



ALL IS BRIGHT

**SANCTUARY FIRST
CONNECT BIBLE STUDY**

DECEMBER 2024

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!

ALL IS BRIGHT

*Silent night! Holy night! All is calm, **all is bright...***

These lines beautifully describe a precious peaceful moment the night our saviour Jesus was born. An impossibly small treasure, a beautiful scrap of humanity in the eye of the storm.

'Silent Night' was written in Germany in the 19th century by Joseph Mohr and was declared an intangible cultural heritage by UNESCO in 2011 to acknowledge the enormous power of this song. The simple words and melody are spine-tingling and reverberate around the world each December. In the cold and dark humanity remembers the bright light that came one dark night.

On the one hand at this time of year it can seem like all is indeed bright as our homes, shopping centres and streets are lit up 24/7 but the reality is it can also feel dark, cold and grim for a host of reasons. Christmas can be a bleak time for many, with the financial and social pressures of the season compounding issues of poverty, injustice, isolation and grief.

In the midst of pressing economic, political and ecological forces what do we mean when we dare to say 'all is bright' this Christmas? In a world that knows only too well hostility, cruelty and inequality, where are we seeing the brightness?

WEEKLY OVERVIEW

- **Purple** — *Passion and power!*
- **Blue** — *Blessing and belting out the blues!*
- **Green** — *Gleaning and gleaming!*
- **Gold** — *Gratitude and glory!*

We are seeing it in Emmanuel — the wonder of God with us! Jesus light of the world shines through everything, we read in Colossians 1 that it is through Christ 'that all things hold together and have their being'! Christ's light cannot be put out it is literally woven into reality. In the middle of a dark and shabby stable, on a dark and inhospitable night, in a dark and dangerous time — all was bright through God's gift of Jesus Christ to the world. Jesus came to redeem and restore our world — to help us see the brightness in everything and Christ has redeemed the world and is going on redeeming the world!

The light of Jesus cannot be extinguished, the darkness will never overcome it. This Christmas let's rediscover the bright multi-coloured light of Christ that shines in and through everything, even if it's sometimes hard to see. And as well as seeing the brightness, how are being the brightness? Carrying the multifaceted light of Christ with us? That light that illuminates the goodness in creation, the harmony we were meant for.

We are not beyond hope, beyond redemption, the light still burns, all is bright! Let's revisit the timeless story of the nativity and have our eyes wide open to the bright colours that empower, enthuse and enlighten us in the face of cruelty, injustice, poverty, isolation and inequality.

Because into the noise of disruption and upheaval, pain and confusion comes a beautiful moment of quiet each year that reminds us that all is — indeed — bright.

POEM

A FISTFUL OF STRAW

A fistful of straw
a fistful of straw
was all it took to hold you.

Straw trapping heat
insulation from Bethlehem cold
your breath caught in the scant light
of that night
and sinks in to Mary's life
burying deep
straw trapping heat.

A little straw
no more,
just a hand's worth
anchoring you to this earth.

Mary is wrapt
then she gasps...

a fistful of straw
a fistful of water
a fistful of flour
a fistful of grapes
a fistful of nails
a fistful of myrrh

and then as you stir

and eyelashes brush your face

a fistful of grace.

Just a handful of straw.

It took everything and almost nothing.

A few strands of faith
a few stalks of hope
just enough,
And the last straw,
is love.

Mary's muscles twitch,
nervous, grinning,
For the last straw is not the beginning of the
end
it's only the end of the beginning.

James Cathcart

PRAYER

LET US PRAY

Father God,
Thank you, thank you, thank you
For the miracle of your son Jesus.

Thank you that his love transforms death into
life
Brokenness to wholeness
Sadness to joy

Thank you that nothing and no one is beyond
his power.

Amen.

Laura Digan

WEEK 1: PURPLE — PASSION AND POWER!

INTRODUCTION:

We begin our journey through the brightness of Christmas with Royal Purple as Joseph is given a sneak peak of the King of Kings that his fiancée is going to give birth to. But this Jesus is no ordinary king as he combines the purple of royalty with the purple of the priesthood. In Jesus these two shades come together in our selfless Prince of Peace who leads us to the throne of God. This unique combination will birth an incredible saviour, but for him to make it Joseph must be stirred to compassion. Our expectations about power and authority are turned on their head and reinvented. This Prince of Peace was born in a stable, the son of a father who almost disowned him and yet he was the most powerful person on earth. This week we want to think about how we can turn expectations of power on their head and be stirred by compassion to empower others. Are children born into difficult fragile circumstances simply regrettable victims of wider forces or are they powerful agents of change and transformation themselves? The nativity tells us it's the latter!

SEEDS TO SOW:

This week consider how you can support organisations like *Compassion* that are empowering young people born into poverty around the world.

READ MATTHEW 1: 18-25

Precarious prince of peace...

Jesus was not born into a wealthy noble family. Emmanuel, God with us, King of kings, is not born in pomp and ceremony but out of the strength and compassion of the vulnerable Mary and Joseph. God and

humanity together, a bright beacon that shines through history.

How do you feel reading these verses? Who do you feel sympathy for and why? And who are the people God is stirring you to show compassion towards today? Who need to be remembered, protected, to belong, to be given a chance?

READ ISAIAH 9: 6-7

Prophesied Prince of Peace!

Our Prince of Peace is a seemingly impossible thing — a selfless ruler, one who leads from the heart, blending the purple of royalty with the purple of the priesthood. Through Jesus we come to God the Father. Christianity depends how we think about power. A carpenter's son born on the margins who speaks about love is the most powerful person on the planet. This is a bright spark of selfless leadership! Why did humanity's saviour come into the world like this?

READ GENESIS 14: 18-20 + HEBREWS 6: 17-20

Who is Melchizedek!?!

This blending of King and Priest (and offering a meal, bread and wine) is a foreshadowing deep in the Old Testament of the figure of Jesus to come. All of us, no matter what, have a sure and certain hope in Jesus — our forerunner, a high priest on our behalf linking God and Humanity. We are worthy of love, dignity, and respect — so let's follow after Christ and help him to make everyone shine! Let's consider practical steps we can take this week to champion those who need us. To change how we see the weak and vulnerable — to see them as powerful agents of change in their own right. Discuss practical steps!

WEEK 2: BLUE — BLESSING AND BELTING OUT THE BLUES!!

INTRODUCTION:

The next bright colour in our All is Bright series is blue — a colour often associated with Mary in artistic depictions of the nativity. Historically there are a number of reasons for this, but some of it stems from the fact that blue is a notoriously difficult and expensive pigment to use and as result was often associated with the transcendent and divine and reserved for special subjects. One consequence of this is the bright visual legacy of 'Marian blue' in art.

But what about Mary's audio legacy, in the... *blues*! Riffing on Hannah's protest song in the Old Testament, this week we join Mary visiting Elizabeth and her powerful song of social justice, the *Magnificat*.

There is a bright light that shines throughout history of those who stand up for and sing with one another, banding together against injustice. In the darkness of modern day poverty, injustice and inequality there is the brightness of solidarity, support and kindness, when we link arm in arm, singing together.

SEEDS TO SOW:

This week consider how you can support organisations like *Christians Against Poverty (CAP)* that work to end poverty and give people hope.

READ LUKE 1: 39-45 + 1 SAMUEL 1: 24-28

Mary + Hannah

Getting that support and encouragement must have been enormous for the young Mary who has just been thrown for a loop by the Angel Gabriel!

Before Mary plugs her guitar into the amplifier, let's rewind the tape to the Old Testament and Hannah, who also belted out the blues.

What similarities and differences do we notice between these women?

They are separated by centuries but what do you think a conversation between the two of them might have been like?

READ 1 SAMUEL 2: 1-5 + LUKE 1: 46-51

The power of song to tell us about God.

Do the opening lines of these songs remind you of any other songs you love?

There are a lot of similarities between these two songs. In the genre of blues music people often revisit, reinterpret and reimagine old tunes and lyrics in new ways.

What words stand out to you in these songs listening to them this Christmas?

READ 1 SAMUEL 2: 6-10 + LUKE 1: 52-55

The Old Testament and the New Testament against poverty!

What is similar between these two songs and how is Mary's remix different from Hannah's?

Finally, what line from one of these songs would you like to carry with you this Advent?

WEEK 3: GREEN — GLEANING AND GLEAMING!

INTRODUCTION:

Are you dreaming of a green Christmas?

Joseph's dreamt, Mary's sung, and now they are out on the road through God's green world displaced and (in Mary's case) heavily pregnant! As we think about our wide green world and the populations that are still being displaced upon it we want to find the bright lights shining for climate justice, global equality and mutual sustainable thriving!

Do we want a materialistic Christmas destined for Boxing Day landfill, or do we want to be drawn into the brightness of a green, *evergreen* Christmas that shines bright for our whole world?

SEEDS TO SOW:

This week consider how you can support organisations like *Tearfund* or the *Vine Trust* who tackle poverty and injustice and champion sustainable development.

READ LUKE 2: 1-5

In those days and these days...

Empires make decrees and lives are thrown into chaos. It happened then. It happens now.

It's intriguing in this story of divine power that we see the the chain of command, the hierarchical infrastructure of the empire. Our King, our new ruler, is about to be born in a lowly stable without any staff or advisers let alone an army of bureaucrats (and actual soldiers). In the Nativity the empire is the sideshow — the real event is happening with some bright lights in a wee stable.

Just like weather and geography, our lives are shaped by politics and history. But our politics and history go further in that they also shape our weather and geography! The consequences of disrupted ecosystems is a strain on our climate, economies and societies. Our big bright green world is a beautiful place one that needs our help to stay evergreen.

Sadly we live in a world full of displaced people who are shunted back and forth like Mary and Joseph. One of the biggest contributors to displacement is pressure brought on homes and livelihoods from a volatile climate.

What is our prayer today for those people? What is our prayer of brightness in the darkness? What is our prayer for evergreen solutions?

READ LEVITICUS 19: 9-10

21st Century Gleaning?

How can we leave spaces for others to 'glean' in the 21st century? Both globally and locally. This gleaning might be agricultural — addressing hunger and inequality — but there are also other resources we have that could be shared better too.

READ LEVITICUS 19: 33-24

Time to be green and glean and gleam!!

Human beings are bright precious things! How can we recognise the brightness and preciousness of the human beings around us who have come from far?

What are practical things we can do to help displaced communities, especially ones who have sought refuge near us.

WEEK 4: GOLD — GRATITUDE AND GLORY!

INTRODUCTION:

Royal purple of the Prince of Peace, Marian Blue of our Blues singing Mary, evergreen forest green of this precious world and now we look up to the brightness of gold from heaven! The bright raiment of angels singing to the shepherds in the fields. And we think too of the golden treasure in Mary's heart as she ponders all these things that have happened to her...

SEEDS TO SOW:

This week consider how you can support organisations like the *Bethany Trust* who work to relieve the suffering and meet the long term needs of homeless and vulnerable people in Scotland.

READ ZECHARIAH 7: 8-10

Gifts for God.

Want to get God a Christmas gift? Here's his list. What can we get for God this year?

READ LUKE 2: 6-12

Golden signs on a golden night.

This is it, before 'all is calm, all is bright', all is noisy, confusing and painful. And then the miracle and the exhausted calm, the tender brightness, Emanuel, God with us.

Who gets to see this golden sign? To be the first to catch on? Well, the local bigwigs are snoring in their feather beds and it's a group of humble wooly shepherds, on the margins of the society round about them who get the honour. Because this Prince of Peace ain't like any noble you've ever come across before.

What does it tell us about God that the golden light of the heavenly choir falls on this hillside rather than a palace?

READ LUKE 2: 13-20

Golden memories to treasure

All is bright, all is very, very bright, as angels meet shepherds, heaven meets earth, eternity meets the present — and all on a little hillside to a very small select audience. This is the gold of heaven that does not perish, not the shiny metallic ring of crowns and coins that will simply decay and rust.

This is a kingdom from the ground up, the edges in. The Angel Gabriel didn't sign up influencers to get Jesus on the agenda. It was beautiful ordinary people in their bright, beautiful, ordinary yet golden lives that shared their story, our story.

What are the golden memories that Mary treasured that first Christmas?

And what are the bright golden memories we want to make this Christmas season? Memories of surprise and generosity, compassion and wonder that we can treasure for years to come?