

## The origin of Jesus' prayer

“ . . . then the Lord God formed the human of dust from the earth, and breathed into the human's nostrils the breath of life; and the human became a living being.” (Gen 2:7)

The Hebrew author of Genesis 2 describes the beginning of a dialogue between God and humankind. The first human ('adam in Hebrew) is formed from “the dust of the ground” ('adama in Hebrew) and is physically related to the earth at a fundamental level. Then the author declares that “*the breath of life*” enters man's physical body and he becomes a “living being.” The body of 'adam and the vitality of God are united in a two-fold yet continuous action through God's initiative. This co-inherence creates 'adam as a “living being.”<sup>1</sup>

Ancient Hebrews believed that breath conveys vital power and is a tangible manifestation of the soul and energy of the giver. They did not make a distinction between “life” and “soul.” The soul of a human being is the totality of that person and includes the body which is its “outward form.” This lies behind the Hebrew understanding of a blessing (*berakha* in Hebrew). When a patriarch blesses his son he is not wishing him good health and success; he is transmitting the totality of his soul – his physical and psychological being – to his son.<sup>2</sup>

The inspiration of God's life-giving breath into man's nostrils begins what may be seen as a prototype for prayer that is manifested in a variety of ways throughout the Hebrew scriptures. It takes a dialogic form when God's vital spirit is personified through breath and enters man's body and becomes the source and sustaining power of human life.<sup>3</sup> Yet the dialogue initiated in Genesis 2 – and continued throughout Hebrew scriptures by God's words and activities in human lives and the nation of Israel – is unfulfilled without a response. God's initiative is the genesis of a prayerful relationship. In this context, prayer is the flow of God's vital and creative spirit into a human being and each person's response to that gift.

There is a clear example of Jesus imparting vital energy through breath in John 20:19–23. When the risen Christ breathes on the disciples they receive the Holy Spirit who will enable them to continue his mission. “*As the Father has sent me, so I send you*’. *When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘receive the Holy Spirit.’*” Perhaps St. Paul has this in mind when he says in 2Cor 5:17 “*So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!*” and “*Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven.*” (1Cor 15:49)

Jesus experience of God, his Abba, in prayer mirrors the wisdom expressed in Genesis 2. His entire life flowed from this very basic, yet profound foundation. We know this because he shared this truth with his disciples in two ways. The first is through a parable. Jesus spoke

<sup>1</sup> For additional commentary on this interpretation of Genesis 2:7 see Pedersen, *Israel*, Vol. I, 156, 171 and Gerhard Von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 11.)

<sup>2</sup> For more commentary on the ancient Hebrew understanding of the human soul and blessing see Appendix C and Pedersen, *Israel*, Vol. I, 181–182.

<sup>3</sup> For further discussion of this insight see Balentine, *Prayer in the Hebrew Bible*, 261–262.

plainly about prayer in the collection of sayings called the “sermon on the mount” in Matthew’s gospel. (We will take a closer look at this teaching from the fifth chapter of Matthew later.) At the end of the “sermon” he tells a parable to encourage his hearers to take his words seriously.

*“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock.”* (Matt 7:24–25)

But why does Jesus think his words are a foundation for wisdom and wise behavior? The answer lies in his awareness that all his words and actions have their source in his prayerful experience of his Abba. He experienced the flow of God’s energy so completely that God became tangible in his life. He told his disciple Thomas,

*“How can you say, ‘Show us the Father?’ Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me [that is, entrust yourself to me] that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves.”* (John 14:8–12)

Jesus words and behavior seem to tell us that his times of prayer were opportunities to respond to God’s initiative and place himself in the flow of God’s energy. He prayed because he knew that it was the only way to become “a living being.” The same is true for every person. Prayer is the source and sustaining power of human life.

When was your first awareness of the vitality of God’s life in you?

What does the Genesis 2:7 account of the creation of “adam” tell you about the nature of human life?

How have you been blessed by God? In what ways are you a blessing to other people?

Biblical texts for study and reflection:

Gen 2:4b–8; Matt 7:24–25; John 14:8–12; 20:19–23; John 20:19–23; 2Cor 5:16–21.

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