

January–April 2021



Bible reflections

for older people

Handed down to us

Ro Willoughby

Signs of glory

John Rackley

**Storms and fair
weather**

Margot & Martin Hodson

Feet made for walking

Ro Willoughby





From the Editor

Welcome to this new collection of Bible reflections.

Months of lockdown took their toll in many ways, but among the most painful was the ban on touching, holding and hugging loved ones. Jesus' words to Mary Magdalene at sunrise on Easter Day have never had such resonance – *Noli me tangere!*, translated variously as 'Do not hold on to me!', 'Do not touch me!' or 'Do not cling to me!' (John 20:17). We can all, now, in some small way, identify with the confusion Mary must have felt when her beloved teacher recoiled from the touch of her hand.

This issue of reflections begins with hands and ends with feet – two moving and intriguing series by Ro Willoughby.

Many of us will be familiar with the prayer of St Teresa of Avila, 'Christ has no body', with its lines: 'Christ has no body but yours, no hands, no feet on earth but yours... Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good, yours are the hands with which he blesses all the world.'

It was so hard when we couldn't be Christ's hands and feet in the world, but Martyn Payne wrote another prayer, for those difficult days: 'God of compassion, who can enter where we cannot go and who can touch those we aren't allowed to hold... Please be our hands and feet, our smile and words, to lighten up their darkness, for nothing is impossible with you.'

God bless you





Storms and fair weather

Margot and Martin Hodson

‘It looks like rain today.’ The British love talking about the weather. Will it rain? Will it stop? Is it a good summer or a hard winter? We all have an opinion. Weather affects people’s moods, and they are noticeably more cheerful when it is sunny (but not too hot) and are more irritable when it is wet or cold. Climate change is affecting our weather and causes anxiety, especially to young people.

The Bible is full of weather. Through different weather, God’s people learned how to depend on him and how to follow him in all circumstances. The Middle East is very dry, and rain became a metaphor for God’s blessing. At times of drought, people prayed for rain, and they also turned to God to work more fully in their lives as they realised how far they had drifted from him.

‘It’s brightening up a bit’ is an optimistic British weather phrase. The rain might be lashing on the windows, but with a slight lightening of the sky we look for sunshine. We hope these reflections guide you to see the brightening hand of God working in your life, through storms and fair weather, to lead you to know him better.



Proverbs 31:21 (NIV)

Well prepared

When it snows, she has no fear for her household; for all of them are clothed in scarlet.

Snow is beautiful, but it is often inconvenient. If you need to get about for whatever reason, it can be hazardous, and many people will fear a serious fall and its consequences. But if you are active and have the right footwear, with a suitable place to take a walk on a sunny, snowy day, it is a magical experience. Looking at a snow scene through a window, while safe in the warmth, can also bring back happy memories of snowball fights and snowmen of old.

Snow is not often expected in Israel, but the woman in Proverbs 31 is very organised. When bad weather comes, she is able to handle it. She runs a big household, is raising a family and even manages a farm, but she is so well prepared that everyone is looked after. Being responsible for other people and managing responsibilities at home and at work can be a real juggling act, and it takes special skill to be prepared when the unexpected happens. But even when those days of responsibility are behind us, building a regular time to pray enables us to be prepared for all weathers and for all that life brings us. Instead of panicking, we can calmly bring our concerns to God and he will show us a way forward.

■ PRAYER

Dear Lord, help me to rely on you day by day, so that you prepare me to be calm and trusting, whatever the weather. Amen

Leviticus 26:4 (NIV)

Rain in season

I will send you rain in its season, and the ground will yield its crops and the trees their fruit.

I (Margot) love seasons, and, as each one comes on the horizon, I look forward to the changes in the countryside: the primroses and fresh leaves of spring; summer's colour with long, warm days, or dashing undercover from unexpected rain; crunching through autumn leaves with the glorious golden display on the trees; and even winter, for all its cold and rain, has its special moments when the snow falls and the world stands still.

Now I notice that the seasons are changing. Spring is a little earlier, with bluebells coming out in April rather than May. Golden October is becoming golden November. The summer is more often hotter and drier or much wetter than in years gone by, and the winter is warmer but stormier. In other parts of the world, these changes have led to crop failures when the rains come at the wrong times – or don't come at all – and older people lose their role advising on the best time to plant or harvest.

As our climate changes, it is important to remember that the earth is the Lord's (Psalm 24:1) and that we have a responsibility to care for all he has made. Even small changes, like moving to a renewable energy tariff, not wasting food and other resources, repairing and recycling, will help to secure the seasons' rhythm for future generations.

■ PRAYER

Lord, give us courage to change where we need to and to care for your creation entrusted to us. Amen

James 1:6 (NIV)

Tossed by the wind

But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.

I (Margot) love sailing but am not an expert. I once got caught in a tidal estuary and was unable to get back to land. However hard my friend and I tried, every small progress was thwarted by the current pushing us back out to sea. We eventually became exhausted and were humble enough to say 'Yes!' when the skipper of a passing motorboat asked us if we needed help. He tossed us a line and towed us into harbour. I clung to that rope for dear life, and I have never felt so relieved to reach dry land.

The apostle James was writing to people who faced difficult situations. They needed wisdom to make decisions and the courage to see them through. Sometimes we know the right decision, but seeing it through can seem like trying to sail a boat against the tide. Prayer is our lifeline, and if we persevere we will find that God will give us strength to face the wind and the waves of difficulties. He will lead us into safe havens.

■ PRAYER

Lord, give us strength to keep going when things get difficult. Give us wisdom to make courageous decisions, when we know they are right. Give us humility to ask for your help when the going gets tough. Amen

Psalm 69:15 (NIV)

Going under

Do not let the floodwaters engulf me or the depths swallow me up or the pit close its mouth over me.

Psalm 69 is attributed to King David, a man who knew many ups and downs in his life. Four verses in the psalm refer to flooding or drowning, suggesting that the writer had some knowledge of this kind of event. Israel is an arid country, but David spent time in the wadis around the Dead Sea while he was hiding as a fugitive from King Saul. For most of the year these are dry, but then rains in the Jerusalem area can rapidly turn the wadis into raging torrents. It is easy for the unwary to be trapped in the wadi, unable to escape as the flood waters rise.

The winter of 2019/20 in the United Kingdom was both the fifth wettest in recorded history and the fifth mildest. The heavy rain caused widespread flooding and considerable damage to property. Homeowners often cleaned up after one flood, only for the waters to return a few weeks later. But we are fortunate in being a rich country with good forecasting and emergency services. Many in poor countries are much less lucky.

■ PRAYER

Pray for those affected by severe weather events, both in the United Kingdom and abroad. Pray too for those trying to bring relief to those affected.

Genesis 9:28 (NIV)

When the storm subsides

After the flood Noah lived 350 years.

Noah's ark is one of the best-known stories in the Bible. Following God's call, Noah builds an ark and saves pairs of every animal and his own family, as a terrible flood wipes out the rest of life. We know Noah the hero, but what happened next?

Noah lived another 350 years, and those years were not without their challenges. A modern reader might wonder if he suffered post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) after the trauma of the flood. Might that have led to a sad episode when he became drunk on wine from his vineyard? Or did he simply find it very difficult to settle down to a humdrum life, after such a courageous time? He was fortunate to have sons who came to his aid.

Roles with major responsibility, respect and sometimes fame usually come around the middle of our lives. It can be hard to accept a more ordinary life afterwards, and we can yearn for the days when 'we were somebody'. But when we turn to God, we find that we are infinitely valuable to him, whatever our role or stage in life. He loves us not for *what* we are, but for *who* we are. Moreover, he can guide us in how to spend our gift of years to enrich the lives of others as well as our own.

■ PRAYER

Thank you, Lord, for giving me the gift of years. Help me to use these years wisely and joyfully. Amen.

Deuteronomy 8:15 (NIV)

A dry and thirsty land

He led you through the vast and dreadful wilderness, that thirsty and waterless land, with its venomous snakes and scorpions. He brought you water out of hard rock.

After their escape from Egypt, God led the Israelites into the wilderness for 40 years before they entered the promised land. The Sinai Desert is a dry, inhospitable land. There were miracles along the way, like the manna which God sent to feed them, but overall it must have been a difficult time for the people. God tested them and built them into a nation, so that they would be ready for what lay ahead in Israel.

Before Jesus began his public ministry, he was also tested in the wilderness, but this time for 40 days and 40 nights. The number 40 is special in Jewish thought, appearing in many places in the Bible and suggesting the period between two epochs or a very long time period.

Sometimes life can be quite a test, and it can feel as if we are wandering in a wilderness. It may be illness, the loss of a job or bereavement, or we may feel lonely and unwanted. God can seem very distant in these wilderness days, but remembering Jesus' words, 'And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age' (Matthew 28:20) can really help us get through them.

■ PRAYER

Lord Jesus, we pray that you will be with us through all of the trials of life. Amen

Jeremiah 51:16 (NIV)

Stormy weather

When he thunders, the waters in the heavens roar; he makes clouds rise from the ends of the earth. He sends lightning with the rain and brings out the wind from his storehouses.

In February 2020 the Swedish climate activist, Greta Thunberg, came to Bristol to lead a climate strike by the young people of the city and the surrounding area. The city ground to a standstill, and over 25,000 people came, despite the pouring rain.

The ‘waters in the heavens’ really did roar, and everyone was soaked. Greta, in typical style, told the crowd, ‘Our leaders behave like children so it falls to us to be the adults in the room. They are failing us, but we will not back down.’

Like Jeremiah all those years ago, Greta is a prophet. Jeremiah spoke to the people of Israel in Babylon, who were exiled for disobeying God. Greta speaks for her generation against the rich and the powerful. Millions of young people all around the world have joined the climate strike movement as the effects of climate change become ever more obvious. Maybe you know some of the youth and children that have been involved. Maybe you also know some young people who are suffering from anxiety about climate change or having nightmares. Remember them now.

■ PRAYER

Lord, we pray for all the young people raising the alarm on climate change and for those who are frightened by it. We also pray for world leaders, that they will take notice. Amen

Matthew 16:2–3 (NIV)

Red sky at night

[Jesus] replied, ‘When evening comes, you say, “It will be fair weather, for the sky is red,” and in the morning, “Today it will be stormy, for the sky is red and overcast.” You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.’

‘Red sky at night, shepherd’s delight. Red sky in the morning, shepherd’s warning.’ It may surprise you to know that this old saying has its origins in the Bible. The Pharisees and Sadducees had come to Jesus, asking him to give them a sign that he was the Messiah. He replied that they knew how to interpret the weather signs, but not the signs of the times. Jesus had already performed many miracles, and it was already clear that he was special.

One of the advantages of age and experience is that we can more easily interpret the signs of our times, or at least we should be able to.

Wisdom can take a long time coming. It can be a very long time before we come to realise that Jesus is the Messiah, the anointed one, and the Son of God. But it is never too late. If you have never before recognised that Jesus is the Messiah, ask him to come into your life. Or maybe you have known Jesus for many years, but long for a family member or friend to come to know him. Pray for them.

■ PRAYER

Lord, I pray that you will come into my life and into the lives of my family and friends. Amen

Proverbs 4:18 (NIV)

Bring me sunshine

The path of the righteous is like the morning sun, shining ever brighter till the full light of day.

There are three people whom I (Margot) remember as teenagers, who are now well-known Christian leaders. I remember them as young people with a thriving faith, a passion for ethical principles and vision in their eyes.

It is good to see how their lives have grown and blossomed. They all now carry big responsibilities, have all had to face major challenges and have each made a major difference in the church and wider world. In many ways, they are shining stars among the people I know.

But there are others I remember who have also ‘shone brighter’ as their lives have progressed. They have not become well known, but they have lived their lives faithfully and well, bringing up families, making thoughtful career choices and becoming backbones of their local churches and communities.

We all have the opportunity to make sunshine in this world. It leads some people to take up major and high-profile roles, but for most people making sunshine is about living our lives well: honestly, faithfully and conscientiously and, when we have made mistakes, being willing to admit them.

When we next see the sunrise, let’s ask God to give us a fresh opportunity to share his love and make sunshine.

■ PRAYER

Lord, give us a vision for where we might bring light and hope to those around us. Amen

1 Kings 19:11b–12 (NIV)

In a whisper

Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper.

Elijah is in big trouble. He has defeated and killed the prophets of Baal, but then the evil queen, Jezebel, promises to have him killed by the next day. This throws Elijah into a major depression, and he has had enough and wishes he could die. An angel comes and encourages him to eat, and he then travels 40 days and 40 nights to Mount Horeb.

There, on the mountain, God shows Elijah something important. God says that he will pass by. Then a wind comes up, so strong that it can tear mountains apart. But Elijah does not sense God in the wind. There follows an earthquake, and finally a fire, but God is not in either. Then comes a gentle whisper. God does not speak to Elijah in the wind, the earthquake or the fire, but in a whisper.

And so it can be for us. God frequently speaks to us not by spectacular signs, but in a whisper. He is often there in the quiet as the ‘still, small voice of calm’. How can we learn to listen for the voice and for the whisper?

■ PRAYER

Lord God, I pray that you will speak clearly to me today, whether in the wind, earthquake or fire, or in a quiet whisper. Amen

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A daily companion to keep by your side

Written by older people for older people, these reflections are designed to bring hope, assurance and sustenance, reminding the reader of the presence and love of God. Each issue contains 40 Bible reflections and prayer suggestions to use and revisit as often as is needed.



In the central section, Pioneer of BRF's Anna Chaplaincy for Older People ministry **Debbie Thrower** offers interviews and ideas to encourage and inspire.



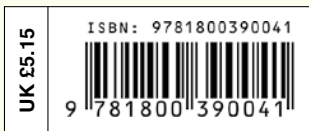
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In this issue...

Ro Willoughby considers hands and feet, our own and in the Bible; **John Rackley** reflects on signs of God's glory in John's gospel, and **Margot and Martin Hodson** show how, through the experience of different weathers, God's people learned to depend on him and how to follow him in all circumstances.



The righteous will flourish like a palm tree... They will still bear fruit in old age, they will stay fresh and green.
Psalm 92:12, 14 (NIV)



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