



The Bible, like a busy pub at closing time, or a heaving post office queue a few days before the Christmas delivery cut off, or a beach on the one day of summer it hasn't rained, is full of characters. And like the pub, post office, and beach some of these characters are somewhat... complex. The Bible is a rich and fascinating trove of people wrestling with what it is to be human. As we follow the twists and turns of these characters jostling together, it offers sharp insights into what it means to be alive. Dreamers, schemers and screamers!

Once before we looked at the Bible through the lens of 'complex characters' surveying a grab bag of striking personalities. This month, off the back of **The Simple Life** we thought it would be fun to think about complexity again! Our faith is often like that isn't it? Quiet for a season and then loud. Chaotic and then calm. Simple and then complex.

So, we step once again into the Bible in search of complex characters, but this time we're also going to expand the concept to think about these complex characters in the complex environments they lived in. As we move from summer towards harvest we read about these men and women in the context of climate change and the environmental challenges that face us today. Each of the people we will look at had to deal with the opportunities and limitations of their environments adapting to pressures of land and weather.

Complex Characters

STUDY QUESTIONS

When we come to the Bible we meet a complex world full of complex characters a mirror to our own complex world and the complex characters like you and I in it. Through this conversation between the two we seek the universal and simple truth that all these complex characters are beloved by God.

These discussion questions adapt our monthly themes for small Connect Groups or personal Bible study (look up the [Complex Characters Resource Pack](#) for more information on this month's theme). The questions are divided into 4 parts to correspond with the 4 weeks of the Daily Worship theme. They are offered as a guideline and there is no need to go through all the given questions in a single session, or in the following sequence. Feel free to pick and choose, or adapt to what interests you or your group.

Complex Characters

STUDY QUESTIONS

Part 1: Generations of complexity

Famine, stars, naming, visiting, laughter, tears, binding, birthing... Reflecting on the complex characters of Abraham, Sarah, Hagar and their descendants. These lives we read about in Genesis were shaped by history, geography and meteorology — just like ours. Like us, they were complex individuals reacting to a complex, pressured environment. Forces of nature, personality and spirituality come together in a complicated family.

Read Genesis 15: 1-6

Abram is comforted looking up at the stars and reflecting on God's promise. When were you last able to look up on a clear night and see the stars? How does it make you feel when you look at up at the stars in the night sky?

Isn't it strange to think that there are stars that shone down on Abram that shine down on us now? If you were a star up there in space looking down at Earth through a speeded up time-lapse from Abram's time to now — what would you see?

Read Genesis 18: 1-15

Let's get into Sarah's mindset. A woman, advance in age, she's just been kneading flour to make cakes at the drop of a hat. She's in the tent, perhaps tidying up, or sitting down for a wee rest and she hears these strange words from these strange guests — she's going to have a son. And she laughs.

Laughter can communicate a lot of different things. What do you imagine her laugh to be like? One of shock? Disbelief? Genuine amusement? Confusion? Bitterness? Hope? Ruefulness? What was behind her laughter and then her denial?

Read Genesis 21: 1-21

Abraham and Sarah are not flawless heroes, they are complex characters. The story of this great patriarch and matriarch is one of longing, promise, parenthood and faithfulness — but also of bitterness, rejection and shame. In this reading Sarah's laughter in verse 6 makes a sharp juxtaposition with Hagar's tears in verse 16.

How does it make you feel — that Abraham and Sarah — like many people we meet in the Bible — are both sympathetic and unsympathetic?

Complex Characters

STUDY QUESTIONS

Part 2: Creativity, responding to crisis

This week we think about creative responses to unprecedented circumstances with the help of Joanna (and the other women referenced in Luke 8:1-3) who bought in to the ground floor ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. What motivated these women to go out on a limb and support him? What can their example show us about how we respond creatively to the climate crisis today?

Read Luke 8: 1-3

What do you think led Joanna and the others to 'crowdfund' Jesus's ministry? It was likely quite an unconventional thing to do. The gospels contain many instances of Jesus healing people but not many descriptions of folk providing for him out of their resources. What do you think it would have felt like to be a woman following Jesus in the early days? What would you have observed and felt?

Read Luke 10: 38-42

This week we're using Joanna as a lens to look at Jesus's life ministry.

With Martha and Mary we have contrasted one sister who listens closely to Jesus while the other sister is distracted and busy with a lot of tasks. As Joanna, one of the women who was practically supporting Jesus (providing for him out of her resources) how would you have responded hearing about this encounter? Let's use our imaginations and imagine what Joanna's take could have been?

Read Luke 24: 1-12

Verse 11: "But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them."

What must it have been like for Joanna, an integral part of Jesus's ministry, to be so quickly dismissed by the apostles? Only Peter got up to run and check. What would it feel like to see something so amazing and yet your friends and colleagues don't even take you seriously?

And thinking of our wider theme this month considering the climate challenges we face, what must it feel for people facing the startling consequences of environmental damage to not be taken seriously by others who feel distant from it?

Complex Characters

STUDY QUESTIONS

Part 3: Heavy weather, complications and cliffhangers

Doubt, catastrophe, frustration, twists, turns, satire. A prophet who doesn't want to prophesy, a big fish that gets awful indigestion, a strange plant and a cliffhanger ending. Jonah is a complex book about a complex character in a complex situation. What does his stormy story have to tell us about the complicated situations and challenges we face today as a result of environmental pressures on our climate?

Read Jonah 1: 1-3

How long do you think the gap was between verses 2 and 3? Was Jonah already pulling the suitcase out from under the bed before The Lord had finished speaking? Was there some soul searching?

What's it like to be in that verse 2.5 place? Do we find ourselves in that 2.5 place when we think about the urgent climate change challenges we have to face, unsure where to turn or go next?

Read Jonah 2

Straight from the belly of the fish... Picture the scene, the sounds, the smell... Pretty... intense! As we think this week about the pressure climate change is putting on nature it could be fruitful to think about what it means to engage more of our senses in prayer, not simply sound/silence like we often do, but paying more attention to where we find ourselves. Fortunately, unlike poor Jonah, we're not in the belly of a fish but we do find ourselves in a living, breathing complex world.

Does it make a difference where we pray to how we pray or what we pray about? Does tuning into the world around you change how you pray?

Read Jonah 3

How long do you think the gap between verses 2 and 3 was this time? Imagine the fishy Jonah trekking to Nineveh. Would people have stopped and stared? Would they have commented on the reeking prophet?

He was an unexpected and reluctant messenger but was listened to attentively. Why?

Complex Characters

STUDY QUESTIONS

Part 4: The complexity of kindness

The complexity of kindness, that is able to dig deep and respond generously and creatively in the midst of heartache and disaster. In literature we often celebrate complicated baddies with cruel mischievous plans but in real life the baddies are often all too predictable and dull in their greed and arrogance whereas the people who are managing somehow to do good and be kind in the midst of crisis are richly complex. They're not superheroes, they're real people like you and I but who manage to find wells of kindness within them.

This week we delve into Ruth to see how Ruth and Naomi, two complex women with complex motivations, respond to heartache with compassion. The pressures we face as a result of climate change now and over the coming years will require us to respond with great determination and resourcefulness but also great kindness.

Read Ruth 1

Land and loss. Upheaval, turmoil and sorrow. Naomi and Ruth stick together in the face of disaster and calamity.

Why do you think Ruth was so determined to stick with Naomi?

Read Ruth 2

Boaz is moved and impressed by Ruth's story, by her care and loyalty. Her kind actions going above and beyond what was expected of her has begun a chain reaction with Boaz going above and beyond simply allowing her to glean in the field. Despite the differences between them their is recognition and mutual respect between Boaz and Ruth.

The process of gleaning, going through the harvest for what has been left behind and that can still be of use, is an interesting way of thinking about the challenges we face as a shared humanity dealing with climate change. We will have to be resourceful and determined like Ruth to overcome the challenges ahead of us, but also kind and caring like her too.

How can we be diligent and kind like Ruth and alert and generous like Boaz and go above and beyond as we seek solutions to solve the problems that face us? And in so doing perhaps start a chain reaction of kindness? How can we go above and beyond for one another and for the earth?

Read Ruth 4: 1-12

What is going through Ruth's mind this day? Boaz's mind? And what about the next-of-kin's mind? As we conclude this series on complex characters let's get into the mindset of these complex characters in a complex situation.