

May–August 2026

A photograph of two women from behind, standing on a pier or dock. They are both raising their hands in prayer. The woman on the left is older, with short grey hair, wearing a yellow and black striped short-sleeved shirt and dark pants. The woman on the right is younger, with long brown hair, wearing a yellow and white patterned dress. They are looking out over a body of water with several sailboats in the background under a clear blue sky.

Day by Day with God

Rooting women's lives in the Bible

FEATURING JENNY SANDERS, CATHERINE LARNER AND LYNDALL BYWATER

May–Aug 2026

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Rooting women's lives in the Bible



Ministries



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EU Authorised Representative: Easy Access System Europe –
Mustamäe tee 50, 10621 Tallinn, Estonia, gpsr.requests@easproject.com

ISBN 978 1 80039 502 2
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Cover image © RDNE Stock project on Pexels

Distributed in Australia by:
MediaCom Education Inc, PO Box 610, Unley, SA 5061
Tel: 1 800 811 311 | admin@mediacom.org.au

Distributed in New Zealand by:
Scripture Union Wholesale, PO Box 760, Wellington
Tel: 04 385 0421 | suwholesale@clear.net.nz

Acknowledgements

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Printed and bound by Zenith Media NP4 0DQ

Day by Day with God

Edited by Jackie Harris

May–August 2026

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Welcome



I'm not sure who first coined the phrase 'Life's a marathon, not a sprint', but the apostle Paul said much the same thing in his letter to the Hebrews. He describes a 'race marked out for us' (12:1, NIV) which will require perseverance and keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus.

My predecessor Jill Rattle referenced this passage in her last editorial and wrote about team races, where one runner, after completing her lap, passes on the baton to the next team member. As Jill introduced me as the new editor, she wrote: 'Jackie is going to run a strong lap until it is her turn to pass the baton on again.' I remember reading that with both a sense of excitement and responsibility.

I have loved being part of the team who produce *Day by Day with God*, but I believe God is leading me to focus on other responsibilities, so now it's my turn to hand on the editorial baton and to cheer on Becca Turnbull, who is busy working on the September–December issue. Becca is part of the content creation team at BRF Ministries, so is already familiar with the notes and excited to take them forward. I know she has some great topics planned for the next issue.

It's been such a privilege to be part of this ministry, and I am so grateful to our fantastic team of contributors who are always willing to tackle different subjects and themes, and to share their experiences and what they have learned. I have so appreciated their insights and wisdom.

I would also like to thank the readers who have contacted us with valuable feedback on the notes, and those who have recommended us to friends or have bought subscriptions to encourage others. Your support is so important and spurs us on to continue inspiring women to root their lives in the Bible.

These notes have been a huge blessing to me in many ways – I have learned a lot, made new friends, and experienced God ministering to me through them. They have encouraged me in the race marked out for me, and I'm praying that they will continue to bless and inspire you in your spiritual journey.

'May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all' (2 Corinthians 13:14).

Jackie

Jackie Harris, Editor

Songs of Ascent



Lyndall Bywater writes...

Welcome to the May–August edition of *Day by Day with God*, where we begin our Bible studies in the book of Psalms. For the next 16 days, we will be reading through a rather special section of the psalms, known as the Songs of Ascent.

These songs probably weren't all written at the same time or by the same person, but gradually, over the centuries, they were gathered into a little song cycle which the people of Israel would sing as they made their way from their homes to Jerusalem for the annual festivals. These were songs of worship, but they were also journey songs, sung to help keep up morale on the long and often arduous climb to the holy city.

I live in Canterbury, where we are familiar with pilgrimage. Not only does our cathedral commemorate the martyred Archbishop Thomas Beckett, but the city was also the inspiration for the 14th-century author Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.

The premise of Chaucer's tales is that a group of pilgrims are challenged to a story-telling competition, and so each has to think of one or two stories which might entertain his or her companions so successfully that they win a prize. Sadly, Chaucer never got to finish the work, so we don't know who won. The tales we do have are funny, scandalous, and profound in equal measure, and they reveal a lot about pilgrims. Even when the object of their journey is to encounter God in a holy place, pilgrims still bring all their humanness with them: their quarrels and conflicts, their pride in themselves and in those they love, and their collective wisdom about life.

While the Songs of Ascent are a long way from a Chaucer tale, they too contain wonderful glimpses into the humanness of the pilgrims on that road to Jerusalem. We will find songs about spouses and children; songs about the history they're so proud of, and the enemies they're so angry with; songs about the beauty of Jerusalem and the goodness of God. These psalms prove again what I love so much about the Bible – that God is in the mundane and the everyday as much as the dramatic and the spectacular.

As you make these readings part of your own pilgrimage from Easter to Pentecost, may they help you to find God in every part of your life.

Getting going

I am for peace; but when I speak, they are for war. (v. 7, NIV)

Imagine you're sitting in your armchair, enjoying the comfort and tranquility of a moment's rest. What is it that's most likely to get you moving? Will it be the prospect of a good cup of tea or the conviction that you've sat still long enough and there are jobs to do? Much as I recognise the call of the kettle or the chiding of a chore unfinished, I confess that, at my time of life, it's most likely to be the grumbling of my bladder that gets me on my feet. Sometimes discomfort is the only thing that motivates us to move.

Psalms 120–134 are called the Songs of Ascent, and they most likely acquired that name because they were the psalms which the people of Israel would recite as they made their way from their hometowns to Jerusalem for one of the annual religious festivals. They were psalms of movement – songs to sing as the people walked up the steep hills to Jerusalem – and they would most likely sing them in the order in which we find them in our Bibles today.

This first song is an interesting place to start. We might reasonably expect a cheerful ditty about hitting the road or heading off on an adventure, but instead we find a lyrical grumble about how bad things have got at home. The psalm mentions Meshek and Kedar, places a long way from Jerusalem, and the psalmist is thoroughly disgruntled with the lying and warmongering going on around him. It's as though he's telling his fellow travellers, 'I just had to get out of there!'

In truth, perhaps that's where a lot of movement begins. We get so tired of the way things are that we just have to get up and get going, in search of something better.

Is there some discomfort or frustration that's stirring you to move? Is God allowing you to see how bad things have got, so you can get up and follow the leading of the Spirit to a new and better place?

Getting orientated

**I lift up my eyes to the mountains – where does my help come from?
My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth. He will
not let your foot slip – he who watches over you will not slumber.
(vv. 1–3, NIV)**

Mountain climbing isn't for the faint-hearted, and neither is it for the ill-prepared. Mountain rescue teams often comment on the fact that the people they go to help simply haven't got the right kit with them. Among the most important things to have with you are appropriate orientation tools, a map and compass, and sturdy footwear – shoes that will support your feet and stop you from sliding.

That's the vision this psalm conjures up for me, as I picture family groups from all over Israel and Judah setting out to make the steep climb to Jerusalem. Hiking boots and GPS wouldn't be around for millennia, but they knew the importance of stable footing and sound orienteering. This Song of Ascent would remind them to lift their eyes to the mountains, keeping their focus on the place they were heading and to put their trust in God, the one who would keep their feet from slipping.

We never walk alone. Whether we're travelling from the old to the new, whether we're going in the right or the wrong direction, whether we're alone or en masse, our loving Father, who neither slumbers nor sleeps, always has his attention on us. It's easy to slip into a 'reward and punishment' theology which suggests that when we're getting it right, God looks out for us, and when we're going astray, God ignores us, but that isn't what the Bible says. This psalm is only eight verses long, yet five times it tells us that God watches over us. God's eyes are on us in our comings and goings, no matter where we're coming from or going to.

Have you ended up somewhere you never meant to be? Take heart! God is still watching over you and God will help you find the right road again.

Father God, I seem to have got myself a bit lost. I've ended up somewhere I didn't want to be. Thank you for watching over me. Would you take my hand and lead me to where I need to be? Amen.

LYNDALL BYWATER

Getting away

**I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord.’
And now here we are, standing inside your gates, O Jerusalem.
(vv. 1–2, NLT)**

For nine years, I organised the prayer venue for The Salvation Army’s ROOTS Conference, where thousands of people from all over the country gathered for a weekend of worship, teaching, and seaside fish and chips. We would set up a huge marquee full of prayer stations, then have the privilege of seeing hundreds of people use the space as a place to meet with God. It became the high point of my year, and I can still remember the excitement I felt as I made that train journey from Canterbury to Southport, full of anticipation at what God would do during the weekend. I truly was glad!

Big festivals have been around for a long time. The Songs of Ascent are the story of God’s people at the high point of their year, making their way to a festival, and this psalm brims over with the excitement of that prospect. Not only are they heading to a wonderful event, but they’re also heading to a wonderful city. They sing about Jerusalem, its architecture and its history, its fortifications and its wealth. One thing’s for sure, it’s nothing like where they come from; somehow that’s important.

Thanks to the internet, we can now join in with almost anything at almost any time. We no longer need to make the journey to spectacular places, because we can hover over them with a mouse from the comfort of our own homes. Even so, we were created for connection and fellowship. We may not be called to make pilgrimage to Jerusalem, but it does us good to step out of what we are familiar with and take ourselves to places which strike awe into us and to journey with others who are as thirsty for an encounter with God as we are.

Is there anything which you would describe as a spiritual high point of your year? Are there moments in your life when you feel that sense of anticipation about going somewhere or gathering with God’s people?

Receiving mercy

As the eyes of servants look to the hand of their master, as the eyes of a maid to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the Lord our God, until he has mercy upon us. (v. 2, NRSV)

I am blind, and when I received my current guide dog, I had to learn a new way of training her. The Guide Dog Association has adopted what is known as positive reinforcement training, a method by which the dog receives a food reward for each bit of work it does. As my dog Venus performs the various tasks of guiding me safely, I hand her pieces of kibble. Being a Labrador, she loves this, and it keeps her attention firmly riveted on me in general and on my hand in particular.

Today's reading is another Song of Ascent which would have been sung as the people of Israel made their way up to Jerusalem for one of the annual festivals. As songs so often do, these psalms tend to have a line or keyword which is repeated several times, and today the keywords are 'eyes' and 'hand'. The writer of this song is imagining their eyes fixed on the hand of God. Unlike my dog Venus, though, they aren't looking for treats.

This song is a cry for mercy. It mentions slavery and servitude, contempt and scorn. It's the song of a people who feel overlooked and downtrodden, yet who are trying hard to keep their eyes fixed on the hand of the one who is their true master, the one who can give them all they need. They sing to remind one another that theirs is the God of mercy.

Just a few weeks ago, we were remembering Jesus' hands, stretched out on a cross and scarred for love of all humankind. As we navigate the complexities of a world where things aren't as fair and just as we'd like them to be, let's keep our eyes fixed on those hands, where there is always mercy and grace in abundance.

Jesus Christ, your hands healed the sick and raised the dead. Your hands held little children and washed feet. Your loving hands were crushed and pierced for me. Help me never lose sight of the hands that make me whole. Amen.

LYNDALL BYWATER

Receiving freedom

We escaped like a bird from a hunter's trap. The trap is broken, and we are free! Our help is from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. (vv. 7–8, NLT)

How quickly do you get into the holiday mood? Are you the sort of person who's ensconced on the sun lounger within minutes of turning on your 'Out of office' notification or are you more the sort of person who takes a few days to really believe you're free from the duties and demands of work?

When the people of Israel made their journey to Jerusalem, it was a holiday. There would be religious observances, of course, but mostly there would be family, friends, and feasting. Today's Song of Ascent has something of a holiday feel to it. There is joy and relief at being free from past troubles and deep gratitude to the God who has made things turn out right in the end, but there are some deeper layers to this song.

Four of the Songs of Ascent are credited to King David, and this is one of them. If anyone is qualified to talk about being helped to conquer his foes and being rescued from traps, it's David. His entire reign was spent dealing with Israel's enemies and establishing peace in the land. There was rarely a time he wasn't being pursued, attacked, or plotted against by someone somewhere.

These days we are rightly reticent to claim God as being 'on our side,' but for David, who faced the threat of death daily, those words were nothing less than heartfelt testimony. He knew God as the one who had set him free, and he left his people a song to remind them of the fact.

You and I have the same story to tell. We may not have faced Bronze Age warriors, but we have wrestled with sins and fears, temptations and addictions, and God, through Jesus Christ, has set us free from every trap and every foe.

Freedom is ours, but much like holidays, it can take us a long time to settle into it. Is there an area of your life where God has promised you freedom but you're struggling to accept it and live in light of it?

Receiving reassurance

Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which cannot be shaken but endures forever. As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds his people both now and forevermore. (vv. 1–2, NIV)

I went to Israel several years ago, and our itinerary included visiting the River Jordan, then getting into our coach and driving up to Jerusalem. The journey is only about 20 miles, but the Jordan is several hundred metres below sea level, whereas Jerusalem is almost 800 metres above sea level. In just 20 miles, you climb almost 1,200 metres (equivalent to three quarters of a mile).

Not only did that short journey make my ears pop a lot, but it also gave me a sense of what the journey to Jerusalem would have been like for those who travelled to the annual festivals from lowland areas. Given the steepness of the climb, I'm guessing some of these Songs of Ascent would have been sung in a rather breathless manner. I'm also guessing that the idea of mountains would have become very concrete to them as they trudged up. There were mountains all around them, even under their feet.

While mountains may be tough to climb, they are fantastic defences for a city. If you're surrounded by them, it's very difficult for your enemies to attack you, and that's exactly why the psalmist is encouraging those pilgrims to look up and be grateful for the very topology which is making their legs ache. Those mountains are to remind them of the strength and protection of the God they worship.

Another pilgrim who may well have made that climb, the apostle Paul, wrote that God's eternal power and divine nature can be understood and seen through the things God has made (Romans 1:20). When we want to remind ourselves of who God is, we do well to look at the beauty of the natural world. When we need reassurance in the most uncertain of times, we do well to muse on a mountain.

As spring brings life to our gardens and green spaces, why not take some time to look for God's fingerprints in nature. What aspects of God's character do you notice? Where do you see power? Where do you find love?

LYNDALL BYWATER

Sowing tears

Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy. Those who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them. (vv. 5–6, NIV)

I remember once hearing an old fable about a woman who had two buckets, one perfect and the other cracked. She would put them on the ends of a pole across her shoulders and carry them to the nearby stream. The perfect one would carry a full load of water home, whereas the cracked one would leak water out along the way. One day someone mocked her for using a broken bucket. Pointing to a host of flowers growing along the side of the path where the leaky bucket had passed, she said: ‘I know my bucket leaks. That’s why I have been planting seeds.’

I would definitely have tried to fix the bucket rather than plant seeds, but sometimes our longing to fix things causes us to miss the beautiful possibilities that come with brokenness.

Today we find our pilgrims climbing to Jerusalem with a song of two halves in their mouths. The first half is an exuberant reminiscing about all the amazing things they’ve experienced in the past, but the second half takes a sadder turn. Things aren’t so good now, and they’re not afraid to include that truth in their singing together.

As is often the way with the psalms, the final verses bring hope in the midst of hardship. They bring resolution, but it’s important to notice that they don’t bring a solution. They don’t offer ways to fix the problems. Instead, they call to mind the God-given processes of planting and watering, sowing and growing.

I grew up in a culture where we thought problems should get fixed and tears should be dried, yet it’s as though the psalmist is saying: ‘Don’t worry about fixing or hiding. Just keep walking and let the tears fall. You never know what new life might spring from them.’

Loving God, I want answers, solutions, and fixes. You want faith, growth and new life. Today I choose to trust you in the unresolved, and to allow my tears to flow, that beautiful things might spring up along the way.

Weeding out comparison

Unless the Lord builds a house, the work of the builders is wasted. Unless the Lord protects a city, guarding it with sentries will do no good. (v. 1, NLT)

I don't usually watch daytime television, but I was keeping my dad company in hospital recently and found myself watching the quiz show *Jeopardy*. If you've never seen it, it involves contestants being given a word or phrase which is the answer to a question, and their job is to work out what the question would be.

I'm reminded of this as I ponder these Songs of Ascent. If the pilgrims to Jerusalem struck up one of these psalms, would it have been in response to a specific conversation they were having, and if so, what were they talking about, for that particular song to come to mind?

There's a specific scene I see in my mind when I think of why someone might come to Psalm 127. I imagine people who have got to that stage in a relationship where they start sharing their achievements: conscientious men talking about building homes for their wives; diligent soldiers talking about how well they perform their duties; and proud parents telling anyone who'll listen just how well their children are doing. And since these pilgrims are all too human, maybe a bit of one-upmanship is creeping in.

Today's psalm is the ultimate leveller. An ancient poem of King Solomon, it reminds everyone, singers and listeners alike, that everything we have comes from God. We bring our gifts and talents, but it's God who guides and empowers our work; it's even God who gives us rest. It's God who keeps us safe and it's God who entrusts our children to us. It's so easy to start comparing ourselves to one another, when the truth is that we all stand equal before God – equally seen, equally valued, and equally loved.

Loving God, forgive us when we compare ourselves to others, needing to prove ourselves better. Teach us to enjoy what we have, to care for what we hold, and to do our best in the things you've called us to. Amen.

LYNDALL BYWATER

Harvesting blessing

You will enjoy the fruit of your labour. How joyful and prosperous you will be! Your wife will be like a fruitful grapevine, flourishing within your home. Your children will be like vigorous young olive trees as they sit around your table. (vv. 2–3, NLT)

I've been involved with the 24–7 Prayer movement for many years now, and like all movements, it has developed its own language – words and phrases which seem to capture its DNA. One of those phrases is, 'Pray your best prayer.' That doesn't mean pray a prayer that is theologically impressive or anything like that. It means to think of the best things you can imagine God doing for anyone, then instead of asking God to do those things for you, you ask God to do them for someone else.

Yesterday we reflected on our need to be reminded that everything we have comes from God, particularly when we are tempted to compare ourselves to others or boast about our achievements. Today we arrive at Psalm 128, and discover we've moved another step further on. Now we're not just counting our blessings and thanking God. This time we're focusing our attention on someone else other than ourselves. Suddenly we're not saying 'we' anymore; we're saying 'you'. This isn't a song about our lives, our journeys, our wants and needs; this is a prayer for someone else. Indeed, it's not just a prayer, it's a generously lavish blessing. The person singing this song really is praying their best prayer for that other person.

This kind of prayer has power. It's not wishful thinking. Throughout the Old Testament, we read of God teaching the people to memorise prayers of blessing, to speak blessing over each other, to be a blessing to the world around them. Blessing is God's own language, and when we bless others, God joins in. We pray our best prayer, thinking up the very best blessings we can imagine for the person we're praying for, and God delights to back our meagre words with acts of love and power.

Who has God put on your heart today? Why not spend some time composing your very best prayer for them: a prayer of blessing which sets out all the things you long to see come to fulfilment in their life.

Refusing bitterness

May all who hate Jerusalem be turned back in shameful defeat... And may those who pass by refuse to give them this blessing: 'The Lord bless you; we bless you in the Lord's name.' (vv. 5, 8, NLT)

Research shows that groups become more generous to each other the longer they are stuck in an unideal situation together. When we board a train, we tend not to give much thought to our fellow passengers. We keep to ourselves. But fast-forward to a moment when that train has got stranded somewhere, and we passengers become far more generous, offering our snacks around, using our phones to get information for each other and helping entertain each other's bored children. Adversity tends to breed solidarity.

The tenth Song of Ascent begins with solidarity: an invitation to everyone to join in. However, this is no happy sing-along. This is a collective cry of pain, with its graphic description of physical violence. There's no doubt that pouring out our pain and distress together is cathartic, but do you notice what happens next? The pain turns to bitterness and hatred towards anyone who is outside of that experience, or who might see things differently.

The culmination of this chorus of defiance is a blatant refusal to bless. We noted yesterday how powerful blessing is – how it is God's native language – and that makes this withholding of blessing all the more severe.

The reaction is entirely understandable. Why wouldn't we reject anyone who causes us pain? Why wouldn't we protect ourselves by cutting them off? Yet Jesus, who literally carried those scars on his back so vividly described in verse 3, chose the way of blessing, and if we follow him, we too need to choose that way.

Let's return to our train carriage, where solidarity has turned to collective anger towards the train crew. When the guard walks through that door, will you and I be the ones who still speak blessing, no matter how frustrated and disappointed we may feel?

Blessing isn't the same as forgiveness, and I often find I can bless even when I'm not ready to forgive. Is there someone you're struggling to forgive? Why not try handing them to God and praying God's blessing over them.

LYNDALL BYWATER

Waiting intentionally

I wait for the Lord, my whole being waits, and in his word I put my hope. I wait for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning, more than watchmen wait for the morning. (vv. 5–6, NIV)

I live in Canterbury, and when I visit our famous cathedral, I always feel moved by the way the steps inside the building are worn away. Each one has been smoothed and shaped by the feet of the millions of people who have made pilgrimage to that place over the past eight centuries or so. But it's not just feet that have trodden the stone, it's knees too. It was tradition that, if they were able, pilgrims would make the last part of their journey on their knees, as a sign of their humility before God.

Journeys often sharpen our focus. Today's Song of Ascent finds the Israelites continuing to climb up the steep road to Jerusalem, travelling in community on a journey which would have taken most of them several days at least. Some of them wouldn't have seen each other for months, so there would've been plenty of catching up, celebrating, and commiserating with one another, not to mention having a grumble about life's injustices. However, with this song the focus shifts and for the rest of the song cycle, their focus is Jerusalem and the God who calls that city home. Perhaps that's not surprising, given that the only way to meet with God was to go to where God lived.

What of us today? We live in the glorious light of Pentecost, the Spirit of God with us at every moment of every day yet somehow hunger for God still matters. We don't have to make pilgrimage to find God, but we do still need to hunger and to seek. It's as though God's presence can only truly be experienced, by us and by those around us, when God's people humbly continue to long for it with all our heart.

If God is present, always close, always with us, what might it mean for us to wait for the Lord with our whole being? Are there practices you can build into your daily routine to help you wait for God?

Cultivating calm

But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; my soul is like the weaned child that is with me. (v. 2, NRSV)

Have you ever tried to help a toddler calm themselves down? It's not an easy task. First there are all the exciting things that need looking at and asking about. Then there's the obligatory dancing, the wild animal impressions, and the impromptu handstands that can't possibly wait until another day. And then, when they do finally sit down on your knee, the calm lasts all of 20 seconds before life's next great adventure sweeps them away again.

Yesterday we were talking about the way our focus sharpens as we get nearer to the end of a journey; the way we see more clearly and hunger more deeply. Today's Song of Ascent has a similar theme. The psalmist is reflecting on letting go of burdens, anxieties, and distractions so they can find a place of peace in God. He likens his soul to a weaned child. In the culture of the time, a weaned child would have been a toddler. Do you ever feel like you have a 'toddler soul'? I'd say mine has distinctly toddler tendencies when I sit down and try to focus on God in prayer. I'm ever amazed at the random topics that flit through my brain, not to mention the sudden desire to get up and do something – if not a handstand, then the Hoovering instead.

If you've ever cared for a toddler, you'll know that the best thing you can do is to keep drawing them back to you, lovingly and gently, till their brains slow down enough to be at peace. I wonder if prayer is similar: the tender process of drawing our souls gently back into the quiet place; not reprimanding ourselves for failing but lovingly bringing our wandering souls back to the embrace of God, who loves us more than we know.

Loving God, I give thanks for the gift of a soul so full of energy, so stirred by wonder. Help me to love my 'toddler soul' as much as you do and help me to find calm in your presence. Amen.

LYNDALL BYWATER

Supernatural presence

We heard that the Ark was in Ephrathah; then we found it in the distant countryside of Jaar. Let us go to the sanctuary of the Lord; let us worship at the footstool of his throne. (vv. 6-7, NLT)

I am part of a prayer community in Canterbury, and the place where we meet has been a place of prayer for about 940 years. I was telling an American friend this fact the other day, and his gasp of astonishment reminded me of how fortunate we are to have such deep wells of prayer in the place where I live. The place where we pray truly is a ‘thin place’, where the presence of God is somehow more tangible.

I wonder if that was part of the excitement of going up to Jerusalem. The temple was the place where the ark of the covenant had finally found its permanent home, and the ark was a precious and highly spiritual artefact which the people of Israel understood as signifying the very presence of God.

With the ark of the covenant, we circle back round to thinking about the presence of God, as we were on Monday. The ark isn’t part of our Christian worship tradition, because we know that God, through his Son, has poured his Spirit over all humankind, no longer to be contained in one place. Through his Spirit, we now have the church – that diverse and glorious collection of human beings who carry the presence of God in our very lives.

Verse six of today’s psalm is a reminder that the ark had a chequered history. It had been captured and moved, housed in the temples of foreign Gods and even in someone’s home, and everywhere it had been, things had happened. Everywhere it had rested, things had changed for the better.

It’s a challenging thought that we, in some way, might be the new ark. When we land somewhere – when the church takes up residence in a community – do things change for the better?

Pray today for the church congregations in your local community, that they will be beacons of hope and refuges of love and kindness; that every believer will be a sower of blessing and a carrier of God’s life-changing presence.

LYNDALL BYWATER

Natural niggles

'I will live here, for this is the home I desired. I will bless this city and make it prosperous; I will satisfy its poor with food. I will clothe its priests with godliness; its faithful servants will sing for joy.'
(vv. 14-16, NLT)

I sat on a bench in the garden of Gethsemane on a warm day in early November. What an experience, to be so close to where Jesus had prayed on the night before his crucifixion. I expected something profound and powerful, but as I stilled myself to soak in the atmosphere of the place, all I could hear was rush-hour traffic, and all I could feel were the mosquito bites on my feet.

Our pilgrims are very nearly at Jerusalem now, and for some it will be their first ever visit. When I read these verses towards the end of Psalm 132, I imagine a young person singing them; someone who's never seen Jerusalem before, but who is caught up in the wonder of these words. Soon they're going to set foot in the city God calls home. And then I imagine an older person walking next to them, who knows all about the noise, the smell, and the busyness of a big city, praying that the young person won't be disappointed if the place isn't all they thought it might be; praying that the humanness of the place won't stop them sensing the presence of God.

When I was in Gethsemane, I had to screen out the niggles and distractions to connect with the presence of God in that place, and that reminds me of what it's like when I gather with other Christians for worship. God promises to dwell with any group of believers who gather in Jesus' name (Matthew 18:20), and perfection isn't required. That means God dwells amid our imperfections, our failings, and our frustrating habits. We too can learn to bear with what is imperfect, that we might encounter the one who is goodness itself.

Is it difficult to worship with your Christian family at the moment? Why not imagine Jesus sitting next to you in church. Talk to him about the things making you sad or angry and see what he says.

LYNDALL BYWATER

Together in unity

How wonderful, how beautiful, when brothers and sisters get along! It's like costly anointing oil flowing down head and beard... It's like the dew on Mount Hermon flowing down the slopes of Zion. Yes, that's where God commands the blessing, ordains eternal life. (vv. 1, 3, MSG)

The story is told of two mice who found a morsel of cheese on the pantry shelf. Such was their determination not to let the other mouse get it that they fought over it, and such was the intensity of their tug-of-war that they entirely failed to notice the huge piece of cheese sitting just above their heads... until a rat popped its head up and whisked it away.

The people of Israel lived in tribes and clans. Descended from the patriarchs and bound by a common faith, there was much to unite them, but we all know what tribes and clans are like, and these tribes skirmished with each other over land, crops, wells, marriages, property, and anything else they felt the need to defend or contest.

Nevertheless, here they are, all climbing up to Jerusalem, all singing their way through the same cycle of songs, and today's song is about unity. I wonder if there's a reason why this song comes so late in the cycle. Perhaps it would have been a difficult one to sing at the start of the journey, when those tribal squabbles felt very real and very important. Yet, as the land falls away behind them and home becomes a distant memory, as the city of God looms large and they prepare to mingle with thousands of others from different corners of that same great family, perhaps unity becomes more possible.

What about us, the church? Are we ever in danger of missing out on the delicious big chunk of cheese because we've got stuck squabbling over the little things? Can we turn our steps towards the new Jerusalem, turn our faces towards Jesus, and let the oil of God's presence soak us until we really do behave like one big, loving family?

Today the Novena begins, the nine days of prayer between Ascension and Pentecost. As we remember the first disciples praying together in that upper room, waiting for the Spirit, let's pray for the unity of the church in our day.

LYNDALL BYWATER

Everyday worship

Praise the Lord, all you servants of the Lord who minister by night in the house of the Lord. Lift up your hands in the sanctuary and praise the Lord. May the Lord bless you from Zion, he who is the Maker of heaven and earth. (vv. 1-3, NIV)

Weary after a long day of touring in the hot sun, we sat down, each of us making ourselves as comfortable as we could on one of the ancient steps. Someone started singing, and we sang out prayers of blessing over the city of Jerusalem. The sound was beautiful. It will be one of my lasting memories.

The steps in question belonged to a flight which would once have led up to the ancient temple, and I think of them again as we reach the end of our Songs of Ascent. Not only would these psalms have been sung on the road to Jerusalem, but they would also have been sung as the pilgrims made their slow way up those steps to the temple – one psalm for each step.

And perhaps it is that slow walk into the temple which explains something about today's reading. After all the anticipation, you might imagine this final song would be an explosion of awe-struck praise, but it's not. It's a short, humble ode to the people on the nightshift. The temple may be the very seat of God's presence on earth, but, like everything else in this world, it runs on the faithful commitment of people turning up to do their jobs, at all hours of day and night.

As I sat on those temple steps, singing my heart out, I was deeply aware of being one voice among millions who have sung in that place over the millennia, and I was filled with hope. No matter how dark our world gets, how contested the city of Jerusalem may be, how difficult things get in our own lives, the people of God keep singing. We keep ministering for God, day and night, and God, who made heaven and earth, will bring all things to fulfilment.

God of our hours and our years, our daytimes and our night-times, help us to keep singing. Whether the praise feels glorious or the song is more of a beleaguered croak, help us to keep on worshipping you. Amen.

LYNDALL BYWATER



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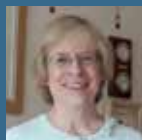
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UK £5.99

ISBN: 9781800395022



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