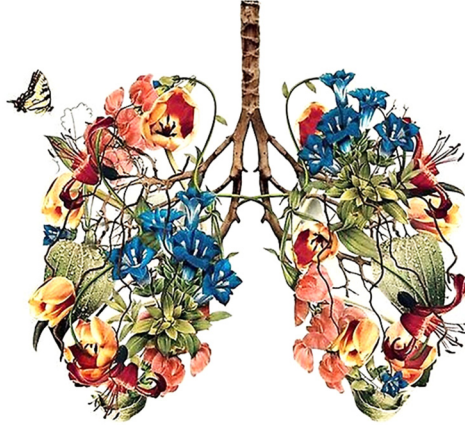


Lungs and Breathing: Inspiration and Exultation

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



"Lung Flower"

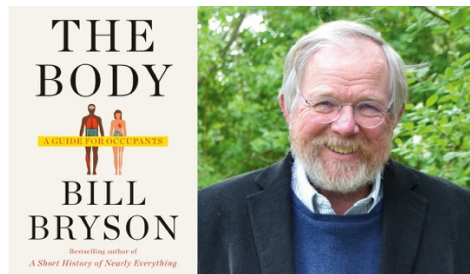
Prayer of Illumination

Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit, that as the scriptures are read and your Word is proclaimed, we may hear with joy what you say to us this day and run this race to win and to run for the glory of your name.

Amen.

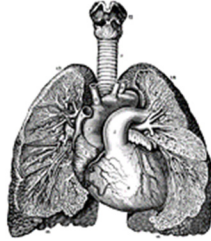
Introduction

Today we're starting a new series—The Beauty of the Body.



Using Bill Bryson's wonderful book "*The Body-A Guide for Occupants*," we're going to look at the wonder of the human body and then connect that to our spirituality, both individually and as a church.

So today, let's look at the lungs and breathing.



Lungs

Each day, quietly and steadily, both night and day, you breathe in and breathe out about 20,000 times, processing roughly 4000 gallons of air—depending upon your size and activity levels. You take about 7.3 million breaths per lap around the sun. And over an average lifetime, you'll take about 550 million breaths. Your lungs can hold about six quarts of air. They weigh in at almost 2.5 pounds and the muscle called the diaphragm helps the lungs do their work. You have about 1000 square feet of lung tissue and about 1500 miles of airways.

Our lungs are a great filtration system—cleansing our body of some twenty billion foreign particles every day—dust, pollutants, pollen, fungal spores, and other unwelcome guests that are expunged by either coughing or sternutation (the fancy word for sneezing) or they are dissolved by hydrochloric acid in the stomach. Asthma and lung cancer are a few of the major challenges for the lungs, but over the last year or so, we've become all too aware of the respiratory disease of COVID-19 and its impact on the lungs.

Physical exercise makes your muscles stronger—including your lungs and heart. Stronger lungs improve your body's ability to get oxygen into your bloodstream. Regular exercise makes you less likely to be short of breath ... which leads us to our Scripture reading that uses an athletic metaphor. But before we read, some historical background on our passage is needed—the ancient Isthmian Games on the Isthmus of Corinth.



The three-day long Isthmian Games were held in Corinth every two years in the spring. They were the second most popular Games in the ancient Hellenistic world, next to the Olympics.



Such sporting events included running, boxing, wrestling, the pentathlon, and horse racing. There were also poetry contests for those less interested in sports. Victors were honored with crowns made of dried celery or pine. Poems were written in the winner's honor. In some cases statues were made of famous athletes and placed at the entrance of the temple in Corinth. The Isthmian Games brought large crowds and substantial income to the city of Corinth. The use of athletic metaphors had long been used by the Greek philosophers—which Paul was likely familiar with. Paul also knew well the people of Corinth would understand the sports imagery used in this passage.

It's important to note Paul isn't saying that we earn our salvation or that only one of us wins and everyone else loses. The purpose of the metaphor is to inspire all Christians to be disciplined, train hard, and win the race of faith God has called us to.

Also, Paul isn't saying the human body is bad. We aren't trying to punish our bodies or escape from them. Rather we care for and train our bodies and our faith to be a living sacrifice that glorifies God. Like the athlete, the Christian must be willing undergo anything to win, whether it be effort or self-denial because he or she is focused on the ultimate goal—the good news of Christ and the life everlasting he offers.

So let's hear now the word of the Lord from:

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 (NRSV)

Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one. So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air; but I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified.

***The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.***

SERMON – Lungs and Breathing: Inspiration and Exultation

One of my heroes is Presbyterian Eric Liddel—the Flying Scotsman who won the gold medal in the 1924 Olympics in Paris. His story is told in the award-winning 1981 movie *“Chariots of Fire”* and more recently in the New York Times Bestselling biography *“For the Glory by Duncan Hamilton.”* It’s an inspiring read.

God gave Eric Liddel a gift—a gift to run. And to run fast. He not only ran for God’s glory, but he later served as a missionary for God’s glory in China. In this scene from the movie, Eric runs in a race in the Olympics that he did not train for. He refused to run in his trained event because it was on the Sabbath and he wanted to honor the Sabbath. Enjoy this scene where we see his victory.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uwyltmUR3MU>

I love that scene!

In another scene from the movie, Eric Liddell gives a message outdoors in the rain after a race. Following is the script from that portion of the movie *“Chariots of Fire.”*

“You came to see a race today—to see someone win—it happened to be me. But I want you to do more than just watch a race. I want you to take part in it.

I want to compare faith to running in a race. It’s hard. Requires concentration of will. Energy of soul. I have no formula for winning the race. Everyone runs in their own way. Where does the power come from, to see the race to its end? From within. Jesus said, “Behold the kingdom of God is within you. If with all your heart you truly seek me, you shall surely find me.”

Commit yourself to the love of Christ... and that is how you run a straight race. ...”
(fade movie clip)

The Apostle Paul had that same passion for the race of faith. He was entirely focused upon Christ and the gospel. He would endure anything to further the gospel. He would let nothing in his life be an obstacle in the way of the gospel.

Paul’s devotion was to a person—to Christ, not a code. And Christ lived in Paul, lives within us, empowering us to love, serve, and obey. You see, it’s all grace. All a gift. Yet we need to position ourselves to receive God’s grace. We want to grow in grace in our lives, and do whatever it takes to do that. This won’t happen by accident or by osmosis. It takes training—and Christ is our trainer.

Paul tells us all runners take part in the games, but only one receives the prize. I think he’s telling us here there are no “participation trophies” in God’s kingdom. Yes, it’s important to show up, but God wants more than that from us. We also need to be personally invested in our spiritual training. To grow in grace, you run to win. Don’t just enter the race. Baptism is our entry into the race, but that’s just the beginning. Just as we have to start in the right way, we also need to continue in the right way.

In other words, we can't just wing this. If you're going to hike the Grand Canyon, Rim to Rim, you've got to train hard, consistently, over a long period of time.

Faith is more than focusing on our "rights" or "freedoms." It's also about our "responsibilities." Having a spiritual regimen and training keeps us focused upon that.

The Christian life is not just about freedom. Yes, it is *for* freedom we have been set free. We not only have freedom *from*, but also freedom *to do* things—freedom to limit ourselves, freedom to deny ourselves, freedom to stretch ourselves, freedom to serve.

And so we practice. We work up a Holy Sweat. We want to do this right. No short cuts, easy roads, or cutting corners. No coasting or slacking. We're not rigid or legalistic, but passionate, focused.

Rather than taking the easy way, we train hard.

Paul lays out a philosophy of life here:

1. As Christians, we're in spiritual training throughout our lives.
2. This race we're in demands discipline.
3. And so we need to know our goal, our purpose, our end to strain towards.
We can't just be busy bodies or just going, going—without going anywhere. We keep our eye on the ball. Keep our eye on the prize. Christ is both our path and our prize.
4. And we need to know the worth of our goal.
This is something that's eternal, not fading. It's a worthy goal. We don't want to miss out on it. It's eternal life, abundant life—a life of glorifying God and enjoying him forever.

God is calling us to be intentional in our faith. Disciplined. Focused. To practice our faith, exercise our faith—deliberately. Don't be an aimless runner or a boxer who beats the air. Let's go all out. Let your whole life, your everyday life, be held captive by the purposes of the gospel. Or as Paul says earlier, "everything I do, I do for the sake of the gospel." Discipline your body, so that it serves you, rather than you serving your body. Paul in Galatians says that self-control is a fruit of the Spirit.

The Spiritual Disciplines are a means of grace. Spiritual training to grow in grace. Try out these spiritual workouts:

- | | |
|-------------|-----------------------|
| – Worship | – Service |
| – Fasting | – Solitude |
| – Scripture | – Spiritual Direction |
| – Study | – Simplicity |
| – Prayer | – Gratitude |
| – Sabbath | – Hospitality |
| – Giving | |

Have a spiritual regimen. Not a law, but a guide, a way of life, a habitus. You don't want to be disqualified from the prize. Learn the rules. Play fair. Don't cheat. Be a good sport. Accept that you

win sometimes, and you lose sometimes, too. That's life. But give it your best shot every time. Play for the love of the game. Have fun—don't take yourself too seriously.

- Inhale worship. Exhale of mission. Breathe deeply.
- Breathe in discipleship. Breathe out service.
- Inspiration and exultation.

Do everything for the glory of God.

"Let everything that hath breath praise the Lord." KJV

Amen.

The New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.