



NEW AND IMPROVED

**SANCTUARY FIRST
CONNECT BIBLE STUDY**

MAY 2025

WELCOME TO CONNECT!

A Connect Bible Study is a small group who meet regularly to explore faith and Godly responses to life issues, growing in the things of God together as we go. Anyone can host one using these materials and contact us for support and guidance. Online or in-person, our heart is that they offer a relaxed space for faith, friendship and fun.

We hope the resources and discussion points encourage, inspire, and invigorate you on your walk with God.

It might be the conversation follows the discussion as laid out or heads in a different direction, both are wonderful and we hope the outline we offer here is flexible and supportive to engage with the Bible and our faith in fresh and vibrant ways as we make our way in the world as 21st century disciples exploring the wonders of life with Jesus!

WHAT IS INVOLVED?

Each week begins with an introduction and a 'seed to sow' conversation starter. These are open-ended prompts to inspire creative responses to the themes. Perhaps they will inspire you to write a song or a poem, or to paint, draw, move or explore! We imagine the material for each week would work for 90 minute sessions but feel free to adapt to your group!

There are more songs, videos, podcasts and blogs linked to this theme on our **website** and **App**, have fun exploring it all!

NEW AND IMPROVED

'New and Improved' is an ever-present slogan, a promise continually made to us from supermarket shelves, high street windows, and the banner ads we scroll past on our phones.

'This thing is like the old thing but better!'

It's a potent combination. A recognisable brand gets a new lease of life and we get to satisfy two deep (and often conflicting) human longings — for familiarity and novelty. On the one hand we want what we know, and on the other hand we want to discover new things — to see what we could be missing out on.

While many things steadily improve over time, often of course these 'New and improved' slogans let us down. Perhaps the new thing isn't especially new or improved, or it is new but is far from improved and in fact the new version is worse. And yet we keep coming back — so deep is the pull for *what we know* and *what we don't know*, the promise of the best of both worlds.

'Can I just have what I already know... but also have it be loads better?' And Jesus look at us with love and says, "Yes."

Because with Jesus, the loving Word at the heart of the universe, we can find — embedded in the old — the seeds of the new. God's Kingdom is new and improved — it is ever expanding, growing, blossoming, flourishing.

Those familiar stirrings and longings in our heart — for security, belonging, fulfilment, purpose — find new expression in God's kingdom. The 'New and improved' promise of Christ is not a quick fix, or a sticker slapped over the same old thing. Rather it is Jesus coming alongside us and promising to lead us step by step into a new, richer, deeper life — in all its vivid tapestry of emotion. Jesus does not promise us an easy life but he does promise us love.

And this is not a bolt from the blue — Jesus finds us where we are and takes us from the old into the new. Jesus gives us what we all long for — being cherished. It's what we already know... but it's loads better.

WEEKLY OVERVIEW

- Old leaves, new leaves
- Old weariness, new wings
- Old ways, new ways
- Old endings, new starts

POEM

WHEN THE HEAVENS TEAR OPEN

Help us to look up
when the heavens tear open,
when blessings are falling,
when voices cry out.

Help us to look up
when the harsh winds blow,
when we are beaten down,
when we are brought down low.

Help us to look up,
when the time is right,
when the kingdom draws dear,
when the good news is on the horizon.

James Cathcart

PRAYER

LET US PRAY

God, loving at the border
touching life and touching death,
Your Spirit brooding, caring, holding,
may we know your touch today.

Jesus knows the pain of death at violent
hands,
yet in scarred, fragile, new-born hope,
was set again to stand,
striding in grace-filled light and peace
to see his friends.

Jesus breathes out the Spirit's power
on quailing people.
Breath of life renew us now.

Resurrection does surprise us.
Generous life, against the flow of death, wins
out
unexpectedly.

Come Holy Spirit.
By Jesus our friend,
for the Father's pleasure,
raise us up ...
so we can welcome others.
We are yours.

Jo Penn

WEEK 1: OLD LEAVES, NEW LEAVES

INTRODUCTION:

Our relationship with God is not static. It is constant but it's always alive — alive to who we are in God, who we have been and who we can be.

This week our readings focus on Peter turning over a new leaf. The resurrection has vividly depicted a new leaf, not only for Peter but for God's relationship with all of humanity. What new leaves are we turning over like Peter? How is our relationship with God growing and changing? And just like Peter was to use the same grit and ingenuity he showed as a fisherman in being an evangelist how is God taking our old lives and making them into something new?

SEEDS TO SOW:

What are some of the skills from Peter's old job as a fisherman that could have helped him with in his new role as an evangelist for God's kingdom?

READ JOHN 21: 1-19

Read the whole reading and then return to each section as shown below below to repeat the relevant verses before going into the discussion.

READ JOHN 21: 1-6

Old boat, new possibilities...

Peter, a fisherman by trade, falls back on *what* he knows and *where* he knows, and in the midst of that familiarity — Jesus is able to work something new. This fisherman is about to upskill his fishing for a far bigger catch...

Even though they don't know who it is who is giving them advice yet, the disciples go ahead and do a 180, and have dramatically different results.

What is it that makes the disciples to go back to what they know and what is it that makes them try something new?

In our churches and faith communities what is an old thing we could try doing in a new way to get different results?

READ JOHN 21: 7-14

Old fish, new fish...

Interestingly we read that Jesus *already* had fish on the BBQ and yet he still invites the disciples to contribute from their catch. Jesus loves us to contribute what we have, to join in the generosity.

While his return was mindbogglingly new, the scene of a simple meal on the shore would have been a comforting one they immediately recognised. Why are we so often drawn to a blend of the old and new? How would you have felt as a disciple standing on the beach that morning?

READ JOHN 21: 15-19

Old Peter, new Peter...

Three times Peter rejects Christ and now three times Peter accepts Jesus. There is power in repetition to heal our souls and give them a new start.

What is our prayer for modern day Peters today? Those who find themselves standing between their old life and their new life. How can we support people leaving the past behind and stepping into the future?

WEEK 2: OLD WEARINESS, NEW WINGS

INTRODUCTION:

The human body is in a constant process of restoration. Our respiratory systems, our circulation, our muscles, expand and contract, go round and reset, expend and recover. We are perpetually being restored, reenergised, propelled forward. Our bodies are simultaneously old and new, regenerating. Our spirits, embedded in these bodies, are similarly in a process of constant restoration. Through Christ each day we are 'new and improved', aging is a continual time of growth, we keep on growing into Christ.

SEEDS TO SOW:

What is something new that you would like to try? And what is something old that you used to do that you'd like to go back to?

READ ISAIAH 40: 27-28

Old understandings, new insights...

The immediacy of the theology in these ancient texts is astounding. This is a God who deeply knows us — not an abstract force or a divine being living on a plane far removed from us. None of us are below God's notice. Every generation this insight is new — that God knows and cares, we do not slip past God's love.

Who today needs to know that God notices them, that God cares for them? Who in our society needs to hear that they matter — that God notices them and cherishes them.

For some people this will be new information. For others it might be something they felt once, but no longer connect to for a host of reasons.

READ ISAIAH 40: 29-31

Old body, new energy...

There is a youngness, and newness and vitality to following God whatever our stage of life — age and life experience is not a barrier! The newness of God keeps us young!

Some seabirds like albatrosses who spend most of their lives in the air, have a 'wing lock'. They are able to fix their wings in position and just ride the air — meaning they can use up less energy just floating on the air than they do standing upright on the ground. With Christ's wingspan spread wide for us we can ride the wind too.

How can we learn to let Jesus take the weight of our lives when we are used to carrying that weight ourselves? What does it mean to soar with the Lord?

READ ISAIAH 43: 18-21

Old things and new things...

We often come to God in prayer asking for new things — but perhaps even more often God is the one who comes to us and invites us to do new things!

Is it possible we are more set in our ways than God sometimes?

Sometimes we long for things that are new but not any better for us. And sometimes we want the same old things because we can't face the change.

How do we tell when God is calling us or leading us to a new thing?

WEEK 3: OLD WAYS, NEW WAYS

INTRODUCTION:

The invitation to God's ongoing unfolding Kingdom that stretches from Alpha to Omega is an invitation to a new way of living.

Christian faith is not a rejection of the world — it is a new way of being *in* the world. How are we embracing the world and our new identities in it?

The story of newness at the heart of Christianity is enacted every time someone becomes a Christian... Our Christian communities are ever new and are enhanced every time the community gets wider and somebody new discover a home there.

SEEDS TO SOW:

What old thing has been made new in your lifetime?

READ JOHN 13: 31-3

Old identity, new identity...

One of the ironies of these verses is that this 'new' commandment is hardly new! This shouldn't be coming out of the blue for any disciple half-paying attention by this point! And yet there *is* something new happening...

The kicker comes in verse 35 — this commandment is now to be so embedded in their lives as to become their identity, how they are immediately known and recognised. They are not just to love another they are to be *known for it*. Their acts of compassion and nurture are to be painted on a broader canvass, a bigger stage — the world. This commandment is 'new and improved' as it matures in their lives, rippling outwards!

So, are Christians today known for loving one another? Are we immediately recognised for our love for each other and one another?

READ 2 CORINTHIANS 5: 16-21

Old creation, new creation...

Who we have been and where we have come from are not barriers to us being ambassadors for Christ — it is because of who we have been and where we have been that we are who we are and where we are now.

Here's a challenge:

How can we ambassadors for Christ tomorrow at 12pm? Where are we likely to be and what are we likely to be doing? How can we be ambassador's of Christ's love and reconciliation in that place? We don't need to do any grand gestures, but what simple actions could we take to be on Jesus's side tomorrow at 12pm?

READ ISAIAH 65: 17-25

Old earth, new earth...

A compelling vision of a peaceable kingdom... one that will be familiar but also novel!

Despair and anguish become relief and joy — we see the wonderful absurdity of transformed relationships — the old is not abandoned — instead it is transformed, made new.

What is a power dynamic in the wider world that you would love to see utterly transformed? It can be as absurd as a wolf and a lamb just chilling together.

WEEK 4: OLD ENDINGS, NEW STARTS

INTRODUCTION:

One of the paradoxes of Christianity is that it is ancient but ever new. Our faith does not depend on actions or contracts made between distant ancestors and mysterious forces — it depends on a real relationship between us and God right now. It has deep roots that connects us to those times, but we are not hostages to them. Jesus Christ is not afraid of the new — new chances, new starts, new life.

Life with Jesus is 'new and improved' as it draws us further into the mystery of God's timeless love. It's not a blank cheque for material prosperity... that's a hollow kind of improvement that can't buy happiness or fulfilment. But it will speak to our deepest longings and needs, with a saviour who draws right alongside us and is with us to the very end... and beyond.

SEEDS TO SOW:

Where do we long for a new start in our churches and Christian communities today?

READ JOHN 5: 1-18

Old isolation, new start...

A man, ignored and alone — literally stepped over — is given an electric new start by Jesus Christ.

While there is joy at the transformation there is also tension. Jesus, both God and man, acts with compassion to restore this man to his community — and in so doing directly undermines the authority of the religious leaders.

Rather than explain why they were custodians over a system that left a man to suffer alone for decades... they try to pin Jesus on a technicality and Jesus calls their bluff.

Where are we fed up of inaction and inertia? Where do we long to see change? And where perhaps are we ourselves guilty of accepting the unfairness of the status quo when people are longing for help?

READ PSALM 51

Old offerings, new sacrifice...

A chance for a new start. In this poem is the restoring catharsis at the heart of our relationship with God. There is redemption, there is newness, there is a way back. Through God our focus can move outwards and upwards, rather than inwards and downwards.

Looking at verses 15-17 especially, what does God actually want from us? What does it mean to bring God a broken spirit?

READ ROMANS 6: 1-4

The same old ways, or newness of life!

The cycle of grace is not a closed loop, it's an ever-growing spiral, that not only grants us a new start but the invitation to expand the spiral of grace ever wider, drawing more and more into newness of life. It's what we know that we need deep down in our hearts... but loads better = New and Improved!

What does walking in newness of life mean to you in 2025?