

May–August 2018

Day by Day with God

Rooting women's lives in the Bible

FEATURING CHINE MCDONALD, JENNIFER REES LARCOMBE AND DIANA ARCHER

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Day by Day with God

Edited by **Ali Herbert and Jill Rattle**

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Michele D. Morrison loves to write, and is working on a fourth book. She has been a regular contributor to *Woman Alive*. Michele edits her church magazine, runs a small B&B and blogs at tearsamidthealiencorn.blogspot.com.

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Diana Archer is an educator, writer and speaker with a theological background. Family experience of eating disorders led to the charity *tastelifeuk*, which trains people to run a university accredited community course offering both those with eating disorders, and their supporters, hope and tools for recovery (www.tastelifeuk.org). She also works for the CPAS leadership team.

Sheila Jacobs is a writer, editor and award-winning author of eleven novels, including *Watchers*. She has also written non-fiction (*Insight into Forgiveness* with Ron Kallmier). Single, she lives in rural north Essex, and attends an Elim church where she is involved in evangelism and leads a house group.

Ali Herbert writes...

Recently, I went with my husband to see a film based on the book *The Shack* by W. Paul Young. The novel is based around a man's suffering after his child is abducted and killed. The story, however, does not dwell on the painful details of the tragedy, but explores what happens when 'Mack' has a letter from God inviting him to come and spend a weekend away with him. Mack, a white American man, reluctantly agrees and is shocked to find God represented by a motherly black woman ('Papa' – Father God), a shimmering, Asian woman ('Sarayu' – the Holy Spirit) and a smiling man of Middle Eastern appearance (Jesus). The majority of the story is based around the Trinity's joyful relationship and the emotional healing Mack is given through their understanding and love.

Theologically, the book raises plenty of questions, as must any story that attempts to look into the character of our mysterious God. However, it offers an intriguing, fresh perspective. It draws us into the idea of the love relationship between the persons of our Trinitarian God – and the relationship we might have too.

I enjoyed watching the film but found that for the last half hour, while I sat enjoying the ideas and images in front of me, next to me my husband Nick was sobbing quietly. The suffering of the child's father and the healing, kind, gentle presence of the heavenly 'Father' had moved him beyond words. It reminded me that we all have different responses at different times to our God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Sometimes our relationship feels easy and joyful, and sometimes it feels distant and merely dutiful. At other times, we can be moved to tears, overwhelmed by the constant love of our Father the comforter and counsellor, the one who knows us better than anyone else in the whole world and who promises to be with us always and calls us to come home to him.

This season of notes looks at the work of the Trinity, through history and in our lives, particularly as we explore *Father* in Abraham's 'school of faith' with Jennifer Rees Larcombe, keep step with the *Spirit* with Fiona Barnard and reflect on *Jesus'* parables with Lyndall Bywater. As you spend time each day, think about your own response to God, and allow yourself to become more aware of his constant, loving presence with you.

The work of the Holy Spirit

Fiona Barnard writes:

I was walking the labyrinth in the grounds of the local hospital. I have grown to love this way of prayer: coming to approach God as I meander around the cobbled route, and then stopping at the centre: ‘Lord, I have been asked to write about the work of the Holy Spirit for *Day by Day with God*. How can I begin to do justice to this massive, mysterious, wonderful, awe-inspiring subject? How can I describe your Spirit and what you do? I don’t want to grab the most exquisite butterfly and pin it down with words and statements.’

I waited. And then the verse came: ‘Keep in step with the Spirit’ (Galatians 5:25). Keep in step. As I walked out from the centre, I repeated those words, my legs miming the idea of God’s Spirit always on the move. He will never be trapped on a page, held down by an idea. So often when we think of the Spirit, we use ‘doing’ words – walking, creating, loving, empowering – or as I tell my students who are learning English: present continuous for NOW!

In the next two weeks, I hope we can not only walk with the Spirit, but skip and twirl with him, frolic in his goodness, move to his rhythm, throw ourselves into the musical extravaganza which is the Trinity’s eternal dance we are invited to join.

There is a great deal that we do not understand about the Trinity. We would be hard-pressed to find a neatly laid-out theology in the Bible of how Father, Son and Holy Spirit are one God in three persons. That was systematised a few centuries later. What we find in scripture is a vibrant dynamic account of Father, Son and Spirit loving each other and being at work in the world, with a charming disregard for job description. ‘I will ask the Father to send you the Holy Spirit who will help you and always be with you... You know the Spirit, who is with you and will keep on living in you... the Father will send the Spirit to take my place’ (John 14:16–17, 26, CEV).

Praise God for the Spirit: and keep in step with him!

Creating Spirit

At the time God made Earth and Heaven, before any grasses or shrubs had sprouted from the ground... God formed man out of dirt from the ground and blew into his nostrils the breath of life. The man came alive – a living soul! (MSG)

One Christmas, along with the shepherds and angels at the church nativity scene, we discovered some figures that bore an uncanny resemblance to individuals in the congregation. The young people had been tutored by a potter and created some hilarious results. As we stood around the crib, trying to guess who was who, worship of God made flesh assumed a new immediacy. Yet even the best statue was only dust and water. It did not have the spark in the eyes, the cheeky dimples, the vitality of the living models admiring them. They were like, and not like: what was missing was breath and life.

‘I was the master worker at his side,’ sings Wisdom in Proverbs 8, commonly understood to be the Holy Spirit. ‘I was filled with delight day after day, rejoicing always in his presence, rejoicing in his whole world and delighting in the human race’ (Proverbs 8:30–31, NIV). How beautiful to think that when God the Holy Spirit breathed life into clay, he did it with laughter and joy! He was so excited at his handiwork, so exhilarated at how the sculpture was breaking out into a living human being.

This master creator not only shapes and forms you with great care and intimacy, he also gives you mouth to mouth (or nostril!) to fill your lungs with air. He sets your heart pumping, awakens your senses, makes your stomach gurgle and your hair sprout. And he keeps on doing it: with every breath, you take in his life and goodness and return it to him in utter dependence. Until your final breath, when you give back to your doting maker what was never yours in the first place, gratitude and wonder are inescapably awe-filled responses.

As you come to God in prayer, pay attention to your breath. Breathe in his generous kindness, and breathe out all that would choke thanksgiving and worship in you.

FIONA BARNARD

Loving Spirit

God spoke: ‘Let us make human beings in our image, make them reflecting our nature...’ God created human beings; he created them godlike, reflecting God’s nature. He created them male and female. God blessed them: ‘Prosper! Reproduce! Fill Earth! Take charge!’ (MSG)

You notice more when you are visiting a church. We chose the English-speaking service that holiday because we could not understand German. We saw cheery teenagers in frayed denims, resplendent ladies in brightly coloured dresses, serious couples in expensive-looking suits, older folk in coats. News of a successful asylum application was met with cheers and praise. An intern returning to the States was showered with songs and affection by a beaming African choir. The pot-luck lunch was an international feast and all were welcome. ‘We visit the jails,’ explained a school teacher, ‘so when prisoners are released, they come to find us because they have no one else.’ Such a congregation must be a pastoral challenge, but where else could you find such close relationships across diverse age groups and life experiences, with top diplomats and disparaged migrants from across the globe celebrating their oneness in Christ?

When I recall that fellowship, I glimpse a reflection of the dynamic, passionate, colourful relationship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. I witness something of that divine image which is most visible when unity embraces diversity in holy love. I marvel that men and women in a Spirit-filled community can display God whose image we bear.

And so I hear again God’s kingdom-blessing for fruitfulness: ‘Prosper! Reproduce! Fill Earth! Take charge!’ The ‘let us make’ resolve, which put the Trinity trademark on our nature, echoes every time we create and care in his name. Together. This is the Spirit in his element.

Are there ways today in which you can model this unity in diversity in your community or church?

Ponder further the loving Trinity evident at Jesus’ baptism: ‘... the Holy Spirit, like a dove descending, came down on him. And... a voice: “You are my Son, chosen and marked by my love, pride of my life” (Luke 3:21-22).

FIONA BARNARD

Crafting Spirit

God spoke to Moses... ‘I’ve personally chosen Bezalel... I’ve filled him with the Spirit of God, giving him skill and know-how and expertise in every kind of craft to create designs and work in gold, silver, and bronze; to cut and set gemstones; to carve wood – he’s an all-around craftsman.’ (MSG)

Of course an extravagantly creative God will relish artistry and design! He dabs yellow on a purple pansy and spots on a leopard. He issues crunches to autumn leaves and whistles to the wind. He foams a wave and goads thunder to chase lightning – for no particular reason other than it is beautiful and displays his glory. He endows us with eyes and ears, skin, tongue and nose so that we become alive to what is around us and within us.

These words of God to Moses are a glittering validation for all artists. Although the world is his temple, he stoops to meet his wandering people in a desert tent. It is a special place of encounter, with furniture and vestments designed to lift worshippers from the dust of their everyday to the magnificence of their Lord. The chief architect and site manager is Bezalel, drenched with godly genius. His skill in craft and carving, metalwork and gemstone setting come straight from the divine artist. The gift to imagine and produce splendid arks and altars, basins and lamp-stands does not simply come from apprenticeship and experience. He is filled with the Spirit. And in time, those who approach the invisible God in worship will experience the wonder and tingle of holy awe. Sparkle and texture and aroma will take them from physical perception to spiritual understanding. The sweat of careful construction and the whoosh of ingenious inspiration are not manipulative. They are Spirit-led.

Why not spend time today being more attentive to the Spirit through art? Listen to some music or contemplate a painting, hold a piece of pottery or linger longer over your meal. How is God glorified in the skill and time invested in its creation? Praise him for it, and pray for those who made it.

‘For we are God’s masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago’ (Ephesians 2:10, NLT).

FIONA BARNARD

Enabling Spirit

‘I’ll take some of the Spirit that is on you and place it on them; they’ll then be able to take some of the load of this people – you won’t have to carry the whole thing alone.’ (MSG)

Have you ever felt that the demands placed on you weigh you down to the point of crushing your spirit, if not your spine? When was the last time that the proverbial straw just about broke your camel’s back? You will understand Moses, then, for whom leading God’s unholy people is driving him to distraction. They whinge about the diet and the desert heat, they squabble with each other and criticise everything he does. ‘Why dump the responsibility of this people on me?’ (v. 14), he cries to God. The burden is too heavy. The loneliness of leadership is overwhelming.

One of the ways in which God comes to encourage Moses is to surround him with a team. Seventy people who are already leaders in the community are chosen to be his delegates. For that special task, he puts his spirit on them, endowing them with divine enabling for the challenges they face. When the Spirit comes upon them, they prophesy as a sign of God’s anointing. This proves a bit of a shock to Joshua, Moses’ deputy, especially when the Spirit rests on two men who were not even present at the consecration of elders. Yet Moses is so relieved to witness God empowering others to share the load that he exclaims, ‘Would that all God’s people were prophets. Would that God would put his Spirit on all of them’ (v. 29).

Moses’ ecstatic reply to a jealous assistant is itself prophetic. Since Pentecost, God’s Spirit is gifted to every believer. When we are wounded and weary, discouraged and doubtful in our service for Jesus, the Spirit is there to empower us. Perhaps you can recall occasions when you felt you had nothing left to give, and in your weakness you experienced the wonder of the Spirit’s strength, through prayer or companionship, filling you with joyful vigour.

Use Ephesians 3:16-21 as a prayer for the Spirit’s power for yourself or others today.

FIONA BARNARD

Indwelling Spirit

'I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.' (NIV)

'I grew up in a secular Jewish home,' a visiting preacher told us. 'But as a teenager, I became haunted by a sense of not being able to keep all of the law in the Torah.' One evening, a presence in the room drew him to a New Testament his brother had smuggled into the house. A voice directed him to read two specific texts, and everything changed: he realised that the Messiah for whom he longed was called Jesus Christ.

For him, Ezekiel's majestic promise was life-giving. Made almost 600 years before Pentecost, it was also a beacon of hope for the original hearers suffering the horrors of exile and punishment for sin. The bestowing of the Spirit of God was understood as a sign of the Messianic age when God would do something new: radical heart surgery! The Spirit would work from the inside out, so motives and passions would be transformed. Rather than struggling with guilt and shame and futile attempts to be perfect, they would be made clean so the Spirit could take up residence. Then they would discover a longing to live God's way and a power to do so.

'Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling,' writes Paul, 'for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose' (Philippians 2:12-13).

When we encounter joy in selfless hospitality and volunteering, when we find ourselves speaking of Christ to neighbours, when we are prompted to pray for someone or burst into worship, when we resist the temptation to cheat or gossip... then we know the truth of this promise. We experience the wonder of God's Spirit at work in us, making us like Jesus.

'If by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live. For those who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God' (Romans 8:13-14).

FIONA BARNARD

Speaking Spirit

‘I will pour out my Spirit on every kind of people: your sons will prophesy, also your daughters. Your old men will dream, your young men will see visions. I’ll even pour out my Spirit on the servants, men and women both.’ (MSG)

Although my father was involved in training pastors in Brazil, I knew from an early age that God did not just speak through people with roles and titles. I am grateful to educated teachers and writers who taught me, but I have also learnt a great deal of theology from illiterate Christians who knew God’s truths from walking with God. In the smelliest of foul slums, I discovered the richest biblical treasures among the poorest people.

The Spirit has always been present, brooding over the waters even before time began, but his activity is less overt in the Old Testament. Where he is mentioned, it is generally when he comes on a specific individual at a particular moment for a certain task. Prophets, priests and kings were all anointed with oil as a sign of the Spirit’s special empowering.

This side of Pentecost, it is hard to imagine how revolutionary Joel’s prophecy would have sounded. The Spirit’s anointing was not to be confined to heroic figures like David and Deborah, Elijah and Ezekiel. It was to be poured out lavishly and without discrimination on all: like a colossal celestial bucket full of Spirit-drenched words and dreams, gifts and fruit, vision and power. In a society which honoured age, the young would not be sidelined. At a time when men were generally the orators, women too would speak God’s words. In an era where hierarchy was respected, servants who might even be foreigners would be soaked in the Spirit’s new language of freedom.

Recently, I was astounded at the contribution in a Bible study of someone living with dementia. Despite struggles in everyday communication, she spoke eloquently of her Lord. It reminded me afresh of the Spirit’s stunning levelling where anyone can know the presence of God and give voice to his revelation.

‘They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly’ (Acts 4:31). Lord, speak through me today!

FIONA BARNARD

Conceiving Spirit

Mary asked the angel, 'But how can I have a baby? I am a virgin.' The angel replied, 'The Holy Spirit shall come upon you, and the power of God shall overshadow you; so the baby born to you will be utterly holy – the Son of God.' (TLB)

'How can this be?' cried a puzzled Mary, a question echoed through the centuries by atheists and sceptics, the devout and the doubting. As far as I am concerned, any conception is a miracle, with or without male input. But while the biology and the theology flummox me, I can see that for Jesus to be fully divine and fully human, he needed both sets of genes. So the creative Holy Spirit did what he has always done: he conceived something, someone, beyond all imagining: the invisible God fusing without compromise with fallen flesh and blood. A holy, helpless baby is formed.

When the Spirit conceives, it is usually hidden: this most startling of beginnings is in the dark fecundity of a peasant's body, in an out-of-the-way place, off the beaten track. When the Spirit conceives, a microscopic seed is planted and tended far from human command and control. When the Spirit conceives, all the parameters and presumptions we set collapse in a heap. The power of God overshadows; the world and the Godhead are never the same again.

Often we look out on a dim, damaged world and cry, 'How can this be?' Poverty, war, famine, injustice, sickness, suffering and pain dominate the news and touch our lives in many ways. We wonder how God's promises will ever come to fruition. We despair that our prayers will ever be answered. The Holy Spirit, who conceived the impossible, continues to form and fashion, nurture and grow God-originated dreams in secret places way beyond *our* conceiving. And that God-child who was born has entered physically into our anguish and understands from the inside out how it feels to be abandoned and betrayed and tortured. He is Immanuel, God with us.

'Conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary' (The Apostles' Creed): how might the Holy Spirit's magnificent creativity burst upon the mundane routine of your family and community life?

FIONA BARNARD

Anointing Spirit

‘The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.’ (NIV)

‘For what was I put on this earth?’ may be a question you should not ask every day or you would never get dinner made or that class taught! However, it is worth periodic pondering. Certain seasons of life make the quest for purpose more prominent: teenage years, post-graduation, midlife and retirement. Some find the answer clearer than others, but it is good to reassess and ask, ‘Lord, what are you calling me to be and to do now?’

How did Jesus know his calling? I think he grew in his understanding through a mixture of absorbing Old Testament prophetic texts like this one, through prayer with the Father and an inner conviction. His compassionate heart was naturally drawn to the poor and broken-hearted, the prisoners and the blind, the oppressed and tormented. He longed for them to hear the good news of healing and freedom and blessing from the hand of God. And then at his baptism, the Holy Spirit came on Jesus to confirm this call and to enable him to fulfil it. He was going to need that divine affirmation in the face of opposition and criticism, spiritual battle and physical stresses. He stuck with it.

Your call as an individual, a family or a church comes as you attend to God through his word and match the longings of your heart with the needs of the world that beckon. These are like wood kindling awaiting the Spirit’s match to set it alight, firing dreams and skills with divine power and grace.

A visit today from a Romanian Christian who distributes vegetables and school bags among the destitute, hosts children’s clubs in his sitting room and is rejoicing at four baptisms, reminds me of the Catherine-wheel miracles the Spirit can accomplish through us, when we are his willing kindling.

Thank you, Lord, that the tasks you ask of me come attached to the Spirit’s anointing to do them.

FIONA BARNARD

Blowing Spirit

‘You must be born not only by water, but by the Spirit... Only God’s Spirit gives new life. The Spirit is like the wind that blows wherever it wants to. You can hear the wind, but you don’t know where it comes from or where it is going.’ (CEV)

Every Friday, a group of students from Singapore, Malaysia, China, Indonesia and Hong Kong gather in my sitting room for Bible study. Ranging between 17 and 35 years old, and representing Buddhist, Muslim, atheist and Christian backgrounds, they are a delightful rabble! Such varied experience of religion and faith makes me feel very inadequate. Some off-the-wall rejoinders leave me struggling to respond. In preparation, I light a candle, pleading with the Spirit to be present and to touch them where I cannot reach. I don’t want them simply to leave with extra head knowledge about Christianity. I long for them to encounter Christ. I am so relieved that my task is simply to direct them to God’s truth, praying that they will be enlightened. The Holy Spirit is the one who gives new life. He is the one who enables them to be born afresh to a new way of being.

Nicodemus knows all about God and the Jewish scriptures. He is a seeker of truth. As he sees the amazing miracles Jesus is performing, he recognises God’s presence and favour. So he goes to talk to him alone, far from the crowds. What Jesus tells him blows his mind. The kingdom of God is not accessed simply through being born in the right (Jewish) nation. There is another type of birth, a spiritual birth of God’s Spirit that is not confined to one ethnic group, not imprisoned in one set of rituals, not reduced to one water baptism.

‘Wind’ and ‘spirit’ are the same word in Hebrew and Greek. So the Spirit as blasting wind, uprooting everything in his path, and as gentle breeze, refreshing and reviving, is a perfect metaphor. We can never grasp, curb, restrict, predict or dictate the Spirit’s movements across the world. He is always on the move, surprising us with his transforming presence.

Where do you long for the Spirit to breathe or to blow new life? Ask him.

FIONA BARNARD

Guiding Spirit

‘If you love me, obey me; and I will ask the Father and he will give you another Comforter, and he will never leave you. He is the Holy Spirit, the Spirit who leads into all truth... he lives with you now and some day shall be in you.’ (TLB)

Comforter. Helper. Friend. Adviser. Advocate. Intercessor. Mediator. Counsellor. Coach. Why choose one word when seven or eight will do? God knows how we need and crave all these. No one translation of the Greek *paraclete* can convey the length and breadth of how Jesus describes the Spirit’s role after he has gone.

As Jesus takes leave of his friends, they only know him as a physical presence with them, wandering on dusty roads, chatting by a fireside, bobbing up and down on the lake. His departure will change everything. They cannot begin to imagine life without him. He explains how the Holy Spirit as his substitute will mediate his spiritual presence, no longer limited by body and geography. When they face persecution, he will pray for them and give them the words to say. As they seek to walk Jesus’ way, he will help them remember and apply what he taught them. When they are battered and bereft, he will coach and comfort them.

Yesterday, I heard the story of Ibrahim, who had recently emailed an evangelistic website. ‘I am disillusioned with my family’s religion,’ he wrote. ‘I am looking for truth and peace. I feel attracted to Christianity.’ A respondent contacted him and, within hours, Ibrahim decided to become a follower of Christ. It was the Spirit who generated a holy dissatisfaction in him and a curiosity to look for answers. It was the Spirit who gave words and wisdom to the person who explained the gospel. It was the Spirit who touched his eyes to see Jesus, his mind to understand his truths and his heart to respond. In days to come, amid the lonely challenges of his new-found faith, it is the Spirit who will make Jesus’ presence real to tutor and guide, strengthen and encourage.

Pray for people like Ibrahim who are in special need of the Spirit’s coaching and care.

FIONA BARNARD

Fruit-bearing Spirit

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control... Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires... Let us keep in step with the Spirit. (NIV)

Student: 'I had to get four A*s to be accepted at the university of my choice. There is such pressure to be successful now in my career. I am also supposed to be skinny and beautiful, go to countless parties, have loads of friends and enjoy a fulfilling life. I feel empty.'

Emotionally vulnerable, less resilient and prone to taking offence: the characteristics of the so-called 'snowflake generation' are increasingly visible among young adults. Productivity and attainment have become slave drivers rather than motivating goals. There are too many victims.

Living by the Spirit takes us another way. When the fruit-bearing Holy Spirit is given control in our lives, the yield is not objects on a conveyor belt. Competition of output and compartmentalisation of life are inappropriate. The Spirit works much more organically, shaping our whole personality and priorities so what grows in us, and then flows out of us, is the beautiful character of Jesus. The being and becoming that he forms in us is much broader than outward giftedness and flair.

Lest we imagine that passivity is the way, Paul reminds us to keep in step with the Spirit. As we live by the Spirit, what we become translates into acts of kindness and compassion, joy and loyalty, patience and peace.

Yesterday, a retired lady responding to a sermon confessed, 'I am always so busy, forever cooking meals. Tonight, I am challenged to make prayer a priority, to spend more time with Jesus.' I felt so moved, because everything about her – her cakes and encouragement, her unheralded visits to drug addicts and chaotic families, her laughter and daily self-giving – speak of a Spirit-filled walk overflowing with Jesus fruit. It is costly, but spills out naturally from his life in her. She cannot help it.

Use John 15:1-17 to pray further about being a fruit-bearer.

FIONA BARNARD

Empowering Spirit

I remind you to keep alive the gift that God gave you when I laid my hands on you. For the Spirit that God has given us does not make us timid; instead, his Spirit fills us with power, love, and self-control. (GNT)

She had a tender heart, devoted to Jesus. She had endured mental health challenges. Yet everything about her spoke of compassionate care for others. She was already using her gifts to encourage many, even if she could not see it herself. Now she was unsure of her future and fearful of what lay ahead.

As I prayed with her, these were the words that came to mind and I spoke them. The friend beside me reiterated it, 'This is the verse that I hear for you too.'

When we think of all that the Spirit can do in Christians and through them, it is easy to feel that we are the exception. Other believers are able and skilled; they are powerful and victorious. Somehow, we are not so sure if the Spirit's work applies to us. Here Paul is writing to Timothy, his son in the faith. For all his godly grounding and pastoral position, it seems Timothy's knees are quaking and his stomach is churning. He feels physically sick from the pastoral responsibility placed on him and weeps for the absence of his mentor Paul. And so Paul sends him a message: remember that this is God's work. The Holy Spirit is active in you and through you. Recognise that this is much bigger than you imagine.

If you love Jesus and long to serve him, if he has given you a job to do, if you feel inadequate and overwhelmed, this eavesdropping encouragement is for you: your humility pleases the heart of Christ. Now, take hold of this staggering truth: God's Spirit delights to fill empty vessels. He comes with power, love and self-control. The fact that you are already serving him is an indication that he has placed his Spirit in you for this task. Trust him.

Bring to God the church worldwide, strong or struggling, growing or dying, persecuted or self-satisfied. Pray that it would be filled with the Spirit of power, love and self-control.

Praying Spirit

God's Spirit is right alongside helping us along. If we don't know how or what to pray, it doesn't matter. He does our praying in and for us, making prayer out of our wordless sighs, our aching groans. He knows us far better than we know ourselves. (MSG)

'I just do not know where to begin!' Anyone serious about praying for the world can soon feel overwhelmed. What words are adequate to plead for a wailing continent, a whimpering child? How do you petition God amid the complexity of pastoral calamity where all parties are furious and grief-stricken? What is the point in persisting to intercede for a relative who seems beyond recovery? What do you say when you are drained, when there is nothing left to be said?

You cry. You sigh. You groan. And astoundingly, God the Holy Spirit is in the weeping, in the lament. In the numb wordlessness and the throbbing ache, he is closer than a breath. He gathers it all up and makes it into a prayer – a prayer so eloquent, so effective that it would stagger you, if only you could see it.

Such prayer takes us into the deep things of the Spirit. It is a mystery how and when and why God works in the most horrific situations. We know we can do nothing. But recognising the Spirit's prayer through our groaning enables us to get our anguish out and place it before him. It aligns us to his loving purpose, even when we don't understand. Especially when we don't understand.

Some of my most powerful experiences in prayer have been when I have realised that the tears on my face are mingled with the tears of God. During those times when my sobs come from a place deeper than I possess, I grasp in part how the Spirit prays in me and for me. And I am grateful.

Thank you for the days I chatter to you and know your closeness. Thank you for the times I meet with others to pray and experience you in our midst. Thank you too when, gathering up my silence and my grief, you pray with me.

FIONA BARNARD

Sending Spirit

When the disciples saw the Lord, they became very happy... he said, 'I am sending you, just as the Father has sent me.' Then he breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.' (CEV)

As this series comes to an end, I hope you are excited afresh by all that we can enjoy through the work of the Holy Spirit. We have omitted many important Bible passages, not least the account of the Spirit's radical outpouring on a fearful baby church at Pentecost. Following that seismic drenching, Acts describes the Spirit moving, motivating and mobilising believers to carry the good news worldwide. New Testament letters reveal the work of Father, Son and Spirit weaving and dancing through doctrine, teaching and practical encouragement.

However, the texts we have considered remind us that the Holy Spirit has always been active, moving over the waters before creation, forming and fashioning and filling, encouraging and enabling and empowering. The Bible narratives anticipate and unveil the activity of the Holy Spirit until he comes upon all Christians in sweeping far-reaching power.

Before that, in this emotional encounter of the risen Christ and his gobsmacked disciples, we watch a mini-Pentecost, a foretaste of the great commission. The God who first breathed life into humankind bequeaths the Spirit on the apostles in a breath. This is a God on the move: the Father sends the Son, the Son sends his friends in the power of the Holy Spirit.

So if you are his disciple, keep in step with the Spirit! God is going places: he is sending you to that colleague at work who appears to have her life together, to your neighbour whose marriage is on the rocks, to the families using foodbanks, to the millions who do not know him. You may not physically board a plane to evangelise and heal, but you have a place in the world mission of the church to preach, teach and baptise, through prayer, giving, living. Go!

You may be frightened, like those first disciples, but the Spirit's breath is in you. You are not alone. So keep in step with the Spirit and watch what he will do.



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Day by Day with God is edited by **Ali Herbert** and **Jill Rattle**.



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