

Isaiah 43:18–19a (CEB)

- ¹⁸Don't remember the prior things;
don't ponder ancient history.
¹⁹Look! I'm doing a **new** thing;
now it sprouts up; don't you recognize it?

Isaiah 48:6–7 (CEB)

- ^{6b}From now on I'll tell you **new** things,
guarded secrets that you don't know.
⁷They are created now, not long ago;
before today you hadn't heard of them,
so you won't say, "I already knew them."

Lamentations 3:22–24 (NIV)

- ²²Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed,
for his compassions never fail.
²³They are **new** every morning;
great is your faithfulness.
²⁴I say to myself, "The LORD is my portion;
therefore I will wait for him."

2 Corinthians 5:17 (NRSV)

¹⁷So if anyone is in Christ, there is a **new** creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become **new**!

Revelation 21:1–5 (CEB)

Then I saw a **new** heaven and a new earth, for the former heaven and the former earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ²I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. ³I heard a loud voice from the throne say, "Look! God's dwelling is here with humankind. He will dwell with them, and they will be his peoples. God himself will be with them as their God. ⁴He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more. There will be no mourning, crying, or pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.

⁵Then the one seated on the throne said, "Look! I'm making all things **new**." He also said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."

*Are we really ready for a **New** Year?*

New. . . New Year. . . New Beginnings. . . From start to finish, the Bible reveals to us a God who is always ready to do something new. From the story of creation in Genesis to the "new heavens and new earth" of Revelation 21, *new* is an enduring biblical theme, rooted in the very nature of the Creator. One can easily see God's "new" across the biblical story, at work in history, nature, communities, families, and even individuals:

The God of the Bible is the God of new beginnings. He is the One who is perpetually "doing a new thing" (Is 43:19) and who makes "all things new" (Rev 21:5). His drama of renewal stretches from creation to apocalypse, with his providential and redemptive history joining the two. God, moreover, always extends an invitation to the human race to join the drama of renewal—to become a new creation and sing a new song. History and eternity are a perpetual waiting for God's new and fuller appearance.¹

¹ From the *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*. 1998. Intervarsity Press.

Even in the darkness of the Babylonian exile, amidst so much loss and devastation, God said to his people, “Don’t dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing . . . don’t you see it?” (Isaiah 43:18-19b above). Smith writes:

This short proclamation of salvation focuses on God’s final eschatological transformation of nature. It is appropriate for the audience to put their trust in God’s past action like creation and the exodus, for these traditions and historical claims strongly support the prophet’s theological position that God can be believed (43:10), for he does what he says he will do. These facts should never be ignored or set aside, for they provide assurances about God’s character (46:9). But the prophet exhorts his listeners not to allow just God’s former miraculous deeds (the exodus in 43:16–17) to influence their faith decisions, for God is still alive and can be trusted to direct the future history of his people.

The future will involve God doing a new creative thing that will far surpass anything accomplished in the past (43:19). The new thing is described as something that “springs up” (*tismah*) suddenly, just like the desert plants that surprisingly sprout in a completely barren area after a rain. Almost in astonishment the prophet rhetorically asks his audience, “do you not perceive it,” implying that they should.²

But like the Israelites, too often we don’t perceive God’s new thing. Our lives are made more difficult by our unwillingness to see the newness that God brings. We nurture past hurts and slights, looking backward rather than forward, and it blinds us to God’s work in our lives. But the New Year is as good a time as any to embrace God’s “new thing” and to renew our own commitment to live as the grace-drenched people of God. And there is no better guide in this than John Wesley.

A renewal

John Wesley adopted the practice of leading congregations in an annual Covenant Service, which came to be most often held on New Year’s Eve. This “Covenant Renewal Service” is still in the UMC Book of Worship in much the same form as used in 1780. I invite you to read through it. You can find it on-line. You’ll discover that the language is . . . stout. It is a serious covenant built upon sincere confession and genuine commitment. The covenant is grounded upon giving ourselves to God completely, holding nothing back. It is about trusting obedience of Christ in all things. The UMC cautions that the covenant is such “hearty fare” that congregations must be prepared for it, lest it become empty words.

Here is a brief excerpt from the service that lays out the heart of the covenant to which Wesley called his congregations:

First, set apart some time, more than once,
to be spent alone before the Lord;
in seeking earnestly God's special assistance
and gracious acceptance of you;
in carefully thinking through all the conditions of the covenant;
in searching your hearts
whether you have already freely given your life to Christ.
Consider what your sins are.
Consider the laws of Christ, how holy, strict, and spiritual they are,
and whether you, after having carefully considered them,
are willing to choose them all.
Be sure you are clear in these matters, see that you do not lie to God.

Second, be serious and in a spirit of holy awe and reverence.

Third, claim God's covenant,
rely upon God's promise of giving grace and strength,

² Smith, G. (2009). *Isaiah 40-66* (Vol. 15B, pp. 209–210). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

so you can keep your promise.
Trust not your own strength and power.
Fourth, resolve to be faithful.

You have given to the Lord your hearts,
you have opened your mouths to the Lord,
and you have dedicated yourself to God.
With God's power, never go back.

For Wesley, true faith is expressed in good works. We can't divorce faith from ethics. How we live expresses how well we know God. Whether or not we are obedient tests our claim to have faith in Jesus Christ. Faithful obedience is not merely something to strive for, but to achieve.

Stout words. Stouter ideas. Countless times I've been asked whether what we do really matters in the end. Why be "good" if it is all about grace? It *is* all about grace and that is precisely why we are called to be good and expected to actually deliver. Trusting obedience can be the only response to a gracious and loving God, to the atoning sacrifice of Jesus.

Obedient as to what? As Jesus himself said and enacted countless times, God's instructions are simple: love God and love one another. Others ought to see this in us. They ought to see "love, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23). Do we feed and clothe and care? How? When?

For me, it has always come down to this. I claim to trust Jesus Christ and, as a consequence, that I live in a right relationship with God, that God's Spirit lives and works in and with and through me. I ought to have something to show for all this. Others should see it. So I strive always to live true to my covenant relationship with God. The inescapable truth is that God has shown us unimaginable love and we are to live out that love in all our relationships, lifetime and momentary, casual and formal, workplace and home. The time has come to embrace fully God's **new** thing!

Daily Bible Readings

This week: *More on God's new thing*

Monday, John 3:1-21 New life

Tuesday, Ezekiel 36:24-32 A new heart and a new spirit

Wednesday, Jeremiah 31:31-37 A new covenant

Thursday, Ephesians 2:11-22 A new humanity

Friday, Revelation 5 A new song (v. 9)

Saturday, Isaiah 65:17-25 A new heavens and new earth.

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Evening Class

We are studying the gospel of John.
Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall
This class will not meet on Jan 1

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are studying the book of Samuel.
Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott must cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Scott's 10:50 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Current series: *The First Days of Jesus*

This class will not meet on 12/31

Beginning January 14: *Rescue: Images of Salvation*