

REVISED AND EXPANDED EDITION

365 readings

for ordinary followers of
Jesus who sometimes
find the going
a bit tough

ADRIAN
PLASS

When you walk

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*When you walk through a storm,
hold your head up high...*

OSCAR HAMMERSTEIN II

INTRODUCTION

Do I enjoy writing books? Yes, on the whole I do. Sometimes the battle to assemble a structure to contain words and ideas can drive me mad, but on those occasions when a piece of work really takes off it can be a wonderful, unparalleled experience. I am very bad at building aeroplanes, but I love flying them.

This book was born in a completely different way, one that brings its own very particular problems and elations. Each section of the book was originally a set of Bible reading notes for *New Daylight*, the Bible study booklet produced by BRF three times each year. Contributors are responsible for writing up to 14 notes on a theme, and I expect we all approach the task differently. No doubt there are highly disciplined individuals who set aside time to write one note each week over a long period, so that when the delivery date arrives the whole thing is neatly prepared and ready to go. I would like to be like that. I am not like that. This is how I do it.

Let us say the delivery date is on a Friday. Right. On the preceding Tuesday evening I lay out everything I will need for the following morning. There will be Bibles, commentaries, at least one concordance, the Concise Oxford Dictionary, Andrew Knowles' Bible guide and several sheets of paper on which to write notes as I proceed.

Wednesday morning arrives. My first, bleary-eyed, panic-stricken thought as I awake is that I *must* write seven notes today if I am to have any hope of reaching my Friday deadline. I don't hang about. Time is short. By eight o'clock I am sitting in front of my computer wishing that I was dead. As my wish is (to date) not granted I simply start to write my first note. By some miracle I always begin to take a deep interest in what I am reading and writing very soon after starting work. Soon I am steaming away, deeply buried and engrossed in the small world of my study, and the Bible verses in question and the lines of Times New

Roman print that are beginning to fill the screen of my computer. Every now and then I stop to agonize over some point, or to pray for relief from my foolishness, or to make an attempt to imagine and empathize with the reader who will eventually be sitting down with that slim BRF volume to share the things that are filling my heart at this moment.

Finally, when the seventh note is completed, I emerge, goggle-eyed and zombie-like from my hothouse of a study, filled with intense relief that once again the impossible has happened. I have filled my quota for the day.

Thursday is a repeat of Wednesday, but with slightly less pressure, and Friday—oh, Friday! I love you, Friday. Friday is the blessed day when I casually flick a button on my wife's computer and those 14 notes sail away into the ether to become someone else's concern.

There are advantages to my way of working, believe it or not, a major one being the unity of approach and style that results from working so intensively over such a short period. An uninterrupted flow of thinking and feeling achieves its own momentum and, I hope, imparts a common flavour to the entire set of notes.

The other advantage is that it suits me to grapple with my own responses to the Bible in the intense and concentrated way that is demanded by such a limited timescale. I have often said that we must deal with our very first response to a passage from the Bible, as opposed to editing our reaction until it falls in line with some worthy corporate view. Sometimes I twist and writhe physically in my seat as I go through the process of dragging the truth from myself before offering it to God and anyone else who cares to read it.

I have made so many friends through the publication of *When You Walk*. All over this country and in many other parts of the world I meet folk who, through the pages of this book, have joined me on a journey that really is for those of us who find the going a bit tough. I am delighted to be involved with the production of this new, expanded version containing more than 140 entries that were not included in the previous edition. There are now 365 readings in all, one for each day of the year, and they are not dated, so you can start on any day you wish, and take a break whenever you feel the need to turn to a proper theologian for more solid sustenance.

Because these notes were written over a period of years, there are references to events and people that are out of date in our lives and in the world context generally, but I am actually rather pleased that this

should be the case. Journeys of the heart travel in all sorts of strange directions, forwards, backwards and, not infrequently, sideways. I hope you enjoy every single detour.

Above all, I pray that you will meet with God through the words on these pages. Jesus calls. Following him will be funny, tragic, puzzling, mysterious, frightening, intriguing and challenging. We don't have to go, of course. We can choose to stand still and watch him recede into the distance if we wish. But let's not do that. Come on. Walk with me.

*To do my duty in that state of life until
which it shall please God to call me.*

THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 1662

NARROW PATHWAYS

JOHN THE BAPTIST

Disciplined, totally focused, unsure and vulnerable, strong but flexible. This list of attributes is not one that we would normally associate with the figure of John the Baptist. He is more often pictured as a hairy, wild-eyed headcase, snarling around the desert, stuffing his face with insects and honey and putting on a sort of loony sideshow for the locals.

The truth is that John was deadly serious about the job he had been born for and absolutely determined to play out his role as the one who would prepare the way for the Messiah. Educated, competent and much loved by his parents Zechariah and Elizabeth, who were more than a little surprised by his arrival, he might have done anything. In fact, he was obedient to the very specific call of God in his life and, because of that, his life was not a very long one.

There are many lessons to be learned from this extraordinary man's devotion to duty, his lack of possessiveness about men or ministry, his ability to remain solidly his own man while never deviating from the need to be God's man and his readiness to be as aggressive and uncompromising as it was necessary to be when faced with sin and hypocrisy.

For me, the most moving part of John's story is the moment in Herod's prison cell when, lost and alone, he loses his confidence and sends a message to Jesus seeking reassurance about the truth that he so confidently announced to the world only a short time before. In the end, John the Baptist was a man, with the weakness and vulnerability that all of us experience from time to time. He was also a hero of the Gospels. He took on the job that was specially his and he finished it.

HE WAS THE ANSWER TO A PRAYER

Luke 1:11–13, 18–20 (NIV)

Then an angel of the Lord appeared... When Zechariah saw him, he was... gripped with fear. But the angel said... 'Do not be afraid... your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John.' ... Zechariah asked the angel, 'How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well on in years.' The angel answered, 'I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent... to tell you this good news. And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words.'

If you get the time, read the whole of this story, verses 5–20.

Can you blame Gabriel for taking such action? Angels do have a rough time occasionally. Imagine turning up full of enthusiasm to tell one of these awkward humans that, against the odds, he's going to have a son. Also, that this son will be great in the sight of God and filled with the Holy Spirit from birth and he'll bring lots of Israelites back to the Lord. Oh, and he'll be the one who prepares the way for the Messiah. All these good things and you get such a wet reaction from the said human.

You might think Zechariah would be just a bit pleased. Instead, the nervous old priest mumbles about feeling unsure about this because he and his wife are well on in years and so it's unlikely... No wonder Gabriel draws himself to his full height and lays down the law in no uncertain fashion. Perhaps he felt he'd been too soft all those years ago when Gideon came out with the same sort of rubbish. Is it possible that angels learn?

The really interesting aspect of the whole business is that, as Gabriel makes quite clear, Elizabeth's pregnancy and the birth of John would be a direct answer to Zechariah's own prayer. It is probably the thing that he and his wife wanted most in the world. Now that he is being offered his heart's desire, he doubts God has sufficient power to make it happen.

It's a lesson to all of us. Prayer is dangerous. We may talk to God about a particular need for years and simply get into the habit of believing it will never be answered. Not a good idea. Remember Zechariah!

Be careful with prayers—they might be answered.

HE WAS LOVED AND WANTED

Luke 1:14, 24–25 (NIV)

‘He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth.’ After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. ‘The Lord has done this for me,’ she said. ‘In these days he has shown his favour and taken away my disgrace among the people.’

I was discussing with a friend recently whether or not he and I would have chosen to have children if we had seen our future with them in advance. We agreed that, probably, neither of us would have proceeded if we had. It’s not, you understand, that our children have not been a joy and delight to us. They have been in their own particular ways, sometimes wonderfully so, but they’ve been other things as well. So many emotional cliffhangers, so many alarms and excursions, so much worry of various kinds. Of course you forget all that when things are good, but, yes, a clear and detailed vision of the future might have put me off altogether.

God was very good to this elderly couple. Once Zechariah had got over his negative response to the good news, he must have remembered and relished that promise from God that John was going to be a joy and delight to his parents. How wonderful for that fact to be furnished in advance from the most reputable source of all. As for Elizabeth, she was like a football manager whose team has just beaten Manchester United—over the moon. After years of barrenness, a son! A gift from God in the autumn of her life.

God gave John the best possible start for the tough times that were to come, didn’t he? It is hard to imagine a son ever having been wanted more than this one. Being loved and wanted was the best possible launching pad for the rest of John’s life. Indeed, being valued and appreciated is rocket fuel for the future of any child.

We must be very tender with those who have not had this kind of start. It’s all very well to say how fellow believers should behave, but if you’ve never been loved it really is ever so hard to be good.

Father, may those whose hearts were broken before they even started learn what it means to be loved by you.

HE WAS FILLED WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT

Luke 1:41–45 (NIV)

When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favoured, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!'

Gabriel had promised that John would be filled with the Holy Spirit from birth, but it seems to have started even before that. In this, one of my favourite gospel moments, we learn that as the two pregnant women met, the unborn John seemed to recognize the unborn Jesus. The foetus inside Elizabeth jumped with a sudden spiritual awareness that the reason for his very existence was only inches away, in that younger, equally excited mother-to-be. I don't know if the presence of the Holy Spirit has an infectious quality, but it appears like that here, doesn't it? Suddenly Elizabeth is speaking inspired words, closely followed by Mary's famous hymn of praise. What a party! Both pregnant, both filled with the Spirit, both filled with babies filled with the Spirit, one bearing God himself within her body.

Much modern teaching about the Holy Spirit has attempted to set down processes or specific stages in connection with the moment when the Spirit enters a believer's life. Such teaching tends to draw heavily on events in the book of Acts and on sections of Paul's letters. Well, that's all right, as long as we don't end up tidying God and his way with us out of existence. I am afraid, brothers and sisters, that God does what he likes. You may have noticed that. It would be very helpful to the church as a whole if we abandoned the notion that theology can be kept in a paddock at the back of the house, and taken out for a bit of a gallop twice a week.

Anything can happen if we are open to being filled with the Spirit at any time.

We long to be filled with the Spirit and to speak out your words, Lord.

REVISED AND EXPANDED EDITION



ADRIAN PLASS

This is a revised and expanded edition of *When You Walk*, the bestselling collection of Adrian Plass's warm, highly individualistic, sometimes refreshingly maverick responses to familiar and not-so-familiar Bible passages. Originally contributed to BRF's *New Daylight* Bible reading notes, the material has been organized into 30 sections for this book, each section beginning with a specially written and substantial preface, which explores the theme further. This revised edition includes a new introduction, plus well over 100 new readings.

Laughter and tears abound in this book. Adrian offers nothing less than the fruits of his own vulnerability so that readers will be equally willing to react honestly. And reading the Bible honestly, admitting the challenge to our innermost feelings, can lead to transformation of our relationship not only with scripture but also with God himself.

Walking the way of Jesus can be very tough but this book helps us remember that no one has to do it alone.

Adrian Plass is an internationally acclaimed writer and speaker. He has written many books, including The Unlocking and Blind Spots in the Bible for BRF, and contributes to New Daylight Bible reading notes. He features as presenter on the DVD for Foundations21, BRF's multimedia discipleship resource, and has travelled and spoken widely on behalf of World Vision UK.



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