

September–December 2024



Bible reflections

for older people



Jesus sat down

Ro Willoughby

Faith in autumn

John Rackley

**God's many-legged
creatures**

the Hodsons

Let the children come

'Tricia Williams



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Ministries



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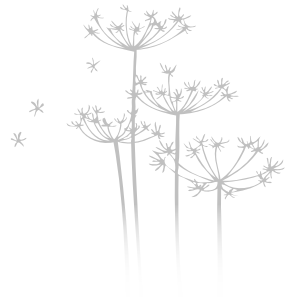
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About the writers



Ro Willoughby has been writing and editing Christian resources for many years. She has recently been licensed as a lay minister at St Chad's Woodseats in Sheffield, where she is engaged in ministry with people of all ages. She has the great joy of living close to her children and grandchildren as well as close to Bakewell and Chatsworth House, although she hasn't yet received an invitation to the ball!



John Rackley has over 40 years' experience in pastoral ministry. He is an associate minister with a Leicestershire Local Ecumenical Partnership and Methodist Circuit. He is currently working on the relationship between biography and belief.



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Tricia Williams is a freelance writer and editor with a passion for helping people engage with God's word. She has a special interest in the spiritual support of people living with dementia and is the author of *God's Not Forgotten Me* (Cascade Books, 2022). She is married to Emlyn (also a writer for *Bible Reflections for Older People*) and has two adult children and one granddaughter.



From the Editor

Welcome.

It was a tatty blue cool box, scattered with leaves, perched on a rickety table beside a forest path. Distracted by the fact I'd almost run out of water and still had several miles to go to reach my destination, I rushed past it. A few steps later, something made me stop and go back.

I brushed off the leaves. A note stuck to the lid read 'Honesty box', in faded felt tip. Tentatively, I opened the box. Inside were bottles of water and cartons of juice, a few KitKats and flapjacks and an old yoghurt pot weighted with coins. I was quite overwhelmed with surprise and gratitude – wonder would not be too strong a word.

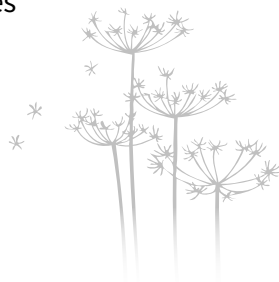
In the days that followed, I came across other honesty boxes, on isolated tracks, in open churches and old stone bothies: all in the tradition of offering hospitality and respite to travellers and pilgrims. I thought a lot about who might have organised the box which saved my day and also about what made me go back.

In 'The gift of years' pages in this issue, George Lings says the 'gift of time to notice' is one of the fruits of older age. Margaret Barnes talks about God's 'cough in the ear': that moment when God whispers 'ahem', to alert you to something you might have missed.

My experience with the honesty box underlines the importance of taking both time to notice and time to listen.

Go well.

Eley
✓
x



Using these reflections

Perhaps you have always had a special time each day for reading the Bible and praying. But now, as you grow older, you are finding it more difficult to keep to a regular pattern or find it harder to concentrate. Or, maybe you've never done this before. Whatever your situation, these Bible reflections aim to help you take a few moments to read God's word and pray whenever you have time or feel that would be helpful.

When to read them

You might use these Bible reflections in the morning or last thing at night, but they work at any time of day. There are 40 reflections here, grouped around four themes, by four different writers. Each one includes some verses from the Bible, a reflection to help you in your own thinking about God, and a prayer suggestion. The reflections aren't dated, so it doesn't matter if you don't want to read every day. The Bible verses are printed, but you might prefer to follow them in your own Bible.

How to read them

- **Take time** to quieten yourself, becoming aware of God's presence, asking him to speak to you through the Bible and the reflection.
- **Read** the Bible verses and the reflection:
 - What do you especially like or find helpful in these verses?
 - What might God be saying to you through this reading?
 - Is there something to pray about or thank God for?
- **Pray.** Each reflection includes a prayer suggestion. You might like to pray for yourself or take the opportunity to think about and pray for others.



Jesus sat down

Ro Willoughby

Maybe you are like me and since childhood you've loved sitting at the front on the top deck of a double decker bus. In the 1950s, research was conducted into double decker bus drivers and conductors. It was discovered that drivers were twice as likely to have a heart attack as their conductor colleagues. They sat for 90% of their shift, whereas conductors climbed about 600 stairs in a day's work.

In Jesus' time, people walked everywhere. While they could ride on a donkey, be carried in a cart or sail in a boat, there were no other forms of transport and they mainly walked. Jesus would have had dirty feet, blisters and splinters. Yet we are specifically told of the times he sat down – to eat, to rest, to be with people, to teach and tell stories, to sit upon a throne in heaven.

We're encouraged to stand up and walk frequently throughout the day to maintain good health, like those bus conductors. Movement and exercise are important, but depending on age, abilities and lifestyle, this is easier for some than for others. We may wish we could walk more and sit less, but take heart. This series invites you to sit down with Jesus and to learn from him.

The Bible passages are the author's own abridged paraphrases, but based on and occasionally directly quoting the NLT.



Luke 2:42–49

Sat in the temple

Aged twelve, Jesus went to Jerusalem for the Passover. When his parents set off for home, Jesus stayed in Jerusalem. Realising he was missing, his parents rushed back and discovered him in the temple, sitting, listening to religious teachers, asking them questions. His anxious mother scolded him. But Jesus replied, ‘I had to be in my Father’s house?’

Most primary school teachers are on their feet most of the time – it’s a physically demanding job. Most public speakers stand to deliver their message – standing is a mark of authority. Preachers rarely sit down to preach. However, at the time of Jesus, any distinguished teacher sat down while his audience gathered around, sitting or standing, to listen intently.

Imagine the twelve-year-old Jesus sitting in the audience among the learned Jewish teachers. He becomes the centre of attention by his insightful questions and the answers he gives when questioned. The audience, turning towards him, is astounded by how he speaks. Maybe they are puzzled by what he means by his ‘Father’s house’. Clearly, he already knows who his Father is and has a deep understanding of his identity. It’s possibly 18 years before crowds gathered around again to listen to him.

■ PRAYER

We call God ‘our Father’ every time we say the Lord’s Prayer. We are God’s sons and daughters, although not in the way Jesus, as the Son of God, was. Say the Lord’s Prayer, thanking God for being your Father in heaven and for his love for you.

Mark 2:13–17

Sat for dinner

Jesus called Levi, the tax collector, to follow him and be his disciple. Later, Levi invited Jesus to come for dinner, along with tax collectors and other disreputable sinners. Seeing this, the religious teachers asked, ‘Why does he eat with such scum?’ Jesus replied, ‘I’ve not come to call those who think they’re good, but those who know they’re sinners.’

Sometimes we don’t even notice a person sleeping rough on the streets. If we do, we may look away or look down on them with scorn, unable to recognise that this is a person who’s probably had a challenging past, with heartaches and broken relationships. Not many people choose to be homeless. They almost certainly know they’ve made mistakes.

We don’t know how Levi, also known as Matthew, became a tax collector. This probably made him rich – tax collectors were expert cheats. Levi works for the hated Roman authorities, so people despise him, but Jesus notices and loves people like Levi. What’s more, Jesus gladly eats with society’s outsiders. Technically, Jesus will not have sat to eat, but will have lain on the floor, leaning on his left elbow, eating with his right hand. How thrilled Levi must be that Jesus accepted his invitation.

■ PRAYER

Next time you see someone begging, someone looking lonely or dejected, someone in trouble, remind yourself that Jesus loves them. Pray now for God to help you notice people like this and ask him to inspire you with ideas for how to share God’s love with them.

Luke 4:16–21

Sat down to teach

In the synagogue, Jesus stood up to read the scroll of the prophet Isaiah: ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me. He’s anointed me to bring good news to the poor, to set the oppressed free.’ He rolled up the scroll and sat down. All eyes looked at him intently. Then he said, ‘Today, this has been fulfilled!’

News spreads fast when a celebrity is coming to town. Crowds flock to see them. Even if a well-known speaker is coming to church, more people than usual will attend the service. Everyone knew Jesus was preaching in local synagogues. We can imagine them excitedly gathering on this sabbath day.

After Jesus reads from the prophet, he sits down to tell them Isaiah was speaking about him and what he’s come to do. They are delighted with his words. ‘He’s one of us, a local boy,’ they say. But as he spells out what that means, they turn against him. How dare he say he’s come not just for Jewish people but for everyone. How dare he remind them that God accepts everyone and that he is the promised one, come to save the world.

■ PRAYER

Remind yourself today that Jesus came to speak good news to poor people, to free those who are imprisoned in some way, to give sight to those who cannot yet see or know God, to transform lives. Pray for someone you know to come to see Jesus for themselves.

John 6:3–11

Sat down on a hill

Jesus climbed a hill and sat down with his disciples. Soon he saw a huge crowd of people coming towards him. ‘Where can we buy bread to feed all these people?’ he asked Philip, who told him that this was impossible. Jesus told everyone to sit down on the grass. Then he took the loaves and fish, thanked God, and everyone ate as much as they wanted.

Jesus and his disciples are tired out by the demands of the crowds of people who want to be near Jesus, to listen to him, and to witness his miracles. So Jesus takes his disciples away to a quiet hilly place, where they sit down to rest.

But the crowds are not so easily deterred. They eventually find Jesus. He probably continues sitting to teach them, until it’s getting late. He knows what it is like to be tired and hungry. So Jesus tells his disciples to organise the crowd. He blesses a few loaves and fish, then the disciples miraculously share out the food. Jesus is overwhelmingly generous. Everyone is satisfied. Baskets of food are left over. Jesus wants to meet the needs of his disciples and the crowds.

■ PRAYER

Pray the Lord’s Prayer again, this time pausing when you come to the phrase, ‘Give us today our daily bread’ (Matthew 6:11, NIV). Our daily bread is not just food, but all our human needs. Tell God what you most need and then thank him that he provides for us in practical ways.

John 6:15–21

Sat in a boat

Jesus went alone into the hills. His disciples waited on the shore. Darkness fell. Jesus still hadn't come, so they got into the boat to cross the lake. When a fierce gale erupted, the water grew very rough. Seeing Jesus walking on the water, they were terrified. 'Don't be afraid,' he called. He got into the boat and they quickly got to the other side.

After you have organised a big event, a family party or an outing, you have probably felt drained of energy. After the crowds had left, having eaten their fill of bread and fish, Jesus must have felt like this. His disciples are keen to get home across the lake, but Jesus needs time for himself and God. Eventually his disciples set off without him. Do they assume he can make his own way back? Or are they just fed up with waiting?

The wind and waves mean they make slow progress. They get scared when they see something like a ghost coming towards them. Maybe they now wished they'd waited for Jesus. Then they realise it is Jesus himself. Once he has sat down in the boat with them, they arrive very quickly over the now-calmed water.

■ PRAYER

The disciples had seen Jesus feed a huge crowd of people, but they couldn't wait for him. Without his presence they were in trouble. They had to learn the important lesson, as we do, of relying on God to be with us. Imagine Jesus sitting with you now and keeping you safe.

John 4:4–10

Sat at a well

A woman was drawing water as Jesus sat wearily by the village well while his disciples went into the village. He asked for a drink. Surprised, she said, ‘You’re a Jew, I’m a Samaritan woman. Why ask me for a drink?’ Jesus replied, ‘If you knew who I am and the gift God has for you, you’d ask me, and I’d give you living water.’

Remember times when it’s hot and it’s the middle of the day and you’re thirsty – what you most want is either a cup of tea or a large ice cream. There is no ice cream van by this well, but here’s a woman with a bucket who could draw cool water from deep underground that would satisfy Jesus’ thirst.

She comes to draw water at the hottest time of day because she doesn’t want to meet anyone and most people only come when it’s cooler. No one wants to socialise with such a disreputable woman. But Jesus enters into conversation and asks her for water to drink. We’re not even told if she actually gives him a drink, but we do know that he opens her eyes to who he is and why he has come. He gives her living water from God that will satisfy her forever.

■ PRAYER

Jesus sits here because he wants to talk to a woman who longs to be loved and accepted. She needs God. Imagine yourself telling Jesus what you long for. Listen to what he says and receive his gift of love for you.

Luke 10:38–42

Sat with friends

Martha and Mary welcomed Jesus and his disciples into their home. Mary sat listening to Jesus, while Martha busily prepared a meal. ‘Lord,’ Martha said, ‘my sister sits here while I do all the work? Tell her to help me.’ Jesus said, ‘Martha, you’re upset over many things! Only one thing is worth bothering about. Mary has discovered it.’

Most Wednesdays I meet with a small group of people from my church. We read the Bible together and pray. It is one of the highlights of my week. We learn from and support one another and listen to God. We know Jesus meets with us. If he were physically sitting with us, as in this story, I wouldn’t leave the room to prepare refreshments. But if Jesus were tired, hungry or thirsty and he asked me for a drink, like the woman at the well, I would hope I’d go out of the room to do so.

Mary is doing the right thing. She is learning from Jesus. Jesus may need refreshments, so Martha is also doing the right thing. She is probably good at entertaining, but she is doing the right thing with a grumbling spirit. Jesus calls her ‘Martha!’ and gently calms her down.

■ PRAYER

Ask Jesus to help you to listen and reflect on his words. But also ask him to help you to serve him in ways that only you can. Pray to do both with a joyful heart.

Matthew 26:20–28

Sat at his last meal

When it was evening, Jesus sat at the table with the Twelve. As they were eating, Jesus took some bread, blessed it, broke it in pieces and gave it to them, saying, ‘Eat it, for this is my body.’ Then he took a cup of wine and gave it to them. He said, ‘Each of you drink from it. This is my blood.’

You’ve probably received bread and wine in Communion more times than you can number, yet it remains very special. At the last meal with his disciples, Jesus prepares them for his death the next day, though when he calls broken bread ‘his body’ they may have been confused. It’s dark. The city of Jerusalem is crowded with Passover pilgrims. His disciples know his enemies want him dead. Jesus sits with them and says that one among them will betray him. The atmosphere over the meal is very tense.

Jesus gives his disciples, and Christian communities ever since, a pattern of coming together regularly to remember his death and resurrection, often with the instruction to do so in our hearts and with thanksgiving. We might experience Jesus’ closeness particularly strongly at times like this.

■ PRAYER

Life can seem difficult, confusing, frightening. Ask Jesus to sit with you by faith, giving you hope and comfort, as he did the disciples. This is possible at any time, but you may find it is especially so when you meet with others to re-enact and remember Jesus’ last meal.

John 21:3–13

Sat on the beach

Jesus' disciples fished all night but caught nothing. At dawn Jesus, standing on the beach, told them where to throw their nets. They caught 153 fish. When they came ashore there was bread and fish, cooking over a fire. 'Have some breakfast!' Jesus said. No one dared ask, 'Who are you? They knew it was him. Then he served them the bread and fish.

Jesus' disciples saw him several times in his resurrected body. He turned up when least expected, especially on the first Easter day. On this occasion we might say he was acting normally, presumably kneeling or sitting by a charcoal fire, cooking breakfast for his hungry friends.

Only nothing is normal about this scene. He has appeared from nowhere at dawn and knows where to find his disciples. Somehow, he knows where a shoal of fish is just waiting to be caught. He's already started cooking breakfast with food that has come from somewhere. Is he cooking bread and fish to remind his friends of how he'd fed the hungry crowd? What's more, to his disciples there is something about him that is the same but different. They are in awe of him.

■ PRAYER

We rejoice that Jesus conquered death and came alive again in a new resurrection body. We also rejoice that he still came to the help of his disciples and showed his love for them. Imagine being on that beach with the resurrected Jesus. What would you want to say to him?

Hebrews 10:11–12; 1:3

Sat down, job done

Previously, the priest stands, ministering day after day at the altar, offering the same sacrifices again and again. They can never take away sins. Jesus, our high priest, offered himself as a single sacrifice for sins, good for all time. When he'd cleansed us from our sins, he sat down in the place of honour at the right hand of the majestic God in heaven.

You arrive at the end of a day after working hard on something physically or emotionally demanding or a task that's demanded a lot of brain power. What a relief to sit down. Job done. Maybe God felt something like that when he rested on the seventh day of creation. A good job, done very well.

The writer to the Hebrews suggests Jesus felt like that too. Before Christ, the guilt and shame that the people of God experienced over their sin was never totally wiped clean. Once Jesus had been killed, voluntarily taking on himself the sin of the whole world, no more sacrifices were needed. His single sacrifice can cleanse us forever. Job done. Jesus could sit down. Only he's not sitting on any old throne but next to God, his Father in heaven.

■ PRAYER

'If we confess our sins to God, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness' (1 John 1:9). We know God has forgiven us, but we still need to daily claim his ongoing forgiveness. Do that now, then relax. You're forgiven.



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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.



Bible Reflections for Older People is edited by **Eley McAinsh**.

In this issue...

John Rackley sings the praises of autumn and **Tricia Williams** listens to the wisdom of children. **Margot and Martin Hodson** celebrate God's many-legged creatures and **Ro Willoughby** reflects on the significant moments when Jesus sat down.



May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy. Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.
Psalm 126:5-6 (NRSV)

