and opposing itself to, God, is *soul*; that life, cleansed and renewed by the spirit of God, is *spirit*; intimate as is the relation of God and man in the new life, the spirit of God is distinguished from the spirit of man (Rom. 8:16, although it is not always possible to make the distinction....” “...the derivation of man’s spirit from God (Gen. 2:7, Isa. 42:5), offers the basis for the new (Rom. 8:1–17, I Cor. 2:11–12), in which man is united to God (see inspiration).” [Hastings’ Dictionary of The Bible, James Hastings, Editor. Quotation herein is from Alfred E. Garvie, which Hastings used in his dictionary.]

Comment: The rest of Hastings work on the term “spirit” is in actuality just a good commentary on the verses using the term “spirit” in the Bible. Let’s look at another:

The following is taken from Russell E. Boatman's book, *What The Bible Says About The Holy Spirit*, pages 29, 30 and 31.

"One scarcely needs to be told that the study of the Holy Spirit is commonly viewed as confusing, and an understanding of the subject nigh impossible. It is of little wonder that this is so. *The subject is shrouded in mystery. This is due in part to: 1. The awesomeness of the terms — holy, spirit, and ghost.... 2. The vagueness of the basic vocabulary* as to specific reference, that is, the variety of meanings common to the word spirit also contributed to the problems inherent in this study. The problem roots in all three classical languages which have contributed to the vocabulary of our English translation...."

1) *Wind*. Whatever one's race or culture, men become aware early on of a vast invisible reality — an entity or force which surrounds us but cannot be seen or grasped. Only the effects of its presence can be discerned. Trees bend and sway. Objects are picked up, without hands, and are hurtled through space or sent tumbling across the landscape. One can feel the unseen force pressing against one's body to a degree comparable to the observed effect upon various objects being moved about. But the entity itself seem to be without substance. In the language of the OT literature (Hebrew) it is called *ruah*. In the language of the NT documents (Greek) it is called *pneuma*. In Latin the word for it is *spiritus*. We speak of it as the wind.

2) *Breath*. Mankind everywhere is likewise conscious of a somewhat similar entity within our bodies. Our chests rhythmically rise and fall. When we are "winded" from over-exertion or have had "the wind knocked out of us," our lungs struggle to regain an ample supply of the unseen substance which surrounds us. We call the process breathing, hence speak of being out of breath when we are winded. In Hebrew, Greek and Latin alike the same word which is used with reference to the wind is used also to speak of the "breath" of breathing creatures.

3) *Spirit*. The words which are used primarily to speak of the wind and secondarily of breath are used in both Testaments to speak also of a metaphysical entity. They are used in a theological sense with reference to supernatural beings of all kinds, and of the intrinsic nature of the supreme Being of the universe — Jehovah God, no less."

Comment: Personally knowing Russell, and talking to him on many occasions, his "spirit", i.e., the influence and attitude he had, greatly impressed upon me to "put on his spirit", to use a phrase in the NT of "putting on the spirit of Christ". Think on that! The NT writings often tell us that we should "have been clothed with Christ", "put on Christ" (Gal. 3:27, NIV, KJV). We are to have the spirit of Christ IN us: "...if anyone does not have the spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ." (See Rom. 8:1–17.) This is one of the ways the term "spirit" is used in the Bible. As Russell once said to me, Jesus compared the spirit to the winds that constantly blow, which left the impression that the operation of God's spirit on each of us is just as varied as is the wind. (See John 3:3–12.) Jesus most likely spoke in Aramaic Hebrew, or even in Koine Greek, which was the "universal" language of His day. He would have not have used the Roman or Latin term "spiritus", for it was not a language his listeners would have been familiar with.

When we look at the many dictionaries and lexicons of the past and of today, we find that we are confronted with the basic meaning of the Hebrew and Greek terms the Bible uses for *wind and breath*, plus they use the transliterated Latin term "spiritus",

“spirit”, in their definition without actually defining that Latin term. This leaves most individuals with the impression/idea that the term “spirit” is a definition of the Greek and Hebrew terms. We will not quote from them now, as they do not define the term “spirit”, although they do define the Greek and Hebrew terms used, as we will attempt to show.

In defining the Hebrew and Greek terms here, almost all dictionaries define and then include in the definition the Latin term “spirit”. This is a great deception that has been hoisted on the average person. The term “spirit” is put as one of the meanings of the Hebrew and Greek terms, when, by itself, is supposed to have the same meaning, because it is the translation of the Hebrew “ruach” and the Greek “pneuma” into the Latin language! A few questions are required to be asked: “What does the term “spirit” mean? Why don’t the authors of the various dictionaries define the meaning of “spirit” into our English language? Why introduce a foreign word into our English language when our English language is capable of defining foreign words?

This is not the only word used in most Bibles that is very deceptive to the average person who reads it. For example: the Greek term baptizo, a verb, is transliterated as baptize; baptisma, a noun, is transliterated as baptism; baptistes, an adjective, is transliterated as Baptist. Why were these Greek terms just brought into our English language without being defined? What do they really mean in our English language? We do have English terms to define them, so why not use them? It is because of philosophical reasoning and convenience that they are not defined by our language! Do you begin to see how **NOT** defining the original words into our own language deceives the ordinary person who reads the Bible?

Now let us proceed on this study

In the first place we find that the “breath” of life is an attribute of God Himself. We frequently read in Scripture of “the breath of the Lord.” This is plainly that breath of life which we read of in Genesis 2:7, and which we have therefore considered an emanation of God Himself. Even after it was given to the form of “man” God created out of the dust of the earth, which made “man” a living creature (soul, person, being), it is still regarded as belonging to God. In the book of Job, chapter 34, verses 13–15, we read: *“And who is the one acting under heaven, and all the things being in it? For if he might want to constrain, and to hold down the spirit (pneuma) by himself, all flesh would come to an end with one accord. Every mortal shall go forth unto the earth from where even he was shaped.”* Here we find that the breath of life, even while in man, is regarded as the property and attribute of God. It is HIS, not man’s. It is HIS, therefore, to dispose of as HE pleases. HIS to take away from man, as it was HIS at the first to bestow it on man. Does anyone want to argue with God?

One can see this same truth in other Scripture verses and passages. The breath of life which man possesses is always spoken of as God’s gift to man, and not as belonging to the make-up of man. God says in Isaiah 42:5 the following: *“Thus says the Lord God, the one making the heaven, and pitching it; solidifying the earth, and the things in it; and giving breath¹ to the people upon it, and spirit² to the ones treading it.”* Like every other

gift it is distinguishable from the creature³ to whom it is given. Man was made of the dust of the earth, and this gift of God made the man a living creature.

1. Greek *pnoen*, [see Gen. 2:7 at start of article – **breath**] i.e., respiration, a breeze: - breath, wind. Used 17 times as breath, 2 times as *spirit*; 3 times as blast (of wind or breath – breathing), and one time each as inspiration and soul.
2. Greek *pneuma*, i.e., vital principle:- breath, wind, or **figuratively** in the Latin *spirit*)
3. Creature, i.e., Hebrew *nephesh*, Greek *psuche*. Both of these terms are variously translated as creature, soul, being, life, person, and other attributes of the living creature, which includes all sea life, birds of the air, land animals and all creepy-crawling things.

This breath of God is that which gives life to man, and makes man a living being. Job, one of the most ancient books of the Old Testament, records him saying: “*The spirit of God has made me, and the breath of the Almighty has given me life.*” In I Kings 17:17–21, the record of the calling back into life of the widow’s son by Elijah, we see that the coming back of the breath [spirit] of the child was dependent on the presence of God’s breath in him. Thusly we find that the breath of life from God to be the source of life, and the breath [spirit] that makes man a living being [nephesh/psuche/soul]. As we will bring up shortly, the “spirit of the Lord” and “the breath of the Almighty” are simply different descriptions of the one and same Divine attribute.

This breath of life is only a gift to man, not man himself; and this gift is taken from every man since it was given to Adam; and without it man is but dust of the earth to which he will return. Isaiah 2:22 (LXX) carries a serious warning against putting one’s trust in man: “*Cease yourself from the man breathing by snorting; for by what is he considered?*” Does this not say, “Why trust in a creature from whom the Divine breath of life, which alone distinguishes him from the dust of the ground, is snorting from his nostrils? Man is not this breath of life, it is a gift from God that made him alive! He only has it from God for a little while, and then what is he? He is dead, as are all creatures that the breath of life is absent from. They all turn back into the dust they came from.” Death is always described as the departure of the breath of life from the living creature, fish, fowl, animal and every creep-crawly thing on the earth, man included. Nephesh, the Hebrew term that is translated with the English term “soul” simply means “creature, being, person, and various other terms attributed to that which is life” All “life” is dependent upon the breath of life given by God.

Job says, “All the while my breath is in me, and the spirit [*pneuma*] of God is in my nostrils, my lips shall not speak wickedness” (28:3). Here Job identifies his “breath” with the “spirit of God”, which speaks of both as a gift from God, and both distinguished from and separate from himself. And then what was he? Dust and ashes! But Job continues further on by saying, “If God set his heart upon man, if he gather unto Himself His ‘spirit’ and His breath; all flesh shall perish together, and man shall turn again into dust” (34:13–15, KJV; see LXX translation on page two).

As we have indicated that the terms “living creature” includes all sea life, bird life, animal life, insect life and human life, we would like to call to your attention that all “living creatures” were given the “breath of life”, “breath” meaning what is translated with the English term “spirit”. In the record of the flood of Noah’s time we read: “*And*

*there died all flesh moving upon the earth of the winged creatures, and of the cattle, and from wild beasts, and every reptile moving upon the earth, and every man, and all as much as have the **breath of life**, and all which was upon the dry land died. And he wiped away every height which was upon the face of all the earth, **from man unto beasts, and reptiles, and the winged creatures of the heaven**; and they were wiped away from the earth; and he left behind only Noah and the ones with him in the ark”* (Gen. 7:21–23, LXX literal translation). We find here that the “breath of life”, whatever it is, or whatever its nature, was not just given to man alone. This breath or gift of God was given to all of His living creation. It is their possession just as much as it is man’s possession. And it can be taken away from man just as it can be taken away from all the other living creatures upon this earth — as you have just read in what was quoted from Genesis about the great flood in Noah’s time.

What can a person draw or infer from the statements of record found in the Bible? First, it is very apparent that the inbreathing by God of the “breath of life” into all the creatures made from the dust of the earth caused them to become alive. An important consequence which also follows is that the possession of the “breath of life” by any of God’s creatures does not of itself give immortality upon the creature. All creatures, without exception, were created under the law of death — the absence of the “breath of life” which results in the death of the creature; all return to the dust of the earth from which they were created. This includes man himself. He would lose his existence, and cease to be, just as all non-human creatures do, for the loss of the breath of life results in the death of the creature. As you can see, this “breath (spirit) of life” does not make one immortal.

As you may now see from what has been drawn out of the Scriptures, the “**breath of life**” is a possession of man and all living creatures, only because God gave it to them on a **temporary** basis. We say temporary for the simple and plain reason that God can take it back at any time He wants to. Remember, God is the “*potter*”, and we are the “*clay*”; and God can do what he wants with his creation (see Rom. 9:20–23). We also find that the “breath/*pneon* of life” is identical with the “spirit/*pneuma*” in man. Any biblically aware scholar can easily see that the “spirit” mentioned in Eccl. 12:7, when compared with Gen. 2:7, 7:21–23 and Job 34:13–15, 32:3 are simply different terms for the one and same principle of life which God gave to man when He made him a living creature (soul, life, being, person).

When looking through the book of Isaiah we find him using the same poetical parallelisms as found in the book of Job. In chapter 42, verse 5, we read, “*Thus says the Lord God, the one making the heavens, and pitching it; solidifying the earth, and the things in it; and giving breath (pnoen) to the people upon it, and spirit (pneuma) to the ones treading it*” (LXX). And in chapter 57, verse 16, we read, “*I shall not punish you unto the ages, nor shall I be provoked to anger with you always; for a spirit (pneuma) from me shall leave (you), and I made all (people) breathe (pneon)*” (LXX).

Now let’s look at how the AV translates it, being aware that it uses the Latin Vulgate terms that “tradition” passed down and they were influenced greatly in their translation of the Old Testament Scriptures in so doing. The LXX, dated about 285 BC, used an earlier copy of the Hebrew Old Testament in their translation, not the Latin.

Isaiah 42:5 — “Thus saith God the LORD, he that created the heavens, and stretched them out; he that spread forth the earth, and that which cometh out of it; he that giveth breath unto the people upon it, and spirit to them that walk therein:”

Isaiah 57:16 — “For I will not contend for ever, neither will I be always wroth: for the spirit should fail before me, and the souls *which* I have made.”

Because we mentioned the Latin Vulgate version of the Bible, let’s look at Isaiah 57:16 in the Douay-Rheims translation of it: “For I will not contend for ever, neither will I be angry unto the end: because the spirit shall go forth from my face, end breathings I will make.” The Latin Vulgate, translated as the Douay-Rheims records it, is also not the best translation to be had.

The AV translation of 42:5 is not all that bad, but makes no distinction as to what the “spirit” is. That is left up to their readers to figure out. The term spirit is not capitalized, so it is vague as to exactly what God gave them: especially since that term leaves the impression, because of tradition, that it is an “entity” within them.

However, in 57:16, we see that the AV does not do a very good job in their translation. Many readers may think that it is the “souls” of man that Isaiah is talking about, but the term translated “souls” is not the term the Hebrew Scriptures behind the LXX used. The word here is “pnoen”, the Greek translation of the Hebrew “n^eshamah”; which means “breath”, as already demonstrated (see Gen. 2:7). Also, look again on page 5 at the definition for “nephesh” which is translated “soul” in many places in the OT: that term actually means a “creature”, man included, which has the “breath” of life animating it.

NOTE: Isaiah, chapter 57 is talking about the nation of Israel, and this particular verse is a warning to them from God that His spirit (pneuma) which He led them with will not be with them always and He will not punish them forever, nor be provoked to anger with them always, for he will just give up on them. They were called to repent and obey the commandments He gave them...or else!

In our reference to the term “soul” we challenge any scholar to produce a single case where it demonstrates a clearly shown identification with the term “spirit.” We have found none, but, on the other hand, have found that between the “soul (nephesh)” and “spirit (ruach)” there is a very definite and clearly shown distinction between them. Never are the two terms used synonymously for each other. Besides, each term has its own definition that is not applicable to the other.

In ending this brief article on the BREATH OF LIFE, we want to emphasize that this “breath of life” combined with the “tree of life” in Eden would have allowed Adam and Eve to “live forever” had they not sinned and been deprived of partaking of its fruit! This is why God said that “dying they would surely die”, which Satan contradicted by saying “You shall not surely die.” Hebrew 9:27 says that “it is reserved to men once to die, and after this judgment.” Why is it reserved? Romans 5:12 says, “...*just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this same way death came to all men, because all sinned.*” Yes, “*for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*” (Rom. 3:23).

This is why Jesus was born. This is why Jesus was crucified. This is why Jesus was raised from the dead and became the first fruit of the resurrection. He was without sin, contrary to all other men (generic for all mankind, for all mankind sinned and will sin). It is believers who receive forgiveness of their sins, not unbelievers. Yes, all mankind will die, for “it is appointed or reserved to men to die once, and after this judgment” comes on the Last Day. Read John 5:18–29, then 6:39–40. Jesus is the life-giver, that everyone who “believes on him should not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

Life or death? Jesus said that He could and would raise men from the dead and give SOME of them eternal (immortal) life, the rest face the punishment of the “second death” from the Judge and then will be thrown into the lake of fire. It’s not where you are going to live, it’s are you going to live? Will that “breath of life” remain with you always after the resurrection, or will it be taken from you? What do you think?

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PS: Russell E. Boatman was a minister with a distinguished career in Christian higher education. He held two baccalaureate and two master’s degrees, graduating from Northwest Christian College, Eugene, Oregon, and Phillips University, Enid, Oklahoma. He ministered to churches in Harrisburg, Oregon, Nash and Sperry, Oklahoma, and Wichita, Kansas. He served as president of Minnesota Bible College, Minneapolis, Minnesota from 1945 to 1962, and as Dean/Dean Emeritus at St. Louis Christian College, Florissant, Missouri from 1962 to 1992. He served on the boards of numerous mission and service agencies.

He spoke widely at churches and conventions and authored numerous magazine and journal articles. He wrote four books: *What the Bible Says About the End Times*, *What the Bible Says About the Church*, *What the Bible Says About the Holy Spirit*, and *Beyond Death: What the Bible Says About The Hereafter*. In 1948 he joined Billy Graham and other Bible college presidents to form the *Accrediting Association of Bible Colleges*. Russell went to sleep in the Lord November 5, 2005, at the age of 91.

His book, *What the Bible Says About the Holy Spirit*, is a very worth-while and biblically oriented book to read. Although he doesn’t get into anything about the “breath of life”, he does make mention of it, and he does a great job of examining what the Bible says about “spirit” in all its aspects. **We heartedly recommend it!** (We don’t know if it is still available, but it was copyrighted in 1989 by College Press Publishing Company, Joplin, Missouri. You might check to see if they still have a copy for sale.)

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