

The background is an abstract painting. The top half features warm, textured brushstrokes in shades of orange, yellow, and red. The bottom half is dominated by a vibrant blue, with a white circular pattern resembling a globe or a stylized design in the lower right corner.

Naomi Starkey

The Recovery
of Hope

Bible reflections
for sensing God's presence
& hearing God's call

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Introduction

As a 'cradle Christian', I cannot recall a time when I did not believe the truths of the faith, when Sunday worship was not as much part of life's routine as eating and sleeping. But (as many much wiser people have reflected and written) I came to realise that there is always more to know of God. There is always more that he wants to do in and through us. While the gospel can be summarised in a few words (try John 3:16, for example), the implications of those few words may well take all eternity for us fully to comprehend.

This book brings together a selection of Bible readings that I originally wrote for *New Daylight* during my years as its editor. As I reviewed my contributions, I found that I had been drawn to a recognisable pattern of themes that related to my own pilgrimage of faith: the hunger for God's consoling presence especially during hard times, the challenge to respond to his call on my life, and the discovery (and rediscovery, again and again) of the deep reassurance that I am not only known but loved beyond understanding.

So I have woven these readings into a kind of journey towards the recovery of hope, the hope of experiencing first-hand the utter sufficiency of God's grace and love and forgiveness, a hope that we may know with our heads a while—perhaps even a long while—before we truly feel it in our hearts. It is the hope of knowing God not only as consoling presence in the darkness but in the challenge of responding to his call and in the transformative experience of knowing how much we are his beloved children.

I have added some poems that I have written along the way, expressing some of the same thoughts and emotions in slightly different terms.

Words of knowledge

Sometimes
God speaks in neon signs,
Slogans branding public buildings,
Text message straight to the heart.

'Everything will be all right'
I guess so...
Though I can't
For the very life of me
Imagine how.

'Take courage'
OK...
I will take enough for today
And hope there will be some left over
For tomorrow.

'Wait in the unknowing'
I'll try...
Still anxiously reconfiguring
The feasible options
'Until the unknowing is known'.

'There is nothing for you in the desert'
Oh...
But I'd thought this was where I should stay,
Balancing the burden
For the effort of the next step.

And with that,
A glimpse of different possibilities,
A smoother path under clearing skies,
The recovery—
So gentle a surprise—
Of hope.

— Part 1 —

Coping with darkness

To begin the journey towards recovering hope, we must first of all find our feet and gather enough strength to start walking, even if we have little idea of where we should be heading. Doing that, strangely enough, may well involve coming to terms with the dark place where we currently find ourselves. We have to know our starting point, avoid panicking over the fear that we can't deal with it, and take a deep breath—and then another. And another. And keep on breathing. Sometimes that is all we can manage; sometimes that is enough.

The following Bible readings cover different aspects of coping with darkness, of living through hard times. Such comfort as they offer is in the context of harsh realities, painful injustice and bitter loss. We hear confidence expressed that God will work out his good purposes, but, until then, the darkness must simply be endured. Life does not go according to our best-laid plans; the in-between, uncomfortable times can feel interminable; we are stuck in Holy Saturday (or even Good Friday), with the joy of Easter tantalisingly beyond reach.

Yet there is that wonderful phrase found in Isaiah 45:3, 'the treasures of darkness'. As we wait, coping in the dark, trusting that things will change but with no idea when, we can still know that God is with us, even if we cannot sense his presence. As the following poem describes, our lives

may feel as if we are stumbling along, lonely and aching, but that is not the end of the story. Love—and resurrection joy—have the final word.

Walking/Wounded

It doesn't feel like courage.
It feels like stumbling,
Falling,
Because the road is rough.
It feels like getting up again
And walking on
When everything feels
Broken.
It feels like choice
That is no choice
But tough, cold necessity.

It may not feel like courage
But others see more clearly—
See strength of will,
Tenacity of soul
And stubborn self-resolve
To carry on in hope,
Because the road dips
Out of sight
And, however far ahead it lies,
At the end
Waits
Love.

Introduction

Praying with Psalm 37

Why do bad things happen to good people? Why don't more bad things happen to bad people? These are the dilemmas at the heart of Psalm 37, part of a group of psalms (34—37) that have as their focus godliness and, by contrast, the fate of the wicked. It is generally acceptable to ask why the innocent suffer, but we are probably less comfortable dwelling on why wrongdoers don't get what they deserve when they deserve it. If we have been Christians for any length of time, we know that, like Jesus, we should love and pray for 'sinners'. The psalmists' talk of the 'righteous' may have uncomfortable overtones of self-righteousness to our ears.

While the modern trend is to say that wrongdoing is due to individuals being misunderstood or damaged in some way, the bracing attitude of the Bible is that we all have a choice—as we have had since the very beginning. The consequences of Adam and Eve's choice in Eden show that, given the ability to choose between good and evil, the human tendency is to go for evil in its various manifestations every time, from Cain murdering his brother in a jealous rage (why couldn't they have just had a fight and then made up?) to the marvel that is the worldwide web being used for the promotion of global terrorism, pornography and endless business scams.

One of the consolations promised to the godly in Psalm 37, and elsewhere, is that they will 'inherit the land', as first promised to Abraham (Genesis 12:1). This psalm is ascribed to David and so predates the catastrophe of the exile, whereby the nation lost the land, being led into captivity

for repeatedly failing to keep the terms of God's covenant and choosing evil instead of good. Astonishingly, despite everything, he is willing to forgive them and eventually a remnant return home. The wicked and the righteous receive their just reward, but the outcome is always tempered by God's outrageous mercy.

The question still haunts us, though: why don't wrongdoers get what they deserve? Praying with this psalm lets us voice thoughts and emotions that we may consider too 'unChristian' to express except in the privacy of our hearts. Using the psalmist's words, we can bring ourselves, just as we are, into God's presence. We can tell him what we are thinking and feeling and then wait for his loving and healing response.

Fret not

Do not fret because of the wicked; do not be envious of wrongdoers; for they will soon fade like the grass, and wither like the green herb. Trust in the Lord, and do good; so you will live in the land, and enjoy security. Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart. (Psalm 37:1–4)

While we may not go around openly complaining about ‘the wicked’, how many of us have not at some point looked with envy at somebody who has built a prosperous and successful life on the basis of values that we consider highly dubious? We may have worked hard over many years, been polite to our supervisors, reliable at all times—and then we see a colleague promoted over our heads whom we know to be disloyal and unkind, yet, apparently, their ‘face fits’, which is considered more important. We may go home and complain angrily to anybody who’ll listen, ‘It’s not fair! Let’s all trample on everybody else, because that’s clearly the way to get on!’

The psalmist, though, tells us not to ‘fret’ (a wonderful word), because ‘the wicked’ are as transient as grass. ‘That’s all very well,’ we may respond, ‘but they still seem to be flourishing nicely. Exactly when will they start withering?’ This is the challenge: we have to trust that God’s way is the best way, even if we feel as if we are waiting endlessly for the benefits to come through.

What we are called to do is ‘live in the land’ where we can enjoy ‘security’. Ours is to be long-term, rooted and sustainable growth, a bit like the difference between flowers

that pop up in the local park and look lovely for a week or two and trees that mature over decades until they are big enough to endure conditions that would wipe out those showy but transient blooms. The final verse here brings a wonderful promise: if we ‘delight’ (the Hebrew word implies intense pleasure, not just a hesitant ‘Er, that’s nice’ response) in the Lord, he will give us what we most long for.

— Reflection —

*What is your heart’s desire?
Bring it to God and await his response.*

I'm telling you again—fret not

Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him, and he will act. He will make your vindication shine like the light, and the justice of your cause like the noonday. Be still before the Lord, and wait patiently for him; do not fret over those who prosper in their way, over those who carry out evil devices. Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath. Do not fret—it leads only to evil. For the wicked shall be cut off, but those who wait for the Lord shall inherit the land. Yet a little while, and the wicked will be no more; though you look diligently for their place, they will not be there. But the meek shall inherit the land, and delight themselves in abundant prosperity. (Psalm 37:5–11)

In case we hadn't got the message, the psalmist tells us again (and again): don't fret. Instead of agonising about our circumstances, wringing our hands over whether we have made the right decisions or not and even mentally stamping our feet and shouting for God to do something, we are to be patient and 'still before the Lord'.

In Psalm 46:10 we find a better-known verse, one that has inspired many songs of worship: 'Be still, and know that I am God'. In Psalm 37, though, the context is less praise to the Lord, more robust advice for his people. If we decide that patience is a second-best approach to life, we should heed the warning that anger and impatience can actually lead to 'evil'. Frustration is an ugly, fast-growing weed (I'm thinking Japanese knotweed) that, if we are not careful, can grow until it smothers any trace of peace and joy.

As well as ‘inheriting the land’ (a promise resonating with Jesus’ ‘Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth’, Matthew 5:5), those who wait patiently are promised ‘abundant prosperity’. Such words may not particularly stir our hearts, but we should remember that, wherever we are on the globe, we are only a plane-ride away from places where ‘peace and prosperity’ remain a distant dream. This is a promise to treasure.

– Prayer –

Lord God, we release into your loving hands our frustration and impatience; grant us a measure of your infinite patience.

Into the darkness

And when the priests came out of the holy place, a cloud filled the house of the Lord, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud; for the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord. Then Solomon said, 'The Lord has said that he would dwell in thick darkness. I have built you an exalted house, a place for you to dwell in for ever.' (1 Kings 8:10–13)

Our final reading in this series comes from the dedication of Solomon's temple. After the ark of the covenant had been installed in the most 'holy place' (v. 10) and the priests had withdrawn, the cloud of God's glory filled the place. A footnote in the NRSV links Solomon's words to Psalm 97, where God is described as surrounded by swirling cloud, darkness and lightning, just as at Sinai when the Law was first given to Moses.

All such descriptions are, in the end, fumbling attempts to use human language and earthly imagery to express the inexpressible and describe the indescribable. Over the centuries, many Christians have come to a point where they feel it is easier to try and grasp something of God by defining what he is not, rather than what he is. Known as the *via negativa*, or 'negative way', this has been given a stronger emphasis in Eastern Christian traditions, especially the Orthodox Church.

Yes, of course, we believe that we find God in scripture and the church and supremely revealed in Jesus Christ, but we can never hope to encompass the eternal with our finite

minds. Instead, we can dare to step out into the darkness, beyond the borders of knowledge and understanding and what we think we know about God. We can dare to venture deeper and deeper into his presence, willing to hold open our hands to whatever he will give us, admitting our emptiness so that his Spirit can truly fill us, remembering that his apparent absence is simply the shadow cast by his immense and unavoidable presence.

– Reflection –

‘I will give you the treasures of darkness and riches hidden in secret places, so that you may know that it is I, the Lord, the God of Israel, who call you by your name’ (Isaiah 45:3).

– Part 2 –

Challenged to journey

When we sense God's call to move on, his summons to take up the work that he has prepared for us to do, we may fear that we are moving from a place of coping (even if it is coping at the level of drawing one breath after another) to what will prove to be a (literally) breathtaking series of challenges. Survival is one thing, which we may have learned to do quite well, but stepping out in the service of the kingdom of heaven may prove a different level of daunting. The questions hammer away at us. How will we know the right way to take? Can we trust that what we perceive as God's guidance is actually just that? What if we accidentally take a wrong turning and find ourselves in a spiritual dead end?

The readings in this next section are, in part, reflections on the costliness of obedience to God's call. Jonah the reluctant prophet, Stephen the first martyr and Jesus himself walked in that obedience (eventually, it must be said, in the case of Jonah), even when it proved immensely costly. For Stephen and Jesus, it cost everything, including life itself.

We may fear that God will ask us to do more than we can possibly manage, but we have to trust that where he calls, there he will also provide the necessary gifts, wisdom and energy. Our task is to quieten our hearts so that we can hear his voice and, as in the following poem, seek to know beyond doubt that this is indeed the way we should go.

Kairos

What if he came now,
Riding the stormclouds
From the west
As high winds
Whip up the white-tops
And curtains of rain are
Torn in two—
Top to bottom—
While sunlight dazzles everywhere
In haloes of spray?

But will I recognise him?
Will I blink and miss the moment
So it all moves on
Without me,
The strategic hour passing,
The right move
Unmade?

All I can do is this:
Watch the skyline,
Walk the sea-margin,
Shoes scuffing the sand,
And wait
In faith
In hope
That when he calls,
I'll know his voice
For sure.

Introduction

Bible stories rediscovered: Jonah

Along with Noah and the ark, Jonah and the whale is one of the best-known Old Testament stories. It is such a small but perfectly formed narrative, with fast-paced action, snappy dialogue, dramatic shifts in scene and, above all, that monstrous sea creature rearing up from the deep to save the (anti-)hero at the eleventh hour.

I hope that, before starting this series of readings, you will take a few moments to read the whole book at a sitting (it is just 48 verses, four short chapters), if only to realise that the 'big fish' is not identified as a whale at all and, in fact, takes up only three verses.

Jonah, the most reluctant of prophets, also appears in 2 Kings 14:25, where he is identified as coming 'from Gath-hepher'. Jesus mentions 'the sign of Jonah' in Matthew 12:39–41 and 16:4, as well as Luke 11:29–32. In the first of the passages in Matthew, he draws a comparison between Jonah's sojourn in the 'belly of the sea monster' and the three days and nights that 'the Son of Man' will spend 'in the heart of the earth'.

'Did it really happen, though?' some may ask. That may not be a particularly helpful question in relation to this story. Some might stubbornly argue that God can do anything he likes, including providing piscatorial rescue services. What is at the heart of the adventures of Jonah, however, is not a question of historicity (or lack of it), but what we learn about God and humanity.

Commentators tend to describe Jonah in disparaging terms

and he is seldom held up as a good example of prophetic witness, but, in fact, Jonah is no worse—and, in many ways, a good deal braver—than the rest of us. We should not feel superior to him, but acknowledge how, like us, he fails and fails and fails again, yet God uses him to achieve a work so amazing that Jonah struggles to comprehend it.

The readings that follow, then, are for those of us who are keenly aware of our personal failings. Like Jonah, we can be humbled to find that, in God's mercy and grace, we can still play some small part in building his kingdom.

Runaway prophet

Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, 'Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.' But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord. (Jonah 1:1–3)

Jonah's 'reluctant prophet' credentials are established here as, instead of heeding the word of the Lord, he embarks on a futile escape attempt. The location of Tarshish is unclear, but, as the name derives from the word for 'sea', it could refer to somewhere on the Mediterranean. Jonah is heading in precisely the opposite direction to inland Nineveh. His desperation is perhaps reflected in his trying to flee by ship—a highly dubious enterprise from the perspective of a non-seagoing nation such as Israel.

He had some reason for his desperation. Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian empire, and the Assyrians are generally considered to have been among the most brutal conquerors in the ancient world. They were notorious for wiping out their opponents, but not before they had tormented and humiliated them in some spectacularly unpleasant ways. At least the later Babylonians and Persians allowed defeated nations a modicum of self-rule. Also, the Lord told Jonah not to denounce this evil empire from a safe distance but actually to go there to declaim against its wickedness.

This passage also points towards one of the main themes

in Jonah—the inescapable presence of the Lord. We can hold before God the memory of those who died in conflict and thank him that his power, love and mercy are greater even than the grave.

— Reflection —

'If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast'
(Psalm 139:8–10).

No escape

But the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up. Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried to his god... Jonah, meanwhile, had gone down into the hold of the ship and had lain down, and was fast asleep... The sailors said to one another, 'Come, let us cast lots, so that we may know on whose account this calamity has come upon us.' So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. Then they said to him '... What is this that you have done!' For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them so. (Jonah 1:4–5, 7–8, 10, abridged)

Have you ever been in a small boat on a stormy sea? Even if the wind has died down, the swell can stay heavy for hours and we may fear a sudden rogue wave swamping us. The sailors here face such a 'great wind' and 'mighty storm' that all hope seems lost. If you have not already done so, read this passage in full so as to appreciate the narrator's skill in evoking the scene, the desperate emotional state of the crew mirroring the tempest raging around them.

The sleep of Jonah has been characterised on the one hand as smug somnolence and, on the other, as exhaustion, the depressed mental state of a man who has cut his ties to his old life, including trying to run away from his God. Perhaps what he feels is simply relief; he hopes that he has escaped after all. Despite the fearful sea crossing to be endured, new opportunities may be opening ahead.

Then his secret is discovered. With horrible inevitability,

the 'lot' picks him out as the cause of the tempest. Jonah is about to learn just how inescapable God is—and also how compassionate—but his journey will take him literally through very deep waters first. Sometimes for us, too, life gets a whole lot worse before we sense any hint of the skies starting to clear.

— Reflection —

O hear us when we cry to Thee for those in peril on the sea!

William Whiting (1860)

Wonder-working

[Jesus said] ‘And these signs will accompany those who believe: by using my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes in their hands, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover.’ So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God. And they went out and proclaimed the good news everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that accompanied it. (Mark 16:17–20)

Many of the ‘signs’ listed here by Jesus are found in the book of Acts, including Paul’s encounter with a poisonous snake after his shipwreck (28:3–5). Commentators are at pains to point out that Jesus is not condoning such behaviour—as if downing a pint of poison is a valid way of demonstrating God’s power and protection. Having said that, a relatively small number of Pentecostal-style churches in the USA claim inspiration from these verses to include snake-handling and drinking strychnine in their worship services, with occasionally (and unsurprisingly) fatal results.

Whatever our preferred style of worship, we should seek signs of God at work in our community, in the wider world and in our own lives. We would be as mistaken to deny that God can act miraculously here and now as we would be to base our faith entirely on signs of the more spectacular kind. Of course the eternal, omnipotent Lord of space and time can heal, for example, but we should never assume that

healing is somehow less holy because it comes about through modern medical expertise, rather than being drug-free and instantaneous.

The point is not the sign in itself, however headline-grabbing it might be, but the faith generated by a combination of gospel message shared and heavenly grace received.

— Reflection —

Jesus' followers are sent out into a hostile world, with the reminder that the power of God's kingdom surrounds and sustains them as they go—as we are still sent and as we are still surrounded and sustained.

– Part 3 –

In resurrection light

Suddenly we are out in the daylight, blinking perhaps, but finding solid ground beneath our feet, blue skies above. The darkness is past, the confusion is over (for now, anyway) and we find our hearts strengthened with the assurance that the one who raised Jesus from the dead can raise us to new life, too. And he does not just raise us to life but blesses us with sufficient strength and clarity of vision to continue to do his work in the world.

In this final section of readings, we consider the good shepherd, who leads us so gently on the right paths; we reflect on gardens found in scripture, places that can restore the soul but may still (human nature being what it is) end up being a cause of sorrow; we ponder the power of God's Spirit—breath of life and blazing fire—who acts decisively to transform the world.

As the following poem hints, we are known by name; we are loved more than we can ever know; we are called by Father, Son and Spirit to walk on in the light of the resurrection, the weight of sin lifted from our shoulders, discovering more and more of the healing that is freely extended to all God's children. Realistically, we acknowledge that hard times will almost certainly come round again, but joyfully we affirm that the risen Jesus is with us, as past experience strengthens our faith that bit more to help us face with fortitude whatever tomorrow may bring.

Walking with God

Eyes open—
A voice half-heard by the heart
Asleep,
Calling your real name.

Morning rises all around,
Shining with presence.
Wind rushes through the grass—
Up and over the hill—
Follow,
And breathe,
Breathe so deep
And feel life
Running right
To your soul's core.

Introduction

The Good Shepherd

A while ago, a kind nun explained to me what it meant to have a ‘special devotion’ (in faith terms). I had sometimes wondered about the significance of the titles common in the Roman Catholic Church—what it meant for nuns to describe themselves as ‘Sister Margaret [or whoever] of the Holy Cross’ or ‘of the Sacred Heart’. My friend told me that such titles signified the ‘special devotion’ of the nun concerned—that is, an aspect of Christian belief or an episode or character in the Gospel story that most inspired her faith and prayers.

Intrigued by this, I began to wonder what my ‘special devotion’ might be. As a long-standing employee of The Bible Reading Fellowship, surely the Bible would be the most appropriate response in my case? What about God the Father, or Mary the mother of Jesus, seeing as I have written a fair bit about parenting, the love of God and related ideas?

Then, as I prayed one day, it came to me: the Good Shepherd. Of course! As far back as I can remember, I have loved stories and pictures inspired by the biblical idea of God as shepherd, caring for us, his flock. When I was very small, my mother would sing me to sleep with a Victorian bedtime prayer: ‘Jesus, tender shepherd, hear me/Bless your little lamb tonight.’ Psalm 23 was the first psalm I ever learned and is still one of my favourites. Still, reflecting on the patience, gentle care and security symbolised by the Good Shepherd remains a rich source of consolation and inspiration for me.

In the following readings, we will reflect on some of the Good Shepherd passages from the Old and New Testaments.

These include some famously lovely words, but they can become overly familiar if we forget their wider context and read them purely to apply to ourselves. We should not forget, either, that being a shepherd was, and often still is, a solitary, arduous and occasionally dangerous job. Both sheep and shepherd are vulnerable, and they need each other.

A final thought: as you read, you may find the Good Shepherd to be a particularly meaningful image for you, too. If not, you could try prayerfully to identify your own 'special devotion'.

He is with us

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long. (Psalm 23)

We begin with the quintessential Good Shepherd passage—best beloved of all the psalms, offering as it does the deepest reassurance that the Lord (YHWH in the original Hebrew, the mysterious and unpronounceable name of God) is with us. His presence sustains us, no matter what has happened, no matter where we are. The psalm begins and ends with reflection on God's loving care, while the imagery shifts from shepherd and sheep to guest and host at a lavish dinner party.

It is worth noting that while the psalm is tagged as being 'of David', some commentators interpret 'the house of the Lord' as referring to the temple, which was built after David's time. The temple was significant not only as the place of sacrifice and public and private prayer but also as the very visible symbol, in the middle of the city, of God's presence with his people.

At the heart of this psalm is the sobering thought that, despite the shepherd's care, dark and dangerous places are

unavoidable. The bad news is that, however well-behaved and careful we are, we will end up journeying through them at some point, because that is life and sometimes life is very hard. The good news is that, even in the most fearful circumstances, we are assured that we have a heavenly armed guard alongside us.

— Reflection —

Take time to read through Psalm 23 aloud, phrase by phrase, and wait in silence to hear God's gentle whisper in your heart.

He cherishes us

Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, 'Here is your God!' See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep. (Isaiah 40:9–11)

These verses are from the turning-point in the book of Isaiah, where judgement and despair turn to comfort and hope. The whole of Isaiah 40 is a profoundly poetic meditation on the grandeur and majesty of God, but here we find a wonderful juxtaposition of images—the coming of the mighty king who is also the gentle shepherd. We will reflect more in the next reading on the traditional connection between those two images in the culture of that time; here let us meditate on the tenderness of the one who picks up his lambs and cuddles them.

Depending on our personal experiences of being loved and looked after, we may or may not find it easy to imagine being held in a safe and secure embrace. Whatever our experiences, we may find it harder still to imagine that such intimacy can characterise our relationship with God. Yes, as Isaiah 40 tells us, God is sovereign, eternal, 'the Creator of the ends of the earth' (v. 28); yet, at the same time, he cherishes us with a love more enduring than that of any mother (49:15).

If we know we have neglected our relationship with God,

we may end up so racked with guilt that we cannot bear to open our Bibles, let alone pray. We may endure times so storm-tossed that we feel too damaged even to think about whether or not our faith can help us. That is when we can hold on to the knowledge that the Good Shepherd promises to hold us, carry us, cuddle us.

— Reflection —

*'Do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid,
for I am your God' (Isaiah 41:10).*

We live in the hope of experiencing first-hand the all-sufficient grace, love and forgiveness which are God's alone, a hope that we may know with our heads long before we feel it in our hearts. Such hope may mean encountering God as consoling presence in the darkness, as well as one who challenges us to respond to his call. That call may prove to be costly but, in responding, we are transformed by discovering and rediscovering that we are known exactly as we are, yet still loved beyond understanding, as God's precious children.

In a series of Bible reflections—and some poems—this hope is explored in different ways, from the yearning of the psalmist to walking the gentle journey of the Good Shepherd's leading.



Naomi Starkey is a full-time ordained minister in the Church in Wales, living on the Llyn Peninsula in North Wales. From 1997 to 2015 she was a commissioning editor for BRF as well as editing *New Daylight* and *Quiet Spaces* over a number of years. She has also written *The Recovery of Love*, *Pilgrims to the Manger* and *Good Enough Mother* for BRF.

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