

Series: **OFF-TRACK!** August 16, 2009

DESPERATE FOR GOD
Jonah 2

1. How many of you as kids went to some kind of Sunday School or summer church thing? How many of you remember the days of **flannel-graph**? For those of you unfortunate enough to miss this wonderful era of history, flannel-**graph** was the kids powerpoint of the 1960's. There was a flannel storyboard with a generic scene on it—and then flannel-backed Bible characters that were moved around on it and used to tell stories.

-So, I'm going to do a little word association:

*Moses and the...**Ten Commandments**

*Daniel and the...**Lion's Den**

*David and...**Goliath** (somehow Bathsheba never made to flannel-graph)

*Jonah and the...**Whale**. Actually, to be technically correct, it should be Jonah and the **great fish**. That's the story we're talking about—and this week it's **Scene 2**—and this is where the whale shows up. The whale's name is **Monstro**, and Jonah is running away from Geppetto because he wants to become a **real** boy... Whoops! **Wrong story!**

- a. Now, here's my point—and there **is** a point. It's at this juncture where people tend to say, "Okay. I can imagine an ancient prophet saying **No** to a scary, difficult mission—and running. People do that all the time. I can imagine a faraway destination like Tarshish—the Wall Street of that day. I can imagine a small ship hitting a vicious storm. But when it comes to the guy being swallowed by a big fish...uhh-h. It sounds like a Bugs Bunny cartoon to me. Fantasy. Myth. Grimm's Fairy Tales.
-And if you think that, you're certainly not alone. To many people, the story of Jonah is one of most unbelievable accounts in the Bible. Some reliable scholars think Jonah wrote it—but intended it to be seen as a parable. More liberal scholars would say that it's proof that the Bible is filled with myths.
- b. Here's the deal. At The Olive Branch, if you're struggling to believe something I say or something the Bible records—**you don't have to check your brain at the door—and pretend to agree**. The goal is to engage and ask the hard questions. But **whatever** you do—don't miss the powerful message this prophet is giving about God's mission on this planet!

-I believe it is an incredible parable—but a **factual** one. That is—it really happened. Why? Because that's the way it's presented here—and because Jesus Himself referred specifically to this story and declared Jonah to be a sign of his own death, burial and resurrection—and presents Jonah right alongside other historical figures. You don't have to agree with me to hear the powerful truth this story teaches about how whole churches—whole **nations** get off-mission!

- c. There has been a fair amount of speculation about what this **great fish** in the story was. Whale sharks—which inhabit the Mediterranean Sea would certainly be big enough to do the job. They are believed to grow to be 65-70 feet long. Look at the mouth of the whale shark in this picture!

[picture]

-The core question in this story is **not**, “How can a man survive 3 days inside a great fish?” The core question is, **Do miracles happen?** Because that’s what it would take. Is the God of the Bible capable of doing keeping someone alive like that? Absolutely!

2. When we left Jonah last week, he was called by God to warn the **great** city of Nineveh about impending judgment. But Jonah defected, went **down** to Joppa, paid his fare to go **down** to Tarshish—the ancient version of Wall Street.

-Well, his attempt to run prompted God to send a **great** storm caused by a **great** wind—causing **great** fear among the sailors. Where’s Jonah? Well--**down** in the bottom of the ship sleeping. When he told them that He was the servant of a **Great** God who ruled everything, they were even more **greatly** afraid. The only solution was for Jonah to be thrown overboard. And when he was—the sea was immediately calmed!

-I mentioned two key words in this story. One refers to what God does. What is it? **Great!** Which word refers to what our AWOL prophet, Jonah, is up to? **Down.** But with all the downers Jonah’s taken—he hasn’t hit bottom. Not yet. Let’s read on in the story:

But the LORD provided a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights. (Jonah 1:17 TNIV)

-Notice—it’s **great** fish—commissioned by God. The word provided or **commissioned** is a governing word—something a king would do with his servants. Picture God saying, “Hey Fish!” “Yes, Lord” says the fish. “Go pick up Jonah out there. Directions will be given as you go. This is important—**swallow, don’t chew!** I’ll tell you where to drop him off.” “Okay, Lord—I’m on my way!” Sounds **strange** doesn’t it?

-The point is **not** the fish, though. It’s the fact that Jonah is as far down as he can possibly get. This is **bottom.** Anyone know what you do when you hit rock bottom—and you can’t go any further down? Well, you usually pray. Up until now, Jonah hasn’t prayed about anything. He makes his plans, pays his fare—man, he’s **goin’ places!** But his story suddenly grinds to a halt. And **then** he prays. Let’s read it:

From *inside* the fish Jonah prayed to the LORD his God. He said: "In my distress I called to the LORD, and he answered me. From deep in the realm of the dead I called for help, and you listened to my cry. You hurled me into the deep, into the very heart of the seas, and the currents swirled about me; all your waves and breakers swept over me. I said, 'I have been banished from your sight; yet I will

look again toward your holy temple. The engulfing waters threatened me, the deep surrounded me; seaweed was wrapped around my head.

To the roots of the mountains I sank down; the earth beneath barred me in forever. But you, LORD my God, brought my life up from the pit. When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, LORD, and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple. Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit God's love for them. But I, with shouts of grateful praise, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. I will say, 'Salvation comes from the LORD.'(Jonah 2:1-9 TNIV)

- a. In Israelite culture of that day—the depths of the sea, where Jonah found himself, was a **horrifying** place to be. It was the place of the dead, sea monsters—it was the place **no** one came out of alive. And Jonah describes his helplessness—sinking, sinking, sinking—down to the darkness, the roots of the mountains—wrapped in seaweed.

-For the average person, these words would be like the script of a horror film. Jonah is desperate. He knows he's as good as dead—and he knows he's about to meet the One face to face that he's thumbed his nose at. There's no way out.

-And **that's** when Jonah prays. And ironically, Jonah has a **grateful** heart. "I called—and He answered me!...**You brought my life up from the pit!**"

- b. Just a thought—has prayer ever been kind of a last resort for anyone here? The mess gets deeper and deeper—and someone suggests, "Why don't we pray?" We think, "Oh my goodness! Has it actually come to **that**?"

-The question is—why do we wait? Sometimes we're just busy. Emails, work, Facebook, cars to wash, clothes to choose—and there's no **reset** button. No quiet. No space to figure out if our lives are headed in the right direction. And sometimes we **stay** busy—because we don't **want** to ask questions like that!

- c. I don't think Jonah was too busy though. When you're running from God—it's **not** like you want to see Him or talk to Him! And Jonah, sometimes like us, had to hit bottom, literally—the bottom of the sea--before he was willing to ask for help. He says,

When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, LORD, and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple. (Jonah 2:7 TNIV)

-When we hit bottom—and there **are** no more options--**that's** when we tend to be desperate for God. And Jonah was **desperate** for God.

3. So Jonah calls out to God, God hears, and Jonah is delivered from death. The **way** he's delivered is where things get weird. Given he's a prophet, you expect a dramatic rescue where God creates a dry path through the sea to land. Or maybe a chariot of fire scoops him up—or maybe he gets beamed up into the clouds. Or Shamu gives him a ride to shore—and then, just like at Sea World, plants a good-bye kiss on Jonah's cheek. But that's **not** what happened! There's this incredible prayer—then this:

**And the LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.
(Jonah 2:10 TNIV)**

-How many of you think that the author should've chosen a nicer, more religious word? Actually, from what I understand, the Hebrew word is even *more* graphic than that. John Ortberg writes:

“The writer wants to make sure the reader gets this: Jonah did not get dropped off by an angel. The whale had a protein spill, tossed his cookies, lost his lunch, launched the food shuttle, took a ride on the regurgitron...okay? Jonah ends up on the shore. Not a tragic figure covered with suffering. Not a heroic figure, covered with glory. A ridiculous figure, covered with shrimp cocktail and tuna tar tare, or whatever it was the great fish had eaten.” (John Ortberg)

-There is a basic way to divide most stories. On the one side are stories where joy loses, hope loses, life loses. That's called a ...**tragedy**. But the other kind of story is where joy wins, life wins and hope wins. That's called a...**comedy**. What kind of a story is this? It's a comedy. He's like Inspector Clousseau in the Pink Panther movies; no matter how badly he fumbles, life, joy and hope win.

-It's like Jonah does everything wrong; God says, “Go East”—but Jonah goes West. It's a pagan ship captain who calls the prayer meeting—and Jonah's **sleeping!** But God works despite all his fumbling—and the whole crew on the ship turns to God and hold's a worship service! And then to top the whole thing off, God sends a great fish by like a pick-up/delivery shuttle from a rental car outfit to rescue Jonah. It's a **comedy!** And Jonah, who **ought** to be he hero in this story—isn't. God works **despite** him!

- a. What you begin to realize is that this isn't a story about a prophet who goes AWOL; it's ultimately a story about God—and His love for **everyone**. Pagan sailors, flawed prophets—**and** some of the most wicked, bloodthirsty people who have ever existed!

-It's a story about much God's people are like Jonah; how the nation of Israel—called to be a light to the Gentiles—wrap their lives around themselves, around their own prosperity and their own security—**thinking** they will find a better deal.

-And it's about us--the church of Jesus; how prone we are to believe a health and wealth Gospel—that life is all about **us**—how we'd rather get into the finer details of Bible prophecy than lay **everything** on the line for people God loves. -But God **will** restore this world and it's people. That's His mission. We can run, but we can't hide. And if we choose to run toward God—and not away—we find that life is a comedy in the midst of tragedy. Joy wins. Life wins. Hope wins. Nothing can stop his plan. But God doesn't intervene until Jonah is **desperate** for Him.

-Anyone here ever been **desperate**? Desperate people do desperate things. People are desperate for success—climbing a ladder and looking for significance; for someone to just **notice** them. They actually think, “Just **one more rung** will do it for me!”

-Some people are in **desperately** difficult relational messes. And rather than go for help, rather than ask for wisdom and forgiveness and grace—they think the **next** relationship will bring them the happiness and hope they want.

-Imagine Jonah, floating down, down, down in the ocean. Thinking to himself, “You know, maybe I could make it big in seafood. Pearls. Nutritional seaweed. I know, **I’ll open a big indoor sea thing so everyone can see what I’m seeing. I’ll call it...um-m...SEA WORLD!**”

-Fortunately for Jonah, that’s not the direction he chose. Barely believing God would even listen—he calls out in his desperation. And God does—and as a kind of fitting end to this part of the comedy, his him sucked into this slimy smelly place—and then unceremoniously puked in the right direction. Nineveh.

- b. As I thought about this story—and what God is up to on this planet, I realized how many words start with the prefix—**re**. God’s plan is to **re**-store all things. **Re**-deem people. But for that to happen, people like you and me need to **re**-pent. To **re**-pent, we need to **re**-turn to the place where we got off the path—and go the **right** way this time.

4. I have a few questions to ask you, a story to tell you, and then we’re done, okay? My first question is—**Where’s bottom?** Where’s bottom for you?

-You may be puzzled this morning—in pain, really, because you’ve tried to love and serve God—it seems like you’re at the lowest point you’ve **ever** been. I just need to say this—and this is **so** important to hear. Life is not all **UP!** There are valleys where we bottom out. Sometimes people who love and follow God hit this place where it feels like we’re bouncing off the rocks at the bottom. We’re not **dying**—but we wish we could! We give and give and give—and end up empty and burned out. We try to move ahead—but it **feels** like every door is shut and triple-locked.

-I’ve hit bottom like that—and the one word that would describe the feeling is **desperate**. Desperate for God. It’s been **hard** in those times to believe God is crazy in love with me—and has a plan. But He **is...**and He **does!**

- a. As I thought about this, I realized that **bottom** would describe where most of God’s greatest people have been at some point. Abraham obeyed God’s call to leave his people and camp in the wilderness—with the promise that he would be a great nation! Then he and Sarah went childless for the next 25 years—at the bottom, desperate for God.

-Moses obeyed God’s call to lead the whole nation of Israel out of slavery in Egypt. He did, and at God’s direction led the whole bunch of them into a trap—between the Red Sea and the whole Egyptian army. But the people didn’t blame God—they blamed **Moses**. At the bottom, desperate for God.

-Elijah—one of God's best prophets—stood alone against all the pagan prophets that had infested Israel—and won a stunning victory! Just 24 hours later, he's cowering under a bush, sucking his thumb and holding his blankie—begging God to kill him.

-David, man after God's heart, steps onto the scene, takes out Goliath, this massive WWF class warrior who had the entire Israeli army petrified. At first—David's like a rock star. He even has a fan club of giggling teenage girls! David leads the troops, marries the king's daughter, is best friends with the king's son. But he hits rock bottom—and loses everything; his job, his home, his wife and his country. He winds up pretending he's crazy, drooling into his beard, writing crazy stuff on the walls of Gath—hoping to find refuge in Goliath's hometown.

- b. Interesting, isn't it, that Jesus would choose Jonah's rock-bottom experience in the belly of a great fish as the sign to his own people. He said,

For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. (Matthew 12:40 TNIV)

-Let's be real clear about what happened. Jesus, Son of God, was perfect in everyway. He humbled Himself, showed up here—spent his life loving, confronting evil and injustice, teaching people about what it would mean to love God with everything and love others as themselves. He left a trail of **spectacular** miracles! But his confrontation of religion was too much. And Jesus wound up at rock bottom. Forsaken, condemned to die, humiliated, beaten, nailed to a cross—suspended helpless between heaven and earth—and then laid on a slab of stone behind a huge rock. Dead and buried. **That** is rock bottom!

- c. Where do you go when you are at the point of ultimate desperation? Well, you call out to God for help. You hold onto God in faith—believing that He is bigger than any problem; that His love goes way deeper than any ocean. That He is the God of the **RE**-do. The ultimate **RE**-make. That He is able to **re**-store anyone, **re**-deem any circumstance, and **re**-surrect us if necessary!
- Anyone here ever find yourself **way** over your head in life? So deep, you're bouncing along the bottom? Pray! Is it your own fault? Pray anyway. Have you maybe **not** been living the kind of life you know God wants you to live? Not toeing the line? You've actually gotten quite sloppy—and even ignored God. Pray anyway! Are you concerned because you **know** if you pray—your motives are kind of mixed, really? I mean, truth is that you're more selfishly concerned about your own well-being—than doing God's will? Pray anyway! That's where Jonah was—and God helped him sort that out. God will help you.
- See, God doesn't need our perfect cooperation—what He **can** use—is our desperation! And He is full of grace. Really!

5. The next question I want to ask is, **Have you already decided what deliverance looks like?** God seems to thrive on unusual rescues. It might **not** be instant healing! If you're down in the depths of the ocean drowning like Jonah—it might not be a

submarine or a chariot of fire—or a rescue chopper. It might be a fish belly—a smelly, claustrophobic slimy place you can't **stand!**

-God's plan for me—or you—is not that we come as the shining hero—the victorious person who emerges and creates awe! Abraham and Sarah prayed—and the answer was two old coots—cackling and chasing a toddler around the tent. For Elijah, it was rest, food, and an understudy named Elisha. For David, it wasn't a quick answer—it was getting hunted like a grouse, hanging with an army of riff-raff soldiers—and a gradual return. For Moses, well, it was pretty cool—a way through the sea; but on the other side it was wandering for 40 years with 2 million people whose main gift was complaining!

-So—don't determine **what** God's answer will be, what deliverance will look like. Just cry out—and let God decide!

6. This next question is a tough one—but I need to ask it. How far down do you have to go before you say, ***This is BOTTOM! This is as far as I want to go. My plan isn't working out so well.***

-From what I can gather, Jonah had about 3 or 4 minutes to come to that place. Friends, I'm going to say this as plainly as I can—**all** detours from God, no matter how glitzy and sexy and prosperous and fun they seem, no matter how initially successful they appear—are **detours**. The longer you stay on them, the farther you get from everything God wants...and you want.

- a. I've had a front row seat in watching a lot of lives over the past 30 years. No one defects from God and from his mission thinking, "This is probably end in disaster!" Everyone thinks, like Jonah, that despite God, they will be wildly successful and find everything their heart seems to lack now. I have **never** seen that happen!
- b. What I have seen is people in denial. People who think that the **next** relationship is going to do it. The **next** financial win will be the big one—the satisfying one. That there's always **tomorrow** to change directions. And as miserable and lost and broken as people get—they will not choose the way home.

-And it's not like God is kicking them around to try to wake them up. The wake up call comes, the clue phone rings, the 2X4 hits us upside the head because there is **no** act of defiance that wins.

- c. I've talked about the TV series, **Intervention**—that deals primarily with addictions and self-destructive behavior. I'm **always** amazed that as close to death as most of these people are, their initial answer to people who love them—and offer a way out is, **NO! No way! Or, Tomorrow! I'll go tomorrow! Next week might be good, or next month—or next year...**"
- d. Here's my question. If you've started on a detour, will you turn back? **Now!** What will it take for you to be desperate enough to call out to God? To get back

on the right path? I can absolutely **guarantee** you that the path your on, like Jonah's, is headed down—which is why it's easy to get on—and hard to get off. I would **beg** you to consider grace; forgiveness. Restoration.

7. In closing, I want to tell you a story I've told before. It's told by Brennan Manning in his book, **The Ragamuffin Gospel**. It's a story about hitting bottom. It's a story about seeing yourself as you are. Do you mind if I tell it again?

The scene is an alcoholic rehab center. The group Brennan was a part of was being led by a man by the name of Sean Murphy O'Conner. The little group is focusing on one particular patient named "Max." He's a nominal Christian, he's very wealthy--owns his own business; he's very poised, well-dressed, confident. But he refuses to acknowledge the truth about himself, his drinking, his sin. And he desperately needs to come face to face with himself.

-So, Sean, the leader, is a very colorful guy—**determined** to crack this guy's cocky exterior. He asks him the question, "So, how long have you been drinking like a pig?" Max has been denying this. And in the book it takes relentless cross-examination and phone calls before Max acknowledges that he keeps two cases of vodka in the garage, along with a case of gin, with some bourbon and some scotch; and he has a bottle of vodka on his nightstand, a bottle of gin in his suitcase when he travels, and three more at the office to entertain clients.

-When they finally worm all of this out of him, he says smugly, "Well, we all gild the lily once or twice." Somebody in the group says, "You're a liar!" "No need to get vindictive," Max says. "Remember the image in John's gospel about the speck in your brother's eye and the 2X4 in your own--and the other in Matthew about the pot calling the kettle black."

-One of the other members says, "Have you ever been unkind to your kids?" "Glad you brought that up, Fred," Max said, "I've great rapport with my boys. I've taken them on a fishing expedition to the Rockies, great time; two of my sons graduated from Harvard." And then one of the guys interrupts him and says, "I didn't ask you that. At least once in his life, every father's been unkind to his kids. I'm 62 years old and I can vouch for it. Now give us one specific example."

-A long pause ensued. "Well, I was a little thoughtless with my 9 year old daughter last Christmas Eve." "What happened?" "Well, I don't know. I just get this heavy feeling when I think about it." "Where did it happen? What were the circumstances?" "Wait a minute, Max said, "I told you I don't remember the circumstances. I just can't shake this bad feeling."

-Unobtrusively, Sean O'Conner dialed Max's home town one more time and spoke with his wife.

"Sean Murphy O'Conner calling, Ma'am. We're in the middle of a group therapy session and your husband just told us he was unkind to your daughter last Christmas Eve. Can you give us some details, please?"

-A soft voice filled the room. Yes, I can give you the details. It seems like yesterday. Our daughter Debbie wanted a pair of earth shoes for Christmas. On Dec. 24, my husband drove her downtown, gave her \$60, told her to buy the best pair of shoes in the store. That's what she did. When she climbed back into the pick-up truck her father was driving, she kissed him on the cheek and told him he was the best Daddy in the whole world.

-Max was preening himself like a peacock and decided to celebrate on the way home. He stopped at the **Cork and Bottle**, that's a tavern a few miles from our house--and told Debbie he'd be right out. It was a clear and extremely cold day--about 12 degrees, so Max left the motor running, and locked both doors from the outside so no one could get in.

-It was a little after 3:00 in the afternoon and..." **Silence**. "Yes?" The sound of heavy breathing crossed the room to where our group met. Her voice was faint, she was crying. My husband met some old army buddies, and caught up in the euphoria, he lost track of time and purpose and everything else. He came out of the **Cork and Bottle** at midnight. He was drunk. The truck had stopped running; the windows were frozen shut. Debbie was badly frost-bitten on her ears and on her fingers. When we got her to the hospital, the doctors had to operate. They amputated the thumb and the forefinger on her right hand. She will be deaf for the rest of her life.

-Then Manning writes, "Max appeared to be having a coronary. He struggled to his feet, making jerky, uncoordinated movements. His glasses flew to the right; his pipe to the left. He collapsed on all fours and sobbed hysterically. Murphy O'Conner said, "Let's leave." 20 recovering alcoholics and addicts climbed the 8 step stairwell. We turned left, gathered in the stairwell, and looked down. No man will ever forget what he say that day, the 24th of April, at exactly noon. Max was still in the doggie position; his sobs had roared to shrieks."

-Brennan Manning goes on to write—and finish the story as a story of repentance and redemption and restoration. But for that to happen—this guy had to hit the bottom—and say, "Enough is enough!"

8. If you've defected from God, how far down is **bottom**? You don't have to go there, you know. You could call out to God right now.