



Spirit of God (Reboot) E2: The Spirit of Life and Death

Official Transcript

Speakers:

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Credits read by audience members Kiara and Taylor, and by BibleProject team member Angela

[Recap of the Meaning of Ruakh (0:0-9:16)]

[BibleProject theme]

Jon: Welcome to BibleProject podcast. Today, we continue our conversation on the Spirit of God, or in Hebrew, *ruakh* Elohim.

Tim: [Audio clip from the episode below] One way of defining *ruakh*: It's an invisible, personal, life-giving energy. It's the thing animating every living thing.

Jon: You only get two sentences into the Bible before you encounter God as *ruakh*, hovering over the dark, abysmal waters, ready to bring order. This is the biblical portrait of God's Spirit creating and holding everything together.

Tim: [Audio clip from the episode below] *Ruakh* is intimately involved and present with all creation, sustaining its existence moment to moment.

Jon: Last week's discussion oriented us to how the ancients thought of *ruakh*. It's the power that rushes through the trees. It's the energy we breathe into our lungs. It's the

vitality that we have that lets us comprehend the world. In the Bible, this energy is a gift. And it's the very life presence of God's self. Humans cannot exist without it.

Tim: [Audio clip from the episode below] This is the biblical author's way of exploring humans as mortal, as not sustaining their own existence.

Jon: But the story of the Bible begins with an invitation to experience eternal life.

Tim: [Audio clip from the episode below] Whatever immortal life that humans are going to experience is not something they have of their own nature. It's something that is given to them as a gift.

Jon: Because humanity cannot exist without God's *ruakh*, its very presence reminds us of our own frailty.

Tim: [Audio clip from the episode below] Job refers to God's breath as the only thing keeping him alive, but also, it's the sign that he's not even sure how much longer he'll be alive because it's not *his* possession. It was something that was gifted to him.

Jon: Today, we examine the inherent mortality of humans and the marvelous gift of God's *ruakh*.

Tim: [Audio clip from the episode below] *Ruakh* is such an unmerited, undeserved, uncontrolled gift that it should humble me.

Jon: Thanks for joining us. Here we go.

[Musical break (2:06-2:14)]

Jon: Hey, Tim.

Tim: Hey, Jon.

Jon: Hey.

Tim: Hi.

Jon: We're continuing this conversation on the Spirit of God.

Tim: Mhm. Yes, we are.

Jon: And what we've attempted to do, just briefly, in our last conversation was—

Tim: [chuckles] Or not so briefly.

[Jon and Tim laugh]

Tim: Yeah.

[BibleProject theme fades out]

Jon: —try to get into the ancient imagination of this word “spirit.” And actually, this is a pillar of ours that we talk about: The Bible as ancient literature.

Tim: Yes, right.

Jon: And so it’s an exercise of not bringing our own present-day understanding of words and concepts and imposing them on the Bible, but trying to empathetically get into the imagination of the biblical authors and the way they viewed the world. It’s challenging sometimes.

Tim: Yeah. Yeah, it’s an exercise in extreme empathy. [laughs]

Jon: Mmm. Yeah.

Tim: Yeah. Which, I guess, is about imagining the feelings of another person.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: But this is about imagining the *ideas* of another person—

Jon: Yeah, I’ve actually used the phrase intellectual empathy before to talk about this, yeah.

Tim: Yeah. There you go. Yeah. Yep.

Jon: [Tim agreeing throughout] Yeah. And so that’s what we’re doing specifically around the word “spirit,” but also our word “wind,” and “breath,” and perhaps even “mind.” And there’s one Hebrew word, *ruakh*. So what does it mean to think of all those things together, and how does the Bible use that word? And [chuckles] what’s your summary of our conversation?

Tim: [laughs] One way of defining *ruakh*—trying to capture a definition, which is like capturing water, you know, with your hand. It refers to something invisible. You cannot see *it*. You see its *effects*.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: [Jon agreeing throughout] That's true of wind and breath and mind. It's personal. It's based on a conviction of the biblical authors that there is someone who is the creator of all that is and the sustainer who's intimately involved and present with all creation, sustaining its existence moment to moment.

Jon: Mmm. Okay.

Tim: So it's a invisible, personal, life-giving energy.

[Jon and Tim laugh]

Tim: The life-giving meaning: It's the thing animating every living thing. But energy: And it's a thing animating non-living things, that is, like, wind in the trees.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: You know, wind can knock down a tree. It can move waters. Whole bodies of water can be moved by the wind. So invisible, personal, life-giving, and animating energy. Yeah. Yeah. There you go.

Jon: What was really helpful for me—there was a moment where you said: When we think of the wind, we think of something physical because we understand the physical nature of air.

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: But an ancient thinker did not. So it was more like a—what you said, like a force, like we think of gravitational force or these kind of things.

Tim: Yeah, in our modern contemporary cosmology, the slot that is occupied by these mysterious, all-pervasive, reality-sustaining forces—

[Jon and Tim laugh]

Tim: [Jon backchanneling throughout] —gravity, electromagnetic, strong and weak nuclear—is the slot occupied by God's *ruakh* in the biblical author's imagination. Now, it's not precise.

Jon: Sure.

Tim: It's not an exact, but it's pretty close.

Jon: Right. Mhm.

Tim: Because in our modern mindset, those forces may or may not point us to a *person*. More often, they're just stated to be impersonal laws.

Jon: Yeah. [laughs]

Tim: So insert God's transcendent personal being into our concept of modern forces—

[Jon laughs]

Tim —and we're very close to the concept of *ruakh* in the Bible. It's pervasive. It comes from the one who is above all things, but it also is the *way* that that one who is above and beyond all is personally present, sustaining everything that is.

Jon: [Tim backchanneling throughout] Yeah. And so this then frame invites us into some mysteries, which is: When I see the wind moving through a tree, am I seeing God's personal energy, or am I seeing God sending what I would call an impersonal force?

Tim: Yeah, something distinct from God. Right.

Jon: Yeah. And I want to make a clear distinction.

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: And are we saying the ancient imagination is saying, "*Yeah, there's a distinction, but don't make it so sharp*"?

Tim: Yeah, I mean—these are almost impossible mysteries. [chuckles]

[Jon laughs]

Tim: But there has to be an absolute difference between God and creation from one point of view. I'm not all that God is, like, very clearly. [laughs]

Jon: Yeah. Okay.

Tim: Ask my wife—

Jon: Or—

[Jon and Tim laugh]

Tim: —or my kids.

[Jon and Tim laugh]

Tim: You know what I mean?

Jon: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Tim: Like, really, I'm quite a frail, mortal, fragile being on many levels. So there's an absolute distinction between me as a weak little temporary creature and the infinite, eternal creator of all. But the only way for anything temporary and finite and small and frail to exist is to be so closely sustained and held in existence by God's *ruakh* that

another way to say it is like the way Paul says it: “In God, we live and move and have our being.”

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: “In God,” he says. [laughs]

Jon: Mhm. Yeah.

Tim: Or like he says in a little prayer at the end of Ephesians: “The Father who is over all and through all and in all things.”

Jon: Mmm. Yeah.

Tim: “Over all” —

[Jon chuckles]

Tim: —“through all” —

[Jon laughs]

Tim: —“in all.” [laughs]

Jon: Yeah. That’s—

Tim: And he’s holding together things that we find almost impossible to hold together. He’s trying to.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: And *ruakh* is one of the ways the biblical authors are naming what is, from our point of view, like a paradox.

Jon: Yeah. Okay.

Tim: So invisible, personal, life-giving energy.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: What I’d like to do in this conversation is really hone in on ways in the Hebrew Bible that *ruakh* is inviting us into the meeting place of life and death or existence and non-existence. So spirit is associated with life. Breath is associated with life.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: And I think what struck me —

[Music fades in]

Tim: —in new ways was that in many cases where *ruakh* in the Hebrew Bible is associated with life, in the context, it's very much also associated with the unpredictable nature of life and death.

Jon: Hmm. I don't appreciate what you're getting at, so let's just get into it, maybe.

Tim: Deal. Let's start on page two.

Jon: Okay.

[Musical break (8:56-9:16)]

[The Breath of Life for Dust Creatures in Genesis 2 (9:16-20:03)]

Tim: Okay, so there's two narratives at the beginning of the book of Genesis. The first is the seven-day creation story, and God's *ruakh* is there hovering, fluttering, over the waters. The second narrative begins in Genesis 2, verse 4, with a little heading saying, "These are the birthings of the skies and the land." And it begins with a lifeless desert, and there's no plants, no human, and no water. So God provides a spring that pops up out of the ground. "*Surprise!*" And when the spring water saturates the ground, the narrative doesn't explicitly say, but it's pretty obvious what you're supposed to imagine. Mix water with dirt, and you get—

Jon: Mud.

Tim: —what has been my entire backyard—

[Jon and Tim laugh]

Tim: —for about a decade [laughs] with my boys—is a huge mud pit that they love to dig in. So: clay or mud.

Jon: Mhm.

Tim: Mhm. So what we're told then is something God does with that wet dirt. Genesis 2, verse 7: "Then Yahweh Elohim"—Yahweh being "the one who is"—that's what it means and is the personal, covenant name of Yahweh with Israel. "Yahweh Elohim formed"—*vayyitser*. It's a word used to describe what potters do with clay actually—

Jon: Okay.

Tim: —elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. Jeremiah 18 is kind of the most well-known. So he "formed 'adam, the human, from "'aphar min ha'adamah." So 'aphar is dust from the ground. So we're talking about the topsoil. [laughs]

Jon: Oh, okay.

Tim: And dust is the most common English word in our English translations used to describe this. But when I think of dust, I think of dry—

Jon: Mhm. Like, the—yes.

Tim: —not wet.

Jon: Right.

Tim: For me, dust is the opposite of wet.

Jon: Yeah. So this is topsoil.

Tim: Topsoil. It's the top layer.

Jon: Moist topsoil.

Tim: Mhm. And the ground is the word 'adamah, which has all the letters of the word 'adam in it. "Human from the humus"— [laughs]

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: —is one way to talk about it. And then dust is referring to the topsoil.

Jon: Okay. So human comes from the ground—molded from the ground.

Tim: Yeah. So that's one thing. God formed human from the topsoil of the 'adamah.

Jon: Does that work, "human from the humus"? Humus can mean earth?

Tim: I think humus—humus is an old English word for the topsoil.

Jon: It's an old English word. Is it? Oh, cool.

Tim: Mhm. Also, the same letters from—

Jon: As hummus?

Tim: Mhm.

[Jon laughs]

Tim: It's one of the most delicious foods in the—

Jon: It really is.

Tim: —history of human food-making.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: But anyway. Uhm, but it's diff— [laughs] it's different than the English word humus —

Jon: [laughs] Different hummus.

Tim: —which refers to topsoil. Okay. “Yahweh Elohim formed human from the topsoil of the *'adamah*, and he breathed into his nostrils the *nishmat khayyim*, breath of life, and human became a *nefesh khayyah*, a living being.” So “breathe” and “breath” here— neither one of them is *ruakh*, but they're synonyms.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: So breathe is the verb *naphakh*, and then, breath is from *neshama*. And they more precisely refer to inhalation, inhaling or exhaling. [Jon backchanneling throughout] So *ruakh* can be the stuff in the trees, in the hummingbird, in me, and the stuff in between. And the verb breathe here and *neshama*, breath, is referring to that stuff when it's coming in and out of my nose and mouth and throat.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: “Inhalation” or something like that.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: “Exhaling,” “exhalation.”

Jon: Why use a different word?

Tim: Yeah, maybe we're emphasizing when the *ruakh* of God becomes a gift to the human person so that in a sense it becomes their *ruakh*. We're emphasizing the human experience and possession of the *ruakh* within their own body.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: And *neshama* signals that. [Jon backchanneling throughout] This is the most common synonym of *ruakh*, and it appears two dozen times in the Hebrew Bible, and often in interesting ways. And so this is one of them. So the dust here just signals the

topsoil, like, on the level of the narrative. And it comes up out of the ground. So on one level, humans are earthlings, [chuckles] like, we come from the ground.

Jon: Yeah, okay.

Tim: What we know about the ground is that it's a neutral canvas that doesn't produce life in and of itself.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: It's material that cannot—this is in the narrative—

Jon: Oh.

Tim: —because it begins with a lifeless desert.

Jon: It needed something more.

Tim: It needed something outside of itself.

Jon: It needed the water, the water of God.

Tim: But then, when combined with that life-giving substance, it can generate life.

Jon: Yeah. Okay.

Tim: And in this narrative, it's the water that God brings up out of the ground. But then also, humans need more than just the clay, like, their, as it were, material. They also need some life source, just like the ground needs something outside of itself—

Jon: To make plants?

Tim: —to produce life. The human, once formed, needs something outside of itself, and that's the role of the divine breath. So I think this—

Jon: Very clearly God's breath.

Tim: God's breath. Yeah, but that becomes the human—thus the word *neshama*—it becomes—

Jon: The human's breath.

Tim: [Jon backchanneling throughout] —native to the human as a living creature. Theirs, so to speak. Quote “their” breath.

Jon: Hmm. Yeah.

Tim: So this is the biblical author's way of exploring humans as frail, as mortal, as not sustaining their own existence or originating their own existence.

Jon: Hmm. For some reason, growing up, I had this image of humans being immortal in and of ourselves.

Tim: Oh, yeah.

Jon: [Tim backchanneling throughout] And I remember you talking here about: Look at how the narrative actually makes you think about it. It's not that the human is immortal. The human is dust, but then is *given* life.

Tim: Mhm. Yeah, here, given life, like, just base life.

Jon: [Tim backchanneling throughout] Yeah, just base life. And then later in the story is given the opportunity to eat of eternal life, which is a gift from God outside of him. So—sorry for the aside.

Tim: But that's—I think that's important, because whatever immortal life that humans are going to experience is not something they have of their own nature.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: It's something that is given to them as a gift.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Now, humans are the kind of beings within the Bible that are capable of living forever. And in that sense, we image God. But we are also dust. Actually, we're to it. We're right to the thing that I want to highlight. So this is the beginning of the Eden story. If we turn to the end of the Eden story after Adam and Eve's folly at the tree of knowing good and bad, when God sings his poetic lament over the man and the woman, what he draws to their attention is that because of their folly, they have introduced a grief into the very processes that God gave them for the gift of life. So he highlights reproduction for women, conception, and the raising of children will be fraught with "grief." Many of our English translations say "pain," like labor pains, but that's not what it refers to—

[Jon and Tim laugh]

Tim: —or means, but "grief." And then when he refers to the man, he talks about how the ground is cursed, and in that same grievous toil, "You will eat from it all the days of your life." So instead of garden existence where God just—overabundance popping up out of the ground, to get abundance out of the ground now, you're going to have to—

Jon: A lot of work.

Tim: A lot of work, and it's a work that will wear you out. In verse 19 in Genesis 3: "By the sweat of your face you will eat your bread until you return to the *'adamah*, the

ground, because from it you were taken, for you are dust and to dust you will return.” So from dust to dust—

Jon: [chuckles] Mhm.

Tim: —that’s the picture here.

Jon: Yeah. And so then what happens to this God-breath that we were given?

Tim: I know. [excited] I know. It’s a great question—

[Jon laughs]

Tim: —that the narrative raises, right?

Jon: Mhm. Yeah.

Tim: Apparently, you give it up. [Jon agreeing throughout] So I’m just going to stick within the story world as given to us. If I received it as a gift that was not my own, then when I go back to the ground, what else does that mean but a surrendering of the *ruakh*, of the breath?

Jon: And if you watch someone die—

Tim: Yes.

Jon: —you watch them take their last breath.

Tim: This is actually what happens, yeah. And any creature. Yeah, you surrender the *ruakh*.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: Mhm. I think what’s significant is that this close association of dust and spirit is really important—

Jon: Hmm. Okay.

Tim: —because what you’ll find is that when dust or dirt is brought up elsewhere throughout the Hebrew Bible—I’m about to show you a bunch of examples—spirit and dirt or spirit and dust often appear in the same context. And spirit or breath primarily signals a creature’s fragile existence in the ways that, the more years I’ve sat with it, it feels really significant.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: So maybe that’s just it. *Ruakh*, this divine breath-spirit, as—should signal in our minds when we come across it in the Bible as much the miracle of life—that life exists period and that I am alive is just a sheer miracle.

[Music fades in]

Tim: And at the same time, the very fact that I have life should signal to me that I'm dying [chuckles] and that I'm fragile and mortal and my existence really isn't my own. And both of those feelings, I think, *ruakh* is meant to signal in certain passages. So should we just look at some?

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Okay.

Jon: Let's look at them.

[Musical break (19:30-20:03)]

[Divine Breath and Human Dust in Job (20:03-29:25)]

Tim: So in Genesis chapter 18, there's a moment when God just told Abraham the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah—there's so much injustice happening, and the cry of the oppressed has risen up to him that he's going to destroy these cities. And Abraham steps in, and he says, "Wait a minute, you're the judge of all the land. Won't you do what's right? What if there's people who do right by you and neighbor there in that city?" And so when he introduces that intercession, what he says is, "Please, my Lord, I am being so bold to speak to you even though I am dust and ashes." [chuckles]

Jon: [chuckles] Yeah.

Tim: That's how dust works in the Bible.

Jon: Yeah, okay.

Tim: I am dust, and so are you.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: So this is used to much effect in the book of Job. There's many places where humans as dustlings are referred to. Here's just a couple examples. In Job chapter 4, verse 19, Job calls humans "people who dwell in houses of clay, whose foundations are in the dust."

Jon: Mmm. Yeah.

Tim: So your body is a little clay house. [laughs] And the foundation of your little clay dwelling, that is your body, is dust.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: So it feels real. That's what I was trying to say in the last conversation. You and I think [chuckles] of ourselves as real. [laughs]

[Jon and Tim laugh]

Jon: Yeah, of course I do.

[Jon and Tim laugh]

Tim: In one— [laughs]

[Jon and Tim laugh]

Tim: [laughs] In one sense, we are.

Jon: Why do you keep telling me I'm not real?

[Jon and Tim laugh]

Jon: It's kind of freaking me out.

Tim: [excited] Well, because—but dude, because we're—like, we're going to die. And in 100 years, like—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: —no one's going to even remember anything about us. It'll be like we never were. What you and I are is so fragile and temporary.

Jon: Okay. But [pause] that's different than real.

[Tim laughs]

Jon: Fragile and temporary.

Tim: And I— [pause] sure.

Jon: I think I know what you're saying, though, is—

Tim: Yeah. [Jon agreeing throughout] For you and I to have these experiences as real creatures, there must be *something*, or in biblical thought, *someone*, who's the ground of it all, who precedes us, will be long after us, and who is so intimately related to every single micro part of whatever it is that I am keeping it all going.

Jon: Yeah. So to whatever degree you're real, that thing is more real.

Tim: Yes, that's right.

Jon: That's what you mean.

Tim: It's a relative real.

[Jon laughs]

Jon: It's a relative—

Tim: You and I are relatively real.

[Jon laughs]

Tim: And that's what these passages are trying to say. We live in clay houses with dust foundations.

Jon: Mmm.

Tim: The foundation of my house—

Jon: Oh, yeah? Tell me about it.

Tim: —in Southeast Portland, a house that was built like 110 years ago—when we got the house inspection—it was this one thing that made us be like, “Should we do this?”—is the foundation material is made out of river rock sand from the Willamette River, like right down a mile from my house.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: And if I were to just start digging into it just with a hand shovel, I could just start dig —

Jon: Break it apart?

Tim: Yes. Yes. But then the inspector told us, “Yeah, every house in this entire part of town is built with this.”

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: So I was like, “Yeah, so what about when the big one, the earthquake, comes?” And he was like, “Yeah, this is all toast.”

[Jon and Tim laugh]

Tim: Because it's basically just being held together by it being compacted by gravity, of the house lying on it.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: So it keeps it sturdy, but the moment that—foundation in the dust is my house.

Jon: People listening—what do you mean by the big one?

Tim: The big earthquake.

Jon: We live in a constant kind of psychological—

Tim: Yeah. [chuckles]

Jon: —terror—

Tim: Yeah. [laughs]

Jon: [Tim agreeing throughout] —of the fact that one day, any day, a massive earthquake could just destroy everything over here.

Tim: We live in the Cascadia Subduction Zone.

[Jon laughs]

Tim: Yeah. Two huge tectonic plates—

Jon: Ah, and to dust we will return.

Tim: Yeah. Yeah, man. That's exactly it.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Yep, that's it. Okay, so I'm going to read Job chapter 10, verses 8 and 9, but I say them as my own words. This is Job talking to God: "God, your hands fashioned me. You made me altogether." And then, Job says, "Look at my life now. You've also destroyed me. Please remember that you made me as clay. And are you turning me back into dust again?" So Job's talking about his suffering and all the terrible things that happened to him, and he's—this is the classic problem of evil, then, for a conception of the world and of God that is core to the Jewish and Christian tradition, which is: God is the source of all reality. If all reality only is real, relatively real, because it participates in God, what is God's relationship to all of the terrible pain and suffering and evil in creation? Right? That's the— [pause]

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: —the classic knot.

Jon: The problem of evil.

Tim: Problem of evil. And Job's exploring that in his own way. And he says, "Listen, you made me like clay." [Jon backchanneling throughout] What this means is—what this is saying is: What human existence is, in its nature, is fragile and mortal. It doesn't sustain its own existence. The only way it would even exist, and the only way it will have any continuing existence, is if God continues to provide the gift of the *ruakh*. In other words, *ruakh* is as much a signal of life as it is of the fragility of life. And this is why, especially in the book of Job, Job refers to God's breath as the only thing keeping him alive, but also, it's the sign that he's not even sure how much longer he'll be alive because it's not his possession.

Jon: Hmm. [with new clarity] Oh.

Tim: —it was something that was gifted to him.

Jon: [with new clarity] Hmm.

Tim: The nature of breath as gift—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: —both refers to the miracle of life and to—

Jon: Yeah, the fragility.

Tim: —fragility of life. So in chapter 27—this is one of his moments where he's pretty angry at God—and so he says, "As God lives, the God who has taken away my rights, the Almighty who has made my soul bitter, as long as I have *neshama* in me and as long as the *ruakh* of God is in my nostrils, I am not going to speak anything unjust. My tongue will not utter deceit." And what he goes on to say, essentially, to his friends, is: "*You guys are accusing me of having done something wrong and that's why I'm suffering.*"

Jon: —"*I'm suffering.*"

Tim: "*And I'm telling you, I haven't done anything wrong [laughs] to deserve all this suffering. The problem isn't with me. I didn't do anything. So however this happened, it's God's issue. And I'm going to take up my issue with God.*" So that's one thing.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: But then what he's naming is the paradox, which is that: "*The only way I can take up*"—

[Jon laughs]

Tim: —“*my case with God*”—

Jon: Oh, “*is with breath that is a gift to me.*”

Tim: —“*is that—if he keeps me alive. But my whole point is that he’s slowly taking away my life.*”

Jon: Mmm. “*But as long as I have a little bit left, I’m going to keep giving my case.*”

Tim: “*As long as.*” As long as. So that “as long as” is really a way of talking about the essence of the biblical picture of human existence. It’s fragile. It’s contingent, dependent, impermanent, temporary. But it’s also a generous gift and a miracle. [laughs]

Jon: Mhm. Yeah.

Tim: But also can’t be taken for granted.

Jon: Hmm. Yeah.

Tim: That’s *ruakh*. “As long as the *neshama* is in me, as long as the *ruakh* of God is in my nostrils. . .” What a bold phrase, “the *ruakh* of God in my nose.”

Jon: Yeah, that one’s sticky in my mind because it really forces me to not make a clear distinction between breath and Spirit of God.

Tim: Oh, sure. That’s right. Yeah. Yeah.

Jon: It really just jams them together.

Tim: Yeah, that’s right. And isn’t it great? It’s poetry, the only real adequate way to—

[Jon laughs]

Tim: —address that. Yeah.

Jon: So I see what you’re saying: that dust is about the death. So you’ve got *ruakh*, and then you’ve got dust.

Tim: [excited] Ohhh, yes. *Ruakh* is life.

Jon: *Ruakh* is life. The dust represents this temporary, fragile, impermanent thing—

Tim: That’s right.

Jon: —where the *ruakh* is permanent.

Tim: That’s good. Yeah. When you think of *ruakh* as life-breath, the biblical authors also want you to think about our nature as dust and hold those two in our minds.

Jon: Okay. Yeah. As soon as you start really reflecting on “*I have life because of a gift outside of me,*” you are just one thought away from “*Oh, I am dust.*”

[Music fades in]

Tim: “*I’m dust.*” That’s right.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: That’s right.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: So let’s look at another poem that explores this in a surprising way, and it’ll be similar ideas. We’re just going to run through them again, but from another poet—

Jon: Okay.

Tim: —the poet who wrote Psalm 104.

[Musical break (29:14-41:09)]

[God Giving and Taking Away His Ruakh in Psalm 104 (29:35-41:14)]

Tim: Psalm 104. It’s a beautiful meditation on creation. It represents somebody who has read and thought a lot about the seven-day creation narrative and the Eden narrative because it joins vocabulary of both together in this poem.

Jon: Okay.

[Music fades out]

Tim: And it's just gone through and talked about how all of the creatures in the skies, the host of heaven, like, the lights in the sky and the messengers, the angels, should praise God for their existence. It went through and talked about the creatures of the land and then the creatures of the sea.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: Kind of just moved through from top to bottom.

Jon: How they all should praise God?

Tim: And how they—literally in the paragraph right before, where we're going to pick up in verse 27, the poet was just, like, marveling about the feeding patterns of wild goats [chuckles] and rock badgers.

[Jon and Tim laugh]

Jon: Okay.

Tim: So it kind of—

Jon: It's the order of creation.

Tim: Mhm, yeah. So verse 27 begins with "All of your creatures wait for you to give them their food in due season." Every creature on the planet, when it is hungry, what it's longingly waiting for is the hand of God.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: [Jon backchanneling throughout] "You give to them, and they gather it up. You open your hand, and they are satisfied with *tov*"—with good. So notice how the biblical authors actually have a nuanced way of thinking about cause and effect in the world. And—so sometimes they'll talk about God as the provider or maker of something, and then five effects down the chain, you know, somebody receives something. But often, when they want to highlight God's intimacy with the world, they'll just put all of the cause-and-effect chain in a parentheses and just go "God to creature." [laughs] "Your hand feeds every little rock badger and wild mountain goat." Direct from God's hand. Just like—

Jon: Yeah, it's a very poetic way to think of a field growing grass as God's hand lifting up food for the animal.

Tim: Yeah. That's right. Mhm. Yeah. And ancient people knew that, like, there's all sorts of minerals—

Jon: And seeds.

Tim: —and things in the ground that are important, and then air temperature, and—they knew about the stuff way more than you and I do.

[Jon laughs]

Tim: [Jon agreeing throughout] So they know there's all these other links in the chain, but they're thinking in terms of ultimate cause, and they talk about God.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: Okay. So verse 28: "You open your hand, and every creature is satisfied with goodness. But if you hide your face, they are dismayed." So God gives with his hand, but if he hides his *face*—which is an image of loss of intimate connection, right? If you hide your face from another person, you're signaling a distance there.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Mhm. "If you hide your face, they are dismayed. If you take away their *ruakh*, they expire and return to the dust." There we go.

Jon: Yeah, their breath is gone—

Tim: *Their ruakh.*

Jon: —they're gone. Mmm.

Tim: [Jon backchanneling throughout] *Their ruakh.* So you're like, "*Oh, I guess it's theirs.*" We're talking about it from the angle of it being their possession, as it were. But God can take it away and does. God can and does take it away. "And they return to the dust." Verse 30: "But you send forth your *ruakh*, and they are created." It's the word *bara'* from Genesis 1, verse 1. So we normally think of creation as being the thing that happened a long time ago, and here "create" is used to refer to the new birth of every generation of every species of living thing.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: So "You take away their *ruakh*, they return to the dust. You send forth your *ruakh*: creation."

Jon: [Tim backchanneling throughout] So I'm looking at a bunch of wild animals. I'm observing that at some point, they die, and they stop breathing. And I would say as someone who believes in God who animates everything and is responsible for life, I would say, "*God took away their ruakh.*"

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: [Tim agreeing throughout] And then I watch a baby goat come into the world and then have its first breath, and I would say, “*Oh, God sent forth his ruakh.*”

Tim: That’s right. Creation.

Jon: Creation.

Tim: “*Let there be baby goat.*”

[Jon and Tim laugh]

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Right?

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Yeah, that’s the idea. So two things must be true about the Jewish and Christian conception of God: that God is above and beyond all—the one who is—God doesn’t depend on something else to exist. God *is* existence. So there couldn’t be anything more remotely different than God than a baby goat.

[Jon and Tim laugh]

Tim: Like, none of those things are true of the baby goat.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: But if God were to—I mean, and language fails us. This is why poetry is so important. If God were to show his face and shine his personal light—day one, “Let there be light”—

[Jon chuckles]

Tim: —to bring about something that is distinct from God but yet depends completely upon God for everything that it is, you could say that God is sending out his own *ruakh*. That anything that is, and every new breath of life of a creature, is like this intimate kiss from God.

[Jon chuckles]

Tim: [Jon backchanneling throughout] Now, of course, there’s a lot of cause-and-effect things that come in between. And we know that. The poets know that. But they want to shrink that chain up to say, ultimately, what we’re really talking about is that anything that exists, especially a living creature, only exists because God is directly creating and sending forth his *ruakh* for every living thing.

Jon: Hmm. [pause] Yeah.

Tim: It's a very powerful, beautiful view of reality.

Jon: And your point in this conversation is to say: Look at the juxtaposition between life and death.

Tim: Oh, yeah. Yes. But that sending forth of the *ruakh* is joined in parallel poetic lines with God taking away *their ruakh*. So—

Jon: But it is a gift.

Tim: [Jon backchanneling throughout] That's right. So clearly this poet also is reflecting not just on God's ideal for creation, but also the fact that we're outside of Eden.

"Returning to the dust," he uses that phrase from Genesis 3. So this is a meditation on God's relationship to a world that is intimately connected with God to be alive, but also is estranged from God in a way.

Jon: Hmm. So in Genesis 2 and 3, you get this picture of humanity given the *ruakh* of God. And then, in proximity to God, being able to never have to give that up.

Tim: Yeah. In the garden, yeah, to eat from God's life.

Jon: [Tim agreeing throughout] Like God would never have to take it back. You always get to have it.

Tim: Yeah. But it wouldn't be because humans inherently possess it of their nature. They receive it as a gift.

Jon: Right. And it's only then, outside of that reality and that proximity to God in that state, that God says, "*Well, you're going to return to dust.*" And so implicit in that is: "*I will take back my ruakh.*"

Tim: [Jon backchanneling throughout] Yeah. Yeah. So really, it raises the question of a reading of the Eden story. Why would God take away his *ruakh*? God's *ruakh* is infinite and eternal. So presumably, if he allowed it to remain in a creature, it would participate then in God's infinite life. And so here we're to the severe mercy that the exile from Eden represents, which is: If God's spirit were to sustain the eternal existence of a creature that insists on asserting its wisdom of discerning good and bad over and against God's wisdom—

Jon: Yeah. In which case, they find pain.

Tim: Yeah. Then that would be hell. That would—to live forever in that state.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: So the severe mercy of the exile from Eden—it's as if God's infinite *ruakh* is too much for the humans. It's too real. And—

Jon: Mmm. It's too permanent.

Tim: It's too permanent. And it's actually a mercy that humans can only live and do so much damage to ourselves and other people before we have to go back to the dust. It's like a mercy on ourselves and those around us.

Jon: Mmm. Yeah, interesting.

Tim: But it's a part of the crisis of the biblical story, then, is like: "*But aren't we made for that?*"

Jon: For eternal life?

Tim: Yeah. We're capable of it.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: [Jon backchanneling throughout] In other words, we've been made as a kind of creature that can receive it and participate in it and experience it. But yet, paradoxically, it's, like, too much for us. It goes to our heads—

[Jon and Tim laugh]

Tim: —right?

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: And we take this gift of breath, and we do all these horrible things like we've been doing throughout human history. And like, the Hebrew Bible is constantly all these case studies and people abusing the gift of breath that God has given them.

Jon: Did the goats get to eat of the tree of life?

Tim: I don't know.

[Jon laughs]

Tim: You know what's interesting is: The tree of life, as we talked about in our Tree of Life podcast series, was a common ancient Near Eastern icon—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Symbol. And in most depictions of the tree of life down in Egypt or Mesopotamian art and literature, it's actually a pair of mountain goats. It's funny you say that.

Jon: Yeah?

Tim: The icon is a pair of mountain goats—

Jon: Nibbling?

Tim: —eating from the tree of life. [laughs]

Jon: [excited] Yeah.

Tim: Yes, yeah.

Jon: [excited] Sweet. Good for them.

Tim: You know, and I never would have thought about this until within this last year. My family and I got a dog—

Jon: [laughs] Yeah. People want to live with their dogs forever.

Tim: [Jon backchanneling throughout] —and it's a regular conversation now with my boys about the gift of God that this little creature is to our family. And we would be sad to think of a future without, [pause] without Pippin.

[Pause]

[Jon and Tim laugh]

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Our little dog.

Jon: All dogs go to Heaven.

Tim: Yeah. So notice: This is a meditation about animals—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: —this paragraph we just read in Psalm 104. And look at how the Psalm ends. “I will sing to Yahweh throughout my life”—this is verse 33—“I will sing praise to my God while I remain alive.” Notice the note of—

Jon: *“I’m not going to be alive forever.”*

Tim: Relatively real.

[Jon laughs]

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: [chuckles] Okay, all right.

Tim: So “May my meditation be pleasing to him. I will be glad in Yahweh.” “While I remain alive. . .” So it just signals that note. Like: *“What’s true of the creatures is true of me.”*

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: *“And I have this gift of ruakh I don’t know how long. It’s not even my—it’s not even mine. But the good that I do get to experience as a result of being alive”—*

[Music fades in]

Tim: — *“I just am going to thank God for that every day. But it’s God’s prerogative also to take away my ruakh here outside of Eden as that severe mercy. And when God chooses to do that, I’ll return to the dust.” And—*

Jon: And that’s it? That’s game over?

Tim: That’s—okay. Okay. Dude, here we go.

[Jon laughs]

Tim: Let’s conclude with Ecclesiastes.

Jon: Okay.

[Musical break (40:47-41:14)]

[Human Mortality in Ecclesiastes 3 (41:14-52:20)]

Tim: The author of Ecclesiastes is pretty— [pause] hmm, is a realist—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: —about going back to the dust—

[Music fades out]

Tim: —and really wants to probe the psychology and the feel of living outside of Eden. And the poet of Psalm 104 can, like, sing a song about it—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: “I’ll praise God as long as I remain alive.” The poet of Ecclesiastes is a little more like Job. “As long as I have *nefesh*, I’m going to actually say something that bothers me.”

[Jon and Tim laugh]

Jon: “*I’m going to complain*”?

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: Yeah. “*I’m going to talk to the manager*.”

Tim: So Ecclesiastes chapter 3—it’s the most famous poem in Ecclesiastes. There’s been songs made about it. “There’s a time for this and a time for that. There’s an appointed time for everything under the skies. A time to give birth and a time to die. A time to plant and a time to uproot what is planted. A time to kill, a time to heal, a time to tear down, time to build up,” and so on goes the poem. So out—here outside of Eden, things are not permanent—constant cycle of flux and change. And for every little Eden gift of birth and planting and healing and building, there is its opposite: death and uprooting and killing and tearing down. And humans, we can’t seem to escape that cycle of opposites. It’s like we’re trapped.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: That’s the reality of life under the sun, as he puts it in the book. So he comes to the end of that poem, and he just says, “So let me ask you this: For all of the work and the toil that somebody does in this world, what profit is there?”

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: “Everything you build is going to get torn down.” [laughs]

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: “Your life is going to end.”

Jon: “What is the point?”

Tim: Yeah. Yeah. So then he ratchets up a notch in verse 17 of chapter 3. He says, “Okay, so I say to myself, ‘Here’s something as an Israelite I confess as true: God is going to judge both the righteous man and the wicked man for a time and every matter and every deed.’” That’s, like, classic—

Jon: What does he mean by that?

Tim: Oh, foundational beliefs of being an Israelite in the covenant: There is a God, that my decisions matter. Because the poem might make you think, *“Well, everything I build is going to get torn down. My life’s going to be taken away.”*

Jon: Okay. *“Why do anything good?”*

Tim: *“What profit is there?”*

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: *“Why do anything?”*

Jon: Okay. And then so here he’s saying, *“Well, God’s watching, and he will make a judgment on good and bad.”*

Tim: That’s right. So he’s holding together two things. From one point of view: *“I can’t see from my limited, mortal, fragile existence the point of it all. [chuckles] I just don’t know. And I can’t control the outcomes of my life.”*

Jon: Okay. But God knows the point.

Tim: *“But I have this confession: God will hold people accountable for their choices, and it does matter. It matters cosmically.”*

Jon: Okay.

Tim: And the author of Ecclesiastes is living in that paradox. *“There is meaning and purpose. I confess that. But for the life of me, literally and metaphorically, I can’t figure it out, and I won’t be able to. It’s actually beyond my ability.”* So he goes on to say, “God is surely testing the sons of Adam so that they can see that they are but animals”—

Jon: [laughs] Whoa.

[Jon and Tim laugh]

Tim: —“because the fate of the sons of Adam and the fate of the animals, it’s the same.”

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: “One dies, so does the other. Indeed, they all have the same *ruakh*.”

Jon: Mmm, yeah, we share that with the animals.

Tim: Me and the hummingbird. “There’s no advantage for a human over an animal. Listen, this is *hevel*—this is vapor. Everyone goes to the same place. Everyone comes from the dust. Everyone goes back to the dust.” And then this is probably the most—what do you say?—*risqué*—this is, like, the Job moment in Ecclesiastes.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: “Who even knows if the *ruakh* of a human ascends upward and the *ruakh* of an animal descends downward to the Earth? Who can actually prove that?”

Jon: What’s he referring to?

Tim: I know. [laughs]

[Jon and Tim laugh]

Tim: So in Genesis 2, the *ruakh* comes from God.

Jon: Yeah, but there’s no talk about what happens to the *ruakh*.

Tim: Right, once you breathe it out.

Jon: Once you breathe it out.

Tim: Just: The human goes to the dirt. So this image of the *ruakh* of a beast going down, but the *ruakh* of a human going up.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: So he appears to be referring to some kind of idea that—

Jon: “What’s after death?”

Tim: “What’s after death?” And: “What happens to the *ruakh*?” So if the idea of: A human *ruakh* comes from God—Genesis 2—Genesis 2 doesn’t describe the origin of the life-breath of the animals.

Jon: Animals, right.

Tim: It just says that God brought them up out of the ground.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: That’s what it says. So is it possible that the author of Ecclesiastes is addressing this kind of popular conception that’s like: “You think even in death there’s a difference between you and the animals, that maybe the human *ruakh* is connected to God so it goes back to God in the heavens?”

Jon: That we can exist beyond—after—

Tim: And then maybe that the animals exist in a different way.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: This line would make my sons really sad about our dog.

Jon: Okay. Right.

Tim: But maybe that's where the difference is. And—but then his—so his point is: “Yeah, who can prove that?”

[Jon laughs]

Tim: “You can't prove that.”

Jon: We don't know.

Tim: We don't know. So *“Even if you want to eke some guarantee of meaning out of how humans are different than animals in death, you can't really. You don't know.”* So he—this is so fascinating. I love that Ecclesiastes is in the Bible. [laughs]

[Jon and Tim laugh]

Tim: [Jon agreeing throughout] Because he's saying, from our experiential vantage point, we don't know. And that lack of knowledge is a—

Jon: Whoa. And that's what makes the resurrection of Jesus such good news.

Tim: [pause] 110%.

[Jon and Tim laugh]

Tim: Yeah. Yeah. I mean, that's fast-forwarding in the story.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: But I'm also trying to empathetically inhabit, just, Ecclesiastes.

Jon: Yeah. I just see some people getting a little itchy.

Tim: [Jon agreeing throughout] Okay, that's good. But the vantage point of Ecclesiastes is just trying to meditate on life outside of Eden under the sun. We just have no guarantees out here from one point of view. And that's true even for me, thousands of years later, as a follower of Jesus. The only hope that I trust in is in the resurrection and new creation of all things. But I can't prove that with certainty. What I can point to is the testimony of the apostles. [laughs] Right? But over my own life and the outcomes of my life and my breath and what I want to build, zero guarantee. It's all fragile. So that's the main point I wanted to highlight. It's—in all these passages where breath and returning to dust comes up, breath is such an un— [pause] hmm—merited, undeserved, uncontrolled gift, that it should humble me.

Jon: *Ruakh* is?

Tim: [Jon agreeing throughout] *Ruakh* is. That it's as much a miracle of life as it is a sign of my mortality and death.

Jon: Hmm. Are we going to get into more about what happens to your spirit after you die? Will that be a conversation for later?

Tim: Yeah, we should when we get into the Prophets.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: [Jon agreeing throughout] And then in the New Testament, of course. But I also found there's merit in just sitting in these earlier parts of the Torah and Prophets and Psalms, and just letting these fundamental passages about spirit and breath and dust kind of sink in. It makes the Good News even more good—

[Jon laughs]

Tim: —I guess, is one way to put it. So ending with Ecclesiastes is always a little risqué.

Jon: Yeah.

[Jon and Tim laugh]

Jon: Yeah. "What is the point?"

Tim: Yeah. So one of the surprises of *ruakh* in the Hebrew Bible is that it's associated with life primarily, but second place award of most common associated ideas of God's Spirit is "wisdom."

Jon: Hmm. It's related to wisdom.

Tim: Which is—yes. The Spirit and life and the Spirit and wisdom are all closely connected. And so what I want to look at next is Spirit and wisdom. And actually, I think we'll see how deeply connected—

[BibleProject theme fades in]

Tim: —it is to the stuff we've just talked about for the last couple episodes.

Jon: Great.

[Musical break (49:38-49:42)]

Jon: Thanks for listening to this episode of BibleProject podcast. Next week, we'll look at how the Spirit of God gives wisdom to humans.

Tim: [Audio clip from Spirit of God E3: The Spirit of Wisdom] If you look in the hundreds of passages where *ruakh* appears in the Hebrew Bible, you will find many passages where God's wisdom is close by.

Jon: BibleProject is a crowdfunded organization, and we exist to help people experience the Bible as a unified story that leads to Jesus. Everything that we create is free because of the generous support of thousands of people just like you. Thank you so much for being a part of this with us.

[Phone beep]

Kiara: Hi, my name is Kiara, and I am from California.

Taylor: Hi, my name is Taylor. I'm from Rogers, Arkansas, and I first heard about BibleProject when doing some landscaping for a job a couple years ago.

Kiara: I first heard about BibleProject from my church who was showing some of their videos. And I've used BibleProject for evangelism and just showing my friends what I've learned.

Taylor: I primarily use BibleProject for understanding scriptures that are particularly challenging.

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Kiara: The BibleProject is a nonprofit funded by people like me.

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[Phone beep]

Angela: Hi, my name is Angela Keuter, and I am from Eugene, Oregon, and I work on our Global team. I work as a localization project manager, specifically with our Brazilian Portuguese and our French teams to create our content into those languages and deliver them to those audiences. I grew up in SoCal, thirty minutes from Malibu. I do think being exposed to a large diversity of culture through food, through religion, through activities of different backgrounds gave me an appreciation of it that I've always felt like: "Oh, I want to know what it's like to live in that person's shoes." That gave me a passion that I've really been able to have realized through my work at BibleProject. There is a whole team of us that make the podcast come to life every week. For a full list of everyone involved in this episode, check out the show notes wherever you stream the podcast and on our app. Thank you!

[BibleProject theme fades out]

[BibleProject sonic logo]