

May–August 2026



Bible reflections

for older people

Rooftops and shelters
Clare O’Driscoll

Surprise! Surprise!
David Butterfield

At the feet of Jesus
Mary Yates

God of all comfort
April McIntyre



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Ministries



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EU Authorised Representative: Easy Access System Europe –
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ISBN 978 1 80039 494 0
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Cover image: Jennie Razumnaya on Unsplash

Acknowledgements

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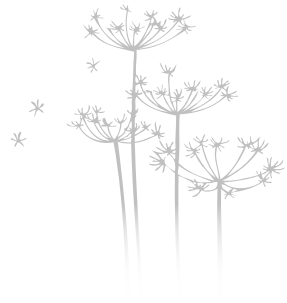
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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Printed and bound in the UK by Zenith Media NP4 0DQ.

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About the writers



Clare O'Driscoll lives with her family in West Sussex where she gives Spanish and French tuition and occasionally writes for Christian publications. Clare is mildly obsessed with the sea and, in between her other tasks, is working on a book reflecting on life and purpose through stories from beach cafés.



David Butterfield was born in Yorkshire. After studying music he felt the call to ordination in the Church of England. During his 40-year ministry he served at churches in Southport, the Midlands, and Shropshire. His final post was based at York Minster, from which he retired in 2017. He and his wife Irene now live in Ripon in North Yorkshire.



Mary Yates lives in Kent, where she loves to write and go for family walks. Inspired by the wonderful relationship she had with her grandparents and two great aunts, she has always enjoyed spending time with people in later life. Having worked as a solicitor to elderly and vulnerable clients, Mary now shares her passion for ministry with the older members of her church as an Anna Friend.



April McIntyre grew up on the outskirts of Stoke-on-Trent and now lives in Derbyshire with her husband Mike. She is now 'retired' from a career in administration but serves as an Anglican lay minister, with interests in contemporary worship and music-making, preaching, spirituality, and silent prayer. She is a member of the Association of Christian Writers and self-published a small book of reflections and poems in 2022.



From the Editor

Welcome!

Last summer I was lucky to have the opportunity to trial a new 'self-learning' version of the celebrated Spiritual Care Series course. The course is fully endorsed by the Anna Chaplaincy team and aims to equip people to better support the spiritual needs of older people. It's both demanding and rewarding and, rightly, involves a good deal of challenging self-reflection. We can easily avoid reflecting on our own mortality in day-to-day busyness and routine, but not when a nice Australian video producer is waiting for feedback.

For me, the most striking thing about the Spiritual Care Series is how it balances great honesty about the serial losses of ageing, with a constant conviction that it's possible to continue to grow, and to find meaning, purpose, and value, right to the very end of life, and even when living with advanced dementia. It chimes well with the theme of Rabbi Zalman Schacter-Shalomi's *From Age-ing to Sage-ing: A profound new vision of growing older* (Grand Central Publishing, 1997). He writes: 'An elder is a person who is still growing, still a learner, still with potential and whose life continues to have within it promise for, and connection to, the future. An elder is still in pursuit of happiness, joy and pleasure and her or his birthright to these remains intact.'

Amen to that.

Eley



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.



Rooftops and shelters

Clare O'Driscoll

The rooftops of St Ives are lichen-scuffed, as though sprinkled with mustard powder. The haphazard jumble of them juts out at every angle in staggered heights, with obligatory seagulls on chimney pots. The mismatched shapes and sizes don't detract from their single purpose however – to provide shelter.

Just like these rooftops, the refuge God gives is varied and diverse. In turn, our gifts of refuge to others reflect our own uniqueness. Our broken world is so full of need and sometimes I fear I'm not giving enough 'shelter'. I see others jump in with support at a moment's notice and feel guilty for not being such a strong provider of refuge. But maybe that's not the kind of shelter I am.

We should always strive to welcome the stranger but, when our situation makes it impossible to offer physical shelter, perhaps we can be a 'rooftop' in other ways? The shelter of kind words in someone's storm of discouragement, the refuge of hope, the sanctuary of a listening ear. In the following reflections, we consider ways we receive shelter from God and how we offer it to others. Whatever form it takes, our unique presence in another's life can make all the difference.



Mark 2:4 (NIV)

Hole in the roof

Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus by digging through it and then lowered the mat the man was lying on.

In some church circles there are jokes about the endless need for a 'Roof fund'. As soon as one leaky hole is patched up, another appears. Like many, I recall worshipping alongside buckets, to the percussion of echoing drips.

Having a hole in the roof isn't usually seen as a good thing. In this story, however, it is actively sought. Here, something else is more important than the building. These people love their friend so much that they will vandalise a roof in order to bring him closer to Jesus.

By making the house a little broken, they draw attention to the brokenness their friend suffers. They admit that he needs help beyond anything they can offer. Jesus sees their humble love and heals not only his legs, but also his soul.

Of course, it is absolutely right that we are good stewards of the buildings entrusted to us. But we must also remember the church is more than this. God's first priority is the people within. Sometimes our shelter, even our lives, might need to be disrupted a little to provide an opening for ourselves and others to come closer to Jesus.

■ PRAYER

Jesus, show us where our desire for an undisrupted life might prevent us from bringing others closer to you. Amen.

Amos 9:11 (NIV)

Broken shelters

‘I will restore David’s fallen shelter.’

The festival was a washout, the campsite waterlogged. Now we had to carry a weekend’s worth of ‘stuff’ to the car. We left our children under the gazebo with strict instructions not to move while we loaded ourselves like mules and set off on the ten-minute walk.

When we returned, we found the children had obediently stayed put. The gazebo, however, was another matter. We found the wreck of it a short distance away. It became an amusing family anecdote. However, in reality broken shelters are a painful business – our cover ripped away, beyond our choice and control.

Probably, at some point in all our lives, one of our shelters has, or will, come tumbling down. It may be a job, a relationship, a bereavement, our health. We find ourselves exposed to the elements, cold and unprotected from the storms of life and the stinging rain of grief.

It’s not just the shelter that is broken. We ourselves feel broken, insecure without this thing we relied on. Like losing a layer of skin, we feel vulnerable and raw. But God is the restorer of shelters, mender of damaged things, with us in our brokenness. He stands in the gap saying, ‘I am with you,’ and a day is coming when he will repair all our ‘broken rooftops’ and wipe away every tear.

■ PRAYER

Thank you that within the exposure and vulnerability of broken shelter, we have the hope and promise of your restoration. Amen.

Psalm 17:8 (NIV)

Security in the shelter

Keep me as the apple of your eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings.

With the rattle of wings and a swoop, a shadow momentarily cuts across our sunlit garden. Then it's gone. In some ways, wings might not appear the most enduring of shelters. They seem a little... flighty. They flutter and move, rarely staying in one place. But maybe that's the point. They're organic, alive. They speak of the kind of shelter that brings freedom.

Similarly, God's shelter might not always look as we expect. It is a living, dynamic refuge. Not some functional, inanimate 'thing' but a being. Strong and beautiful, limitless with love for us.

Like wings, God's shelter is constant and unchanging without being rigid and unmoveable. It is freedom and security rather than a constrictive ceiling. It covers us wherever we go without restraining us.

Perhaps it is in the knowledge of his deep love for us that we find true security. Not just physical shelter but a better understanding of who we are in God's eyes, how we are cherished, the apple of his eye. Covered by his wings, we are safe. Held close by God, we can find peace with ourselves and become more sure of who we are: children God created. Beloved of God.

■ PRAYER

Thank you for your never-changing shelter that covers me wherever I go. Thank you that I can always be secure in your love. Amen.

1 Kings 19:11a (NIV)

Away from the shelter

The Lord said, ‘Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord.’

The twigs crackled satisfyingly under our feet as we wandered with friends between tall trees. Then the rains came. We took refuge in a damp wooden bird hide and ate our sandwiches there, shushing our collective gaggle of young children as serious, binocular-clad twitchers stepped in.

There, for a short time, we were protected and could look out on the rain-drenched beauty of a tree-lined lake, inside the storm but untouched by it. The time came, however, when, rain or no rain, we needed to move on. We could not spend our whole day in that hut.

Nor can we spend our whole lives hiding. Pursued by the whirlwind storm that was Jezebel, no one would blame Elijah for wanting to take cover. But after a time, God called him out of his shelter. The storm wasn’t over, but this time of grace and respite had strengthened him for the onward journey.

When God called Elijah out, it was not to walk on alone but in ‘the presence of the Lord’. Leaving our shelter does not mean God abandons us. Quite the opposite. He walks with us through the ongoing storm. God alone knows when we are strong enough to stand again. His whisper will tell us.

■ PRAYER

Thank you, Father, for your constant presence – for your shelter when I need it and your strength to move on when I’m ready. Amen.

Deuteronomy 22:8a (NIV)

Build a parapet

When you build a new house, make a parapet around your roof.

When a woman in the village found herself suddenly, searingly alone, widowed unexpectedly young, the ladies from the local church came. They surrounded her with love, hemmed her round with their care. Held her up.

It was as though they'd joined hands around her. They brought food, organised practical support and offered listening ears. None of these women would claim to have done everything, but collectively they built a 'parapet', encircling her and stopping her from falling.

We may not always feel much good at offering shelter, but perhaps our care and small actions can build a parapet around those who might otherwise fall, hemming them round with God's love.

This isn't just for those experiencing major traumas. Sometimes, those on the edges, hovering vulnerably in the margins, are most at risk of falling. Perhaps we can ask God how we might be a parapet for them. Our part may feel small: packing bags at a food bank, writing a letter of protest against injustice or maybe listening to the lonely. We will rarely meet a need fully – God alone can do that – but we might add a few bricks to the parapet, perhaps filling a crucial gap, restoring the faith of others as they see God at work.

■ PRAYER

God, who hems me round, thank you for those who have built a parapet around me. Show me how I might prevent others from falling. Amen.

Matthew 8:8 (NIV)

As you find us

The centurion replied, ‘Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed.’

‘You’ll have to take us as you find us!’

It was a phrase I often heard my mother say cheerily as she ushered unexpected guests into our loved and lived-in home. In fact, when my parents replaced the front door, they chose one with an external handle so that anyone could – and often did – walk straight in.

I’ve inherited Mum’s love for offering hospitality but not always her ability to be so relaxed about it. Often, I want things to be just right, flying around tidying up clutter before I allow that door to be opened. Because what would they think if they found us as we are?

Worse than the mess in our homes can be the mess in our hearts. It’s easy to feel unacceptable, not ‘tidy’ enough, but actually Jesus prefers my mum’s way. He would rather ‘take us as he finds us’. When Jesus knocks at the door, he wants to see the honest messy beauty of who we really are. He is the guest who doesn’t care about trimmings. The one who simply wants to spend time with us. By opening the door, we will share the centurion’s confidence, because, when Jesus meets us where we are, we find healing for our weary perfectionist souls.

■ PRAYER

Jesus, please take me as you find me today. Amen.

2 Kings 4:10a (NIV)

Loft conversion

‘Let’s make a small room on the roof and put in it a bed and a table, a chair and a lamp for him.’

After a difficult autumn term in southern France, walking on eggshells in unwelcoming, even hostile accommodation, a friend and I took refuge in the attic flat of an elderly French couple’s house in a quiet, leafy part of a Provençal city. The long, thin space was quirky and makeshift with a tiny shower and toilet built into hardwood cupboards in the living room. But it was a haven in comparison, a gift from God. To feel unwelcome in one’s home is a terrible thing.

I will never forget this couple’s kindness in sharing their resources, allowing us use of their washing machine and providing a kitchen – things which had previously been denied us. Their decision to make part of their home available and affordable to students met our needs, allowing us to study and enjoy life there.

I think of loft conversions as relatively recent but, in this passage, we see what might possibly be the first. By building a room on the roof, the Shunammite woman allowed Elisha to fulfil his work for God. It’s not always possible to give over part of our home, but perhaps we can welcome the outsider in different ways? Perhaps, our sharing of God’s gifts with others might even enable them to fulfil God’s call.

■ PRAYER

Father, show me how to share your gifts of refuge with others. Amen.

Ecclesiastes 7:12 (NIV)

The shelter of wisdom

Wisdom is a shelter as money is a shelter, but the advantage of knowledge is this: wisdom preserves those who have it.

I did a double take. Someone was describing a financial gift so generous it was almost ridiculous – possibly even making the difference between the recipients having a home or not. And that’s just one of the stories I’ve heard lately of people giving, not just willingly, but unhesitatingly, to meet the genuine needs of others.

Knowing how wrong attitudes regarding money always lead to pain, we can see it as tainted. However, used wisely, money has huge potential for good. It provides shelter, food, security, even rescue. We cannot pretend to live in a world where money is irrelevant, but we must get the pecking order right. Wisdom shows us that every last thing comes from God’s abundant generosity, lavishing us with his good gifts. Wisdom straightens our wonky priorities, sparing us from mistakenly taking refuge in money.

And generosity is the place where money and wisdom meet. It reveals that we understand that this money was never really ours, that it has no hold on us and that we instead find our security and refuge in God. Perhaps the wisdom of having such an attitude to money is what gives true and lasting refuge. The wisdom of knowing our true shelter is always in God.

■ PRAYER

God of abundance, thank you for all your gifts. Give us wisdom to be channels of your generosity to others. Amen.

Matthew 10:27 (NIV)

The shelter of truth

‘What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight; what is whispered in your ear, proclaim from the roofs.’

I wanted to curl up and disappear. I had taken a visitor who was rather more extrovert than myself to some castle ruins and he’d grabbed the opportunity to do a little vocal training – climbing the crumbling stairway and bellowing an echoing voice across the calm surrounding parkland. I laughed and winced in equal measures. In our British culture, we’re not always good at shouting things from the rooftops.

Although sometimes perhaps we should. Sometimes we need to speak up for God’s truth, whether it’s carefully following up an instinct that something’s wrong, sharing our faith, or offering a word of encouragement.

A year or so back, a friend who had struggled through her teens wrote to our church youth group leaders of 30 years ago to tell them how life-changing their gentle guiding presence had been. Later, I chanced upon them at an event. The wife shared how she had been going through a rough patch when the letter arrived, and she wept as she read it. Often people have no idea of the positive difference they make, so we need to tell them because our words of truth and encouragement might in turn be a shelter to them, covering them in God’s love at a challenging time.

■ PRAYER

Give us words of wisdom and truth so that we might bring your protection and hope to others. Amen.

Psalm 61:4 (NIV)

Tent dwellers

I long to dwell in your tent forever and take refuge in the shelter of your wings.

My tiny hand shot up at the ballet teacher's question. She wanted to know what fairies built houses from, and I absolutely knew the answer. We'd been learning about buildings at school.

When I confidently enunciated 'bricks and cement', it didn't get quite the affirmation I'd expected, just the teacher's smothered laughter. Apparently, she was thinking more along the lines of twigs, leaves, and petals. In my young mind, none of these were really going to cut it, however lovely they looked.

Sometimes our flimsy shelters aren't enough to protect us from life's storms. I have been in leaky tents. I've put my trust in other things that don't cover me too. The wrong things. Achievements, approval, and accumulations. They look enticing, but don't cut it when the crunch comes.

It's when that crunch comes, when challenges rain down in torrents, that we understand. We cannot rely on leaky shelters. We cannot put our faith in superficial appearances. If we are looking for strong refuge, we'd be unlikely to choose the silky-fine fibres of a tent. It seems too fragile. But God's tent is different. God turns this world's understanding upside-down. In his tent we find a secure refuge, a haven from the storm. Trustworthy and leakproof, it holds us forever.

■ PRAYER

Loving God, in times of trouble, let me always find myself safe in your tent. Amen.



Surprise! Surprise!

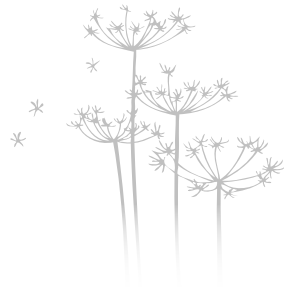
David Butterfield

When we read the gospels, there are many occasions when we are told that the crowds who were attracted to Jesus were surprised. On other occasions we read of how the disciples were surprised.

As we will discover, there were a number of different reasons why people were surprised. Sometimes the element of surprise was positive and sometimes it was negative.

There are also occasions in the gospels when Jesus himself was surprised. Again, sometimes he was surprised for positive reasons and sometimes for negative reasons. As we read our Bibles, we might find that what we read comes as a surprise to us.

It was in 1955 that the well-known author C.S. Lewis wrote a book called *Surprised by Joy*. In the book he tells of how he was surprised by joy when he became a Christian. May you know something of that joy as you read these reflections.



Matthew 7:28–29 (CEV)

The sermon on the mount

When Jesus finished speaking, the crowds were surprised at his teaching. He taught them like someone with authority, and not like their teachers of the Law of Moses.

When I was ten years old, our teacher at school encouraged us to memorise the opening section of the sermon on the mount. The sermon covers a number of significant topics, including being salt and light, giving to those in need, praying, and storing up treasure in heaven.

Jesus was a rabbi, which means ‘teacher’. At that time, people would be used to listening to sermons preached by rabbis. However, when they listened to Jesus’ teaching, they were surprised because it was very different from what they were used to. This was because Jesus spoke with an authority that other rabbis did not have. Of course, we know this was because he wasn’t just a rabbi; he was and is the Son of God. So, if the words of Jesus have authority, we need to take to heart what he teaches in the sermon on the mount and elsewhere.

In preparing this reflection, I decided to read the whole of the sermon on the mount out loud (Matthew 5–7) and to time myself reading it. It took 15 minutes and 43 seconds. May I suggest that you read it out loud to yourself. If you do, you might find that some of it surprises you in a fresh way.

■ PRAYER

Lord Jesus Christ, thank you that today we can read the sermon that you preached all those years ago. Help us to take your words to heart, so that we will be blessed. Amen.

John 3:7 (NIV)

Born again

You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’

In John 3 we read how a Pharisee called Nicodemus came to Jesus at night. He may have come at night because he didn’t want his fellow Pharisees to know about his conversation with Jesus. Nicodemus was surprised when Jesus told him that he needed to be born again.

My dad sang in the church choir for many years. He got to know well the hymns, psalms, and anthems that the choir sang. However, when he looked back on his life he would say that, during those years, something was missing.

When my dad was in his 40s, a new vicar was appointed. The church grew significantly under his ministry. From time to time he would preach about how, when Jesus encountered a Pharisee called Nicodemus, he said to him, ‘You must be born again.’

This struck a chord with my dad and, as a result, his Christian belief was transformed into a close relationship with Jesus. He would say that he had been born again. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul writes: ‘I pray that the eyes of your hearts may be enlightened’ (1:18). I believe the eyes of Nicodemus’ heart were enlightened. When this happens to us, we are born again – we become alive spiritually.

■ PRAYER

Lord Jesus Christ, enlighten the eyes of my heart so that I will see you more clearly, love you more dearly, and follow you more nearly, day by day. Amen.

Matthew 8:5–8, 10a (GNT)

The faith of a Roman officer

When Jesus entered Capernaum, a Roman officer met him and begged for help: ‘Sir, my servant is sick in bed at home, unable to move and suffering terribly’. ‘I will go and make him well,’ Jesus said. ‘Oh no, sir,’ answered the officer. ‘I do not deserve to have you come into my house. Just give the order, and my servant will get well’... When Jesus heard this, he was surprised.

I imagine that, at some point in our lives, most of us will have experienced a family member or a good friend being seriously ill. It may have been a very worrying time for that individual and for their friends and family.

In today’s passage, we read of how a Roman officer was very worried about his servant’s illness. During the time of Jesus, Israel was occupied by the Romans, so it would have been unusual for a Roman army officer to approach Jesus. He must have done this out of desperation, having heard how Jesus could heal people. Jesus was surprised at the faith of this Roman officer. He wasn’t a Jew and may not have been a religious man. Jesus said to the officer, ‘Go home, and what you believe will be done for you’ (v. 13). The officer’s servant was healed that very moment.

In Hebrews 11, the writer recalls a long list of people from the Old Testament who had great faith, people like Noah, Abraham, and Moses. May the example of the faith of the army officer and of those listed in Hebrews 11 be an inspiration to you and strengthen your faith in God.

■ PRAYER

Heavenly Father, please increase my faith in you, so that I may be a help and a strength to friends and family when they go through difficult times. Amen.

Mark 6:1–2a, 5–6 (GNT)

Jesus goes back to Nazareth

Jesus left that place and went back to his hometown, followed by his disciples. On the Sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue... He was not able to perform any miracles there, except that he placed his hands on a few sick people and healed them. He was greatly surprised, because the people did not have faith.

In the last reflection we heard about a Roman centurion who surprised Jesus by his faith. In today's Bible reading we find the opposite. I recall in my childhood that there were occasions when I would readily accept what I was told by my teacher at school or by other people, but would be less open to accepting what my parents had to say. It is interesting how we sometimes dismiss comments made by people we know well but accept them from others.

This is what happened to Jesus when he went to Nazareth. There was a negative atmosphere. This was because those who lived in Nazareth had known Jesus as a child and watched him grow up. They were probably thinking to themselves, 'How can we learn anything from him?' So Jesus said to them, 'Prophets are respected everywhere, except in their own hometown and by their relatives and their family' (v. 4). It's surprising that this lack of faith of the people of Nazareth prevented Jesus from performing miracles. Just as faith has positive effects, the absence of faith can hinder the working of God's saving power. Are there any people whom we hesitate to take notice of, who might actually have something of value to say to us?

■ PRAYER

Heavenly Father, help me to discern what you might want to say to me through my conversations with other people. Give me an open and receptive heart so that I may discover what you might want to say to me through them. Amen.

Matthew 19:23–25a (NCV)

A rich man meets Jesus

Jesus said to his followers, ‘I tell you the truth, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. Yes, I tell you that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.’ When Jesus’ followers heard this, they were very surprised.

Today’s passage comes after the account of a rich man who came to Jesus and asked, ‘What good thing must I do to have eternal life?’ (v. 16, CEV). To which Jesus replied: ‘If you want to be perfect, go sell everything you own! Give the money to the poor, and you will have riches in heaven. Then come and be my follower’ (v. 21, CEV).

Jesus’ illustration of a camel going through the eye of a needle is an example of hyperbole – using exaggeration to make the point. I believe he was saying that the richer we are, the less likely we are to be generous. However, we shouldn’t hold back from being generous because Jesus also said: ‘Give, and you will receive. You will be given much. Pressed down, shaken together, and running over, it will spill into your lap. The way you give to others is the way God will give to you’ (Luke 6:38).

Down the years I have been surprised how this has been true in my life. Jesus also said: ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive’ (Acts 20:35). I’m sure there have been times in your life when you have been surprised how true this is.

■ PRAYER

Heavenly Father, thank you for the surprising ways in which you have been generous to me throughout my life. Please show me how I can be generous to others and be a blessing to them. Amen.

John 4:27–29 (NIV)

The woman at the well

[Jesus’] disciples returned and were surprised to find him talking with a woman. But no one asked, ‘What do you want?’ or ‘Why are you talking with her?’ Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, ‘Come, see a man who told me everything I’ve ever done. Could this be the Messiah?’

During my lifetime, the role of women has changed dramatically for the better, though there is still a way to go. Thankfully, in the UK today, women’s equality is a fundamental human right and a core value of the United Nations. This was not so in the culture in which Jesus lived. As Jesus was on his way to Galilee, he came to a town called Sychar, in Samaria. He was tired from the journey, so he sat down at Jacob’s well. His disciples had gone to buy food.

While he was there, a Samaritan woman came to the well and Jesus had a conversation with her. This was unusual because, in that culture there was a saying: ‘Let no one talk to a woman in the street.’ As the commentator William Barclay writes: ‘Jesus could hardly have done a more shattering, unconventional thing than to talk to this woman.’ So when the disciples returned they were surprised because this woman had quite a reputation. She had had five husbands. But we need to follow Jesus’ example and make sure we don’t discriminate against people who may be different from us. While, in some instances, we might not find this easy, it is something that Jesus has set as an example for us to follow.

■ PRAYER

Lord Jesus Christ, thank you that when you were on earth, you treated people equally. When we meet people who are different from us, help us to follow your example: to be kind to them and show them love and care. Amen.

Mark 15:43–45 (NIV)

Did Jesus really die?

Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent member of the Council, who was himself waiting for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body. Pilate was surprised to hear that he was already dead. Summoning the centurion, he asked him if Jesus had already died. When he learned from the centurion that it was so, he gave the body to Joseph.

In today's Bible reading, Mark tells us that Pilate was surprised when he was told that Jesus was already dead.

In the 19th century, a man called Heinrich Paulus publicised a theory that Jesus did not actually die on the cross. He believed that Jesus became unconscious on the cross, but survived crucifixion, and then regained enough strength to appear to people. Thankfully, as far as I am aware, it's not a theory that has a following today.

Of course, if Jesus didn't really die, the Christian faith is an utter sham. However, if he did die and rise again, as the gospel writers tell us, I would say that it is the most momentous and significant event in all of history. When the disciples saw Jesus alive, they must have been very surprised, yet it wasn't long before they realised that he truly had risen from the dead. So, although there may be people today who do not believe that Jesus rose from the dead, we can have confidence that he did. That confidence can come from reading the biblical accounts of the resurrection. It can also come through the witness of millions of people who have followed Jesus across two millennia.

■ PRAYER

Lord Jesus Christ, thank you that we can have confidence that you rose from the grave. As we seek to follow you, strengthen us in our faith so that we know that you are with us day by day. Amen.

Matthew 22:30–33 (CEV)

Raised with Christ

‘When God raises people to life, they won’t marry. They will be like the angels in heaven. And as for people being raised to life, God was speaking to you when he said, “I am the God worshipped by Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” He isn’t the God of the dead, but of the living.’ The crowds were surprised to hear what Jesus was teaching.

During Jesus’ time, there was a group of a wealthy, aristocratic Jews called Sadducees. They did not believe in the resurrection of the dead or an afterlife. One day they tried to catch Jesus out. They asked him what would happen if there were seven brothers and each died, one by one, after marrying the same woman. At the resurrection, whose wife would the woman be, given that she had been married to all seven brothers? Jesus told them that there won’t be any marriage in heaven.

Can you imagine the tension that must have been in the air when Jesus was asked this question? The people must have held their breath as they wondered what Jesus would say. Would he be able to give a satisfactory answer to the question? But it was Jesus who surprised them with his reply.

Is there someone you know who has died, whom you miss? Jesus’ reply to the Sadducees is an encouragement to remember that those who die in the faith of Christ will one day be raised to life and be with Christ forever.

■ PRAYER

Heavenly Father, thank you that through faith in the risen Christ we can be assured that one day we will be raised to new life. Please increase this faith in us, so that we may have confidence that on that day there will be no more death, grief, crying, or pain. Amen.

Acts 4:13 (EASY)

Friends of Jesus

The Jewish leaders saw that Peter and John were not afraid of them. They also knew that they were not special people. They had not been to any school. So the leaders were very surprised about how Peter and John spoke. They understood that Peter and John had been friends with Jesus.

In Acts 3 we read how Peter and John went to the temple in Jerusalem. Every day, a lame man used to sit at an entrance to the temple called Beautiful Gate begging for money. Peter said to the man, 'I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk' (v. 6, NRSV). The man was immediately healed. A crowd gathered and Peter explained to the people that the lame man had been healed by the power of the name of Jesus.

Peter and John were still speaking to the people when some priests, the officer in charge of the temple guards, and some Sadducees arrived. They arrested them and put them in jail and the next day they interrogated them and realised that they were friends of Jesus.

It's interesting to ask ourselves the question, 'How many people we are acquainted with know that we are friends of Jesus?' There might be some occasions when we are able to show a special kindness and thoughtfulness to some of our friends and relatives in such a way that might surprise them. In so doing, some might realise that we are friends of Jesus.

■ PRAYER

Heavenly Father, please show me how I can surprise people by being kind and thoughtful. May they know that I am a friend of Jesus. Amen.

Galatians 1:6–7 (GNT)

I am with you, keep going

I am surprised at you! In no time at all you are deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ, and are accepting another gospel. Actually, there is no ‘other gospel,’ but I say this because there are some people who are upsetting you and trying to change the gospel of Christ.

One day, Paul heard that some members of the church in Galatia had given up their Christian faith. This news must have been devastating for Paul, so he decided to write to them.

When Paul wrote to the churches he had established, he usually began with a warm greeting, thanking God for the people to whom he was writing. For example, in Philippians he writes, ‘I thank my God for you every time I think of you’ (1:3).

However, when he wrote to the Galatian Christians, he was so concerned about them that after the initial greeting he launched straight in with ‘I am surprised at you!’ He was surprised because some of his readers had given up following Jesus. There may be times in our lives when we might be tempted to neglect our faith in Christ. In those times it’s more important than ever to trust in the Lord and seek his help and assurance.

If the Lord Jesus were to write a letter to you when you were persevering through difficult times, I don’t think he would say, ‘I am surprised at you!’ I believe he would say, ‘I am pleased with you, I am with you. Keep going!’

■ PRAYER

Lord Jesus Christ, thank you that you have said: ‘I will never leave you or forsake you’ (Hebrews 13:5, NRSV). May I know the truth of this when I go through difficult times. Thank you that you care for me. Amen.



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In the central section Debbie Thrower, founder of BRF Ministries' Anna Chaplaincy for Older People, offers interviews and ideas to encourage and inspire.



Bible Reflections for Older People is edited by Eley McAinsh.

In this issue...

In this issue we're delighted to welcome Mary Yates, an Anna Friend in Kent, whose series is called 'At the feet of Jesus'. Clare O'Driscoll writes with her usual freshness and originality on 'Rooftops and shelters', David Butterfield brings wisdom and insight to his exploration of some of the many moments when people are 'surprised' in the Bible, and April McIntyre reflects movingly on the 'God of all comfort'.



And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you forever; Even the Spirit of truth... ye know him; for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you. I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you.
John 14:16-18 (KJV)



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