THE GIFT TABLE

SANCTUARY FIRST

CONNECT BIBLE STUDY

NEW YEAR 2026

WELCOME TO CONNECT!

A Connect Bible Study is a small group who meet regularly to explore faith and life, 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!

RESOURCES

This booklet includes a meditation and two short prayers to reflect upon. You will find a page on how to run a Connect Group, to walk you through the steps if this is your first time. Each week has an online corresponding page in both our app and on the website where you can get the questions and videos.

There are more songs, videos, podcasts and blogs linked to this theme on the Sanctuary First **website** and **app**.

THE GIFT TABLE

As a new year begins we gather round the gift table ready to discover the gifts God has for us! And while we're there we will also uncover the gifts we ourselves bring to God.

Gifts freely given — with no expectation of return — completely transform lives, transform communities, transform the world. Gifts of time, love, compassion and care have the power to save us, sustain us and spur us on. The act of giving a gift opens up a pocket of space and time that did not exist before the gift was given. A gift doesn't maintain the status quo the way a like for like exchange does. Instead it gives the status quo a little nudge! And with enough nudges and enough momentum it can really get spinning!

And it all begins with God who gave us life, who gave us Christ. A chain reaction of giving that began long ago and yet is still felt in every selfless act, every generous gift. As a new year gets underway with Epiphany we will reflect on the gifts we have been given, the gifts we are carrying, and the gifts we have yet to uncover.

Our theme begins with God's incredible gift to humanity — Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, God-with-us. We will join the Magi and bring our own gifts to Jesus. Then we will unpack what it means to receive the gift of Baptism. After that we will consider the gift of restoration and how the Bible can be a kind of repair shop — breathing new life into us. In the fourth week we think about "the gift to see ourselves as others see us" as Robert Burns famously wrote in his Scots poem To A Louse. Discipleship — shared life following after Jesus — is a gift of humility and new perspective that reminds us that we are not the centre of our own universe.

Then as the theme gets to its penultimate week it's crunch time, you've got the gift, and the gift receipt — what are you going to do with it? How are we bearing the gift of the good news? And then finally as we anticipate Lent we consider the gifts we need for the journey, for the mission ahead!

WEEKLY OVERVIEW

- **God's gift —** Jesus!
- **The gift received —** Baptism!
- **The gift of restoration —** Bible!
- **The gift to see ourselves as others see us… —** Discipleship!
- **The gift receipt —** Evangelism!
- **Gifts for the journey —** Mission!

Thanks to James Cathcart and Albert Bogle for developing this material.

MEDITATION

Three Boxes

As we come to God's gift table we are surrounded by the empty boxes of Christmas and we ask God for the gift to reimagine the possibility all around us.

Box 1:

Holy Spirit Unseen,
Open my sight wide,
Undo the ordinary that fills these eyes
where I see tape and cardboard starting to split
show me a castle, a racing car or a pirate ship!
Bless me with your vision
that gives imagination ignition
attention wrapped
through doodling, engineering, craft
we have found a home at last
moving done
unpacking begun
Holy Spirit transform the humdrum
with your anarchic fun
as we make dens of cardboard
and sigh at the treasure
our hearts have stored.

Box 2:

Holy Spirit Unseen,
Open my sight wide,
Undo the ordinary that fills these eyes
show me how a battered box cluttering up the place
can become the mechanism of your grace
as love gains pace
and determination traction
as a passing spark turns into action
and a box fills with tea and soup
a Spirit filled adventure let loose
bring warmth and love
to steaming bowl and mug
bringing the gift
of a relaxed grip
meeting a thirst
with a sigh too deep for words.

Box 3:

Holy Spirit Unseen,
Open my sight wide,
Undo the ordinary that fills these eyes
so that I might see how your love mends
Show me how this box
latterly of odds and ends
of miscellaneous things that don't fit
can transform in cardboard chrysalis
dreaming in its quiet slumber
of creation's thunder
as it becomes new things
bursting forth on new wings
telling us something
about a God, inspired, gentle, loving
who wastes nothing.
Help us to grasp that creation is still unfolding
and it's still worth hoping.

James Cathcart

WEEK 1: WEEK 1: GOD'S GIFT — JESUS!

INTRODUCTION:

Jesus is God's gift to the world, the divine becoming human, Emmanuel, God-with-us. At Epiphany the Magi brought three distinct gifts to identify Christ as prophet, priest and king. As we gather round the Gift table we rejoice in God's gifts freely bestowed on us that sustain us. As we take a seat at the table we ask: what gifts have we received at the table.

SEEDS TO SOW:

We are just past Christmas which can often bring an excess of gift-giving that can strain our bank balances, living spaces and relationships! January is often a time of renewed clarity and focus and (often short lived) resolutions to clear away the old and change habits.

When we come to God's gift table there's no demand to bring a bunch of gifts! God wants us to receive the gift of Jesus. This January are you up for rediscovering anew the gift of God's son? To rediscover who he is?

READ JEREMIAH 31: 7-14

Coming to the table to discover something new. The gift of gladness!

There are many ways to meet Jesus, to receive God's gift to humanity. This passage from the Old Testament shows us a multicultural, multigenerational scene of restoration, reunion and rejoicing. Celebrating the simple things of food, music and being reunited together gives us an opportunity to experience Jesus's love for us through one another. This reading is from several centuries before Christ walked the earth and we live many centuries later — and yet we are all united through God's firstborn son.

Q: What words or phrases leap out at you from this reading?

Q: What are the simple God-given things that we are glad for this year? The things that sustain us? The things that make us sing out with joy? How has your Connect group helped you to 'meet Jesus' in one another?

READ MATTHEW 2: 1-12

The gift of discernment!

The Magi brought discerning gifts that marked Christ out as prophet, priest, and king.

Jesus does not ask us to bring such tributes to him. We don't need to follow the Magi's example and bring our own gold, frankincense and myrrh to Christ. The greatest gift we can bring to God is the knowledge of our need of God, our humility, and our open hearts.

Q: What do you want to bring to Jesus this year? Not in the sense of material gifts, but in terms of attitude, outlook and approach to life?

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READ EPHESIANS 1: 1-14

The gift of adoption!

Jesus welcomes us into an incredible family that knows no borders!

The first followers of Jesus were a ragbag of very diverse people from various cultures and backgrounds. We live in a world today used to large international organisations but the inclusive welcome of the early church would have been radical at a time when outlooks were more limited and tribal.

Q: Christians in the first century lived in an insular, inward looking time of divided people that was gradually becoming more global in perspective…

Christians in the twenty first century live in a globally connected age that is gradually becoming more insular and inward looking again, with people being divided against each other…

How can our Christian perspective help us to value the local and the global — the glocal!

Discuss!

WEEK 2: THE GIFT RECEIVED — BAPTISM

INTRODUCTION:

Jesus's baptism was a gift that sustained him with the knowledge of God's presence and his own status as a beloved child of God. In the same way the gift of our baptisms sustain us and reminds us that we are also beloved children of God.

SEEDS TO SOW:

Have you been baptised? If not is it something you would like to learn more about? If so, what does your baptism mean to you?

READ MATTHEW 3: 13-17

The gift of baptism!

Jesus — firstborn of creation — cannot baptise himself, for baptism must be a gift. He receives this gift and as he does he opens up baptism for all of us to hear those words — that we too are chosen and delighted in.

Q: If you were going to summarise this reading in one word what would it be?

Q: Illustrations of this scene often depict a literal dove, but what do you think Jesus saw when he burst out of the water?

READ ISAIAH 42: 1-9

Chosen, delighted in, called, sent.

This paradigm of God's servant: chosen-delighted-called-sent is the one Christ followed in his baptism and we can follow as we emulate Christ. We are not called to be Christ, but rather to follow in his footsteps as what C.S. Lewis called 'Little Christs' who gradually become more Christlike.

We are of course not *the* servant in this reading, but the same God chose us, chose us to follow after Christ — to ourselves reflect the light and bring liberation.

Q: God has chosen you! Baptism celebrates this fact. What are some of the Christ-like qualities you have seen in other people in your life? How have the actions of Christ-like people affected you?

READ ACTS 16: 11-15

The Gift that keeps on giving.

Lydia and her household get baptised very quickly! Everything moves fast. Today in most church traditions when someone enquires about baptism for themselves or a loved one it's a fairly long process often involving classes or a series of conversations.

Q: This is not to say that Lydia got baptised too quickly or that we tend to get baptised too slowly — but let's discuss the difference! What do we gain by giving people time to learn more about their baptism? And what might we lose by drawing out the process too long?

WEEK 3: THE GIFT OF RESTORATION — BIBLE!

INTRODUCTION:

The gift table is a multipurpose table. It's a place where we can gather to eat, but it's also a workshop where the gifts of God can be tenderly and expertly restored, redeemed, renewed. The Bible is a gift that can restore us to our past and refocus us on our future, as it meets us in this current moment.

SEEDS TO SOW:

What are some of the gifts Gods has given humanity that need restoration and renewal?

READ PSALM 40

The gift table that God calls us to is a restoration table!

The Bible is gift library that both shows authentic human wisdom and experience and transcends it by giving us glimpses of the divine that lift us from the mud and mire!

Q: What verse in this reading is God's gift to you today? What reading is going to build you up and restore you this week?

Q: What other favourite verses do you have from across the Bible that god has given you?

READ JOHN 1: 29-42

Come and see!

Through the Bible Jesus speaks to us directly, like he did to those disciples and says "Come and see for yourself!" Spend a day with me, get to know what I'm like, what I care about, how I live. It didn't take long for Andrew to get a sense of who Jesus and get his brother on board!

What does it mean to see the gift for ourselves? A gift with our name on it! Let's explore how the Bible itself is one means of people 'Coming and seeing' for themselves.

Q: How has the Bible been a way for you to 'meet Jesus' and come and see for yourself? Are there particular verses — describing things Jesus said or did — that have been especially helpful for you to 'see for yourself' who Jesus is?

Q: Are there times we need to 'get out of the way' of Jesus and let Jesus speak for himself through these timeless words, when there's too much 'church' getting in the way?

READ JEREMIAH 33: 10-16

Room enough for what is required!

The gift of transformation! These verses invite us to consider something about the nature of God.

Q: Why is verse 11 such a key verse to hold onto in times of trouble and distress?

Q: Where do wee desolation around about us and where do we long to see cultivation? These words have inspired generations of reformers, how do they inspire us?

WEEK 4: THE GIFT TO SEE OURSELVES AS OTHERS SEE US… — DISCIPLESHIP!

INTRODUCTION:

This week we think about discipleship, humility and "the gift to see ourselves as others see us" as Robert Burns famously wrote in his Scots poem 'To A Louse.'

O wad some Power the giftie gie us / to see oursels as ithers see us! / It wad frae mony a blunder free us, (from To A Louse, Burn's poem puncturing pomposity and vanity).

Discipleship — shared life following after Jesus — is a gift of humility and new perspective that reminds us that we are not the centre of our own universe, we are constellations in a much more exciting one!

SEEDS TO SOW:

This weeks marks Burns Day (25th January) in Scotland. Let's read '**To a louse**' that inspired this week and share our thoughts on it!

READ PHILIPPIANS 2: 1-11

The gift of humility.

An essential part of our relationship with God is our relationship with God's world and the people who live there!

Q: Why is Christianity not a solo pursuit; simply a closed loop between each of us as an individual and Jesus?

Q: What is it that makes humility such a challenging idea? What lies behind the humility of Christ?

READ 1 CORINTHIANS 1: 18-31

Accidentally foolish and willingly foolish.

In Robert Burns's 'To a louse' we see unwitting foolishness, but in Christ we see deliberate foolishness! There's a difference between looking foolish as a result of being arrogant and looking foolish out of joy!

Often the world calls it foolish to act out of love rather than 'logical self-interest' (however that is defined at the time). But this passage challenges the way we humans think. God's world is an upside down world where our reason and rationale can only go so far — God invites us to step beyond into love.

Q: How can the cross be seen as a stepping stone to love?

Q: What are some joyful things we could do together to bless others — that might look like foolishness to the world — that connect us to God's gift in Jesus Christ?

READ 2 KINGS 5: 1-14

"Nae, man!" says Naaman.

Naaman wants a grand solution to befit his grand status.

Q: What do you make of Naaman here? Do you find him at all relatable?

Q: How often do we ourselves reject God's simple gifts when we would rather a grand complicated one?

WEEK 5: THE GIFT RECEIPT — EVANGELISM

INTRODUCTION:

So you are at the gift table, gift-receipt in hand. What are you going to do? The gifts of God are gifts — freely given and freely taken. Do you take the gifts, or look to return them?

How are we bearing the gift of the good news — the message — the gospel?

SEEDS TO SOW:

What do the words 'evangelism' or 'evangelical' mean to you?

READ PSALM 84

The gift of trust.

It is in trust and in feeling like we belong that we learn to blossom and grow — as children, as adolescents, as friends, as partners, as employees, as citizens — as the beloved of God.

Q: What is your favourite verse in this psalm?

Q: In verse 11 God is described as a sun and shield. In what ways is God like a sun and shield? How do these metaphor resonate with you?

READ MICAH 6: 1-8

Do you do store credit?

You cannot bring a thousand rams to God and expect to earn 'store credit' in heaven. We are not called for the quick work of extravagance but rather the slower work of justice, kindness, and humility. As a church throughout history we have loved to look inward and makes things increasingly complicated when God would have us keep it simple and look outward.

Q: In your experience — Do people tend to see the Christian message as:

A: Something that's straightforward to understand but hard to live out in practice.

B: Something that's hard to understand but seemingly easy to slot into the rest of your life?

Discuss!

READ PSALM 24

The gift of looking up!

Sometimes when we have been shuffling around looking at our boots the greatest gift is simply to look up.

We are living through unsettled times and there are many people seeking fresh answers to the fundamental questions of life and meaning who but don't know where to turn. Current established behaviour in politics, culture, technology and economics are shifting and people hearts as restless as people reassess what really matters in life.

Q: How can verses 1-6 of this psalm speak to restless hearts in our society? To those who want to 'come to the mountain', perhaps come to God, come to the 'truth' but are not sure where to begin.

Q: How can verses 7-10 encourage us to open our hearts and open the hearts of our world to God?

WEEK 6: GIFTS FOR THE JOURNEY — MISSION!

INTRODUCTION:

As our theme draws to a close and we anticipate Lent we consider the gifts we need for the journey, for the mission ahead of us! And we also take time to reflect that we ourselves are gifts delivered from the gift table — to be salt and light in the world!

SEEDS TO SOW:

As a Connect group how can we be salt and light (see Matthew 5: 13-16) bringing zest and illumination to the world?

READ ISAIAH 58: 1-12

The fast that I choose.

It is in our giving that we receive the gifts we need for the journey. It is in feeding others that we are fed, in liberating others that we are freed, in healing others that we are healed.

Q: How does this reading make you feel?

Q: What does this reading make you want to do?

READ 1 CORINTHIANS 12

Unity through diversity.

Many gifts but one source and given for mutual benefit.

Here is Paul's classic metaphor of how we are more than the sum of our parts when we work together as part of the same shared body. In our culture when we talk about someone 'having a gift' or 'being gifted' it generally sets them apart from the crowd. They have a quality, trait or talent that isolates them from the rest. But in 1 Corinthians 12 being gifted means being part of something bigger than yourself — not *set apart* but *set in place*.

The richness of Paul's metaphor is that a body is simultaneously a complete, unified thing, and an incredibly diverse ecosystem of lots of *different* things. The body of God is not a homogeneous blob! It is a vibrant place where diverse things come together to make something incredible.

Q: What interests you, challenges you or inspires you about Paul's metaphor of the body?

Q: As a group, what gifts to you have that help you to work together? (This could be as a Connect group or reflecting on a local community you're a part of).

READ 2 TIMOTHY 1: 1-14

Keep fanning the flame!

As our theme comes to an end we leave the gift table empowered to go out in the world — so keep fanning the flame!

Q: Imagine that instead of writing to Timothy, Paul is writing to you! How do you feel reading this letter?

Q: How can this reading challenge us to be braver in our mission to share God's love and God's compassion with others?

RUNNING A CONNECT GROUP

Follow the Spirit and do what works for your group!

Our Connect material is intended to be flexible and you are encouraged to adapt it to suit your needs and where the Holy Spirit takes you. Below is a completely optional rough outline of how we envision the material could be used in a 90 or 60 minute weekly session. As a leader you are free to shake things up (either as you prepare, or on the fly) responding to the discussion as it unfolds. Our experience of small groups is often the fascinating stuff happens 'off topic' when a group has gone on a tangent and ended up somewhere new. Go as the Spirit leads you and don't feel like you have to cover every reading or topic in each session.

If you are a pre-existing group/community you may have already have a format that works for you. Perhaps you always begin with a song, maybe you read a short liturgy aloud, share a meal together, have an informal catch up before diving into the reading, break for tea and coffee in middle and so on. If so that's great, just weave our material into that.

Optional outline for running a session:

1. Welcome — introducing yourself as the group leader and asking others to do the same, you could share briefly what interests you/draws you to the theme this month/week

2. Brief summary of the overall theme and Sanctuary First/and or specific organisation running individual group

3. An opening prayer, inviting God to travel with us as we explore the Bible

4. Introducing the theme of the week — reading the theme introduction aloud and/ or tailoring to your group context, allow space for comments and initial impressions if any

5. Point to videos, podcasts, Daily Worship etc on the Sanctuary First site that links in (there is a short video to accompany each week in the Connect section)

6. Share the Seed to Sow for the week and perhaps return to it at the end of the discussion

7. For each section begin by inviting someone to read the Bible text aloud. Then the leader begins the discussion, reading the prompts out to the group and then throws it over to them to respond. (As a leader you may wish to adapt/expand/ edit, for instance only focusing on two readings etc or changing the order, or expanding reading ranges etc). The discussion prompts are designed to go in a number of directions. It can be helpful to ask general questions about what stood out for people in the reading, what questions, insights or personal responses do they have to the text? And then you can link those responses to the topics in the material.

8. A closing prayer led by the leader or the group leaving space for intercessory prayer as the group develops and gets to know one another

9. Telling people about the next session's topic and pointing them to Connect resources on the Sanctuary First website.