

MAY-AUGUST 2024



New Daylight

Sustaining your daily journey with the Bible



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Silence DAVID WALKER

Acts 8–15 MICHAEL MITTON

New Daylight

Edited by **Gordon Giles**

May–August 2024

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Suggestions for using *New Daylight*

Find a regular time and place, if possible, where you can read and pray undisturbed. Before you begin, take time to be still and perhaps use the prayer of BRF Ministries on page 6. Then read the Bible passage slowly (try reading it aloud if you find it over-familiar), followed by the comment. You can also use *New Daylight* for group study and discussion, if you prefer.

The prayer or point for reflection can be a starting point for your own meditation and prayer. Many people like to keep a journal to record their thoughts about a Bible passage and items for prayer. In *New Daylight* we also note the Sundays and some special festivals from the church calendar, to keep in step with the Christian year.

New Daylight and the Bible

New Daylight contributors use a range of Bible versions, and you will find a list of the versions used opposite. You are welcome to use your own preferred version alongside the passage printed in the notes. This can be particularly helpful if the Bible text has been abridged.

New Daylight affirms that the whole of the Bible is God's revelation to us, and we should read, reflect on and learn from every part of both Old and New Testaments. Usually the printed comment presents a straightforward 'thought for the day', but sometimes it may also raise questions rather than simply providing answers, as we wrestle with some of the more difficult passages of scripture.

New Daylight is also available in a deluxe edition (larger format). Visit your local Christian bookshop or BRF's online shop brfonline.org.uk. To obtain an audio version for the blind or partially sighted, contact Torch Trust for the Blind, Torch House, Torch Way, Northampton Road, Market Harborough LE16 9HL; +44 (0)1858 438260; info@torchtrust.org.

Comment on *New Daylight*

To send feedback, please email enquiries@brf.org.uk, phone +44 (0)1865 319700 or write to the address shown opposite.

Writers in this issue

Louise Davis lives in Leicester where she spends most of her time gardening, both at home and on her allotment. When she is not up to her elbows in dirt, she works with children and families at Leicester Cathedral.

Martin Leckebusch worked in IT for 37 years before retiring to spend more time writing. He lives in Gloucester, is an elder at a Baptist church and is the author of over 500 published hymn texts.

Michael Mitton is a freelance writer, speaker, spiritual director and canon emeritus of Derby Cathedral. He has been a parish priest, the director of Anglican Renewal Ministries, the deputy director of the Acorn Christian Healing Foundation and the fresh expressions officer for the diocese of Derby. He is author of *Restoring the Woven Cord* (BRF, 2019), among other books.

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Catherine Williams is an Anglican priest working as a spiritual director and freelance writer. She contributes regularly to a variety of devotional, biblical and preaching resources. Catherine is also the lead voice on the Church of England's *Daily Prayer* and *Time to Pray* apps.

Gordon Giles writes...



Easter was a month ago, relatively early this year. Perhaps you know that Easter is calculated as being the first Sunday after the first full moon after the vernal equinox (20 March). Easter always falls in spring, therefore, and can be as early as 22 March (if 21 March is a Saturday and has a full moon).

That last happened in 1818. In 2000 we saw the latest possible Easter, 23 April. This year's date for Easter – 31 March – is not so rare; it was the same day in 2013.

Every Easter is a pausing point on the spiritual highway, which parks us on a new Golgotha hill, with the same view changed by seasons and circumstances. The perspective is altered. For we and everything and everyone else have changed, sometimes imperceptibly, sometimes radically. If we have lost someone, the idea of death and resurrection will strike us in ways that may be challenging or comforting, or both. For others it may just be 'another Easter', a couple of bank holidays with ancient Christian heritage, blessed only with hints of longer days and spring flowers.

Meanwhile every year there are some who are truly affected, deeply, perhaps for the first time, by the very presence of the risen Lord, deep in their hearts, breathing Holy Spirit down necks that have become unstiffened, at last. Whatever Easter has been for you, whatever it has done and is doing to you this year, *notice*, give thanks and do not let it ebb away.

For after Easter day we speak of Eastertide. Tides come in waves, literally. Every year these tides – Christmas, Epiphany, Passion, Easter and Ascension – ebb and flow. Now that Eastertide has washed us in its baptismal waters again, where will it bear us as it goes out? We cannot know, we cannot tell. Yet if the psychologists are right, our ability to imagine the future is buried in our capacity to remember the past. For while we can remember, we can imagine too, and imagination is one of the greatest Easter presents. For buried in memory are the seeds of imagination, which rise up and become a flowering of hope.

This edition we welcome two new authors, Martin Leckebusch and Catherine Williams, both of whom will help us use our imaginations in new Eastertide ways as we journey into spring and summer.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Gordon".

Psalms 52—66



Over the next fortnight, we are spending time reflecting on excerpts from 15 of the psalms. The psalms in the Hebrew Bible are the hymnbook of the people of God, the place where the ups and downs of life are reflected upon and recorded. It is often said of the psalms that ‘all life is here’, meaning that they reflect the full range of human experiences and emotions. In our reflections, we shall encounter fear, anger and desperation, as well as trust, joy and praise. Many of the psalms we are reflecting upon are laments written when the people of God were under attack and in great danger. We shall see how they learn to lean on God, trusting in God to rescue and deliver them from their enemies. We shall see too how God remains steadfast throughout, faithful to the covenant of love made with the people of Israel. Towards the end of our fortnight, we will read some great hymns of praise in which all creation gives thanks for God’s love and faithfulness.

From time to time, we shall also see how themes within the psalms are reflected in the life of Jesus. The psalms were Jesus’ songbook and he knew them intimately, as did his first disciples. We will see how particular verses in the psalms resonate with the gospels and point to Jesus as the word of God made human: one with us, and for us.

The psalms encourage us to be real with God – to not be scared to come into God’s presence and say how we are really feeling. Sometimes we think we have to be on our best behaviour with God, showing deference and being polite in God’s presence. But God knows us through and through, so we can be confident to be really honest about how life is for us at any given time. It is just as important to complain to God about the difficult situations we find ourselves in as it is to be grateful when life is going well. With God, we can tell it how it really is, just as we would with a very close relative or friend. By turning to God in all circumstances we build a deep, trusting and loving relationship that will keep us secure and enable us to flourish in our faith.

Green olive tree

All day long you are plotting destruction. Your tongue is like a sharp razor, you worker of treachery. You love evil more than good and lying more than speaking the truth... But I am like a green olive tree in the house of God. I trust in the steadfast love of God forever and ever. I will thank you forever because of what you have done. In the presence of the faithful I will proclaim your name, for it is good.

Today's psalm contrasts a person of might and power bent on destruction with the faithful follower of God whose sense of purpose comes from trusting in God's steadfast love. The difference is stark and arresting.

The introduction to this psalm indicates that the tyrant is Doeg the Edomite, who slaughtered the priests of Nob when David visited Ahimelech (1 Samuel 21–22). Here is someone who chooses evil over good, rising to fame and fortune through destruction and deceit. Power and wealth have become his gods. The psalmist is confident that God will search him out, judging his rule of terror.

In contrast, the faithful person is portrayed as a green olive tree planted in God's house. The green olive tree is a potent symbol for God's people. Olive trees are a staple in the economy of the Holy Land. Olives are used daily for food, fuel, medicine and cosmetics, and also for holy rituals, such as anointing. Olive wood makes furniture, household goods and ornaments. Both prolific and durable, a healthy olive tree will produce abundantly for years. Virtually indestructible, olive trees can be ancient.

In the Hebrew scriptures, the olive tree stands for peace, fruitfulness and long life. The psalmist uses this symbol to describe the faithful follower of God. Such a follower readily expresses gratitude for all that God has done in the past, is doing now and will do in the future, telling others that God is good, loving and to be trusted. In what ways are you like God's green olive tree today?

Faithful God, may I be like a green olive tree: secure, useful, fruitful and holy. Help me to trust in your steadfast love forever. Amen.

CATHERINE WILLIAMS

Rejoice, be glad

Fools say in their hearts, 'There is no God.' They are corrupt; they commit abominable acts; there is no one who does good. God looks down from heaven on humankind to see if there are any who are wise, who seek after God. They have all fallen away; they are all alike perverse; there is no one who does good, no, not one... When God restores the fortunes of his people, Jacob will rejoice; Israel will be glad.

I was once at a school prizegiving ceremony, where the preacher – an invited guest – took the first verse of Psalm 53 as their text. The preacher declared to a large church full of young people, staff and parents that anyone who did not believe in God was a fool and an idiot. The preacher pronounced that such people were corrupt and capable only of wicked and sinful acts. We heard in no uncertain terms that unless we turned to God, we would be eternally damned. I listened in horrified astonishment. As you might imagine those assembled were angry and offended. The people of faith were embarrassed, as all were subjected to a harsh and belittling message, lacking the compassion, mercy and kindness of God, who gave himself for the entire world in Jesus. Such is the danger of taking verses out of context.

In Psalm 53 the psalmist is looking at his own people, the people of God and recognising some of the dangers of falling away, becoming lukewarm in faith or not maturing in holiness. Sometimes we hold to an immature view of the divine. Instead of being open to God's new and surprising ways, we expect God to act in the ways that seem best to us. It is all too easy to make God too small or in our own image. The good news is that God is always seeking us out, taking the initiative and enabling us to grow deeper in faith and divine intimacy. God will not let us go. Nothing we do can stop God loving us. God comes to us in Jesus, this is how our fortunes are restored, and so there is much in which to rejoice and be glad.

*Thank you for loving me just as I am.
Enable my love for you to keep maturing. Amen.*

Argh! Help me!

Save me, O God, by your name, and vindicate me by your might. Hear my prayer, O God; give ear to the words of my mouth. For the insolent have risen against me; the ruthless seek after my life; they do not set God before them... My heart is in anguish within me; the terrors of death have fallen upon me... But I call upon God, and the Lord will save me... Cast your burden on the Lord, and he will sustain you.

Many years ago on a retreat, the wise priest leading said that there are two prayers every Christian should know by heart and be prepared to use. The first is 'Argh!' – a cry of strong emotion – followed swiftly by the second: 'Help me!'

This type of praying is ably demonstrated in Psalms 54 and 55. The psalmist cries out to God, calls for help and implores God to act. Under attack, the psalmist turns to God trusting that God will rescue and restore. The psalmist also asks God to deal with those who are attacking him. In recognition of God's intervention, the psalmist gives thanks, makes an offering and speaks God's name to others.

As a spiritual director, I listen to complex and troubling situations that affect others. I encourage people to cry out to God, express their deepest feelings and ask God for help and protection. The ways that such prayers are answered can be astonishing and very humbling. Together we find ourselves giving thanks to God and discussing the brilliant ways God solves the seemingly impossible. Sometimes this happens very quickly; other times it takes many years of faithful prayer and trust. This may also include following Jesus' injunction to pray for those who cause us trouble (Matthew 5:44) and believing that God will bring new life from deadly situations – just as in Jesus, whose life we share.

If you are currently going through difficulties, cry out to God: 'Argh!' Call on God: 'Help me!' Trust that God will act for good. Patience and openness to God's timing and ways are key. And when you realise that God has acted and brought new life, give thanks and tell others.

Lord, remind me to cry out to you for help when times are tough. Amen.

CATHERINE WILLIAMS

God knows

You have kept count of my tossings; put my tears in your bottle. Are they not in your record? Then my enemies will retreat in the day when I call. This I know, that God is for me. In God, whose word I praise, in the Lord, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I am not afraid. What can a mere mortal do to me?

The themes of fear and trust are woven throughout Psalm 56. As with the psalms we explored yesterday, the psalmist, under attack, is crying out to God. Oppressed by those who fight and trample, lurk and stir up strife, the psalmist feels the attack is relentless. Perhaps you have been in situations that feel like this. Perhaps you are in such a situation now. At such times, deep fear in the core of our being can take hold. But the psalmist is determined not to let such fear have the upper hand. Perspective is gained by turning to God and trusting deeply in God's promise to rescue and save. People can cause great damage, but they are only flesh and blood. In contrast, God is almighty, eternal and loving.

This is the God who keeps track of all our comings and goings – who is with us on every journey: physical, emotional and spiritual. 'Wanderings' is a better translation than 'tossings' in verse 8. This is the God who knows us through and through and notices everything that happens to us. God is so involved in our lives that even our tears are kept, held safely and preserved. Various cultures from the ancient Greeks and Romans to the more recent Victorians kept the tears of their deceased loved ones in special bottles called lachrymatory phials or tear-catchers. It is a beautiful thought: God holding and cherishing all our tears – of sorrow and joy, mourning and celebration.

Staying close to God, and dwelling in God's word enables trust and faith to blossom, sufficient to overcome fear. For the Christian God's word became incarnate in Jesus, the one who overcame not only fear but also death, opening the way to new life for all.

*Lord God, thank you that you know and notice everything about me.
When I am afraid help me to trust in you. Amen*

A steadfast heart

Be merciful to me, O God; be merciful to me, for in you my soul takes refuge; in the shadow of your wings I will take refuge, until the destroying storms pass by... I lie down among lions that greedily devour human prey; their teeth are spears and arrows, their tongues sharp swords... My heart is steadfast, O God; my heart is steadfast... Be exalted, O God, above the heavens. Let your glory be over all the earth.

John Lennon is credited with saying: 'Everything will be okay in the end. If it's not okay, it's not the end.' Psalm 57 encapsulates this wise thought. The psalmist continues to be under attack. The enemies are like beasts of prey, who bite and tear. Their words are destructive weapons – attacking at a deep level. Our psalmist is surrounded by storms and devastation. This is a very present reality. Perhaps it is a reality for you too.

But there is another reality to hold on to – that of a loving and faithful God who has rescued before and can be relied on to do so again. The shadow of God's wings is a place of safety and refuge. This beautiful maternal image is one picked up by Jesus, who likens himself to a mother hen longing to gather and protect her chicks (Luke 13:34). It is also reminiscent of the Spirit, who broods over the waters at the beginning of creation (Genesis 1:2), waiting to breathe new life into emptiness.

The psalmist responds with joy to this protective and nurturing care. The future is secure, and this assurance enables praise and thanksgiving to bubble over. Our psalmist's desire to sing for joy is sufficient to call a new day into life. When our hearts can hold and reflect God's steadfast love and faithfulness, even in the middle of devastation, then hope is possible: 'Everything will be okay in the end. If it's not okay, it's not the end.' God is in everything, through everything and over everything. Therefore, we can have confidence and hope even when times are tough, the journey long and hard or we can't see a way forward. In the end, everything will be okay.

Lord, make my heart steadfast, even in the toughest times. Amen.

CATHERINE WILLIAMS

Really angry!

The wicked go astray from the womb... They have venom like the venom of a serpent, like the deaf adder that stops its ear, so that it does not hear the voice of charmers... O God, break the teeth in their mouths; tear out the fangs of the young lions, O Lord! Let them vanish like water that runs away; like grass let them be trodden down and wither. Let them be like the snail that dissolves into slime.

What makes you angry? Really angry! Is it a person, a group of people or a situation in your community or in the world today? Think for a moment and identify an injustice that really makes your blood boil. Sometimes only a full-on rant will do. Jesus knew that: overturning the money changers' tables in the temple (Matthew 21:12) or calling the religious authorities a 'brood of vipers' (Matthew 12:34).

Today our psalmist is uncompromisingly angry. Psalm 58 is an uncomfortable psalm, with its intense, violent language and vicious imagery. We might feel embarrassed to read out this psalm in public worship. The writer is absolutely furious and in desperation pours out anger and bitterness. The evil of the community leaders is exposed. They are like snakes who are both poisonous and deaf. Unable to hear the voice of the snake charmer, they cannot be controlled.

It gives a powerful image of chaos unleashed where violence and wickedness have the upper hand. The psalmist calls out for God to intervene and suggests ways that these leaders might be stopped – from disarming them to making them dissolve or vanish. The psalmist looks forward to a time when the wicked will be judged and the righteous will celebrate and rejoice in a God who overturns injustice here and now.

Back to the person, people or situation that is making you angry. What would you like to say to God about that? How would you like God to act? Tell God about it now, and in the privacy of your own home, do not be afraid to strongly express how you are feeling deep down inside.

'Hear my prayer, O Lord; let my cry come to you' (Psalm 102:1). Amen.

Night and day

Each evening they come back, howling like dogs and prowling about the city. They roam about for food and growl if they do not get their fill. But I will sing of your might; I will sing aloud of your steadfast love in the morning. For you have been a fortress for me and a refuge in the day of my distress. O my strength, I will sing praises to you, for you, O God, are my fortress, the God who shows me steadfast love.

It is well-known that dangers seem worse at night, in the dark. When we are anxious, we find it hard to sleep, and our worries seem greater as we lie awake in silence. Aches and pains, fevers and illnesses often seem worse in the small hours. Many parents will have experienced anxious trips to hospitals with young children in the middle of the night. The Samaritans receive their highest volume of calls from people in suicidal crisis during the very early hours of the morning. The empty space of night awakens our imaginations, and suddenly things that are very unlikely to happen – burglary, fire or worse – are just a heartbeat away.

In Psalm 59 our psalmist is again calling for protection and deliverance from those who are making life intolerable through their evil acts. The psalmist likens them to wild dogs who roam the city at night, howling and baying for blood, looking for anything or anyone they can attack and eat. Such terrors of the night are overwhelming. The psalmist calls on God to wake up and help. To be a strong safe place, a fortress and a refuge, where the enemy is barred from entry.

To quell these night-time fears, the psalmist commits to singing confidently in the morning – telling all the world of God’s faithful and steadfast love. Starting each day by recalling God’s love is such a good plan. Reminding ourselves that God will be with us, whatever happens, is easier at the beginning of the day when we often feel more secure. What is your favourite hymn or song about God’s love? Why not sing or listen to it now?

Lord, hold me secure in the darkness. Teach me to sing in the light. Amen.

CATHERINE WILLIAMS



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New Daylight provides four months of daily Bible readings and comment, with a regular team of contributors drawn from a range of church backgrounds. It is ideal for anybody wanting an accessible yet stimulating aid to spending time with God each day, deepening their faith and their knowledge of scripture.

'Thank you for all you do to make every issue so readable and enlightening, giving us the opportunity to get closer to God.'

'Thank you to all the wonderful writers who bring scriptures to life and make them relevant for us in the here and now.'

'I just wanted to say how much I appreciate the notes for helping to keep me going with reading the Bible and shedding light on demanding passages.'

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New Daylight is edited by Gordon Giles, Canon Chancellor of Rochester Cathedral.

In this issue

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