

Waiting...

A Pentecost Study for Connect Groups

In the beginning... creation waited. There was nothing else for it... Reality, it turns out, takes time to load...

Then this lump of rock suspended in the universe received life and colour through the voice of God.

And then, after more waiting, humanity — a family to share it.

This pattern of **waiting**, **receiving** and **sharing** repeats itself throughout the Bible and throughout history. Through prophecy and poetry, pictures and patience, prayer and protest God's people wait on God, receive from God, and then share with God.

This waiting has sometimes been dull, exasperating, dispiriting, galling, and frightening. But it has also been peaceful, blessed, exciting, humbling, stretching, and enriching. Waiting it turns out, is not optional, it is part of the rhythm of life. Receiving and sharing come through waiting — like a tree comes through seed and rain and sunlight. There is no such thing as an instant tree — a tree is a storied thing with a story to tell in each of its rings. Some of the most beautiful things have very long wait times.

Waiting is deep in our psyche. From infancy — we have to wait on other people for everything. So we scream and cry out. There's nothing else for it. We come into a loud and vibrant and confusing world full of things we don't understand, but already we're full of deep longing and needs. And this experience continues into childhood — where a day can feel like an eternity — and into adulthood. We never stop making our way in a loud, vibrant confusing world full of things we don't understand and we don't ever stop having deep longings and needs to fulfil. That is the human experience. To know what is and to know what could be. To hope.

But in all our waiting, all our longing, all our hoping — God waits with us. The Holy Spirit is closer to us than we'll ever know, in our heart laughing and sighing and crying out with us.

For God is waiting too.

This introduction could be read aloud by the group leader at the first session to give an overview of the study.



In **Week one — Loading....** we think about the first 'load screen' in the Bible as Reality 1.0 is installed.

In **Week two — Typing...** we explore the sometimes agonising wait for an answer, a response, a confirmation.

In **Week three — Downloading...** we continue the digital metaphors thinking about the updates Jesus urges us to look out for — are we ready for the new thing God is doing?

In **Week four — Expecting...** as we come to Pentecost we move from the digital metaphors of loading, typing and downloading to the physical — flesh, blood, and fire metaphors of birth and flame!

In **Week five — Anticipating...** as the theme draws to a close we ask one another, what are we anticipating? For ourselves, our communities, our churches, our world? What do we long to receive, what do we long to share?



The group leader reads *The Context* to set up this week's discussion.

Context:

This week we explore the very first 'load screen' in the Bible as Reality 1.0 is installed. The Bible, like our lives, is full of such moments when we are stuck with nothing to do but wait. These can be times to catch our breath, or sigh in wonder, but they can also be restless uneasy places. We have all spent time desperately willing the loading bar to move faster, or refreshing our browser over and over again.

During the 'load screens' we can take heart that God takes time for us, makes time for us, treasures time with us. For after all there is no screen — no separation — we don't 'look in' at the wonders of God, instead we 'look around' at the one who wants to have a relationship with us, loving us into eternity. The screen becomes a window or a doorway through which we are invited to come and seek the God who is seeking us!

While we are often keen to rush on to the next thing where could God be calling us to reboot and restart? **Discuss!**

The group leader leads a quick discussion on any initial thoughts and reactions to these ideas before moving on to the next section: *Introducing the Reading*

Introducing the reading:

The opening words of Genesis show us the loading screen of creation in this incredible, timeless poem that sets the scene for the entire Bible. The phrase 'In the beginning...' is everywhere in our culture and are foundational to how we think about creation, the *genesis* of anything! The words of this ancient Hebrew poem are repetitive and meditative, following a sequence that's effortless to recognise and pick up. They give us a picture of an organic, emerging creation that takes time to grow. God speaks, God is delighted, God rests. This is a

Read Genesis 1:1-2:3

Response:

The 'Q:' sections are questions that are thrown out to the group to initiate discussion on the passage and themes. Pause after these to discuss the ideas.

Q: What are the words, and phrases, ideas and pictures that stand out to you from this reading? What are you drawn to? What intrigues you? What unsettles you? What inspires you?

As the load screen of the universe runs let's list some attributes of how God acts — right from the get-go of the Bible — that we can take from this poem:

- God is not rushed
- God rests

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- God is not afraid of repetition
- God is not afraid of doing something new
- God properly looks at creation and sees that it is good
- God blesses what he makes
- God sees himself in his creation
- God delights in things
- God is considerate and wants to provide

Q: What other statements describing God could you add to this list from our reading?

Here are some follow up questions for discussion:

Q: How can this reading inspire us to take our time when we want to rush to the end of something?

Q: Upon creation fully loading God immediately reboots and rests. Are we getting enough rest in our lives? Are we making time for it daily and weekly?

Q: Rather than thinking about what he can take God is preoccupied in these verses with what he can give. When we're struggling with a long wait — could an act of generosity to somebody else change our mood, outlook, and mindset?



Context:

The group leader reads *The Context* to set up this week's discussion.

It can be agonising, you're waiting for a reply from someone and all you can see is 'So-and-So is typing...' or perhaps the three bouncing dots. What are they going to say? You're in suspense. And then, the dots stop, and no message arrives and you're left hanging. This week we explore the moments in our lives when it seems like 'God is typing...' and the three dots are bouncing, but no message seems to be coming through.

What is our personal attitude to waiting in our lives? How does it make us feel? What are we waiting for God to say or do?

Discuss!

The group leader leads a quick discussion on any initial thoughts and reactions to these ideas before moving on to the next section: *Introducing the Readings*

Introducing the readings:

This psalm is a call to praise God and celebrates the collective experience of a people who waited a long time for God to deliver them. The psalms in general recognise the rollercoaster human experience of reaching out to God — the joy and struggle, the longing and fulfilment. In the gospel reading from John, Jesus is anticipating how bereft and alone the disciples might feel when he dies and when he ascends to heaven and so he tells them about the gift of the Holy Spirit and how through the community of the Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit they will not be left alone for they will always be together. This is echoed in the brief excerpt from the apostle Paul's letter to the Romans, as Paul beautifully describes how we don't just wait *for* God we wait *with* God, who is not distant and remote, but right with us in the here and now through the power of the Spirit.

The 'Q:' sections are questions that are thrown out to the group to initiate discussion on the passage and themes. Pause after these to discuss the ideas.

Read: Psalm 66, John 14: 15-21, Romans 8: 26-27

Q: Is there a particular verse in the psalm that resonates with you and your relationship with God at this moment? Or perhaps you'd like to share a verse from another psalm that resonates with what you are going through?

Q: How does hearing about the experience of others, and sharing our own experience of faith help us through our times of waiting on God? Both in the forms of songs and shared history and ordinary conversation with friends. Do you have a story to share of when you have felt yourself waiting a long time on God? Or when you felt God answer your prayer after a long time of praying?

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Sometimes waiting on God can leave us feeling like God is distant and remote — like a friend who only sends us intermittent texts. But the Holy Spirit abides in us, closer than we know. You could say the longing we have for one another, the longing we have for God, the longing for response and connection is woven deep in our very DNA. As Jesus says in John 14, we are not orphans — in the fabric of our being we are held.

Q: Does knowing that the Holy Spirit waits with us, endures with us, feels it with us — groaning alongside us — change how we feel about waiting? The God we read about in the New Testament is not on the other end of a phone — dropping in and out of signal but here, in the wordless places of our hearts, the places where there are no words, through the Holy Spirit.



Context:

Sometimes we are impatient with God to do a new thing — 'Why won't you do *something* God?' when it is actually us who are tied to an old way of doing things. We are waiting for God to do something in the old place, in the old way, when God is already at work somewhere else, preparing us for something else.

The group leader reads *The Context* to set up this week's discussion.

After looking at loading and typing we will keep our digital metaphors going this week by thinking about downloads. Now we are not machines and there's limits to any metaphor! We are organic beings made of love — not soulless machines to be programmed. When we explore downloads this week it's simply a way of thinking about our openness to receive from God, and our patience to wait while we receive.

God is always doing new things. Are we more bound to the specifics of 'the hardware' (the buildings, the titles, the traditions) than God is? Are we happy to rely on old glitchy software if it means we can keep an old building machine running? Or are we willing to look to where God is calling us now? To check our download folder. Because we need the resurrection software running and up to date! In this metaphor Communion keeps us connected, keeps us downloading!

Some questions for us to reflect on in our communities: What do we do that we have been doing for a long time and we could stop doing? And what is something we used to do that we could start doing again? **Discuss!**

The group leader leads a quick discussion on any initial thoughts and reactions to these ideas before moving on to the next section: *Introducing the Readings*

Introducing the readings:

The book of Acts is a sequel to the Gospel of Luke showing how the first apostles, the first followers and advocates of Jesus, responded to Christ's life, death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven. This opening chapter anticipates the vivid drama of Pentecost (that we are going to look at next week!). But before we get there we are going to skip on in Acts to a remarkable scene in chapter 16 that fits in with the idea of waiting for downloads. The early church was hugely countercultural and many people in positions of power felt threatened by how these Christians were undermining their ways of dominating and exploiting people. In this Chapter Paul and Silas end up being thrown in jail and waiting on a download from God!

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Read: Acts 1: 1-11 and Acts 16: 16-34

This scene in Acts 1 could be seen as somewhat comical. Jesus tells his disciples that a new download is coming (Pentecost 1.0 in the next chapter ready for some really wild Beta testing!) but they won't know exactly when and where all the downloads are coming! They stand around dumfounded, staring glakitly up at the sky and then two men in white robes pop up and tell them to get going — 'What are you standing about for?'

Q: How could God use this reading to challenge us today? Where are we staring intently — looking at where Jesus has *been* and therefore missing where Jesus *is* now?

As Jesus says in Acts 1, it is not for us to know the times and dates God has set! Sometimes when we are waiting on the download, the new thing, we can be waiting a while. Paul and Silas choose to pass the time with praying and singing as they wait on God. It must have been quite some session. The jailer's whole life has changed and who knows what the morning brings... but he choose to mark this incredible night through Baptism. Not once the dust has settled and the chaos is over, but while the dust is still swirling and everything is up in the air.

Q: So while we are waiting for downloads from God how are we passing the time? What songs are we singing? What prayers are we praying? And how are we marking the time while the dust is still swirling?



Context:

As we come to Pentecost we move from the digital metaphors of loading, typing and downloading to the physical — flesh, blood, fire — metaphors of birth and flame! Expectancy is not just *A* way of life, it is *THE* way of life. Nothing arrives fully formed. No flame bursts into life without heat and oxygen and fuel. Creation took time to form and so does new creation. Life takes time to grow and so does new life. Birth takes time and so does rebirth...

The group leader reads *The Context* to set up this week's discussion.

As it says in our Acts reading "Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting." Sometimes in the midst of the waiting comes the 'Suddenly moment' a pivotal breakthrough. What has been your experience of being surprised by God in your life? When has God thrown you a curveball? **Discuss!**

The group leader leads a quick discussion on any initial thoughts and reactions to these ideas before moving on to the next section: *Introducing the Readings*

Introducing the reading:

After the wait it comes all in a rush! This encounter almost defies description. It's an incredible multi-sensory, multi-lingual scene when the Holy Spirit comes to enthuse and empower the followers of Jesus causing bafflement, scepticism and amazement.

Read: Acts 2: 1-21 (or the whole of chapter 2 if your group wants to go on a deep dive!)

It is striking in this reading the interplay between fire and language because language is a bit like fire. Both spread quickly, are hard to control and have the power to both take life and to save it, to comfort us and shock us, warm us and burn us.

This new language of heaven, long expected and yet unexpected (Peter name checks Joel!) bursts into life and spreads like, well... wildfire!

The 'Q:' sections are questions that are thrown out to the group to initiate discussion on the passage and themes. Pause after these to discuss the ideas.

Q: What one word stood out to you in this reading? How could you carry that word with you in the week ahead and continue to reflect on it? Perhaps you could write it down somewhere or make a note of it on your phone.

Q: As a Connect group, how can this vivid scene of blessing and testimony, surprise and wonder, diversity and vibrancy — inspire you as a group? What new ways could you

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support one another or share God's love in the world together? Why not list some practical suggestions.



Context:

As our month on waiting comes to an end what are we anticipating? For ourselves, for our communities, for our churches, for our world? There is a pattern repeated often throughout scripture and in our lives is of **waiting, receiving** and **sharing**. What are we waiting for? What are we longing to receive? What are we hoping to share?

The group leader reads *The Context* to set up this week's discussion.

This anticipation is tied up with an enigmatic idea about — 'remembering the future'. In theology it is known as 'proleptic anamnesis' to partake of something before it's fulfilment. This is often described as what happens when we take Communion — a foretaste of the Kingdom to come. Living in this kind of understanding of life creates within us an understanding of the importance of the role the Church is being called to play in the world.

What do you anticipate for your Connect group? What does the next year hold for it? **Discuss!**

The group leader leads a quick discussion on any initial thoughts and reactions to these ideas before moving on to the next section: *Introducing the Readings*

Introducing the readings:

We close our theme with two practical, emphatic and encouraging extracts from the Epistles — letters written to early church communities and widely circulated among them. The Bible contains many genres, and even just one epistle can contain many. The early church was spread out, oppressed, and feeling its way into a new way of living. In real time Christians are working out what it is to be Christian — how to bear with one another, how to be patient, how to build resilience, how to go the distance.

Read: Colossians 3: 1-17 and Philippians 4: 1-9

Q: The words in our Colossians reading were radical when they were first heard and they still have radical power today. Verse 11 is an incredible, unequivocal vision of inclusion. We live now, thousands of years later, in a world profoundly shaped by the universal claims of personhood and dignity made in the New Testament. As global tensions rise and we face an uncertain future are we at risk of becoming a more divided, tribal planet where these assumptions are undermined? Is this reading going to become increasingly radical again as the 21st century wears on?

The 'Q:' sections are questions that are thrown out to the group to initiate discussion on the passage and themes. Pause after these to discuss the ideas.

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Q: What would it mean for us in our lives — our homes, our work, our local communities — to clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience? Does it help us to know that we don't do it alone, and that others in our Connect group are putting on the same outfits?

Q: What are we rejoicing about today? What is true and noble that we can celebrate? What is something pure, lovely or admirable that we have experienced recently? What in our shared life together is excellent and praiseworthy? Pool together all your responses and give thanks!