



The Spirit and the Earth

*When you send your Spirit, they are created, and you renew
the face of the earth.*

(PSALM 104:30)

Most churches have an annual prayer service in which the Lord's blessing is asked over the summer season of growth and labor. We draw near to the throne of God in prayer with a sincere faith. He alone is able to provide in all our needs, and he has also promised to do so. "Open wide your mouth and I will fill it." And God's people are told that they "... would be fed with the finest of wheat; with honey from the rock I would satisfy you" (Psalm 81:16, 10). God loves to give.

The same teaching is found in the New Testament. God is generous and giving, even more than earthly fathers, as Christ said, "If you, then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him?" (Mat 7:11).

Our Lord specifies that the recipients are those who ask. The Lord God wishes to be petitioned, for therein he is recognized and glorified. God wishes to be acknowledged as the Creator and Giver of all. There are many psalms which lead us clearly in this direction. Perhaps no psalm is as powerful and elaborate in this respect as Psalm 104, sometimes called a hymn to the Creator.

The Spirit as Creator?

What is remarkable in this psalm is the confession that God creates and re-creates by the Holy Spirit, verse 30, "When you send your Spirit, they are created...." The Holy Spirit is named here the agent of creation, the One by whom God creates. This is said more often of the Son. For example, we read in Colossians 1:15, 16, "He (Jesus) is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, things in

heaven and things on the earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him.” We can think also of John 1:3, “Through him (the Word, Christ) all things were made, without him nothing was made that has been made.”

So the Lord Jesus is the One through whom the Father made all things. The work of the Holy Spirit is often imagined by us as being more a matter of the inner space than of the outer space. When you consider what the Holy Spirit does, you tend to think of regeneration, sanctification, or renewal, the spiritual transformation that takes place and must take place within us. You look for the Spirit’s work within you, and not so much outside of you or around you.

The Bible, however, does not restrict the Spirit’s work in this manner. One can argue that this passage from Psalm 104 does not speak about creation in a strict sense, as does Genesis 1 and that it refers more to ongoing creation in the sense of maintaining, preserving, and restoring what once was created. This is indeed true. But the Spirit restores and renews what he himself also has created. This is done in full unity with the Father and the Son. It is not without reason that the verb to create is ascribed also to the Holy Spirit. We want to look closer at this important work of the Holy Spirit. We will see in this passage the power of the Holy Spirit in maintaining creation to the glory of God, in giving new life, and in sustaining all life.

Ode to the Creator

This psalm is definitely an ode to the Creator. When we look at the way the psalm is organized, we see that the days of creation, as described in Genesis 1, determine the unfolding of the psalm. Obviously the writer is fascinated by all that he sees around him in this vast, glorious creation of God. “I say to myself: what a wonderful world,” as Louis Armstrong sang. From beginning to end, the LORD, the Creator, is praised as being very great. Verse 1, “Praise the LORD, O my soul. O LORD my God, you are very great; you are clothed with splendor and majesty.” This praise is carried through to the end, verse 35, “Praise the LORD, O my soul. Praise the LORD.” “How great Thou art,” states the well-known hymn.

What is further striking about this psalm is that it describes the ongoing involvement of God in this creation, in this world. The LORD did not create everything to let it run by itself, but he governs and guides all things. His creation is followed by his government and providence. This is a very important aspect. You may have heard of the teaching of *Deism*, the idea that God created everything to run perfectly like clockwork through natural

laws or ordinances without his direct, daily involvement. Just wind it up, set it down, and let it go on its own. If this is true, God is not involved in his creation. In fact, then he is irrelevant. We are on our own. If things really turn sour, God might perhaps act to reset the clock, but that's about it. We have to trust the laws of nature and where possible assume control ourselves.

Human reason failed

This kind of approach led to the modern glorifying of human reason. As enlightened and highly-developed beings, we ourselves will keep everything under control. Just as God is not interested in us, we do not really need him. All we have to do is stay cool, calm, and collected, think things over carefully, develop our scientific skills, and everything will be fine.

The last century has shown how far we came with our reasoning and our skills. World wars, atomic explosions, genocide, ethnic cleansing, and many other unspeakable horrors have happened. As we came to the end of another century, a millennium even, there was much searching for meaning and purpose. Was there a seeking after God? Should the Creator not be more involved in his struggling and crumbling creation?

This psalm tells us that he is involved, has always been involved, and wants to be heard and obeyed. Rejection of God leads to the judgments that we have seen in the world wars and in other calamities. If people would break with their idolatry, they would see the only living God at work in his world.

How the world turns

The psalm paints a very vivid picture of how the world turns in the hand of God. There is a remarkable fascination in this psalm with water, thunder, clouds, wind, and springs. You can understand this emphasis, for the psalm was written in a dry land where the people prayed to Baal, the god of rain and thunder, where fertility was given by Baal and Astarte, and where heavenly bodies like sun and moon were worshiped, because they determined ebb and flow, rain and drought, warmth and cold. There was great temptation for the people of Israel to fall prey to this pagan cult of materialism.

Therefore the psalm places great emphasis on the fact that that the LORD is the living God, who interacts constantly with his creation, who fills it with all good things, so that all creatures are cared for properly. The same

God is also revealed as awesome, the God who can terrify creatures by hiding his face (verse 29). He can simply look at the earth and it trembles (verse 32). It becomes evident that from the hands of this God, the LORD, come life and death.

In wisdom you made them all

We may not take life for granted, because it is a sovereign gift of God. We should not become accustomed to death, for it is the righteous curse of God. Even more, we must recognize that all life depends fully upon God's providence and government, and that only those who seek him are blessed.

Verse 24 of this psalm is perhaps the best-known, "How many are your works, O LORD! In wisdom you made them all; the earth is full of your creatures." There is an endless variety of life, a constant movement and shifting of tides, and everything has its place, function, and time, but all depends on God. In the verses 27-30 this truth is applied to food and sustenance, and to life and death. Put in the simplest terms: when God opens his hand, we live, but when he hides his face, we die. "When you take away their breath, they die and return to the dust" (verse 29b).

Notice the word breath here, for it is the same word that is also used for spirit and for wind. As he writes about the breath of living creatures being taken away, and their bodies returning to the dust, the psalmist is led to speak of the Holy Spirit. Verse 30: "When you send your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the earth." Life can be given, received, and experienced only through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Focus on man

The writer of this psalm is talking here about all creatures (see verse 27, "these all"). But the description of death as a taking away of breath and a returning to dust reminds us of Genesis 1 and 3, the creation and fall of mankind. Of all creatures, humans are the most concerned with the ultimate question of life and death, and with the intermittent struggle for survival. We caused this awful reality by our willful sins, and only the LORD can undo it by his power and grace.

It pertains to all the living, but especially to mankind: when you send your Spirit, they are created. It is important to note at this point that, aside from the writer referring to himself, man was mentioned twice before in this psalm. In the verses 14 and 15 he writes about the grass that grows for the cattle, but then elaborates on the gifts God gives to man: food-bearing plants

to cultivate (vegetables), wine that gladdens the heart, oil to make his face shine, and bread that sustains his heart. Here the main essentials which we need are mentioned in their richest measure. We receive not just water to drink or wash, but also wine and oil.

In the verses 21-23 a distinction is made between the night and its creatures, especially the lion, and the day and its creatures, especially man. As the lion rules by night, so man rules by day, and can go out to do his work. The king of beasts is subjected to the king of creation who is called man. Yet like all creatures, man is dependent upon God.

The sending of the Spirit

In the text the focus is general: when you send your Spirit, they (all creatures) are created. What requires our attention now is the verb “to send,” that is, the Holy Spirit being sent. The Lord Jesus later also spoke about the Spirit being sent. See John 14:26, “But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things.” This sending of the Holy Spirit does not mean that he has an inferior position to the other persons in the Trinity, even though the sender is usually more than the one being sent. But it means coming with the authority of the Sender to complete his work. The Spirit does not just come on his own, but he comes from the Father and the Son to complete and perfect legitimately and authoritatively the one work of God. The use of the verb “to send” here means having an official mission.

We learn that only when the Holy Spirit comes from the Father and in the name of the Son, can life be created. The breath of all living creatures, and especially that of mankind in whom God specifically breathed life, is a wonderful gift of the Holy Spirit who comes from the Father and the Son. Life is a gift of the Triune God. God’s people of old have known that life, also new life, is a direct work of the Spirit.

Ongoing creative work

I ask your attention now for the next verb that is used here: they are *created*. To the Spirit of God is ascribed the work of creation. The same verb is used as in Genesis 1:1, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” What does this mean? Generally we assume that the work of creation was finished on the sixth day, and that God then rested on the seventh. And this is true indeed. The initial and official work of creation was done on the sixth day.

Yet here we find that the creative work of God continues. Every living creature is a new creation of God, a work of the Holy Spirit. Its life is directly linked to the design, purpose, and will of God. There is no life outside the one true God. It is therefore totally absurd when people tell themselves that they are a product of circumstances, or that they can control the origin of life. Scientists work in clinical laboratories, use all kinds of fancy techniques and expensive paraphernalia, but only when God speaks his powerful word in the midst of this world and sends his Spirit is life created. Life exists because God wants it to exist, and it exists exactly as he wants it to exist.

We should have an keen eye for the ongoing creative work of God in this world, for only then we can really see and enjoy the beauty of all things. If you are oriented to God and his word, and orient yourself in this way to the world around you, creation also becomes to you an open book, where every creature great or small is like a letter spelling out the majesty of God (Belgic Confession, Article 2; Psalm 19:1-4). Many people see little of the beauty of creation because they do not see it as a result of God's power and majesty. Every creature and each life is a work of the Holy Spirit's influencing, working, determining, and leading. You can see this work everywhere, but you notice it especially when you work closely with the soil, under the sun, and in the fields.

The origin of life

In this light we can also better understand Psalm 139, which speaks of the origin of life. We read in the verses 13 and 14, "For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well." When it comes to our origin, there should be no doubt whatsoever that God created each one of us.

We will focus in a next chapter on Psalm 139. I refer to it here only to note who is specifically mentioned in this same Psalm 139 in connection with creation: the Spirit of God, his power, his leading, and his guidance. Psalm 139:7: "Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?" Then we read in verse 13 about this Spirit, "For you created my inmost being, you knit me together in my mother's womb." Here the Holy Spirit is mentioned in connection with conception.

God who regarded me when I was still in my mother's womb, also throughout my life brings about what he has ordained. Therefore, since nothing is hidden from the LORD, we are called to open our life to him. "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious

thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.” (Psalm 139:23, 24)

We may believe that every person is a creation of the Holy Spirit. The Lord uses us as his instruments, and we must be responsible parents, but each life, each baby born is a creation of the Spirit of God. And when born of believers, this child belongs to God’s covenant, for so God has decreed his involvement with mankind. Let us receive our children in this way, treat them from this perspective, and as we work with them, pray for them that they may come to love the LORD.

Sustaining all life

As the Spirit creates new life, so he also sustains it. Psalm 104:30: “...and you renew the face of the earth.” In the previous lines, the psalmist has spoken about the cycle of death and life. All creatures die, and new creatures take in their place. One generation goes, another comes. There is in this respect a constant process of change. Everything has its place and time under the sun (cf. Ecclesiastes 3); all things are here temporarily.

The important thing, according to many people, is that we should “live and let live, never take more than we give.” That line is from Walt Disney’s *The Lion King*. We all appear on the circle of life: we come in on the circle, and we all go off that circle. Meanwhile we go round and round. It’s like being on a wheel of fortune. Some are lucky, others are not. In the eyes of many, life is a circle, sometimes a vicious circle.

The movie urges us to make the best of it. We should take life as it comes, not get too worried, and show a stiff upper lip. That’s the warthog’s song: “Hakuna Matata: it means no worries for the rest of your days. It’s our problem-free philosophy, Hakuna Matata!” Life comes and goes like a “twisting kaleidoscope,” but the spirit of man is triumphant.

However, it says here that the LORD by his Spirit renews the face of the earth. He sustains life, and keeps this world inhabitable. We are not caught up in the circle of life, but we are on an open road that leads us to the new world, where we shall live forever with our great King, the Lord Jesus Christ. Circles are endless; roads lead somewhere.

Spring is here again

What does the expression “renewing of the face of the earth” mean? Are we to think in terms of a superficial face-lift? We understand that more is meant. When the LORD sends the Holy Spirit, a powerful work happens; something occurs that goes very deep and has amazing consequences. It says: you renew the face of the earth.

The verb used here is a rather interesting one. It means to make new by giving a new spirit, especially in this sense: a completely fresh look. It means that whatever hinders and holds back growth is removed. The time of stress or restraint is past; the time of growth has come. Explainers who think here especially of spring are correct. After the fall season, winter comes. In Palestine winter is the dry season, when everything withers and dies. In Canada, we are faced with the great deep freeze. For months snow can cover the frozen ground. Animals go into deep hibernation, all plants are dormant, and the cold wind ruffles the snow banks. Sometimes we wonder how the earth can ever recover from such a devastating process. Will the new growing season ever come?

People say: in due time, it will be spring. One day the rain will fall, warmth will return. The seasons follow a natural course. To a certain extent this is true. But sometimes there is a long and widespread drought in areas that are already dry. Sometimes a number of poor growing seasons follow one another. There are storms that can inflict much damage. Who has not read about the dust bowls of the thirties and the forties, when nothing grew, farms were abandoned, and people looked in vain for jobs. It happened in North America where otherwise prosperity reigns. We may not take anything for granted.

Same old world: fresh new look

God renews the face of the earth. This means that everything starts to grow again. Seed, perhaps sown in the fall, germinates. The sap of trees begins to run, and buds and blossoms appear. How accurate and beautiful is the expression “the face of the earth.” Everything looks different, fresh, new, and vibrant. The cold winds are driven away; the rays of the sun are warm. We rediscover the great outdoors. It’s the same old world, but with a fresh, new look.

Is it any wonder that spring is welcomed by all people? Especially at the end of the winter we look forward to it with great longing, and it cannot come soon enough. In many languages, the word for spring literally means

the beginning of the year, the first time, and it is often compared with youth. Everything is young again and looks fresh: he renews the face of the earth. It is the Spirit's work. He brings back the life that seemed to be gone and causes growth to commence once more. The Holy Spirit watches over the fields, the orchards, the meadows, the valleys, and the streams. He causes the weather to change and the earth to be renewed.

Produce and sustain

The renewal of the face of the earth is not meant only to make things look nice; its purpose is to make the earth produce what its inhabitants need for life. The Spirit sustains life. Creatures are given what they need in order to function properly. The earth is made to support those who live on it, and the Spirit time and again each year sets things in motion for this purpose. People enjoy the bounteous gifts of God. The Lord nurtures the life he has given.

This is also true in a spiritual sense. The Holy Spirit works in us to renew us, to bring forth new life. That is one of the promises of God, signified in holy baptism, with which we must work. It is also true in a physical sense: the Spirit brings forth the bounty of this earth to sustain life.

Does this not sound too optimistic? Not all baptized children come to faith. Not all people have a good meal every day. There is the third world, being destroyed by terrible poverty and extreme hunger. There are countless refugees who line the streets of inhospitable cities and stand before closed borders. The psalm paints a rosy picture, but what about all the problems of food shortages on this earth?

The eternal Spring

Indeed, there is one great difficulty. The destructive power of sin and its curse permeate everything. It leads to the situations I just mentioned. Psalm 104 is not an idyllic psalm that ignores reality. The psalmist writes in verse 35, "But may sinners vanish from the earth and the wicked be no more". Do not overlook that petition. Sinners and wicked people are not just to be kept in check, but must vanish and disappear. The psalm teaches us to anticipate a new world where there will be no exploitation and upheaval, no hunger and sickness, no strife and tears.

There is a longing for a greater renewal than only spring. The great regeneration is coming when all things will be made new by the Spirit. But first the Lord Jesus Christ must come to redeem his people from their sins.

He will come, for the ultimate renewal depends on his work of deliverance. This psalm, too, as do many other psalms, looks forward to the new heaven and earth.

The same longing is expressed at a child's baptism, as it enters this world and embarks on its journey through this life. We pray that the child may stand "without terror before God in the assembly of the elect in life eternal" (Form for the Baptism of Infants, *Book of Praise*, page 584). There lies the focus of our labor under the sun. We look for the final renewal, the eternal spring, to live with the Lord Jesus forever in the life that never ends. "Praise the LORD, O my soul" (Psalm 104:3).