

SEPTEMBER-DECEMBER 2024



New Daylight

Sustaining your daily journey with the Bible



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The return of Christ MARGOT AND MARTIN HODSON

The O Antiphons AMY SCOTT ROBINSON

New Daylight

Edited by **Gordon Giles**

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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

Steve Aisthorpe is the director of Kilmalieu, a place of prayer, hospitality and nature on the west coast of Scotland. He is the author of *The Invisible Church* and *Rewilding the Church*.

Amanda Bloor is archdeacon of Cleveland in the diocese of York, and has previously been a bishop's chaplain, a diocesan director of ordinands, an advisor in women's ministry and a parish priest.

Paul Gravelle (1931–2023) was an Anglican priest in Auckland, New Zealand, as well as a poet, writer and retreat leader. (See the interview with Paul, and the editor's note, on page 147.)

Margot Hodson is theology and education director for the John Ray Initiative. She is also a vicar in the Oxford diocese. **Martin Hodson** is a plant scientist and environmental biologist and teaches at both universities in Oxford. The Hodsons have published widely together on Christianity and the environment, including *A Christian Guide to Environmental Issues* (BRF, 2021).

Andy John was elected bishop of Bangor in 2008 and archbishop of Wales in 2021. His main interests include sports of most kinds and walking in the hills on North Wales, although has been known occasionally to indulge his terrible taste in music on a rickety old electric guitar.

Stephen Rand worked with Tearfund and Open Doors, travelling widely. He established advocacy and campaigning at both organisations. Now retired, he is part of the church leadership team of Orchard Baptist Church in Bicester, Oxfordshire.

Amy Scott Robinson is the author of several books, including *Image of the Invisible* and *Images of Grace*, a regular contributor to *Church Times*, and works as commissioning editor for children's and youth at Kevin Mayhew.

Margaret Silf is an ecumenical Christian committed to working across and beyond traditional divisions. She is the author of a number of books for 21st-century spiritual pilgrims and a retreat facilitator.

Veronica Zundel is an Oxford graduate, writer and columnist. She lives with her husband and son in North London. Her book *Everything I Know about God, I've Learned from Being a Parent* was published by BRF in 2013.

Gordon Giles writes...



Beethoven's Fifth Symphony begins with just four notes, which form the basis of the first movement of perhaps the most famous symphony there is. From that little phrase, which lasts about a second, comes seven-and-a-half minutes of music.

From a small start something big can burgeon. A symphony, a large painting, a great novel or indeed a human being: everything must start somewhere, somewhere small. From a single cell emerges so much – all life in fact.

Jesus described a mustard seed as the miniscule basis of something large. Similarly Peter's brief statement of faith, when he declared Jesus to be the Messiah, turned out to be huge. For the church started out small. Small is beautiful, and small is just the first stage of big. The Big Bang of creation was a very small thing that literally exploded into something massive which is still expanding, growing.

The earthly church, emergent from the singularity of Jesus himself, currently stands at 2,173,180,000 Christians, which is 31% of the world population. Half are Roman Catholic and 37% Protestant (including the Anglican Communion), 12% Orthodox and 1% other.

There are 1.5 billion Muslims and nearly 14 million Jews, 80% of whom live in Israel or the USA, while 1.2 billion people have no religious affiliation. Just over a billion are Hindus, 94% of which live in India. There are half a billion Buddhists, half of whom live in China. Christianity is not a minority nor is it in decline. According to recent surveys, by 2050 the number of Christians will reach 3 billion (which will be 31.4% of the world's population) and by 2060 Christians will still form the world's largest religion when the number will reach 3.05 billion (or 31.8%). Of course, this is not a numbers game, but the numbers do give us a sense of perspective, and crucially a sense of how much has expanded from what seems so little.

The journey of faith is one of growth. The story of Christianity is one of small beginnings and great growth, which in us and through us can be a burgeoning of faith, hope and love, for ourselves and others. A little trust in God, belief in Jesus, kindness to others and humility make up a small opening which can grow into a symphony of faith, hope and love.

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

The prayer of BRF Ministries

*Faithful God,
thank you for growing BRF
from small beginnings
into the worldwide family of BRF Ministries.
We rejoice as young and old
discover you through your word
and grow daily in faith and love.
Keep us humble in your service,
ambitious for your glory
and open to new opportunities.
For your name's sake,
Amen.*

'It is such a joy to be part of this amazing project'

As part of our Living Faith ministry, we're raising funds to give away copies of Bible reading notes and other resources to those who aren't able to access them any other way, working with food banks and chaplaincy services, in prisons, hospitals and care homes.

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Habakkuk



We might ask what a short book of 56 verses, probably written 600 years before Christ's birth, has to do with us. We know nothing about its author (except his name) and there is little detail about his location, his people or the enemies he faces. Habakkuk has no great revelation to offer about God's involvement with the world; indeed, he seems to repeatedly question if God will intervene at all. Violence and injustice seem to rage around, there are hints of famine and hunger stalking the land, and there is little respect for legal authority.

Of course, these are not issues that are unique to Habakkuk's time and place. We have had, in recent times, to come to terms with a pandemic and its continuing effects upon individuals and institutions, an economic downturn and ongoing armed conflicts. Some very public failings have made many distrustful of politicians and political systems, while there seems to be a lingering sense of widespread anxiety. What might we have to deal with next?

The fascinating thing about this book is that it does not attempt to give answers. There are no instructions to Habakkuk's people that will enable them to lead a more godly life and ensure their salvation. There are no prophetic promises of divine intervention, the destruction of enemies and the ensuring of a lasting peace. In fact, nothing much happens. Habakkuk poses the sort of questions that we all at times might ask of God: are you there? Why don't you do something? Do you care? Yet God does not always answer. The whole text is an exercise in internal reflection that might hope for external replies, but which does not expect them.

Yet despite all this, Habakkuk keeps on asking questions. He refuses not only to pretend that everything is, after all, alright, but also to submit to despair. There is a righteous anger that Habakkuk directs towards God as well as his enemies, but there is also a deeply rooted faith that insists that God's vision for the 'appointed time' will come to fruition and will not be unnecessarily delayed. In the end, Habakkuk insists, we will see God's glory cover the whole earth 'as the waters cover the sea' (2:14). That will be worth waiting for.

Look and see

O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you, 'Violence!' and you will not save? Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. So the law becomes slack, and justice never prevails. The wicked surround the righteous; therefore judgement comes forth perverted. Look at the nations and see! Be astonished! Be astounded!

'God sees everything,' we assure ourselves. We are told in the scriptures that we are loved, that we are valuable, that we all matter. We pray for support, and we hold before God those people and places which suffer. Yet there are times when things go badly wrong, when we or others need help, and when injustice seems to rage around. We can be tempted, like Habakkuk, to cry out, 'How long, Lord?'

It is easy to empathise with the prophet's pain. Habakkuk seems to wonder if God is really interested in the well-being of humanity and if God chooses not to listen to the cries of creation. It is exhausting to be caught in the middle of violence and destruction that appears to be out of control, and it is distressing to see the suffering of individuals and communities. How much can one person bear?

Yet there is a bigger question there, and it is one that we are required to ask of ourselves when in similar circumstances. 'Why, Lord, do you make me look at this?' asks Habakkuk. The answer might well come back, 'In order to do something about it!' As St Teresa of Ávila pointed out, we are Christ's hands here on earth and so it is crucial that trust in God's saving presence does not turn to passivity and disengagement. It is not sufficient just to look at a situation – we are not simply observers – it is crucial also to see and then to respond. If God (as we believe) cares, then so must we.

God our hope, in difficult circumstances help us to look and to really see, to recognise what is necessary and to know what to do. Guide us and give us strength, so that your justice may prevail. Amen.

There is a plan!

I will stand at my watchpost and station myself on the rampart; I will keep watch to see what he will say to me and what he will answer concerning my complaint. Then the Lord answered me and said: Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it. For there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay.

Have you ever attended a school performance in which a young child you know is taking part? If so, you will probably have spotted them looking out across the audience, keen to spot that you are there. They might look anxious, unsure if anyone will come to support them, or they might be confidently searching for the person they know will not let them down. Either way, when they recognise your face, they are likely to beam with delight that you are there and all is well.

Our relationship with God can follow similar lines, often influenced by the experiences we have had, especially if they affect our ability to trust. In this passage, the prophet seems to be trying to convince himself that God will be present; that God's promise is reliable and true. Like a soldier patrolling the ramparts of the city, the prophet looks out and waits until he can see ahead. Will his faith be rewarded, will help be on its way? Then the Lord speaks: 'I have a plan and it will happen. Be patient and wait for the right time.'

It is never easy to wait, especially when we look around us and clearly see the need for God's presence. Perhaps we, like Habakkuk, need to learn patience, drawing comfort from faith that God has a vision and it will be achieved.

Lord, sometimes I strain my eyes looking into the darkness for signs of your light. It is hard to hold on, to know that you are there and that you do have a plan. Help me to be patient and to trust in your love. Amen.

AMANDA BLOOR

Actions and consequences

‘Alas for you who heap up what is not your own!’ How long will you load yourselves with goods taken in pledge? Will not your own creditors suddenly rise and those who make you tremble wake up? Then you will be plunder for them. Because you have plundered many nations, all who survive of the peoples shall plunder you – because of human bloodshed and violence to the earth, to cities and all who live in them.

We live in a society whereby we expect to have the things we want whenever we want them. An economic downturn might make us think more about our finances before clicking the ‘buy’ button on a website or taking something to the checkout, but if we can afford it, it can be difficult to resist an impulse purchase. We expect to have sufficient electricity to light our homes and power our devices, limitless clean water to drink, heating to keep us warm and a choice of foods – in and out of season – to eat. This, for many of us, is normality. It is only when something disrupts the provision of goods or services that we give them thought.

Yet Habakkuk’s words about plundering many nations bring me face-to-face with the reality that my behaviour has consequences for others. Ridiculously low prices for clothing means that people elsewhere pay the price: the machinists who are badly remunerated for skilled work, the villages where water sources are contaminated by chemical runoff and the land put out of use when cheap clothes are simply dumped after one wearing. Using the planet’s resources carelessly not only means high bills for individuals, but also damages God’s creation. Climate change disproportionately affects people living in poorer parts of the world, leading to flooding, air pollution, loss of land because of rising sea levels and the increased spread of some infectious diseases. Greed and thoughtless consumption on one side of the world can indeed do violence to the earth and its peoples. May God give us grace to recognise this and change our ways.

Generous God, you give us so much and it’s easy to become complacent with our prosperity. Help us to realise that our actions affect others so that we may act with care and conscience. Amen.

The glory of the Lord shines out

The very stones will cry out from the wall, and the rafter will respond from the woodwork. ‘Alas for you who build a town by bloodshed and found a city on iniquity!’ Is it not from the Lord of hosts that peoples labour only to feed the flames and nations weary themselves for nothing? But the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.

I find it remarkable that Habakkuk is so conscious of God’s presence throughout the created world that even inanimate objects (in this case, the stones that form a wall and the beams of the rafters) cry out against greed and iniquity. There is nowhere that is not touched by God’s desire for justice and righteousness; nothing that can hide human iniquity from God’s view.

We hear again in this passage the passionate desire of the prophet that his people will change their ways for the better. Towns built on ‘bloodshed’ and cities founded on ‘iniquity’ are a tragic indictment of a lack of concern for others and the absence of a moral compass that would challenge such unjust behaviour. God, the prophet reminds his people, knows that they are expending energy to no good purpose. Their actions will have no positive outcome.

It would be easy at this point to simply give up, as greed, carelessness and violence seem to have the upper hand. Yet that is not the prophetic way. It is not God’s way either. If the very stones from the walls are crying out, then the call to change is still being heard and there is the possibility that there will be repentance and amendment of life. Habakkuk believes that God is present, and he trusts that God will be recognised. The knowledge of God’s glory will fill the whole earth, spreading across the land as water spreads to form the sea. Justice will prevail.

Lord Jesus Christ, God with us, you experienced the toxic effects of iniquity and bloodshed. Open our eyes so that we may see God’s glory in all places. Make us agents of change and advocates of peace. Amen.

AMANDA BLOOR

Worthless idols

What use is an idol once its maker has shaped it – a cast image, a teacher of lies? For its maker trusts in what has been made, though the product is only an idol that cannot speak! Alas for you who say to the wood, ‘Wake up!’ to silent stone, ‘Rouse yourself!’ Can it teach? See, it is gold and silver plated, and there is no breath in it at all. But the Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him!

We probably believe that we are too sophisticated to worship figures made of wood and plated with gold and silver. But I wonder if we recognise that there are other things that we can be tempted to turn into idols? I remember being in my early teens and being fascinated by pop stars and Hollywood actors, people who seemed glamorous, successful and popular. Magazines shared carefully selected details about their lives: their favourite foods, their family members and friends, their hobbies and even the colours they preferred to wear. I drank it all in, hoping to become a little like that person and a little less like myself. It is no exaggeration to say that I idolised them. As an adult, I recognise that different aspirations are offered to me, promoted largely by those who have something to sell: a different lifestyle, a better car, a bigger house. It is easy to become dissatisfied and overlook the many blessings I already have.

This passage encourages us to consider the things in which we place our trust and to look beneath the surface glitter. Idols, whatever form they take, cannot give us the things we really need; only God can do that. The passage challenges us too. Do we have form and substance, or are we, like idols, all outward appearance? Do we have the depth that comes from a mature spiritual relationship with the Lord, before whom the noisy chatter of the whole earth is silenced?

Loving God, you give us the things we need and guide us into ways of truth and peace. Grant us the discernment to turn away from idols, so that we may draw closer to you. Amen.

God of power and might

In fury you marched on the earth, in anger you trampled nations. You came forth to save your people, to save your anointed. You crushed the head of the wicked house, laying it bare from foundation to roof... I hear, and I tremble within; my lips quiver at the sound. Rottenness enters my bones, and my steps tremble beneath me. I wait quietly for the day of calamity to come upon the people who attack us.

Do we, I wonder, hold conflicted views about God's nature? The Bible tells us repeatedly about a God of love and forgiveness, but sometimes we are faced with passages such as the one above, which describes divine wrath and the consequent destruction of peoples and places. This can lead us to an unhealthy imbalance in our understanding. We know that God is much more than we can conceive, but it is easy to imagine God in terms of human people we know. And some significant figures in our own lives, or examples of earthly leaders, might be profoundly unhelpful models of what power and influence look like.

What is important to remember here, I believe, is that Habakkuk is recognising that God is deeply involved with humanity and that violence and injustice will not be allowed to prevail. The prophet's cry is not one of fear and trembling at God's presence, but an affirmation that God is present and that wickedness, in the end, will not triumph. Which of us, after all, like Habakkuk has not prayed in moments of distress that our persecutors will be punished for the distress that they have inflicted upon us? Yet even in this maelstrom of fear and emotion, Habakkuk holds on to the knowledge that he is loved by God, that he will be saved and that this terrible time will come to an end.

God of power and might, be with us, we pray, when we are beset by danger and fear. Remind us that we are valuable to you and grant that we and all your children may live in freedom and quietness. We ask this through Jesus Christ, Prince of Peace. Amen.

AMANDA BLOOR

Holding on

Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines; though the produce of the olive fails and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off from the fold and there is no herd in the stalls, yet will I rejoice in the Lord; I will exult in the God of my salvation. God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer and makes me tread upon the heights.

We all love a happy ending, with everything tied up neatly and brought to a proper conclusion. Sadly, life is not always like that. The short book of Habakkuk comes to an end without completing the story; the prophet still prays that God will defend his people against those who are intent upon violence, he still trembles for fear of the future and he still has a heart set on retribution.

Food is short because the land is showing the after-effects of sustained aggression. Domesticated animals are cut off from places of shelter and fodder, and harvests are failing, perhaps because there is no one to nurture vines and plant crops. Enemies are close at hand and peace is a distant hope.

It would be understandable if Habakkuk lost heart, blamed God and turned away from religion. We often see that in our own times when tragedies or calamities happen and people ask, ‘Where was God?’ It is easy to empathise with those who have suffered greatly and have, as a result, lost their faith, and we might ourselves have gone through periods when God seems far off. Yet remarkably, Habakkuk is able to trust God and rejoices in the Lord, whom he describes as his strength and his salvation. Despite all that has happened and the uncertain future, the prophet sings of hope and transformation. I wonder if we, in an uncertain world, can do the same?

Great and generous God, give us strength and courage to face difficulty and disaster. Help us to hold on to faith in your love for us and your continuing presence, even when everything seems to be against us. Give us resurrection hope, through Christ who brings us into new life. Amen.



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'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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Margaret Silf
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Veronica Zundel

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Margot and Martin
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Amy Scott Robinson
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