

Jonah & Esther

Called to go and called to stay;

The reluctant Prophet and the courageous Queen

In 2019 we're focussing on what it means to follow Jesus' call to share his truth and love with the people of Wick, Littlehampton and the World...

What is God calling us to do as a church?

How do I know Jesus called me?

Is the Lord calling me to serve the people and places I already know?

Maybe God is calling me to something new?

My prayer is that spending time with Jonah and Esther will help us consider those questions for ourselves.

As always, your time together may move on to other passages and lines of discussion. Hopefully these notes can root each discussion in God's word as we then apply it to our calling as disciples of Jesus. I hope that you will spend time each week praying for one another, and the prayer suggestions are intended as an addition to your own personal prayer requests.

JONAH

Everyone knows the story of Jonah, but how recently have you read it? And when was the last time you asked God to speak into your life from the story of this runaway prophet?

One question that often comes up is whether the story is true. It's certainly set in real places, but it lacks some of the historical detail that other prophets include. Jesus refers to it, but some have considered it a parable much like Jesus' own stories. One thing's for sure, a God who can create out of nothing and raise a dead man to life can arrange for a fishy B&B.

In the end, the promise of Scripture is that it is all God-breathed and useful for us, so let's head prayerfully into the story of this prophet with ears open for what God is saying to us about the call to follow him...

Jonah 1

Getting started...

What's the strangest/hardest/funniest thing you've been asked to do recently?

Read Jonah 1

Understanding what was happening...

Why does God send Jonah to Nineveh?

Why might Jonah have decided to do the exact opposite?

Does this storm remind you of an event in Jesus' life?

What is the difference in response between the sailors and Jonah?

Jonah tried to avoid telling pagans about God, but what actually happened in the end (v16)?

By the end of this chapter, who needs God's grace and rescue?

What does that tell us about the people God calls to serve him?

Applying to our situations...

Would God call us to do things that can seem daunting and scary?

With Jonah in mind, should we ever feel unworthy to be used by God?

If there are times we've failed to obey God's call, is there forgiveness?

Do we have to hear God's audible voice? How do we know God calls us to follow him?

Prayer

As well as prayer for specific things in each other's lives, why not pray that this year we would know the call to follow Jesus, as well as forgiveness for our failings. Ask for wisdom for one another, ask him to show us how he's calling us to follow him.

Jonah 2

Getting started...

Can you share an answered prayer that got you out of a difficult situation?

Read Jonah 2

Understanding what was happening...

How does Jonah's faith seem to have grown since chapter 1?

What's prompted that change?

Does Jonah's prayer in vv1-6 remind you of any of the Psalms?

What is it that Jonah has learned about God from his dramatic submersion?
Does God sometimes allow difficult times so that we learn to trust him?
It's an extraordinary story, but does that mean we must read it as a parable?

Applying to our situations...

Do we go through times when we feel 'in the depths'?
Is there a lesson here for when following Jesus takes us through difficulties?
Do you find it easy to acknowledge your need for God's forgiveness?
If we've truly answered the call to follow Jesus, will he ever let us go?

Prayer

As this chapter is really just one long prayer, you might like to begin or end your prayer time by reading this chapter together as a prayer. We too have been rescued from the pit (of sin) and from death - into life in Christ!

Jonah 3

Getting started...

How easy do we find it to give people a second (third, fourth etc!) chance?

Read Jonah 3

Understanding what was happening...

How do we see God's grace to Jonah in vv1-2?
What seems to have happened in Jonah so that he now obeys God's call?
What is the result of Jonah's message?
How does this demonstrate God's concern for justice in all nations?
How would you expect Jonah to feel as he sees this change in Nineveh?

Applying to our situations...

Are we all called to speak of repentance and faith? (see Luke 24:46-47)
Is it reassuring that Nineveh's repentance was dependent on God's power, and not the faith of the messenger?
There are different ways of telling people about Jesus. Are there ways that you would love to be more confident doing so?

Prayer

Are there particular people on your heart that you'd love to share the good news with? Why not name one or two people each and pray for faith and opportunity to talk to them in God's timing and strength.

Jonah 4

Getting started...

I don't think it's just me... why is it hard to forgive people who've hurt us?

Read Jonah 4

Understanding what was happening...

Jonah's call to preach repentance has gone well, so why is he so angry?

What does it suggest he really wanted to happen?

Does it seem strange to hold against God just how gracious and loving he is?

What is God showing to Jonah through the plant?

How do you feel as the story ends, without knowing Jonah's final response?

Does leaving it on a cliff-hanger help us 'enter into' the message of the book?

Applying to our situations...

How often do we check our hearts to ensure our motivations are in line with the Lord's?

Do we sometimes fall into the trap of entitlement in our faith, but expect more of others?

As we seek to follow Jesus' call to share the message, are we ready for a variety of outcomes?

Do we trust the Lord that as we obey his instruction, he will act?

Prayer

As we reach the end of Jonah, is there one thing in particular that you'd like prayer for in seeking and following God's call?

ESTHER

We're not going to read the whole book in church, but I would encourage you to read the whole story if you can. And remember, the Bible doesn't necessarily condone all that it describes!

This is a complex story, and none of the people involved emerge as perfect individuals. But that may be exactly why it's so helpful for us - the same issues of truth, loyalty, faith, justice and the call to distinctive lives are as real in Wick as they were for the Jews exiled in Babylon.

'The events described in this book took place between 483 and 473 BC, with some of God's people still exiled and under the rule of the Persians. (It occurs just after the lifetime of Daniel). Xerxes ruled from 485 to 465, and Esther became queen in 479. At that time a Jewish remnant was struggling to rebuild their nation in the Holy Land (Ezra 1—6), but the people were not totally committed to God. Though God is not named in this book, He is present and active. He was not hiding; He was only hidden.' (W. Wiersbe)

Esther Part 1

Getting started...

We're joining the story in chapter 2, but previously the Queen (Vashti) has refused to parade herself before the guests of her husband, King Xerxes. Having defied his orders, Vashti is banished from the King's presence, and a new Queen is sort as the advisors to the King want to make an example of her. It is a sad and messy situation, full of pride, chauvinism and the excesses of power. Yet that is the context in which Esther finds herself...
How often do we find ourselves in unexpected and difficult situations?

Read Esther 2:1-18

Understanding what was happening...

Vv1-4 The way Xerxes treats women is shocking to us, but do we still (sadly) see similar problems in human hearts?

Vv5-7 What do you remember about the Jews taken to Babylon (from when we studied Daniel)?

Vv8-9 Was Esther (and the other women) given any choice about being taken to the King?

Vv10-11 Why might Mordecai and Esther want to keep their identity quiet?

Vv12-16 How do you feel about the way Esther acted, could she have done any differently?

Vv17-18 Is it Esther's fault that she ends up in this situation by v18?

Applying to our situations...

Do we ever face situations that we know to be wrong, and yet seem powerless to change?

How does Xerxes view of sex and marriage contrast with the Bible's teaching of an exclusive, committed partnership?

How can we uphold what Jesus taught about marriage, and be gracious to one another (since none of us are perfect)?

Does the church have a calling to speak the truth in love about the good use God intended for sex and marriage?

Prayer

We should acknowledge that this whole area is a personal one, for ourselves, people we know and society. Jesus has this wonderful way of speaking God's truth and loving people. Perhaps we should pray for the wisdom to be able to care and love people in all sorts of situations in the way that Jesus did.

Esther Part 2

Getting started...

Have you ever felt the need to take a stand for your faith, knowing that it might cause you difficulty?

Read Esther 3:1-14

Understanding what was happening...

Vv1-4 Knowing that Mordecai was a Jew, why would he not kneel to Haman?

Vv5-6 Do we have examples from recent history of anger extending beyond individuals to whole nations?

How is it that people can get so angry and so vicious?

Vv7-9 How does Haman sneakily turn this into something that becomes an issue for King Xerxes?

Vv11 Why is money such a powerful motivator, especially for evil?

Vv12-14 At this point, does it seem like there's any hope for the Jews scattered throughout the empire?

Applying to our situations...

When might the call to follow Jesus require us to take a bold stand either for or against situations around us?

Should we expect that being a Christian and member of God's people will shield us from hate and anger?

How can we ensure that we're so filled with God's grace, that we can respond in grace and love, not anger and hate?

Prayer

Are there specific situations people in the group are finding it hard to be a follower of Jesus? When and where is it hardest to follow the call to live for him and can we pray for endurance and grace to do so in Christ-like ways?

Esther Part 3

Getting started...

When was the last time you had that feeling of just being in the right place at the right time?

Read Esther 4:1-17

Understanding what was happening...

Vv1-3 Does the way that Mordecai act seem strange across cultures?

How would you react and feel in such a horrendous predicament?

Vv4-8 What does this exchange with the messenger tell us about how secluded Esther had been?

Vv9-11 Why was it such a big thing for Mordecai to ask Esther to go and speak to the King?

Vv12-14 Is it harsh of Mordecai to assume Esther's just trying to save herself?

But what is the significance of the final words of v14?

Vv15-17 How does Esther respond and what does it show about her faith?

Applying to our situations...

What can we learn from Esther about our response when God calls us into difficult situations?

Have we lost sight of the role of fasting as part of our prayers and intercessions?

Do you believe that God might be calling you to a current or new situation, 'for such a time as this'?

Prayer

This week would be a really good time to pray for Christians around the world who do face dilemmas like this; will I speak up and risk punishment or worse? But also in our own small ways, it's not always easy, and so we should pray for courage for one another.

[We're skipping over chapters 5 and 6, so why not read them in preparation?]

Esther Part 4

Getting started...

Last week we heard how Esther agreed to risk her life to try and save her people.

In chapter 5 Esther begins hosting banquets for the King and Haman. Haman meanwhile grows even more angry with Mordecai and he sets up a

pole on which to horrifically kill him.

In chapter 6 the King remembers that Mordecai once saved him from a plot, and Haman has to parade him through the streets declaring what a good guy he is!

By chapter 7, Esther's plan is reaching its crucial moment and Haman is still plotting to kill Mordecai and with him, all God's people...

Read Esther 7:1-10

Understanding what was happening...

Vv1-4 How do we see both God's actions (behind the scenes) and Esther's wise actions together here?

Vv5-7 How do you feel about Xerxes by this point, is it as simple as 'good or bad?'

Vv8-9 It seems this is a false accusation against Haman. Is the Bible justifying it, or simply describing what happened?

Vv10 We're clearly intended to see some justice in the way that Haman's evil plan came back to bite him. Again we can ask, is the Bible's account justifying the use of torture, or highlighting the warning that 'those who live by the sword will die by the sword?'

Applying to our situations...

Is this a direct lesson in how we are to treat our enemies, or does Jesus call his people to differ from the Xerxes and Hamans of this world? (Read Matthew 5:43-48)

By this point, do you feel inspired, challenged or worried by Esther's example of following God's call?

Prayer

There's been some big issues and challenges in these studies. As we draw to a close, why not have some quiet and longer opportunity to pray for all that's going on in one another's lives.