

Lent Reflections

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Psalms

The book of Psalms is a wonderful resource. The 150 individual psalms cover themes from the heights of the majesty of God through to the deepest expressions of the human condition. They delve deep into the personal relationship between God and Man, and the corporate relationship between God and His People. They are poetic in nature, and are wonderful for spending time over in reading and pondering the words. They are excellent for meditation, soaking in the words before God. As they are poetic in nature they lend themselves in full or in part to being committed to memory.

It may be that our experience of the psalms has been through singing them to Anglican chant (with or without the pointing marks to help us place the words against the music), or reciting alternate verses as minister and congregation. Neither of these methods in themselves do much to assist the user to understand or get inside the words themselves. You need to take the Psalms away with you and read them for yourself.

In the book of Psalms we have a direct line into the heart of the great king David, who is acknowledged as the author of a large number of psalms, though scholarship presents a variety of views on this. If for our purposes we suggest that if a psalm touches our heart then it is God-inspired, and blessed is the one who wrote it, whatever his or her name.

There are psalms of praise, of thanksgiving, of wisdom, cries for help, even expressions of a desire for vengeance. They cover penitence, too. Some psalms were written to accompany great processions and acts of worship, and some are personal reflections before a God who is both holy and personal.

We have the advantage of knowing our Father God through Jesus, who offers us a direct route to his throne room, but while the psalms were all written under the Old Covenant (the Law), they still express aspects of God – his warmth and his love – that we'd normally associate with seeing Him through the lens of Christ Jesus.

A longer read

Our extracts will be longer than usual – some psalms are quite long. Please allow the time to read and soak as part of your devotions this Lent.

Responding to psalms

As the psalms are good for learning and pondering, I would recommend that when you read a psalm or a portion of a psalm that touches your heart you write something down. Use cards, write or draw the words, using colours, pictures if you are drawn to that form of expression, design patterns to match the words, but above all, read the psalm more than once, and when something stirs in you from reading God's word in the Psalms, make a note of it. Keep a plain paper note book just for the purpose.

Translations

I shall be drawing from a number of different translations of the Bible over the course of this series. Acknowledgements appear at the end of each day's reflection.

With Blessings

Day 1: Wednesday, 6 March

Psalm 8

For the choir director: A psalm of David, to be accompanied by a stringed instrument.

1 O LORD, our Lord, your majestic name fills the earth!

Your glory is higher than the heavens.

2 You have taught children and infants

to tell of your strength,

silencing your enemies

and all who oppose you.

3 When I look at the night sky and see the work of your fingers—

the moon and the stars you set in place—

4 what are mere mortals that you should think about them,

human beings that you should care for them?

5 Yet you made them only a little lower than God

and crowned them with glory and honour.

6 You gave them charge of everything you made,

putting all things under their authority—

7 the flocks and the herds

and all the wild animals,

8 the birds in the sky, the fish in the sea,

and everything that swims the ocean currents.

9 O LORD, our Lord, your majestic name fills the earth!

NLT

We start with a song of praise. The task of any translation is to express the immediacy, the excitement, joy and awe that David felt as he penned these words. Imagine yourself as the young son who was chosen by God to be king. Imagine the responsibilities he carried. Place yourself at the head of his armies in battle. Join him in hiding for fear of his life. Imagine yourself in very serious trouble with God.

David talks of the universal praise of God, even from the mouths of 'babes and sucklings', as another translation puts it. If their praise is just babble and gurgle then our praise would be so much greater.

I cannot help but utter these words whenever I'm out on a dark, clear night with shining stars. Each of a billion stars in a billion galaxies is bursting with an energy that would melt this small planet. Just who do I think I am in the light of creation? And yet, we, the smallest degree lower than God (some translations: the angels), are given authority over the created things of our earth, sky and seas.

Such a magnificent hymn of praise could only end with the repeat of the opening.

What is your place in God's created order?

How are we doing with the care entrusted to us for God's creation?

Do you see evidence of a Big Bang, or God's handiwork above your head on a clear night?

Father God, draw my eyes outwards and upwards to see the wonders of your creation and show me how you have created a place and a purpose for me. Amen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BnDcQglU-Dk> Jews sing psalms, too

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ahxPqeZc4zg> a more meditative take

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Day 2: Thursday, 7 March

Psalm 19:1-6

To the Chief Musician. A Psalm of David.

The heavens are telling of the glory of God;

And the expanse [of heaven] is declaring the work of His hands.

Day after day pours forth speech,

And night after night reveals knowledge.

There is no speech, nor are there [spoken] words [from the stars];

Their voice is not heard.

Yet their voice [in quiet evidence] has gone out through all the earth,

Their words to the end of the world.

In them and in the heavens He has made a tent for the sun,

Which is as a bridegroom coming out of his chamber;

It rejoices as a strong man to run his course.

The sun's rising is from one end of the heavens,

And its circuit to the other end of them;

And there is nothing hidden from its heat.

AMP

Psalms vary greatly in length, in style and in content. We'll break longer psalms into smaller chunks, though there will still be some long extracts. Perhaps over Lent you can adapt to doing something which may be different. Try speaking out the reading – it is poetry, after all. You get to hear it, too! Also, take time to read it again at the end. Commit any verses that speak to you onto paper – a notebook for the purpose would be good. And, when all is said and done, try to commit some verses (dare I suggest a whole psalm?) to memory.

The theme of Psalm 8 is echoed here in a poetical cry of praise from the very heavens and stars themselves. Clearly the stars have no mind or voice of their own, but we still enjoy singing 'All creatures (creation) of our God and King', including the verse that calls the burning sun to praise God!

David is telling us that creation, all creation is a testament to the amazing work that God has done. The sun is described as a bridegroom, and a strong man running through the sky. Do you stop when the sun is setting, to look out across the expanse of earth and sky around you? It amazes me that everything I can see is visible only because of the sun, that spot of light in the sky. All of the man-made lights in the world are but a candle on a birthday cake to the sun. We can only see the moon because it reflects sunlight, and on a clear full moon night we can see to walk outside, lit by a sun that has set beyond the horizon.

The Amplified Bible offers some guidance in understanding the text by adding 'missing' or explanatory words or phrases in square brackets. If you find the Bible you normally read sometimes can be a little unclear because the words are not making full sense then perhaps the Amplified Bible may help.

Would David see, were he able, the earth, sky and seas of our century in the same way?

Do you have answers to questions about creation and evolution?

Father God, you created all this splendour for your glory, to give us a glimpse of who you are. Would you reveal yourself more so that I might gain greater knowledge and understanding of your nature? Amen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p4lSauxyFWo> from Haydn's Creation – glorious music, prosaic translation into English from German (which wasn't that much better).

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Day 3: Friday, 8 March

Psalm 19:7-13

The law of the Lord is perfect (flawless), restoring and refreshing the soul;
The statutes of the Lord are reliable and trustworthy, making wise the simple.
The precepts of the Lord are right, bringing joy to the heart;
The commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes.
The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever;
The judgments of the Lord are true, they are righteous altogether.
They are more desirable than gold, yes, than much fine gold;
Sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb.
Moreover, by them Your servant is warned [reminded, illuminated, and instructed];
In keeping them there is great reward.
Who can understand his errors or omissions? Acquit me of hidden (unconscious, unintended) faults.
Also keep back Your servant from presumptuous (deliberate, wilful) sins;
Let them not rule and have control over me.
Then I will be blameless (complete),
And I shall be acquitted of great transgression.

AMP

Continuing with Psalm 19, David reflects on God's law. God's law, the Old Testament Law as it is written down not only in the Ten Commandments but in great detail in the books of the law, is just and righteous, but it is also strict, hard to follow perfectly, and it prescribes penalties, or at least lays bare our own sinfulness. This is the only law that David knew, and he fell foul of God's law a number of times, resulting in serious loss for him.

To David, who knew how much God has used him, and was fully aware of the position, privilege, honour, power and authority God has placed on him, God's Law is so much more real. He spent time in reflecting on the Law's demands, and was able to see how all people would benefit from obedient submission to it.

The Law is described as the best thing ever. In keeping these sweet, beautiful, true, right, priceless statutes the faithful will find reward.

Only by meditating on the law can a person become more aware of hidden sin. As David says, who can understand his [own] errors or omissions? As Christians we can only truly know who we are when we come closer to God in Jesus. I rejoice that in Christ I have a level of access to Father God that even the great king David did not have.

How much do you value the books of the Law (Exodus to Deuteronomy)?

How much do you value the pathway to Father God that Jesus has won for you?

Father God, your righteous and holy demands have been met in Jesus' dying for me. In Christ I stand free from the penalties of the Law but open to its rewards, and I live in a

**new and enduring relationship with You. Thank you for giving your Son to the world.
Amen.**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9elcbyTG53s> a more meditative version

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Day 4: Saturday, 9 March

Psalm 19:14

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart

Be acceptable and pleasing in Your sight,

O Lord, my [firm, immovable] rock and my Redeemer.

(A psalm by David for the music leader.)

AMP

Boney M sang it in *By the waters of Babylon* (otherwise based on Psalm 137); you may hear it before a preacher breaks forth into the sermon, sometimes with an inclusive tweak to include all our hearts. These words that bring this psalm to an end are not, however, just for pop-singers and preachers.

What I say is governed by what I think. I can only speak in words that are acceptable to God if their meaning and import flow from a godly heart and mind. It is possible for someone to think one thing and speak another. If I do that then I am not true to God and I am not true to myself. No amount of Christian words spoken will ever cover over the impure soul that lies deep within, nor can they in some way wash back to purify an impure heart.

Growth and maturity in Christian life come from spending time in the presence of God. Only by getting heart and soul right with God can your words and actions become acceptable to Him.

Let the words of my mouth *reflect* the meditations of my heart. Let my meditations be God-toward. How do we maintain a godly heart? By feeding ourselves with godly food. If you spend time in regular Bible reading and meditation then your heart will reflect Bible truth.

It may be a bit late for a preacher to hope that the sermon that's been prepared will in any way be improved by speaking those words as a preface. They were never intended for this, as they refer not just to sermons but to every word that we utter. If we don't wake up every day uttering these words, then perhaps we could remember them as we approach the congregation?!

In what situation do you find that your words or your thoughts are less than godly?

Father God, place a guard on my heart today. Let my thinking be about you and your nature, about my response to your great love for me in giving me Jesus. Let my mouth speak from a heart that has been broken and reformed from your Father-heart. Amen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rB1OcEaln-c> It's not Boney M

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Day 5: Monday, 11 March

Psalm 23

A psalm of David.

1 The Lord is my shepherd;

I have all that I need.

2 He lets me rest in green meadows;

he leads me beside peaceful streams.

3 He renews my strength.

He guides me along right paths,

bringing honour to his name.

4 Even when I walk

through the darkest valley,

I will not be afraid,

for you are close beside me.

Your rod and your staff

protect and comfort me.

5 You prepare a feast for me

in the presence of my enemies.

You honour me by anointing my head with oil.

My cup overflows with blessings.

6 Surely your goodness and unfailing love will pursue me

all the days of my life,

and I will live in the house of the Lord

forever.

NLT

This is one of the most well-known psalms. Its familiarity is increased through numerous hymns based on its words, though some of them employ a dash of poetic licence. David knows all about sheep and shepherds. Jesus took upon himself a shepherd title. Just before his arrest he quoted Zechariah 13:7: I will strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered.

The psalm's shepherd theme covers provision, refreshing and protection for the person who follows, and extends beyond the sheep analogy as it continues. From verse 5 David moves into a personal response to God for his protection. The extravagance of Father God in preparing the very best for us as our enemies watch and gawp is something that David had experienced in his life as a king and a soldier.

As you recite these psalms, and I urge you to speak them out aloud, you will start to feel the poetic nature they contain. I do not wish to give you a clinical analysis of the structure of psalms as this is something you can find out for yourself when your love of this book causes you to research further. Suffice it to say that many psalms pair up lines to expand a thought by telling it again in a new way. Can you see this happening in this psalm?

Are you able to join David in claiming verse 1 as a truth in your life?

<https://www.hymnal.net/en/hymn/h/528>. How has the writer of this hymn developed the theme?

Father God, in Jesus I have a Good Shepherd, who knows me and who will not let me go. Thank you that you should care for me in this way. Amen.

There are many versions of Psalm 23 – just click:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pN4tPkX0MG0>

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mo3HgtT_OiE

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CglQuMr0ifk>

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Day 6: Tuesday, 12 March

Psalm 47

A Psalm of the Sons of Korah

Applause, everyone. Bravo, bravissimo!

Shout God-songs at the top of your lungs!

God Most High is stunning,
astride land and ocean.

He crushes hostile people,
puts nations at our feet.

He set us at the head of the line,
prize-winning Jacob, his favourite.

Loud cheers as God climbs the mountain,
a ram's horn blast at the summit.

Sing songs to God, sing out!

Sing to our King, sing praise!

He's Lord over earth,
so sing your best songs to God.

God is Lord of godless nations—
sovereign, he's King of the mountain.

Princes from all over are gathered,
people of Abraham's God.

The powers of earth are God's—
he soars over all.

MSG

The sons of Korah feature as the writers of a number of psalms. Korah, a grandson of Levi, met his end very swiftly (see Numbers 16). This translation brings out the immediacy of the praise and worship of God. The words of themselves are not meant to be beautiful or transcendent. This psalm is a hymn of praise, of triumph, of the greatness of God, pointing to the Author, not the scribe.

The perhaps more familiar words of the opening, 'O clap your hands together, all you/ye people' do seem a trifle tame. Clap hands?! Where in our orders of service is there a space for applause of God?! Could it be that in our Christian experience and subsequent worship we may have lost sight of the reason why God should be applauded? For the Israelites, the story of their escape from Egypt and their victories under God in gaining the land where they now lived was still fresh and strong in their folk memory. God has indeed done a marvellous thing. Now, what do we in the twenty-first century recall of the past or present greatness of God? What has God done for us?

We have no physical ground to conquer, but the forces of secularisation are uniting to wipe out faith in our land and continent. Are we sitting by, watching it happen, or even hiding in our churches, hoping not to have to address it?

The call to sing to God comes many times in this psalm. I am aware that singing is not universally taken up by people during worship, sometimes because of their own low perceptions of their ability to sing, a fear of singing out, or simply because the music never seems to fit one's vocal range, though I am always impressed by the vocal gymnastics of the octave-shifters who shift the high notes down a gear and the low ones up! It's a bit like driving an automatic.

Negative attitudes regarding the type or selection of music can leave some people refusing to worship God out of personal principle. I've been there – it's sinful because I put my personal sensitivities or my opinion of what pleases God before obedient worship of God. We are called to worship. Refusal to worship is a refusal to acknowledge who God is.

I conducted a funeral of a dear friend a little while ago. The church was full. There was a small music group accompanying the hymns. The bass guitar player's performance was dire – he took a couple of verses to find the correct key, and he was LOUD. He stood just two yards from where I was standing. My initial reaction was that he was turning our worship into a cacophony. This was actually true. How could God be worshiped here? I paused for a moment or two and wondered whether the sound of the finest musicians would be any more pleasing to God than that which the rest of us have to give. I let go of my sensitivities in the racket and gave in to God. I sang as if I was surrounded by angels. I believe that the high praise of God was offered, with angels in attendance, at that funeral. I later found out that this man was a faithful musician known to the family over the years who was now suffering from a form of dementia.

Do you sing your best songs to God?

Can God be worshipped with all that modern stuff/all those old tunes (select the one that matches your viewpoint)?

Is it possible that God is Lord of godless nations today?

Father God, when I come to worship you, I pray that it is in obedience to your call and not according to my preferences. Amen.

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Day 7: Wednesday, 13 March

Psalm 95

- 1 Come, let us cry out with joy to Yahweh, acclaim the rock of our salvation.
- 2 Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving, acclaim him with music.
- 3 For Yahweh is a great God, a king greater than all the gods.
- 4 In his power are the depths of the earth, the peaks of the mountains are his;
- 5 the sea belongs to him, for he made it, and the dry land, moulded by his hands.
- 6 Come, let us bow low and do reverence; kneel before Yahweh who made us!
- 7 For he is our God, and we the people of his sheepfold, the flock of his hand. If only you would listen to him today!
- 8 Do not harden your hearts as at Meribah, as at the time of Massah in the desert,
- 9 when your ancestors challenged me, put me to the test, and saw what I could do!
- 10 For forty years that generation sickened me, and I said, 'Always fickle hearts; they cannot grasp my ways.'
- 11 Then in my anger I swore they would never enter my place of rest.

NJB

This psalm has formed part of morning worship services for centuries. As a choirboy I never sang past verse 7, as the remainder of the psalm was marked as optional. You can see why. Why did the writer continue into all that Meribah stuff? And as for the sting in the last verse...! Many psalms have a change of direction, more often in a positive direction rather than what is the case in this psalm.

This psalm would have been sung as part of a festival celebration. The musicians were from a particular tribe of Israel and their job was to play instruments or sing, often in procession.

The opening verses command us to cry out with joy. Have you been encouraged by the leader of a service to sing up, or to look more joyful? Have you ever felt like arguing or shouting back something less than complimentary to the leader or even to God? Let's get something straight, then.

Joy is a state that transcends grumpiness, self-pity, tiredness, off-day, bad hair day and a lot of other feelings and attitudes. Joy is prescribed. Joy is a response to the goodness of God – it is not an emotion, neither is it mechanical. God has the right to command a response from us. Even they that sow in tears shall reap in joy (Psalm 126); when the night is filled with tears of sorrow, joy comes in the morning (Psalm 30) – the night may be dark, and may last for more than just a few hours. However, joy is the final outcome, and joy will be the state of eternal life. Joy is a response of obedience – so, cry out, and acclaim the rock of our salvation.

It is helpful, especially when the Bible says one thing and you think another, to read the words again, and to soak in them. Meditate upon the words – meditation ought always to have words upon which to reflect. Give the words, a verse or a passage, time to sink deeper into you. Accompany this by prayer, asking God by his Holy Spirit to make the words clearer in order that you may understand them better and trust more fully in them.

Music is commanded, too, and so it should be. God loves a joyful noise, but he may love joyful music and singing even more!

Why should we make a noise? Because He is the creator and sustainer of all. Why should we bow the knee to Him? Because He is our God. There is no other.

From the middle of verse 7 (the psalm writer did not number the verses) there is a turn. We are reminded of some of the misdeeds of God's people in the past, of our spiritual ancestors in the desert. The writer pleads with us not to be like them, for God dealt with their hardness of heart and disobedience by denying them sight of the Promised Land.

In response to v2, how do you come into your church or fellowship building?

Have we lost the obedience of kneeling?

Father God, your Word created everything. Cause me by your Holy Spirit to understand and fill me with joy that I may respond as you desire. Amen.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4kUfMaYhN_U Performed by the Sons of Korah

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Day 8: Thursday, 14 March

Psalm 100

A psalm. For giving grateful praise.

1 Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth.

2 Worship the Lord with gladness;
come before him with joyful songs.

3 Know that the Lord is God.

It is he who made us, and we are his;
we are his people, the sheep of his pasture.

4 Enter his gates with thanksgiving
and his courts with praise;
give thanks to him and praise his name.

5 For the Lord is good and his love endures for ever;
his faithfulness continues through all generations.

NIV

This psalm is an explosion of praise. In just a few lines it covers themes of joy, worship, ownership, thanksgiving, praise, and God's everlasting goodness. It would have been used in processional worship, sung as the procession moved into the courts of the Temple itself.

It, too, is also used in morning worship. The traditional words 'O be joyful in the Lord, all ye lands' may miss the emphasis slightly. We are not called to be joyful but to shout out for joy, to be so agitated by joy that the earth has to hear it.

The whole earth is called to rejoice –but following verses claim the special covenant relationship that God has with his people, Israel. Verse 3 reveals God's ownership of this covenant nation, a truth that is repeated in the one verse.

The sight of a procession of priests and musicians moving into the Temple courts must have been something to behold. The music would have been loud, the singing strong. A CofE procession might not quite match the colour, the dynamism, the noise and the dancing (very likely) of the procession to the Temple. The tone of the psalm would suggest that dignified solemnity did not play a major part in the proceedings.

We, too, are called to come into our places of worship with joy and proclamation. It might be the done thing for people who have entered into a church to sit down and say a quiet prayer. That tradition, and I am not criticising it, does not appear to have its origins in Psalm 100, which stands into eternity as a model for our corporate, rather than personal, worship.

The last verse expresses God's eternal goodness, love and faithfulness. These qualities come as part of the special covenant relationship He has with his people. Goodness, love and faithfulness are attributes of a God who seeks to give of himself for his people's benefit. Today we can be recipients of God's great love in his gift of Jesus Christ to all who receive him.

What can we learn from Nehemiah 12 about processions?

How can your church foster a sense of joy as you enter your place of worship or as the act of worship begins?

How has God shown his goodness, love and faithfulness to you? Who have you shared this with?

Father God, through the Word I am your creation, and I am yours. Teach me how to live under your covering. Show me how You desire a joyful, glad, praising and thankful people coming together to worship you for your everlasting love. Amen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OjgdKWbD0xE> A worshipful rendition

<https://gloria.tv/video/aBCSdCKoZsn84bLsLm77EKF2W> You can do it, too!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L9zpzch8LiE> A gentle gospel rendition

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gZqPxIj5EPM> The Old Hundredth

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Day 9: Friday, 15 March

Psalm 103:1-6

Of David.

- 1 Praise the Lord, my soul;
 all my inmost being, praise his holy name.
- 2 Praise the Lord, my soul,
 and forget not all his benefits –
- 3 who forgives all your sins
 and heals all your diseases,
- 4 who redeems your life from the pit
 and crowns you with love and compassion,
- 5 who satisfies your desires with good things
 so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

- 6 The Lord works righteousness
 and justice for all the oppressed.

NIV

David expresses his personal praise of the God who has cared for him. We'll cover this psalm over three days. The opening verses tell of a God who is personally involved in each of our lives. Even though David is seeing God through the eyes of the Law he is able to reveal to us a God who cares about each one of us. David calls up praise from his inner being, not just through the medium of a physical response action alone, but from deep within.

David knows from bitter experience that God's retribution for sinful behaviour is tough, but he knows that when he follows God's laws from a heart of praise and worship then God will bless him. Forgiveness under the Law demands sacrifice before it can be given, yet David still knows the unutterable joy and freedom that forgiveness brings. David doesn't differentiate – all sins may be forgiven. Likewise, there is healing, which in David's day was scarce, but David knew that God could heal any disease.

This is not all. Forgiveness sets you back where you were, placing you back on level ground and closing the hole you had fallen into. David goes further in saying that God lifts us even higher because of his love and compassion for us. He responds to our desires with good things. God wants to bless us!

In Jesus we have forgiveness through repentance. It is no less sweet that we have not had to pay for it. Whoever thinks that they can plan to do wrong and then seek forgiveness for that wrongdoing is committing a sin they haven't yet understood. Repentance is an action, not a state.

Verse 6 is a one-liner. The Lord is a God of righteousness and justice. He is active in promoting and maintaining these among his people. He is not just a judge who decides whether something is right or wrong – God puts things right, he increases justice and righteousness.

Do you also seek restoration when you seek forgiveness?

Do we have a part to play in God's working out of verse 6? Do you?

Why would God raise us even higher?

Father God, You are ready to reach down into the pit to lift me out when I turn back to you in repentance. There is no situation awful enough that you will not rescue me from. My soul, praise the Lord!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tp-UOjstQ1o> – the late, great Andrae Crouch.

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Day 10: Saturday, 16 March

Psalm 103:7-18

7 He made known his ways to Moses,
his deeds to the people of Israel:

8 the Lord is compassionate and gracious,
slow to anger, abounding in love.

9 He will not always accuse,
nor will he harbour his anger for ever;

10 he does not treat us as our sins deserve
or repay us according to our iniquities.

11 For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
so great is his love for those who fear him;

12 as far as the east is from the west,
so far has he removed our transgressions from us.

13 As a father has compassion on his children,
so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him;

14 for he knows how we are formed,
he remembers that we are dust.

15 The life of mortals is like grass,
they flourish like a flower of the field;

16 the wind blows over it and it is gone,
and its place remembers it no more.

17 But from everlasting to everlasting
the Lord's love is with those who fear him,
and his righteousness with their children's children –

18 with those who keep his covenant
and remember to obey his precepts.

NIV

Some of our readings will be longer than others. Try not to fall into the entangling web where you attempt to rush through the text in order to finish 'in time', thus losing the meaning and drowning in words rather than soaking in them.

Verse 8 is used in worship services as an introduction to confession. A compassionate person not only senses how others are feeling but can also experience the feeling. Compassion places you alongside another person as you feel what they feel. Jesus saw the crowds when he stepped off the boat and had compassion on them. Not only did he feel what they were feeling, mentally and physically, but he also burned with desire to do something about it. That day he healed many people of their various diseases and conditions.

Grace is what God gives to us when we don't deserve it – it's a free get out of jail card. Grace comes from God's love for us, love that, as with grace, we do not deserve. Verses 11 and 12 tell of God's amazing love and mercy and his readiness to forgive. Commit these two verses to memory.

God has every right to be angry when we disobey, walk away, dishonour him, reject him in favour of what we want to do. God cannot help but be angry when he sees us breaking his commands or carving out our own tablets of stone with text to match our personal agenda. He is God, he is not human and he does not conform to our wishful thinking about his nature. He does not turn his anger off, but he delays the full action so that we might turn back to him before he vents that anger. He said the same to Moses – anger is in his name, but so is mercy.

We may hear the words of the second section above at funeral or commemoration services. The emphasis there may be upon the frailty of human life, but the words actually say something far more powerful about God's compassion, love and righteousness and our obedience to him. To paraphrase: God knows what we're like. Humanity is feeble and perishable, but God has compassion and love like a father to his child on those who fear (honour, respect) him, and his love extends to infinite time.

Can my compassion grow to be like that of Jesus?

How easy is it to adopt a cold heart in order to be free of compassionate commitment to those God places before us?

Have you set boundaries to God's grace?

Father God, I have no idea how far the east lies from the west in the unchartable cosmos, but you have placed my sins that far away from me and you choose not to remember them. Break the coldness in my heart with the warmth of your love and grace, and renew a right spirit in me. Amen.

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Day 11: Monday, 18 March

Psalm 103:19-end

19 The Lord has established his throne in heaven,
and his kingdom rules over all.

20 Praise the Lord, you his angels,
you mighty ones who do his bidding,
who obey his word.

21 Praise the Lord, all his heavenly hosts,
you his servants who do his will.

22 Praise the Lord, all his works
everywhere in his dominion.

Praise the Lord, my soul.

NIV

The Psalm ends with an upturn of praise and a call for everyone to praise the God of heaven. Verse 19 is, however, a tough statement to take in. We may all agree that God's throne is in heaven, but does his kingdom actually reign over all? There have been too many events of history that would disclaim this. Creeping secularism may suggest that the boundaries of the Kingdom are being pushed back.

Simple pre-logic will tell us that if God is God, then God *is* God. What we see does not change the truth. Should God raise his voice, the earth will melt away (Ps 46:6). At his presence the mountains melt like wax (Ps 97:5). Remember yesterday's psalm? So, let's praise God.

The last three verses are a doxology – a word of praise. Angels do it (we don't need, of course, to tell them to!), all the heavenly armies do it. We should do it, too.

What do you think, looking at the last line of the psalm, soul-praise is?

What is going on in heaven at the moment?

North Korea is reckoned to be the most dangerous place to be a Christian today. Can God's kingdom really be established there?

Father God, father of compassion and mercy, look upon this child of yours with your love, your grace and your mercy. I give you all that I have placed in our way for you to cast to the very ends of the cosmos. May my heart, my soul and my life be filled with praise, adoration and worship. Amen.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AUfyowttvmY&index=6&list=RDBc_vQngf_c8 – All Souls Orchestra with the composer.

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Day 12: Tuesday, 19 March

Psalm 150

Praise the Lord.

Praise God in his sanctuary;

praise him in his mighty heavens.

2 Praise him for his acts of power;

praise him for his surpassing greatness.

3 Praise him with the sounding of the trumpet,

praise him with the harp and lyre,

4 praise him with timbrel and dancing,

praise him with the strings and pipe,

5 praise him with the clash of cymbals,

praise him with resounding cymbals.

6 Let everything that has breath praise the Lord.

Praise the Lord.

NIV

Bang a gong! Here we may find the answer for those who feel that they cannot sing praises to God, though you shouldn't assume that bad singers always make good instrumentalists! Even a cymbal has to be clashed at the right time, for there is a difference between a joyful noise in God's holy place and an unholy racket – the trouble, however, is that the dividing lines between the two are not clearly marked, being partly a matter of taste, and this can lead to some quite strident or entrenched opinions about the type of music used in worship.

The psalm repeats its opening sentence at the end. The last word of the last psalm leaves us in no doubt as to what we should do. The writer calls us to praise God. How God is to be praised is not a question of whether pipe organs and robed choirs are to be pitted against electric bands and worship leaders – such discussion is a complete red herring that only distracts from discovering what true heart-worship of our Lord God is about. If any musician seeks to place their way of worshipping above that of another then the focus has already shifted away from God. If anyone refuses to worship God because of personal preferences then the focus again slips.

Imagine a procession of priestly/levitical musicians in the Temple, filling the lofty spaces or the external courtyards with the raucous and jangling noise of this seemingly odd set of instruments. Trumpets might only be used for repetitive fanfares. Harps (portable, of course) and lyres may pick out melody. Strings and pipe would not be violins and three-manual organ but much simpler instruments. The percussion section would bring pace, punctuation and rhythm to the music as it moves. There would be chanting and declamation, shouts and clashing. It all sounds pretty primitive, but it is what God had ordained, and He had provided his people with highly-skilled ministers in music.

How many times are we called to praise God in this psalm, even if the means is beyond our capability? Twelve. What a glorious closing psalm.

Why should we praise God? There is no answer to that in this psalm – just do it!

However, the psalm does offer another option – dance, with or without timbrels (tambourines). In the Old Testament stories and in Psalms we read of women taking part in celebration in an honourable way. Women were not part of solemn processions with priests, Levites and musicians but there are many examples in the Old Testament of women celebrating in dance. It's likely that dancing was more the preserve of the younger women than the older, but today we have some awkwardness surrounding women flaunting themselves/expressing worship (you choose) in dance and movement.

Dancing, with timbrels has long been a particular aspect of Salvation Army activity. We have slowly lost the communal connection with dance. Barn dances are a little old-fashioned, and though you may have thoroughly enjoyed Strictly Come Dancing, it may well have been solely as a spectator. Dance is still part of Jewish religious celebration, and perhaps we may need to consider whether movement can find its way back into our worship.

Are we prudish types (male or female) if we see dance as somehow provocative, and would prefer to have none of it at all rather than risk any corruption of others? I may be exaggerating in this analysis, but if in Christ we are given freedom to express our love for God with our hearts, minds, soul and strength (surely that is a physical thing?!), should we not learn to accept it, acknowledge and deal with our own negativity or weakness, and encourage it?

Our final verse, the last verse of the last psalm, commands even my pet cat to praise the Lord.

Have you ever turned your nose up at the way worship is conducted in your congregation/fellowship?

Is it possible for us to revive movement and dance (not necessarily just for women) as part of our celebration of faith? How might it be realised?

(Verse 2) What acts of power can you witness to in your worship?

**Father God, I pray for a release of your people into true praise that captures body and heart, soul and strength as well as our voice and raises us to the heavenly places.
Amen**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B9XIFgDFexU> (It's quite long, but educating. I thought the church was empty! Did you spot Mary Sumner?)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gyszISlrB60> Timbrels and dancing

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y6KIBtIFGbM> – Palm Sunday procession as you may never have seen it before.

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Day 13: Wednesday, 20 March

Psalm 30: 1-5

A psalm. A song. For the dedication of the temple. Of David.

- 1 I will exalt you, Lord,
for you lifted me out of the depths
and did not let my enemies gloat over me.
- 2 Lord my God, I called to you for help,
and you healed me.
- 3 You, Lord, brought me up from the realm of the dead;
you spared me from going down to the pit.

4 Sing the praises of the Lord, you his faithful people;
praise his holy name.

5 For his anger lasts only a moment,
but his favour lasts a lifetime;
weeping may stay for the night,
but rejoicing comes in the morning.

NIV

While the psalmist exhorts us to sing praise to God, the overwhelming theme is thanksgiving. The opening verses are a deep personal statement from David concerning God's protection and preservation of him in what appears to be serious life-threatening illness. To this David also adds his thanks that his enemies do not get to gloat over him, thus preserving, too, his status and by extension, that of Israel, among the nations.

Verse 5 is worthy of committing to heart for rapid retrieval when the need arises. God is totally unbalanced in his treatment of us. He is righteous; He is just; He is holy; but above all of these he places his love. He is righteousness crowned with love, justice infused with love, holiness swarming with love. When we incur his anger, it is both slow in coming and quick to dissipate. We do not have to spend days in sackcloth and ashes to prove our repentance because repentance is the key that releases God's forgiveness.

Has anyone ever said to you, "It's not fair – you have God on your side"? If not, then perhaps you need to seek his favour, or even wonder why you're a Christian! God's favour is ours as a gift of our sonship. It may be one of the least invoked gifts of God. God wants us to prosper in all sorts of ways, beyond the ability of our own intellect or skill of themselves, God-given though they may be, to bring about success. On the see-saw of life, God will upset the balance in my favour. This could result, for instance, in improved relationships, better life chances, superior outcomes, even longer life (and the small matter of eternity at the end of it). In human terms this is not equal, but Christians do not live the life the world lives. God favoured his people Israel in many ways. It can be argued that God's favour is still working its way through generations of Jews in business, finance, entertainment and other areas.

The second half of verse 5 can be read two ways – in one sense it sounds like a whole new truth about sorrow and joy in aspects of life, and we know that human life gives us plenty of sorrow.

We might feel a little aggrieved when the psalmist suggests that sorrow is short-lived, because that isn't necessarily the case. Sadness can last for a long time. It can also last in a healthy way (recalling the love a deceased parent lavished on you) or an unhealthy way (failing to be reconciled to the death of a loved one). There is little comfort in being told how you should feel. After all, many of the Psalms are expressions and outbursts of the writer's feelings!

A very common pattern found in Psalms is what I might call, *saying the same thing again, but using different words*. Expressing the same thought or truth in two different ways can help to broaden its meaning and allow us to latch on to it more securely. If we see the two halves of verse 5 as complimentary views of the same truth then the meaning of the second half is all about the short-lived sorrow we feel when God is angry with us, which lasts but a night, and the continuing joy of God's favour discovered in the new day.

Have you ever been in a situation like that described in the opening verses? Where did God feature in it?

Do you still feel there are dark clouds of God's anger or displeasure overhead?

In what aspects of your life do you need to experience God's favour?

Father God, you are with me in the brightest times, when I should praise you the most, and in the darkest times, when I need you most. Let me know your continuing presence in my life - your protection, your healing, your favour. Amen

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZA2h9HBb7-c> Sackcloth and ashes.

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Day 14: Thursday, 21 March

Psalm 30: 6-end

6 When I felt secure, I said,
‘I shall never be shaken.’

7 Lord, when you favoured me,
you made my royal mountain stand firm;
but when you hid your face,
I was dismayed.

8 To you, Lord, I called;
to the Lord I cried for mercy:

9 ‘What is gained if I am silenced,
if I go down to the pit?

Will the dust praise you?
Will it proclaim your faithfulness?

10 Hear, Lord, and be merciful to me;
Lord, be my help.’

11 You turned my wailing into dancing;
you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy,
12 that my heart may sing your praises and not be silent.
Lord my God, I will praise you for ever.

NIV

The writer reflects on how God’s favour can be lost (or at least that God’s favour is his alone to bestow) when we fall away from God. Perhaps he has some past sin in mind as he writes. He appears to be suggesting that God has moved away from this servant, but that is the outcome of this servant’s first turning away from God. While my act of turning away from God will cause sorrow in heavenly places, or my disobedience cause anger to smoulder, when it is God himself who hides his face from me, I will find myself in a far worse place. This realisation is echoed in Jesus’ parable where the son comes at last to his senses and decides to go back to his father: how much better is life as a hired servant in my father’s house than where I am at the moment!

In verse 9 the writer tries to pitch an argument to God as to why He should save him from death. He suggests to God that if He were to consign him to death (the pit) then he wouldn’t be much use to God down there! He is, however, wise enough not to rely on that as a deal-breaker, and pleads for God’s mercy.

The final two verses bring back the positivity of the psalm’s opening. The natural outflow of knowing God’s love and favour is praise, continuous and lasting praise.

How much of this psalm matches your experience of God?

Which would you prefer – a sense of God’s smouldering displeasure, or nothing at all?

Father God, lift me from the depths when I am in despair, but also topple my perch when I think I am successful in myself. Turn my sorrow into dancing that I may praise you as long as I live. Amen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OqGIM2gs4bs> He Lifted me up from the deep miry clay. He planted my feet on the King's Highway. And this is the reason why I sing and I shout, My Jesus came down, down, down and lifted me up.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V20My43EtIc> A more upbeat rendition.

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Day 15: Friday, 22 March

Psalm 32:1-5

Of David. A maskil.

1 Blessed is the one

whose transgressions are forgiven,
whose sins are covered.

2 Blessed is the one

whose sin the Lord does not count against them
and in whose spirit is no deceit.

3 When I kept silent,

my bones wasted away
through my groaning all day long.

4 For day and night

your hand was heavy on me;
my strength was sapped
as in the heat of summer.

5 Then I acknowledged my sin to you

and did not cover up my iniquity.

I said, 'I will confess

my transgressions to the Lord.'

And you forgave

the guilt of my sin.

NIV

Maskil is an obscure term that appears at the heading of a number of psalms. There is much learned discussion on the matter should you wish to pursue it. I'm not going to worry about it. Let me know what you find out.

The writer explores how sin can destroy our very fabric. If we are out of line with God because of sin, then we are also out of line in ourselves. If our body, by which I also mean our mind, our thoughts, our intentions and actions, our nature, are out of kilter then we will be unwell. The unresolved situations of our own making and of others', our refusal to turn away from a state of disobedience; our proud reliance on our abilities alone, all of these will prey upon us.

David tells us that when he kept quiet (about his sins) his whole being suffered. When he confessed his sins, he knew forgiveness. Note carefully that David included the words 'and [I] did not cover up my iniquity'. It is not easy to lay your whole self on the altar before God – it's painful. David knew that very well, and we shall come later to a psalm that reflects that.

Forgiveness is a free gift of God in Jesus. It's free because Jesus has paid in advance for us. It's free, but it was not bought cheaply – it cost the life of the Son of God. Sin still has a cost, and it is a cost we each must bear unless we seek forgiveness in Jesus. No sin is magically dealt with except by repentance. If you are not ready to repent then no-one, not the Pope, neither Patriarch Bartholomew or Patriarch Kirill, no-one can pronounce you free from any sin, even upon acts of penitence.

There are some theological issues around not being sin-free at the point of death. I do not intend to spend all my life worrying about its conclusion.

More serious, though, is the realisation as we grow in faith that there could be a problem with that in us which we haven't yet realised is sin. Sin is not just about wrong actions – it goes deep into our being, our nature, who we are. It might be that we're not yet ready to handle everything that God knows about us. He graciously will only reveal to us what we are mature enough in Him to be able to understand, acknowledge and repent of. I won't spend time worrying about this, either, because my loving God will sort that one out. Praise His holy name.

Are you keeping hold of something you should have brought to God long ago?

Is there something secret you cannot bring yourself to confess that is eating you up?

Have you experienced the joy of a forgiven sin?

Are you worrying about anything? Do feel free to get in touch – I'd love to be able to help, or refer.

Father God, I will not fully understand in this life the love you showed me in giving your Son Jesus, and his willing obedience to death that my sins may be forgiven. I take your love and forgiveness it in faith and deep gratitude. Amen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zRjEiJW4zCA> There is a fountain...

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Day 16: Saturday, 23 March

Psalm 32:6-end

6 Therefore let all the faithful pray to you
while you may be found;
surely the rising of the mighty waters
will not reach them.

7 You are my hiding-place;
you will protect me from trouble
and surround me with songs of deliverance.

8 I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go;
I will counsel you with my loving eye on you.

9 Do not be like the horse or the mule,
which have no understanding
but must be controlled by bit and bridle
or they will not come to you.

10 Many are the woes of the wicked,
but the Lord's unfailing love
surrounds the one who trusts in him.

11 Rejoice in the Lord and be glad, you righteous;
sing, all you who are upright in heart!

NIV

David has a special relationship with God because he is king. He, the youngest of the sons of Jesse, was chosen by God and picked out by the great, great prophet Samuel. We may have lost the sense of awe that filled the places where Samuel, the prophet of God, entered. David knows all too well that his reign as king depends totally on God's favour to him. David knows the responsibilities and the struggles of reigning over the people of Israel, of fighting his enemies, of staying true and safe.

When David says 'You are my hiding-place', his words express the only and absolute security David has in God to protect and sustain him in the role God gave him. Although David has God's ear because of his position we should not think that we therefore do not. We do, because of Jesus. I might not have been picked out by Samuel but one came who is greater than Samuel and he has picked me, and you, for his work and service.

The words of verses 8 and 9 may be those of God to David or to the people of Israel.

Do you see your Protector and the Lifter of your head (Psalm 3:3) as One who in whom you can hide away or One who is your protective armour?

Do you walk alongside Jesus on your journey, or do you act as one needing a bit and bridle?

Father God, in your presence I stand safe. Under the cover of your wings I find your protection. Teach me to praise you with the congregation of righteous people in songs of deliverance. Amen.

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Day 17: Monday, 25 March

Psalm 67

For the director of music. With stringed instruments. A psalm. A song.

1 May God be gracious to us and bless us
and make his face shine on us—

2 so that your ways may be known on earth,
your salvation among all nations.

3 May the peoples praise you, God;
may all the peoples praise you.

4 May the nations be glad and sing for joy,
for you rule the peoples with equity
and guide the nations of the earth.

5 May the peoples praise you, God;
may all the peoples praise you.

6 The land yields its harvest;
God, our God, blesses us.

7 May God bless us still,
so that all the ends of the earth will fear him.

NIV

The opening verse echoes the blessing Moses was commanded by God to give to his brother Aaron as a blessing (numbers 6:24-26):

May the Lord bless you and take care of you.
May the Lord smile on you and be gracious to you.
May the Lord show you his favour and give you his peace.

A blessing is not words that just make you feel warm and fuzzy. Blessing implies favour (we've already covered this), prosperity and fullness in all that you are and do (not just financially). The purpose of a blessing is two-fold. Clearly it is for the benefit of the recipient, but it is also given so that the world might see the goodness of God as shown to His people, hence the pairing of the first two verses.

The psalmist cries out that God may be praised by all nations, not just Israel. His desire is that the whole earth praises the God of Israel. It is like a song within a song, with its initial line repeated at the end.

This short psalm concludes with a reminder that God has blessed the land and its harvests, and the desire to see the nations know (and fear) God because of His blessing of Israel is once again expressed at the end.

How much do you desire to see people of all nations come to God in worship and praise through knowing Jesus Christ? Is this a request you regularly bring before God?

Father God, I seek your blessing upon every aspect of my life, especially where I know that I am deficient. May those who see your work in my life get to be jealous for You. Amen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VX39hg9p0YU> Anglican chant.

<https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution> A reminder of those nations that not only do not know the saving power of Jesus Christ, but actively seek to oppress and suppress.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MN_VhXQMc6E North Korean gods?

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Day 18: Tuesday, 26 March

Psalm 68:1-6

For the director of music. Of David. A psalm. A song.

- 1 May God arise, may his enemies be scattered;
 may his foes flee before him.
- 2 May you blow them away like smoke—
 as wax melts before the fire,
 may the wicked perish before God.
- 3 But may the righteous be glad
 and rejoice before God;
 may they be happy and joyful.
- 4 Sing to God, sing in praise of his name,
 extol him who rides on the clouds;
 rejoice before him—his name is the Lord.
- 5 A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows,
 is God in his holy dwelling.
- 6 God sets the lonely in families,
 he leads out the prisoners with singing;
 but the rebellious live in a sun-scorched land.

NIV

You may have experienced some of those long processional hymns ('Lift high the Cross', 'For all the Saints') that are sung on special days in the cathedral as the choir and the various orders and dignitaries make their way from outside the building into their allotted places at the top, all in their appointed order and costume. You may have something similar to cover a Palm Sunday procession in your church.

Psalm 68 is a processional psalm. It is long and detailed, and it is worth reading in full (over a few days). It only lasts for a few minutes. It may have been performed and sung many times over, perhaps with musical interludes, dancing and rejoicing as the procession made its way into the Temple courts.

The opening words are taken from Numbers 10:35, those that Moses proclaimed whenever the Ark of God was lifted up and carried as the tribe of Israel moved from one place to another. Confidence spills over into the following verses that proclaim the awesome power of God, whose breath, or simply whose presence, will quell the enemy. Israel was a nation that had to fight to protect and keep what God had given it. They did not always live at peace with their neighbours, much like today, but I shall not comment on the modern state of Israel, but I ask you to pray for the peace of Jerusalem, which is not Israel.

The psalmist blesses the righteous, those who, in contrast to the enemy, follow God's Law and yearn to see its truth and principles applied in all aspects of national life. He calls the people to sing out to the great God of heaven who yet stoops to uphold the cause of orphans and widows. The rebellious, however, will have a hard time.

I cannot help but pull in the opening verses from The Message translation. The translator conveys a wonderful modern sense of the brilliance of God:

Up with God!

Down with his enemies!

Adversaries, run for the hills!

Gone like a puff of smoke,

like a blob of wax in the fire—

one look at God and the wicked vanish.

Do you believe that God can by his presence, or by a simple exhalation, scatter the enemies of faith?

Can you differentiate (v3) the differences between being glad, being happy, being joyful and rejoicing?

Do modern translations suffer from a lack of reverence?

Do older translations sacrifice accuracy for fine prose?

Father God, when I join with my brothers and sister in worship, and when we move in mission, teach us to proclaim your praise in the same way as Moses and your people did as they lifted up the Ark. Amen

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sVmRzQSTqro> Let God arise!

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Day 19: Wednesday, 27 March

Psalm 68:7-14

- 7 When you, God, went out before your people,
when you marched through the wilderness,
8 the earth shook, the heavens poured down rain,
before God, the One of Sinai,
before God, the God of Israel.
9 You gave abundant showers, O God;
you refreshed your weary inheritance.
10 Your people settled in it,
and from your bounty, God, you provided for the poor.
11 The Lord announces the word,
and the women who proclaim it are a mighty throng:
12 "Kings and armies flee in haste;
the women at home divide the plunder.
13 Even while you sleep among the sheep pens,
the wings of my dove are sheathed with silver,
its feathers with shining gold."
14 When the Almighty scattered the kings in the land,
it was like snow fallen on Mount Zalmon.

The psalmist looks back to the past when the children of Israel were led through the wilderness into the Promised Land. Perhaps we use the term 'children' because it was only the children who eventually went through. While the Bible narrative tells us about leaders, prophets and other characters who played their parts in the story of Israel, they are hardly mentioned by name in Psalms – the honour here goes to God alone. Moses may have stood for hours on end with his arms raised up, but it was God who parted the waters. It was God who led the people through the wilderness, and when the Lord was on the move the earth reverberated with shock and tempest.

Moving on beyond the time in the wilderness, when Israel was establishing its land and its identity with soldiers fighting battles, the mighty throng of women were given the words of verses 12 and 13, which they may have recited with dance, tambourines and voices. The (homing) doves may have been used to bring back news of victory in a faraway battle.

Does the voice of the Lord shake anything these days?

Father God, your people recognised You in the fire and cloud that led them through the wilderness. Let me see and follow the light of Christ in my life and in the life of my church. Amen.

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Day 20: Thursday, 28 March

Psalm 68:15-23

- 15 Mount Bashan, majestic mountain,
Mount Bashan, rugged mountain,
- 16 why gaze in envy, you rugged mountain,
at the mountain where God chooses to reign,
where the Lord himself will dwell forever?
- 17 The chariots of God are tens of thousands
and thousands of thousands;
the Lord has come from Sinai into his sanctuary.
- 18 When you ascended on high,
you took many captives;
you received gifts from people,
even from the rebellious—
that you, Lord God, might dwell there.
- 19 Praise be to the Lord, to God our Saviour,
who daily bears our burdens.
- 20 Our God is a God who saves;
from the Sovereign Lord comes escape from death.
- 21 Surely God will crush the heads of his enemies,
the hairy crowns of those who go on in their sins.
- 22 The Lord says, "I will bring them from Bashan;
I will bring them from the depths of the sea,
- 23 that your feet may wade in the blood of your foes,
while the tongues of your dogs have their share."

Mountain envy is a sad thing! Bashan (aka the *little* hill of Hermon) was actually quite large and God's mount Zion was small, but God chose the latter, moving from Mount Sinai, the mountain of the covenant, to the temple in Jerusalem. Appropriate words as the procession moves up the hill to the Temple.

The book of psalms can get quite gory at times. While on one hand the God of Israel is their protector, on the other He smites Israel's enemies. He really smites them. Imagine the relish with which the words in verse 23 would be sung. The worst fate you could wish on your enemies is not only that they should perish, but that dogs would lick their blood – a terrible sacrilege in itself. It happened to Jezebel.

Where is the power-seat of God today?

Is it too violent of us to wish that Satan be crushed under our feet?

Father God, make me zealous for your kingdom and your reign in the situation that you have placed me. The only righteous anger is yours. Give me a heart that senses what hurts You and causes your anger to burn in today's world. Amen.

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Day 21: Friday, 29 March

Psalm 68:24-end

- 24 Your procession, God, has come into view,
the procession of my God and King into the sanctuary.
- 25 In front are the singers, after them the musicians;
with them are the young women playing the timbrels.
- 26 Praise God in the great congregation;
praise the Lord in the assembly of Israel.
- 27 There is the little tribe of Benjamin, leading them,
there the great throng of Judah's princes,
and there the princes of Zebulun and of Naphtali.
- 28 Summon your power, God;
show us your strength, our God, as you have done before.
- 29 Because of your temple at Jerusalem
kings will bring you gifts.
- 30 Rebuke the beast among the reeds,
the herd of bulls among the calves of the nations.
Humbled, may the beast bring bars of silver.
Scatter the nations who delight in war.
- 31 Envoys will come from Egypt;
Cush will submit herself to God.
- 32 Sing to God, you kingdoms of the earth,
sing praise to the Lord,
- 33 to him who rides across the highest heavens, the ancient heavens,
who thunders with mighty voice.
- 34 Proclaim the power of God,
whose majesty is over Israel,
whose power is in the heavens.
- 35 You, God, are awesome in your sanctuary;
the God of Israel gives power and strength to his people.

Praise be to God!

From the vantage point of the Temple mount the writer now spies the procession as it makes its way into the inner and more sacred parts of the Temple. We can now see how it is made up. It is both a solemn and a noisy procession. We might think that solemn means measured and dignified, but see who approaches. Singers, musicians, young women (might older ones not have the agility required?), representatives of the tribes of Israel are spotted. This is a Big Day Out, and crowds will have gathered to watch. Imagine a carnival atmosphere.

Among the procession may also be kings of neighbouring nations who have come to bring tribute and gifts. Verses 30-31 may be a reference to Egypt, which clearly will get a bad write-up.

The psalm concludes with a glorious song of praise to Almighty God, the victor. Again, the writer urges all nations to praise the God of Israel (for there is no other god), a God of majesty, of power and strength.

We sometimes go out as a church into our neighbourhood – a walk of witness (for fear of calling it a triumphal march?) may be the term we use. I wonder whether we'd dare to proclaim this psalm as we walked.

When you have a few minutes to spare, try reading or, better, reciting the whole psalm. Read it from a different translation – you can view a wide variety of translations on biblegateway.com. Just Google Psalm 68 MSG for the Message version, or follow this link:

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm+68&version=MSG>

Is there anything to be said for open-air processions (walks, marches, etc.)?

Father God, open my heart to my neighbourhood, and instil in me a desire to proclaim your glory in my life and witness. Restore the honour of your name. Amen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PNOzMm1Qxpw> – you may recognise the place.

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Day 22: Saturday, 30 March

Psalm 1

1. How blessed is anyone who rejects the advice of the wicked
and does not take a stand in the path that sinners tread,
nor a seat in company with cynics,
2. but who delights in the law of Yahweh
and murmurs his law day and night.

3. Such a one is like a tree planted near streams;
it bears fruit in season
and its leaves never wither,
and every project succeeds.

4. How different the wicked, how different!

Just like chaff blown around by the wind

5. the wicked will not stand firm at the Judgement
nor sinners in the gathering of the upright.

6. For Yahweh watches over the path of the upright,
but the path of the wicked is doomed.

JB

The opening psalm of the collection is a poem that oozes wisdom. As such, it is well-suited to be the introductory psalm to the whole collection. The books Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs are referred to as wisdom literature.

Yahweh, in this translation, is The LORD. The Hebrew is JHVH, which may be translated as anything from Jehovah to Yahweh. The writer describes the person who takes time not just to study but to soak in the Scriptures (the Law), taking delight not only from its content but also from reciting it at all times.

The very first words should be understood as God blessing the person, not how blessed the person must be who rejects the wisdom of the wicked but who delights in the law of the Lord. God commands a positive blessing onto that person.

While we know that reading our Bible is a good thing, there is more to gain by adopting what we read about above. Firstly, there is power in the physical reading out loud of the Bible. By speaking the word, you are affirming it with your tongue. You are hearing it, too, along with anyone else in the room or anywhere else. Reading out loud tests our understanding as we place inflections upon the words in their sentences. Reading out loud is slower than silent reading – the words have more time to soak in. Reading out loud gives every word its utterance.

Secondly, through frequent reciting, verses become more fixed in your head, i.e. you start to memorise verses. While we can get a verse up on a mobile phone these days or simply ask Blessed Alexa or St. Google to find it for us, the power of oral tradition gets lost. I have passages of scripture in my head that I learnt at school. It was not difficult to learn them. Once learnt, never

forgotten. Why not set yourself a task of learning a couple of (shortish) psalms by heart? Psalms 23 and 121 would be excellent candidates.

Where is your tree planted?

Which projects are more likely to succeed?

What scripture do you know?

What scripture do you apply?

Father God, would you reveal to me the delights of studying and pondering upon Your word in the Bible, and set my heart to read, mark, learn, inwardly digest and apply its truth to my daily life? Amen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TYhQATf8HDw>

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B_Y9m3xH6vI – Greek orthodox singing

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tTVADUln6dU> – A lovely version, in Dutch, but followable.

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Day 23: Monday, 1 April

Psalm 15

A psalm of David.

- 1 Lord, who may dwell in your sacred tent?
Who may live on your holy mountain?
- 2 The one whose way of life is blameless,
who does what is righteous,
who speaks the truth from their heart;
- 3 whose tongue utters no slander,
who does no wrong to a neighbour,
and casts no slur on others;
- 4 who despises a vile person
but honours those who fear the Lord;
who keeps an oath even when it hurts,
and does not change their mind;
- 5 who lends money to the poor without interest;
who does not accept a bribe against the innocent.

Whoever does these things
will never be shaken.

NIV

This psalm is a short but complete guide to living a holy life. The question is posed at the very beginning. Who, indeed, may come close to God? Should one who is not right before God dare to approach him as the result would be obliteration. God warned the people of Israel that while Moses was receiving the Ten Commandments, they should not set foot on that mountain upon pain of death. In God's regulations for worship in the wilderness should any Israelite dare to fabricate without permission the spices used in the Tent of Worship the same fate awaited him. Who, indeed, may dwell in the sacred tent, or live on the holy mountain?

The psalmist offers a list of the qualities of one who may. It's not like the rich young ruler who came to Jesus seeking eternal life, thinking that his obedience to the Law was in itself sufficient, only to discover that in his worldly life there were things that still needed to be put right. That man had a problem with his wealth, and he went away disappointed because he refused to trade things of this life for things of eternal life.

The qualities that may be found in one who would be acceptable before God in his sacred tent or upon his holy mountain are expressed in the following verses. They constitute a tall order, but not an impossible one. I am sure we would all want to be known as exemplars of these things. In this world it is not easy to be honoured by God and also by men. Which would you choose if you had to make the choice? You know the right answer, but are you prepared to live that life?

A blameless lifestyle accompanied by righteous and just action, devotion to truth, care about what words come out of one's mouth, fair treatment of others, integrity, constancy, and willingness to use one's money for the benefit of others (it's interesting that money is lent, not given). Whoever does these will never be shaken.

Are you satisfied with the stand that you have taken in your life regarding the balance of earthly and heavenly things?

Father God, in Jesus I have access to your holy mountain without fear of death. His blood has paid the price for me. In Jesus I may be bold to approach your throne and sit at your feet. Teach me how to linger there. Amen.

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Day 24: Tuesday, 2 April

Psalm 37:1-11

Of David.

- 1 Do not fret because of those who are evil
or be envious of those who do wrong;
- 2 for like the grass they will soon wither,
like green plants they will soon die away.
- 3 Trust in the Lord and do good;
dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture.
- 4 Take delight in the Lord,
and he will give you the desires of your heart.
- 5 Commit your way to the Lord;
trust in him and he will do this:
- 6 He will make your righteous reward shine like the dawn,
your vindication like the noonday sun.
- 7 Be still before the Lord
and wait patiently for him;
do not fret when people succeed in their ways,
when they carry out their wicked schemes.
- 8 Refrain from anger and turn from wrath;
do not fret—it leads only to evil.
- 9 For those who are evil will be destroyed,
but those who hope in the Lord will inherit the land.
- 10 A little while, and the wicked will be no more;
though you look for them, they will not be found.
- 11 But the meek will inherit the land
and enjoy peace and prosperity.

NIV

This psalm is forty verses long and difficult to cut short without losing its integrity. However, we will look at just a couple of sections, and I would urge you to read it (out loud) in its entirety when you have up to five minutes to spare. Web link:

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm+37&version=NIVUK>

This psalm contains teachings similar to those found in the book of Proverbs, but whereas the teacher in Proverbs pours out little two-line (poetically) individual nuggets of wisdom the psalmist expresses his wisdom in four-line groups that expand upon a theme.

We all may get the feeling in life that it's unfair – why do the baddies always seem to get away with it? Why do they always seem to prosper? What about those corrupt politicians, leaders and despots, the money-grabbing bankers and confidence tricksters who have destroyed the savings of others, the bullies and abusers, and wonder when, or even if, they will get their just rewards. We should be aware that sometimes our sense of unfairness is fuelled by the propaganda of those who are pushing for a particular social/political outcome, and so our outbursts could be unfairly levelled at people who do not deserve them and who may in fact be far worse-off than we are.

We should also watch out that we do not ourselves become like the wicked. When we treat privilege as expectation, when we take perks as a right, when we sneer at the less fortunate, when we assume that we are superior to others, all these are symptoms of the deadly sin of pride. The young have a strong sense of injustice and unfairness, but they may also be prone to taking hasty, ill-advised action. To the powerless and oppressed there is a sense of being pushed down even further.

The writer is old, and has seen it all. He has been through similar experiences, but in the end, perhaps after some time, he can still report that God does uphold the righteous and their children.

The psalm opens with a warning that we should not get worked up over what our eyes see. In the bigger scheme this will be put right. Those who are evil and those who do wrong will not survive long. The verses that follow concentrate on how we should conduct ourselves. The essence is that we should learn to trust God, to be at rest in Him, to expect Him to act and to reward us. Too many people want immediate redress, instant closure, prompt action, but they have forgotten that this will not bring about the right result - the evil people will win every time.

What the writer is telling us is that God will take care of the evil and the wicked, and he will do that in his own way. We have to let go of the human desire for fairness and retribution and allow God to work his justice and righteousness, which go far beyond anything we can wield. Again and again in the Bible we read of the promises of God. They are either true or false. Will you trust your head or what God has said?

So, delight in God, wait patiently, commit to him, fret not, don't get angry, and you will see how He sets things right.

What galls you about the unfairness in our world?

What breaks your heart about the unfairness in our world?

How does God feel?

Father God, I get righteous about things I may not even be right about, or have no right to get righteous about. I get angry and frustrated. Open your heart to me that I may see what causes you sorrow, and teach me to pray for the resolution of that, and that alone. Amen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YbGruMKwi7M> Wait patiently

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rGCZsZMqrXE> Don't worry

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Day 25: Wednesday, 3 April

Psalm 37: 21-31

- 21 The wicked borrow and do not repay,
but the righteous give generously;
22 those the Lord blesses will inherit the land,
but those he curses will be destroyed.
- 23 The Lord makes firm the steps
of the one who delights in him;
24 though he may stumble, he will not fall,
for the Lord upholds him with his hand.
- 25 I was young and now I am old,
yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken
or their children begging bread.
- 26 They are always generous and lend freely;
their children will be a blessing.
- 27 Turn from evil and do good;
then you will dwell in the land forever.
- 28 For the Lord loves the just
and will not forsake his faithful ones.
- Wrongdoers will be completely destroyed;
the offspring of the wicked will perish.
- 29 The righteous will inherit the land
and dwell in it forever.
- 30 The mouths of the righteous utter wisdom,
and their tongues speak what is just.
- 31 The law of their God is in their hearts;
their feet do not slip.

The banking crisis of a few years back, where mortgages considered to be sub-prime, because of the applicants' higher risk of defaulting, were being packaged up and sold around to investors hoping to make a profit. The bubble grew and eventually burst, reducing house prices to a point below that of the mortgage. This could all be seen as what happens in the markets, but many people had no idea of the volatility of what they were signing up to. I leave it to you to decide whether greed was a factor in all this, and where it was to be found.

The wicked may be stealing a march financially over the righteous, who themselves may even be giving their money away. The righteous, however, trust God for his provision and protection, and He will deliver. Is it always this simple? We live in more complex times than those of the writer. People lived largely stable lives based on their land and livestock, and some were poor and others very well-off. There were the bankers and money-traders in the large towns who helped to oil the wheels of commerce, but the law did not allow large profits to be made out of lending. Inflation is non-existent in a world where things do not change.

Jesus condemned the Temple money-changers for their greed and their unholy abuse of the Temple. He did not condemn every tax collector. The widow's penny was praised above the wealthy people's gold.

Once we are able in our time to figure out what is good and right, in God's eyes and not in comparison with the Jones', we should begin to understand the blessings of God's economy much better.

Don't forget to read the whole psalm slowly – five minutes, max:

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm+37&version=NIVUK>

Will God always deliver for someone who invests to his rules?

How does God deliver for someone who invests in the growth of His kingdom?

Is it possible to eradicate poverty?

Father God, you delight in my giving. Everything is yours, anyway, and I cannot be blessed when I give you only what I have spare. Teach me to trust you more. Amen.

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Day 26: Thursday, 4 April

Psalm 119: Aleph

אֲשֶׁרִי תְּמִימֵי־דֶרֶךְ הָהֶלְלִים בְּתוֹרַת יְהוָה

You're blessed when you stay on course,
walking steadily on the road revealed by God.

You're blessed when you follow his directions,
doing your best to find him.

That's right—you don't go off on your own;
you walk straight along the road he set.

You, God, prescribed the right way to live;
now you expect us to live it.

Oh, that my steps might be steady,
keeping to the course you set;

Then I'd never have any regrets
in comparing my life with your counsel.

I thank you for speaking straight from your heart;
I learn the pattern of your righteous ways.

I'm going to do what you tell me to do;
don't ever walk off and leave me.

MSG

Not everyone will read Psalm 119 in its entirety, but they might pick up a lightweight book at the airport or station and read it in a few hours. Yes, I know, there's light reading and there's heavy reading, but Psalm 119 is actually not that heavy, and in the lively translation of recently departed Eugene Peterson it can jump off the page at you.

As to structure, I will only say that there are regular sections taking an acrostic, and it is very clever how it works, even if you don't hear it in translation. The opening line is displayed at the top – don't forget to read it right to left, otherwise you'll miss the acrostic (and it won't make a lot of sense). If you want to learn more, then this may help: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psalm_119

The psalm covers the worries and complaints that a young man brings before God as he tries to follow a pattern of life consistent with the law of Moses. Over 22 ordered eight-line stanzas his unordered, sometimes chaotic life is laid out in its rawness and searing honesty. His complaints are not aimed directly at God – he seeks God's help in understanding and dealing with the difficulties of life.

The psalm starts like a New Year resolution. The writer admits before God that His way is the right way, but he is going to need God to be close at hand if he's going to make it through the difficulties of life.

Do you know the direction in which you're walking?

Are you following the road signs?

Do you know where the road is leading?

How do you recognise distractions?

Father God, I want to walk in step with your Holy Spirit's leading. I will be satisfied with the journey, the pace, the rough terrain and the smooth, for you alone know the way you want me to go. Amen.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vif_Q27nBY metrical version

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Day 27: Friday, 5 April

Psalm 119: Gimel and Daleth

17-24 Be generous with me and I'll live a full life;
not for a minute will I take my eyes off your road.

Open my eyes so I can see
what you show me of your miracle-wonders.

I'm a stranger in these parts;
give me clear directions.

My soul is starved and hungry, ravenous!—
insatiable for your nourishing commands.

And those who think they know so much,
ignoring everything you tell them—let them have it!

Don't let them mock and humiliate me;
I've been careful to do just what you said.

While bad neighbours maliciously gossip about me,
I'm absorbed in pondering your wise counsel.

Yes, your sayings on life are what give me delight;
I listen to them as to good neighbours!

25-32 I'm feeling terrible—I couldn't feel worse!
Get me on my feet again. You promised, remember?

When I told my story, you responded;
train me well in your deep wisdom.

Help me understand these things inside and out
so I can ponder your miracle-wonders.

My sad life's dilapidated, a falling-down barn;
build me up again by your Word.

Barricade the road that goes Nowhere;
grace me with your clear revelation.

I choose the true road to Somewhere,
I post your road signs at every curve and corner.

I grasp and cling to whatever you tell me;
God, don't let me down!

I'll run the course you lay out for me
if you'll just show me how.

With all the excitement and good intentions of youthfulness, the writer expresses his deep desire to follow God closely. Hunger is part of the language of youth, and while the original text is more about desire and longing, the description is good. Again we see the ongoing motif of the proud, wicked, the unrighteous, the enemy.

The writer talks of hungering after God. Our hunger is satisfied with the good food of the Bible and time spent meditating upon it, in prayer time with Father God and by coming into the congregation of the righteous (i.e. turning up to church).

Verses 25 onwards bring in a theme of mortality. The Authorised Version renders verse 25 thus:

my soul cleaveth unto the dust: quicken thou me according to thy word.

The writer recognises the failure of his own power to drag himself up from the floor. Only God can do that – look to his word.

The course of life without God is structureless, and with Him it can be a scary ride in the dark. We are called to hold on, to grasp, to trust in God for everything, relying on nothing of our own strength.

Are dry times to be expected?

Father God, my journey with You can take some turns in direction that may leave me breathless, either through excitement or through exhaustion. In either case You lift me up. Amen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qlUfRqGD7Wg> Simple setting of the words.

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Day 28: Saturday, 6 April

Psalm 119: Pe

129-136

Every word you give me is a miracle word—
how could I help but obey?

Break open your words, let the light shine out,
let ordinary people see the meaning.

Mouth open and panting,
I wanted your commands more than anything.

132 Turn my way, look kindly on me,
as you always do to those who personally love you.

Steady my steps with your Word of promise
so nothing malign gets the better of me.

Rescue me from the grip of bad men and women
so I can live life your way.

Smile on me, your servant;
teach me the right way to live.

I cry rivers of tears
because nobody's living by your book!

MSG

129 Thy testimonies are wonderful: therefore doth my soul keep them.

130 The entrance of thy words giveth light; it giveth understanding unto the simple.

131 I opened my mouth, and panted: for I longed for thy commandments.

132 Look thou upon me, and be merciful unto me, as thou usest to do unto those that love thy name.

133 Order my steps in thy word: and let not any iniquity have dominion over me.

134 Deliver me from the oppression of man: so will I keep thy precepts.

135 Make thy face to shine upon thy servant; and teach me thy statutes.

136 Rivers of waters run down mine eyes, because they keep not thy law.

AV

The young man puts total trust in the word of God. We should not assume that he has a permanent line to God - God's commands and teachings, testimonies, precepts and statutes are all to be found in the Scriptures.

Young men may need answers more quickly than older ones, yet this young man trusts in the scriptures, and also knows that he will need God's help in understanding them. It would be good to learn verses 132 and 133 for times when we get ourselves into a pickle. We may trust in the Lord God, because He will look with mercy on those who love him. Do you love him enough to trust him? His promises are good to settle our fears in any situation and for us to trust.

Do you sense God smiling on you as you read the Scriptures?

What do you do when a passage of Scripture seems hard to understand?

Father God, I want to say alongside this young man that every word you give me is a miracle word! Reveal the truth of your word in the Bible so that as I read it, I become more aware of its deep truth. Amen.

<https://eternalevangelism.com/psalm-119-sung-acapella/> Pick the first section and let it run.

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Day 29: Monday, 8 April

Psalm 27

The Lord Is My Light and My Salvation
Of David.

1 The Lord is my light and my salvation;
whom shall I fear?

The Lord is the stronghold of my life;
of whom shall I be afraid?

2 When evildoers assail me
to eat up my flesh,
my adversaries and foes,
it is they who stumble and fall.

3 Though an army encamp against me,
my heart shall not fear;
though war arise against me,
yet I will be confident.

4 One thing have I asked of the Lord,
that will I seek after:
that I may dwell in the house of the Lord
all the days of my life,
to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord
and to inquire in his temple.

5 For he will hide me in his shelter
in the day of trouble;
he will conceal me under the cover of his tent;
he will lift me high upon a rock.

6 And now my head shall be lifted up
above my enemies all around me,
and I will offer in his tent
sacrifices with shouts of joy;
I will sing and make melody to the Lord.

7 Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud;
be gracious to me and answer me!

8 You have said, "Seek my face."
My heart says to you,

"Your face, Lord, do I seek."

9 Hide not your face from me.
Turn not your servant away in anger,
O you who have been my help.
Cast me not off; forsake me not,
O God of my salvation!

10 For my father and my mother have forsaken me,
but the Lord will take me in.

11 Teach me your way, O Lord,
and lead me on a level path
because of my enemies.

12 Give me not up to the will of my adversaries;
for false witnesses have risen against me,
and they breathe out violence.

13 I believe that I shall look upon the goodness of the Lord
in the land of the living!

14 Wait for the Lord;
be strong, and let your heart take courage;
wait for the Lord!

ESV

I can't place my finger on what it is about this psalm that I love so much. It may be a mixture of the way the psalmist describes God's protection over him (and therefore, me) and his (my) desire to remain, to rest, to stay in God's presence.

David was not a priest (his sons are oddly listed as priests) and it was his son Solomon who built the Temple, but David still knew about the close presence of God. He had the Ark of the Covenant, one of the most holy objects from the Tent of Meeting, moved to Jerusalem. The Ark was a central artefact as it contained objects significant to the Jewish faith and it was over the Ark that the presence of God had been revealed to the High Priests of old in the Tent of Meeting. God did not always speak directly with David – God's plans were more often revealed to prophets who then had the task of relaying the good or bad news to the king.

All the same, David could draw on his experience of God's present protection from foes without and within and his past support for David in battle. This was enough to bring David before God in worship. It is a gift of God in Christ that I, and you, may dwell in God's presence. No condemnation now I dread, so Bold I approach th'eternal throne. God calls us to rest in his presence. This must be the desire of our hearts. It is easy to fall into the trap of busy-ness - we so much want to be seen to be busy for God that we take no time to rest in him, and we run on empty. Time for God can quickly become Whatever Time's left, if any, for God.

It's not easy to stop and rest. What will I say? What should I do? What words should I use? How do I hear what God's saying? Am I listening correctly? The simple answer is that if you spend time, the rest will follow on naturally. Holy pauses in your day, grace over a meal, turning the telly off, Face-time with God, all of these help build the relationship.

Pauses for God are not freestanding, separate activities that have no bearing on the rest of your life. They are actually necessary parts of your life that will enhance it. David acknowledges that because he spends time in God's presence he is shielded and protected against his enemies. There is positive outcome from spending time with God. Take note of, and learn verse 14

How do I seek the Lord's face? Perhaps by sensing his smile:

The Priestly Blessing

Numbers 6:22-27

Then the Lord said to Moses, "Tell Aaron and his sons to bless the people of Israel with this special blessing:

'May the Lord bless you
and protect you.

May the Lord smile on you
and be gracious to you.

May the Lord show you his favour
and give you his peace.'

Whenever Aaron and his sons bless the people of Israel in my name, I myself will bless them."

NLT

If you have not regularly spent time in God's presence where might you go to do that? What might you need to take with you?

Father God, simply resting in your presence is better than reeling off prayers to you. Bring me home to you as I make the first steps. Amen.

Psalm 27 sung in Hebrew (with subtitles): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wMZkqhZfVqc>

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Day 30: Tuesday, 9 April

Psalm 51

For the director of music. A psalm of David. When the prophet Nathan came to him after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba.

- 1 Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your unfailing love;
according to your great compassion
blot out my transgressions.
- 2 Wash away all my iniquity
and cleanse me from my sin.
- 3 For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is always before me.
- 4 Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight;
so you are right in your verdict
and justified when you judge.
- 5 Surely I was sinful at birth,
sinful from the time my mother conceived me.
- 6 Yet you desired faithfulness even in the womb;
you taught me wisdom in that secret place.
- 7 Cleanse me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
- 8 Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones you have crushed rejoice.
- 9 Hide your face from my sins
and blot out all my iniquity.
- 10 Create in me a pure heart, O God,
and renew a steadfast spirit within me.
- 11 Do not cast me from your presence
or take your Holy Spirit from me.
- 12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation
and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.
- 13 Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
so that sinners will turn back to you.
- 14 Deliver me from the guilt of bloodshed, O God,
you who are God my Saviour,
and my tongue will sing of your righteousness.
- 15 Open my lips, Lord,
and my mouth will declare your praise.
- 16 You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it;
you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.
- 17 My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart
you, God, will not despise.

18 May it please you to prosper Zion,
to build up the walls of Jerusalem.
19 Then you will delight in the sacrifices of the righteous,
in burnt offerings offered whole;
then bulls will be offered on your altar.

NIV

David is in deep, deep trouble with God. The introduction tells it as it is. David knows better than to deny the truth like some local and transatlantic leaders may have done, and the shame of what he did has the rare honour of being repeated once every seven weeks until Kingdom Come in the Anglican Daily Prayer cycle.

David was a murderer. No two ways about it. Nathan had the task of telling him so. As I frequently say, 'Who'd be a prophet?!'

Verses 1 to 4 cover the span of the wretchedness of humankind to the infinite compassion, love and mercy of God. David is crushed, and he knows he deserves to be punished severely. He falls upon God's mercy. He also admits to having been in a state of sinfulness from his mother's womb, from the moment of his conception. This is consistent with the Church's teaching on original sin. We could talk much about this, but another time. If only the mighty and powerful in our world could but utter these words.

Hyssop is a purgative. David was probably talking figuratively here, but he knew that he desired from God a deep cleansing through his whole being so that he was clean inside, and outside through cleansing to snow-whiteness.

Read this psalm again, and again, today. Read it loud, read it soft.

Was David right in saying that he had sinned against God only?

How would you describe sin to someone who asks?

Are children, being born into sin, sinful people?

How would you respond if someone were to ask you if he or she is a sinner?

Father God, there is no getting away with anything before You. You see it all, you hear it all. You see what I try to hide from You, and you turn your nose up at my excuses. Until I admit my sin You cannot forgive me. I stand open before you. Amen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=px-eU1QjQiU> – Create in me a clean heart, O God.

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Day 31: Wednesday, 10 April

Psalm 22:1-21

A David Psalm

22 1-2 God, God . . . my God!

Why did you dump me
miles from nowhere?

Doubled up with pain, I call to God
all the day long. No answer. Nothing.

I keep at it all night, tossing and turning.

3-5 And you! Are you indifferent, above it all,
leaning back on the cushions of Israel's praise?

We know you were there for our parents:
they cried for your help and you gave it;
they trusted and lived a good life.

6-8 And here I am, a nothing—an earthworm,
something to step on, to squash.

Everyone pokes fun at me;
they make faces at me, they shake their heads:
"Let's see how God handles this one;
since God likes him so much, let him help him!"

9-11 And to think you were midwife at my birth,
setting me at my mother's breasts!
When I left the womb you cradled me;
since the moment of birth you've been my God.

Then you moved far away
and trouble moved in next door.

I need a neighbour.

12-13 Herds of bulls come at me,
the raging bulls stampede,
Horns lowered, nostrils flaring,
like a herd of buffalo on the move.

14-15 I'm a bucket kicked over and spilled,
every joint in my body has been pulled apart.

My heart is a blob
of melted wax in my gut.

I'm dry as a bone,
my tongue black and swollen.

They have laid me out for burial
in the dirt.

16-18 Now packs of wild dogs come at me;
thugs gang up on me.

They pin me down hand and foot,
and lock me in a cage—a bag

Of bones in a cage, stared at

by every passer-by.
They take my wallet and the shirt off my back,
and then throw dice for my clothes.

19-21 You, God—don't put off my rescue!
Hurry and help me!
Don't let them cut my throat;
don't let those mongrels devour me.
If you don't show up soon,
I'm done for—gored by the bulls,
meat for the lions.

MSG

David is in the throes of a failing relationship with God. Wherever he looks, he cannot seem to find God. While some people may not think of God from one day to the next, David is acutely aware of both God's presence in his life and his absence from it. David's mood, his outlook, his whole being reflects whether God is present with him or not.

In this Psalm David expresses that he is sensing God's absence from his life. Because he is aware that he can do nothing without God's help, he is helpless. Lost and helpless without God. God is the source of David's strength, his status, his power to reign and to succeed in battle. He might as well be a worm.

He describes his loss in terms of real pain, wasted waking time and sleeplessness. It's as if his batteries have been pulled out and his failing power is causing his system to shut down.

So, God, where are you? Are you content to sit back and enjoy the praises of the rest of them, and not care about me? David's words in verse 8 sound very similar to those who mocked Jesus: Let God deliver him, if he (God) is pleased with him. This psalm does not contain, as many do, a twist at the end calling for the destruction of enemies; this one will end on a higher note. It contains overtones that are a hint to Jesus' suffering and death. Read it through a few times so that you might partner with that to some degree.

Then you moved away – how do we cope with times when God is not around?

I hinted above at the indifferent, those who have no desire to grow in God's presence (or suffer from His absence). Some may choose to keep God at a distance because having God close disrupts things, challenges our thoughts and actions, makes demands on our lives. A quiet life outside in a sandbox may seem preferable, but the blessings God gives far, far outweigh the trouble He allows. Just one day in the presence of God is better than a thousand spent anywhere else (Psalm 84), Disney World, the QE2, Portman Road (a refuge for failed hopes), whatever. A thousand days might be paraphrased as 'my life'.

In Psalm 51, David pleads with God not to hide his face from him. In Psalm 27 David responds to his heart's call to seek God's face. To take this literally might cause problems, as God himself said, "no-one may see me, and live!" In Christ we have access to Father God, and if we are living in Christ, we are bold to approach Father God. If God seems distant, start with Jesus.

Have there been times when God has seemed far away? If you look back and reflect on them, does God reveal why this might have been? Do you see those times as a loss, or an opportunity to grow? (I am not telling you what you should think.)

Father God, you are ever more ready to listen than I am to pray, and in the darkest parts of my life you are there. I claim access to your throne room through Jesus, who opened the way for me. Amen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UaJ-moIjATU> My God, my God, ...

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Day 32: Thursday, 11 April

Psalm 22:22-end

22-24 Here's the story I'll tell my friends when they come to worship,
and punctuate it with Hallelujahs:

Shout Hallelujah, you God-worshippers;
give glory, you sons of Jacob;
adore him, you daughters of Israel.

He has never let you down,
never looked the other way
when you were being kicked around.

He has never wandered off to do his own thing;
he has been right there, listening.

25-26 Here in this great gathering for worship

I have discovered this praise-life.

And I'll do what I promised right here
in front of the God-worshippers.

Down-and-outers sit at God's table
and eat their fill.

Everyone on the hunt for God
is here, praising him.

"Live it up, from head to toe.
Don't ever quit!"

27-28 From the four corners of the earth
people are coming to their senses,
are running back to God.

Long-lost families
are falling on their faces before him.

God has taken charge;
from now on he has the last word.

29 All the power-mongers are before him
—worshiping!

All the poor and powerless, too
—worshiping!

Along with those who never got it together
—worshiping!

30-31 Our children and their children
will get in on this

As the word is passed along
from parent to child.

Babies not yet conceived
will hear the good news—
that God does what he says.

MSG

What has happened to David?! From worm and no man to one who is re-energised in the company of worshippers! What do you say to friends when you come to worship? It always

fascinates me that the space before the 'official' worship starts can be a hubbub of conversation, which invariably cuts itself short when a minister or the choir turn up. We come in to worship with an ounce or two of joy, and then we go solemn, work through a liturgy that allots time to be joyful, penitent, forgiven, peace-sharing and so on, until we get to the end of the service, and we start doing what we did before it started.

It may be that a worship band is playing away before the service and there's perhaps a bit of worship and a bit of noise going on.

I'm not criticising worship services or liturgies, as long as they allow us both to cover what God desires of us at the particular point we stand in our corporate journey as Church and allow us to meet with Him. I do wonder, however, whether we can fall into the trap of letting the service carry us through on its own wave, and that we avoid the difficulties (personal relationships that need sorting, arguments that need settling, encouragement that a faint-of-heart is desperate to receive, support for the weak, correction, and the direction that God is taking us all) implied in the call on us not to give up meeting together. Can an organised form of worship cover all that?

Perhaps we need more than just one hour on a Sunday.

How can my church/fellowship be a place where verse 29 is evident in its fullness?

How will babies not yet even conceived get to hear the Good News?

Father God, I want to enter my place of worship with both joy and a longing to share something of your goodness in my life. I might not always feel like it; I might prefer to chatter and gossip; I might not have left stuff at the door. Revive me, Father, and make the leaving of my house the start of the procession. Amen.

Psalm 22 set to Anglican Chant (7 mins): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Whj3peHkYGY>

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Day 33: Friday, 12 April

Psalm 139:1-18

For the choir director: A psalm of David.

13 You made all the delicate, inner parts of my body
and knit me together in my mother's womb.

14 Thank you for making me so wonderfully complex!
Your workmanship is marvellous—how well I know it.

15 You watched me as I was being formed in utter seclusion,
as I was woven together in the dark of the womb.

16 You saw me before I was born.
Every day of my life was recorded in your book.

Every moment was laid out
before a single day had passed.

1 O Lord, you have examined my heart
and know everything about me.

2 You know when I sit down or stand up.
You know my thoughts even when I'm far away.

3 You see me when I travel
and when I rest at home.
You know everything I do.

4 You know what I am going to say
even before I say it, Lord.

5 You go before me and follow me.
You place your hand of blessing on my head.

6 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,
too great for me to understand!

7 I can never escape from your Spirit!
I can never get away from your presence!

8 If I go up to heaven, you are there;
if I go down to the grave, you are there.

9 If I ride the wings of the morning,
if I dwell by the farthest oceans,

10 even there your hand will guide me,
and your strength will support me.

11 I could ask the darkness to hide me
and the light around me to become night—

12 but even in darkness I cannot hide from you.
To you the night shines as bright as day.

Darkness and light are the same to you.

And when I wake up,
you are still with me!

17 How precious are your thoughts about me, O God.

They cannot be numbered!

18 I can't even count them;

they outnumber the grains of sand!

NLT

Who am I? Where do I come from? This psalm supplies answers, and I've re-arranged the verses accordingly.

God knows me. He knows me in a way I cannot fathom – my beginning to my end. The psalmist restricts his meditations to the span of his life, but God planned us from the very beginning, before time, before Creation. I was there at the beginning, though I did not know it. Nor did I know about the time I was conceived, growing secretly, coming into the light at my birth, or my very early days. My first memories were not of the God who created me. And yet his hand was upon me.

The opening verses tell of a God who knows us intimately. He knows more about me than I know myself. As David says, such knowledge is too much for me to handle! As God inhabits all that He has made, it is impossible for me to find a place in the cosmos where He cannot see me. I cannot hide. When God said, 'Where are you?' to Adam and Eve, he already knew. There has been only one moment on earth where God in heaven was not to be found, and that was when Jesus was on the cross, for Father God was not able to look upon the sin that Jesus became for us.

Where am I going?

Is a child that does not make it to birth a separate case?

How far ahead does God know what I will be saying? Is there a script of my words?

Father God, I can only repeat the words above. You have examined my heart, and You know me. Show me how I can know You more. Amen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dIWMXiT8yrs> Far too wonderful.

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Day 34: Saturday, 13 April

Psalm 139:19-end

- 19 O God, if only you would destroy the wicked!
Get out of my life, you murderers!
- 20 They blaspheme you;
your enemies misuse your name.
- 21 O Lord, shouldn't I hate those who hate you?
Shouldn't I despise those who oppose you?
- 22 Yes, I hate them with total hatred,
for your enemies are my enemies.
- 23 Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my anxious thoughts.
- 24 Point out anything in me that offends you,
and lead me along the path of everlasting life.

NLT

It's not surprising that this some may consider this psalm better if this section were not included. We are jolted from the reverie of a warm embrace in the arms of Father God by this trumpet-blast call for vengeance.

For us who purport to follow and share a message of God's love with the world the thought of hating seems rather barbaric. We should be careful, however, that while we are called to spread the Good News of a God who loves the world so much, we are not called to be nice to those who stand in opposition to God. Those who oppose God oppose his work and therefore oppose His Church. They are in conflict, and whether it's by ideology or activity there is no difference. The Church brings to the world the Son who called light into being, who fought and defeated Satan, who acted in anger at those who distorted the truth of the Kingdom. We, too, must be ready to react strongly not only to injustice and unrighteousness in our world, but also to powers, authorities, forces of evil in heavenly realms that surface in our world.

We may act with meekness, but when the Kingdom is being attacked, we have to take a stand. It is not wrong to hate the evil in this world.

The Psalm concludes with a prayer for personal purity. You may find it rewarding to learn and store them for current or future use.

Should we also hate the perpetrators of evil in this world?

Search my heart, Father God, and surface anything that is not of you. Take my fears, my anxieties and replace them with perfect love. Amen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tM00khmydCY> – not quite sure about the dancing, but a lovely song.

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Day 35: Monday, 15 April

Psalm 42

For the director of music. A maskil of the Sons of Korah.

- 1 As the deer pants for streams of water,
so my soul pants for you, my God.
- 2 My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When can I go and meet with God?
- 3 My tears have been my food
day and night,
while people say to me all day long,
“Where is your God?”
- 4 These things I remember
as I pour out my soul:
how I used to go to the house of God
under the protection of the Mighty One
with shouts of joy and praise
among the festive throng.
- 5 Why, my soul, are you downcast?
Why so disturbed within me?
Put your hope in God,
for I will yet praise him,
my Saviour and my God.
- 6 My soul is downcast within me;
therefore I will remember you
from the land of the Jordan,
the heights of Hermon—from Mount Mizar.
- 7 Deep calls to deep
in the roar of your waterfalls;
all your waves and breakers
have swept over me.
- 8 By day the Lord directs his love,
at night his song is with me—
a prayer to the God of my life.
- 9 I say to God my Rock,
“Why have you forgotten me?
Why must I go about mourning,
oppressed by the enemy?”
- 10 My bones suffer mortal agony
as my foes taunt me,
saying to me all day long,
“Where is your God?”
- 11 Why, my soul, are you downcast?
Why so disturbed within me?
Put your hope in God,

for I will yet praise him,
my Saviour and my God.

NIV

We enter Holy week. Intense activity in a short space of time. Over the next seven days we see the expectation of triumph turn to abject defeat, but with a glorious and unexpected twist a short time after. I think we can get quite maudlin over Holy Week, as commemoration can turn so easily into rather solemn ritual. The psalms over the following days are psalms of ascent – more about that tomorrow.

Today's psalm speaks of the desire and longing of the worshipper to be where God is. Hymns like 'As the deer longs for the water, so my soul longs after you' can possibly hit a positive note of desire and confirmation, but the psalm itself is a little darker than that.

The writer laments for the presence of God. There are times when God seems far away. I've not suffered with depression, but I wonder if the sentiments being expressed here have any resonance with that condition. The writer is lamenting the loss of the good times when he would joyfully go to God's house, but now it seems as if he can't bring himself out of his own house. Verse 3 suggests that the writer is fasting as a penitential response.

Verses 5 and 11 are like a refrain of hope to the verses of despair. Why are you upset, my soul? Put your hope in God! For many people in the dumps, a cheer up call might not be what they want to hear. The writer does not switch from lament to rejoicing just like that, but God calls his people to rejoice. A second reminder is needed at the end. Perhaps rejoicing even when you do not feel like it can still make a difference to your state. If God hears your rejoicing might he not want to come closer to hear some more?

How would you describe your spiritual walk with God? Is it a walk in the park, a roller-coaster ride, submerging and surfacing, or something else?

How close is your walk with God?

Father God, despite my condition, You are constant, ever ready to listen, to guide, to admonish and ever-present through your Holy Spirit within me. It's probably in my dark times that I see You least, but You are closer than ever. Amen.

Two contemplative takes on Psalm 42:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wGgsmCEgf4w>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cG-fHEjygU>

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Day 36: Tuesday, 16 April

Psalm 121

A song for pilgrims ascending to Jerusalem.

- 1 I look up to the mountains—
does my help come from there?
- 2 My help comes from the Lord,
who made heaven and earth!
- 3 He will not let you stumble;
the one who watches over you will not slumber.
- 4 Indeed, he who watches over Israel
never slumbers or sleeps.
- 5 The Lord himself watches over you!
The Lord stands beside you as your protective shade.
- 6 The sun will not harm you by day,
nor the moon at night.
- 7 The Lord keeps you from all harm
and watches over your life.
- 8 The Lord keeps watch over you as you come and go,
both now and forever.

NLT

As a counter to yesterday's psalm. We're going up to the Holy City, to Mount Zion. The writer pours out his confidence in the Lord God's ability and readiness to help, protect and watch over him in all conditions of life. Where does my help come from? The Lord, of course!

God is able and ready to watch over each one of us day and night. He watches in the mundane things, our going out, our coming in, our visit to the supermarket, at the hairdresser's, walking in town, driving to work, on the bus. Every common task of our daily lives is covered.

There is a caveat. In order for God to take care of us in the commonplace, we need to commit ourselves to Him in the commonplace. I'm not saying that God will only respond to those who ask, but if we are to see the truth of this psalm evident in our lives we need to consider and rejoice in God's goodness to us in the commonplace as well as in the spectacular. God's watching over us in the small events of life are no less important to him than watching in the big events. We may easily forget that, and can easily fail to give God the honour for the way he preserves us from all harm, and checks our movements day in, day out.

Do you commit your car journeys to God before you turn the ignition key or press the start button?

Do you pray on the bus for a safe journey for everyone?

Do you uphold the supermarket cashier in prayer as you queue up with your trolley?

Father God, you care for me in a way that goes beyond my understanding. What am I, that you should care for me! I commit to you my goings out and my returns from this day forward. Amen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mzmYuOFsYtU> - a positive, confirming confessional acknowledgement of God's providence.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jBJsK-RRt8> – Hebrew with subtitles

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Day 37: Wednesday, 17 April

Tehillim 122

122 (Shir HaMa'alot, [Song of Ascents] of Dovid). I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go into the Bais Hashem.

2 Our feet shall stand within thy she'arim, O Yerushalayim.

3 Yerushalayim is built as an Ir bound firmly together;

4 That is where the Shevatim (tribes) go up, the Shivtei Hashem, according to the edut l'Yisroel (the statute to Yisroel), to give thanks unto the Shem of Hashem.

5 For there are set kise'ot l'mishpat (thrones of judgment), the kise'ot of the Bais Dovid.

6 Sha'alu shalom Yerushalayim (pray for the peace of Jerusalem); they shall prosper that love thee.

7 Shalom be within thy wall, and security within thy citadels.

8 L'ma'an (for the sake of) my achim and companions, I will now say, Shalom be within thee.

9 L'ma'an the Bais Hashem Eloheinu I will seek thy tov.

Orthodox Jewish Bible

This is an English language version that employs Yiddish and Hasidic cultural expressions. Most of the words I suspect you can figure out. If not, open up your Bible to Psalm 122 and compare.

Come, on, let's go up to Jerusalem! One translation I have loved for many years doesn't quite hit the mark on this psalm: *I was glad for the suggestion of going to Jerusalem*. Whether you go down to London, or up to it, it's always up to Jerusalem.

This is more than a daytrip to Freeport, or a day out in London with a show thrown in. This is a pilgrimage to a festival. People coming to Jerusalem for its various festivals could be taking a week or two out of their lives to travel there, to stay for the festival, and to travel back home. Remember that it took a few days before Mary and Joseph actually missed young Jesus as they journeyed home after a festival.

This journey will end in Jerusalem, within the gates, upon the hill of Zion, in the Temple. Jerusalem is a city at unity in itself – if only that were true today. When we pray for the peace of Jerusalem, we may be praying more for peace between the different religious groups that inhabit the city, rather than peace for Jerusalem and Israel in the wider world setting. However, we can still love the city, and I suggest we do, for they shall prosper that love Jerusalem. Pray for peace for all those who live there, and, by extension of the microcosm, who share lives and space in Israel/Palestine.

Peace, Jerusalem, be within your walls.

What is the nearest we do to a pilgrim journey?

Father God, I pray for Jerusalem, shalom Yerushalayim. I pray for peace among people of differing faiths, and that those who carry the name of Jesus may stand for his light and truth in this dark world. Amen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iDcfe2s--I8> pray for the peace of Jerusalem.

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Day 38: Thursday, 18 April

Psalm 128

A Song of degrees.

1 Blessed is every one that feareth the Lord;
that walketh in his ways.

2 For thou shalt eat the labour of thine hands:
happy shalt thou be, and it shall be well with thee.

3 Thy wife shall be as a fruitful vine by the sides of thine house:
thy children like olive plants round about thy table.

4 Behold, that thus shall the man be blessed
that feareth the Lord.

5 The Lord shall bless thee out of Zion:
and thou shalt see the good of Jerusalem all the days of thy life.

6 Yea, thou shalt see thy children's children,
and peace upon Israel.

AV

A short psalm that is packed with content. Fear means respect, honour and reverence, knowing your place. God is an awesome god. He is the only God. He demands the bowing of our knees before him. Stay in his shadow, learn his ways, get close, and you will understand them better. Your life and labour will be blessed, as will your home and family.

The journey to Jerusalem is important to the great number of pilgrims who make their way there from all across the world (see the list of countries mentioned in Acts 2:7-11). Blessing from God could only come through the priests who worked in the Temple. This could not be obtained in the local synagogue.

Pilgrimage was a central part of life. We may wonder at pilgrimage today, as the veil of the Temple was split at Jesus' death, and blessing comes directly from God in Jesus, who lives in us where we are by his Holy Spirit. Certainly, the appropriation of pilgrimage as a money tool to hit people with was evident in Jesus' day (the Temple money-changers), common in medieval times, and still continues in largely Catholic countries.

There is still something to be said for committing to making a journey to a special place of significance as an outward act of seeking renewal (I avoid including penitence, as repentance trumps penitence). Though not particularly to my taste, there are sites that commemorate an event or hold some mortal remains of past brothers and sisters in faith, and the connection they offer may help strengthen faith.

Our nearest place of pilgrimage is Walsingham, which has both a Catholic and an Anglican shrine. It's an interesting place. That the Lord does and shall bless us in Christ through his Holy Spirit reminds me that I do not need to go on pilgrimages to find God. I may, however, wish along with others to make a public pronouncement of my faith in, say, walking around the area the church is situated.

How ready is your church to do a walk of witness in its neighbourhood?

How would you prepare the ground?

Father God, I know that I am called to share my faith. It would be easier if it already overflowed from me. Join my spirit with your Holy Spirit that I may cry out, 'Abba, Father' in response to knowing your love, your grace, your mercy, your fatherhood. Amen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0A8bbXdxTac> Sons of Korah

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Day 39: Friday, 19 April

Psalm 134

Praise in the Night

A Song of Ascents.

1 Come, bless the Lord, all you servants of the Lord,
who stand by night in the house of the Lord!

2 Lift up your hands to the holy place,
and bless the Lord.

3 May the Lord, maker of heaven and earth,
bless you from Zion.

NRSVA

This is not the shortest psalm, though as a psalm of ascents I'd imagine you wouldn't get far up the hill on one iteration on these words. The psalm is initially addressed to the Levites, the ones

Our corporate praise is predominantly morning praise. Wake up and praise the Lord!

When morning gilds the sky,
my heart, awakening, cries:
May Jesus Christ be praised!

Our night time hymns can be a little less exciting

The day thou gavest, Lord, is ended,
The darkness falls at thy behest,
To thee our morning hymns ascended,
Thy praise shall sanctify our rest.

This hymn is actually quite popular at funerals. I think it has been misunderstood a little, as it does hint at constant praise of God, though by others across the world in their various daylight hours. Of course, there is 'Come bless the Lord', which is based on these words, but evening worship has become an opt-out in most churches. We might want to settle down at home, to batten up the hatches as Sunday evening approaches, but God is to be worshiped at any time.

Our morning worship is probably more seat-based than upstanding. We'll stand to sing, possibly for a Gospel reading in a communion service and that ninth lesson in the carol service, but not for many other readings. Prayers are not often recited in a standing position, and so this psalm's call to bless God as we stand before him and raise our hands up towards his presence is not universally taken up.

Are we slipping away from 'physical' worship as expressed in the psalms?

Father God, set my hands to move at the impulse of Your love. Take myself, and I will be ever, only, all for Thee. Amen.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X_O4uYFbVKo – a gentle evening song.

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Day 40: Saturday, 20 April

Psalm 119: Lamedh

- 89 Your word, Lord, is eternal;
it stands firm in the heavens.
- 90 Your faithfulness continues through all generations;
you established the earth, and it endures.
- 91 Your laws endure to this day,
for all things serve you.
- 92 If your law had not been my delight,
I would have perished in my affliction.
- 93 I will never forget your precepts,
for by them you have preserved my life.
- 94 Save me, for I am yours;
I have sought out your precepts.
- 95 The wicked are waiting to destroy me,
but I will ponder your statutes.
- 96 To all perfection I see a limit,
but your commands are boundless.

NIV

We return to Psalm 119. The section where each line in the Hebrew starts with the letter lamedh is found above. I have mentioned that learning words is a good thing, and it is not so difficult if you take the time. What would be better: to look it up in a web browser on your mobile or to recite it instantly?

These are words of encouragement. Repeat to yourself the opening verse until something of its truth touches your heart. The three verses are powerful statements about God. It might seem a little odd to delight in God's law, for to me the Ten Commandments carry a lot of "thou shalt not" in them, and the 'thou shalt's' might not seem that exciting, either. But I'd be missing much if I did not peer more closely into the text and ask myself why God gave these words to Moses. They speak of long life, of blessings passing directly and free of charge through generations of families, and you *will* take a day off each week. Jesus added a layer of truth to the words of the law and summed it up in a few words, and he himself paid in his blood the price of our sin. As the Temple veil was torn, so the tablets of stone became redundant to those who follow Jesus.

The Law exists today, and everyone who is not in Christ remains under it, whether they believe that or not. Anyone who loves the law and follows it will be like the young psalmist above, who follows God with excitement, fervour and outright commitment. Even better for those who follow Christ.

What has a Christian got that surpasses the joy of the psalmist?

If you have found these reflections useful, how might you develop your understanding of them or respond artistically to their content? How about keeping favourite verses in a journal, drawing designs or pictures to colour in, learning a psalm or two?

Father God, I commit myself to you. Commit me to meditating upon your word that it may enlighten my thoughts and actions and set my spirit to rise in worship. Amen.

For the pure joy of it: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zOo2HbNESNo>

If you like that, then <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=--UABwqW9Sg>

Journaling and colouring in Bible: <https://www.google.com/search?q=ISBN+9781473640160>

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