

Series: **OFF-TRACK!** August 9, 2009

RUNNING FROM GOD
Jonah 1:1-17

1. Did anyone here as a kid ever get so ticked off with your parents that you threatened, “I’m going to run away from home!” I did once or twice—but my parents called my bluff. They said, “Great, here’s a suitcase! Here’s your teddy bear! Go pack!” That wasn’t the part that bothered me, actually--it was when they said, “Ken, it’s about time! You’re 24, for crying out loud!”

-There are times when we **feel** like running away, aren’t there? And not just as kids or teens—as adults. The pressures get too great. Life seems like it’s one big “to do” list. And sometimes we actually **stay** home, but in our hearts, we run away. Retreat from people who love us and need us. Go on emotional detours. And sometimes we go on spiritual detours. We defect. We know where God wants us to go and have a sense of what He wants us to do. And whether it’s of rebellion or fear—or apathy—we turn and run in the opposite direction.

-The Bible is full of stories about people who got **off-track**. And the story of Jonah is one of the best. Really! And so, for the next few weeks we’re going to be talking about this guy, Jonah, who lived 2800 years ago in a world that was **very** different than ours—but filled with people **very** much like us.

2. I’m always indebted to someone for insights—but in this story, particularly indebted to the writing of John Ortberg. Let’s read the first few verses of Jonah’s story:

The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai: "Go to the great city Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me." But Jonah ran away from the LORD and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the LORD. (Jonah 1:1-3 TNIV)

- a. Jonah lived in Israel around the 8th century B.C.—and served as a **prophet**—not a priest. Priests worked in the temple system, but prophets were reformers; activists. There were a lot of priests—but usually only one prophet—because that’s all Israel could stand at a time.

-So, one day God speaks to this guy, Jonah, and tells him to go to Nineveh. That, friends, was a tough and dangerous assignment. Those three little words, **Go to Nineveh**, were life-changing.

- b. Let me tell you a little about Nineveh—cause I think it will help you understand why Jonah went in the opposite direction. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria—a powerful, brutal country that conquered, chewed up, and spit out nations like Israel for recreation. Genocide was state policy, in fact. When Assyrian soldiers conquered cities, they would stack the heads of its citizens outside the city walls to terrorize anyone who happened to walk by. When Assyria eventually conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel—where Jonah prophesied—the population—all ten tribes—vaporized.

-The Assyrians were brutal and sadistic—and hated by the world of that day. To put this in perspective, imagine how a Polish Jew would feel about Nazi Germany—a country who had slaughtered his relatives, enslaved his children, and raped his sister—and that would give an idea of how repulsed a guy like Jonah felt about this assignment.

- c. We aren't told how Jonah heard God on this one—and whether or not there was any wiggle room. We aren't told if there was a Mrs. Jonah that he consulted with. Just that God told him to go—and he **knew** it! Nineveh was far away—and Nineveh was **not** in his comfort zone. Nineveh was trouble. Nineveh was fear. And the question for us is—what do you do when God asks you to go somewhere outside your comfort zone—because, see, that's where God calls us!
- d. So—Jonah, this prophet—the man who **really** knew God—where did he go? Well, look at this map and you'll get an idea. **[picture]**. The account says that he went **down** to Joppa; Nineveh would've been east—about 600 miles or so. Guess which direction Tarshish was. **West!** Experts think it was probably on the coast of Spain—over 2000 miles in the other direction.

-Well, **that's** dumb, isn't it? To think that you can actually run from God. I mean, how stupid is **that?** God is God! God is everywhere! God is relentless—brilliant! We can't outsmart Him or hide from Him. But...that doesn't mean I don't try. And that doesn't mean **you** don't try, right? And Jonah did.

3. Just a couple of notes on Jonah's decision to run that you might find interesting.
- a. First, how many of you noticed the phrase, **paid the fare...?** The fare for this journey would've been amounted to some **big** bucks! Money was relatively new—and most people in that culture wouldn't be able to afford a trip like Jonah took. Jonah was **very** deliberate! It's funny, isn't it, that money still has this effect on us of making escape seem easier—because it gives us options. Has anyone here ever heard an exotic vacation called an **Escape?** If you don't like things? **Get away!**
- b. Second thing about this defection to Tarshish that would tend to get overlooked. Tarshish wasn't just a location on the opposite end of where God was calling Jonah. It was known for its long-distance shipping trade—and the prosperity this new technology had brought to the people who used it. In our culture **Wall Street** is more than just a location in Manhattan, right? **Ships of Tarshish** became synonymous for wealth, self-sufficiency, pride and power in the ancient world.
- Jonah's choice of destinations was a deliberate turn in the opposite direction.
4. So, how did Jonah's detour go? I mean, did his vacation in exotic places turn out like he dreamed it would? Well, maybe not! Let's read on:
Then the LORD sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up.

All the sailors were afraid and each cried out to his own god. And they threw the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship.

But Jonah had gone below deck, where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep. The captain went to him and said, "How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us so that we will not perish."

(Jonah 1:4-6 TNIV)

- a. Compared to a violent place like Nineveh, I'm sure Jonah thought Tarshish would be paradise. Fun. Warm sandy beaches. Drinks with little umbrellas in them. In a word—**safe**. I'm sure his notion of safe began to change.
-One of the characteristics of this story is its brilliant use of words. One of those words is **great**. You see it all through the book. God uses it first, when he tells Jonah to go to the **great** city of Nineveh. It's used again here when it says that the Lord sent a **great** wind—which, of course, created a violent storm. Storms on the Mediterranean Sea can be vicious. This one threatened to crush the ship.

-Sailors are superstitious—but they're not particularly religious. These guys are scared to death; they not only call out to their own gods—they throw the all the cargo over the side. They've just lost all their profit for a long risky voyage. Imagine one of the monstrous container ships—dumping all 15,000 containers overboard! Not a **good** trip, but better than dying.

- b. However, one piece of cargo remains. Jonah. The irony in this story is amazing. Like the other cargo, he's down in the hold of the ship—oblivious to the storm.

The ship's captain wakes him up, saying, "How can you **sleep** at a time like this! Get up and pray!" Interesting, isn't it, a pagan Gentile ship captain telling a prophet to wake up and pray! Even though God doesn't seem to care much about the cargo, He's doing something behind the scenes here to redeem and restore—both Jonah and everyone on this ship!

-The story gets more intense.

Then the sailors said to each other, "Come, let us cast lots to find out who is responsible for this calamity." They cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah. So they asked him, "Tell us, who is responsible for making all this trouble for us? What kind of work do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?"

He answered, "I am a Hebrew and I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land."

This terrified them and they asked, "What have you done?" (They knew he was running away from the LORD, because he had already told them so.) (Jonah 1:7-10 TNIV).

-The sailors pepper Jonah with questions to find out what he has done that would put everyone at risk. When Jonah names the God He serves—that He's not some local, tribal deity—but **The One. Lord of All. Maker of heaven and earth and sea**—they were terrified. Literally, they feared a **great** fear. Jonah

spoke in language they knew—and told them in this crisis about the God who is above **all** the little god-lets and god-lings people serve.

-The irony in this story is seen at several levels. First, Jonah doesn't come to them as this strong, **Thus saith the Lord** prophet who has his act together. He comes to them as this bumbling knucklehead—who runs away when he should be obeying and sleeps when he should be praying. He didn't even talk to them about God until they demanded answers from him about what was going on. -If he had come to them with some message about how much greater his God was than theirs—they would've **never** listened. But somehow through a guy who's stumbling around—they seem to have more respect for his God, the Lord of All—Yahweh—than he does!

-This, friends, is **not** a story about a human plan. This is a story about a God on a mission--who cannot be stopped or even slowed down by human plans. This is a story about a God who is able to use **all** kinds of tools to accomplish His mission.

5. Well in the middle of this chaos there's only one solution to this problem with so many faces: Nineveh, Jonah, these sailors, and the storm. The rest of the cargo has to go overboard.

The sea was getting rougher and rougher. So they asked him, "What should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us?"

"Pick me up and throw me into the sea," he replied, "and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you."

Instead, the men did their best to row back to land. But they could not, for the sea grew even wilder than before. Then they cried out to the LORD, "Please, LORD, do not let us die for taking this man's life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, LORD, have done as you pleased." Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm. At this the men greatly feared the LORD, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows to him. (Jonah 1:11-16 TNIV)

- a. Fascinating, isn't it, that these pagan sailors who've only known about the Lord of All for hours seem to more compassion on Jonah, this man who knew God so well—than he did on the people of Nineveh.

-It's like the author is saying to the people like the Israelites—and like us--who identify with God, "You'd better be careful before you judge who the good guys and the bad guys are—where God is working, and where God could never **possibly** work! You **could** be wrong!

Before they throw him over the side, notice **Who** they pray to:

Then they cried out to the LORD, "Please, LORD, do not let us die for taking this man's life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, LORD, have done as you pleased." (Jonah 1:14 TNIV)

b. This is a phenomenal conversion! Who would ever think that God would use a joke of a prophet—running from God—to create the ***First Church of the Ships of Tarshish!***

6. I'd like to talk, for a few minutes in closing, about running from God. Resisting God. Knowing ***where*** He wants to go—and deliberately going in the opposite direction. Sometimes we just totally defect, like Jonah. Sometimes we just make it ***appear*** like we're going in the right direction. But in our hearts, ***we*** know that God is leading us in a different direction than we are currently going.

-See, God has a mission in this world. His mission is, at the core, to ***redeem and restore***. God cares about the redemption and restoration of ***all*** creation. God's people have ***always*** been called to join Him in his mission. The problem is--the focus of God's mission is people. All people.

-I want you to think of someone right now that you ***really*** don't like. Someone with ***very*** different views than you. Someone of a ***very*** different lifestyle, political persuasion. Someone you wouldn't want living next door to you here—or in Heaven. Thinking about them raises your blood pressure. Makes you feel indignant. Intimidated. Afraid. Even horrified. To even care about them would alienate you from most of your friends.

-To understand this book, you have to know—that's who ***Nineveh*** was to Jonah. And I can imagine his indignation, "You want me to go ***where?*** Really? Like, this isn't a joke! And you want me to learn ***Assyrian*** so I can go and warn these creeps that they're about to finally get what they deserve—so they can ***avoid it? I DON'T THINK SO!***"

a. This is a story about God. It's a story about God's outrageous love. It's about how He asks His people to love and restore those they don't love—and go where they don't want to go. Do the thing they are most afraid to do. Confront the fear that's been nagging them. The mission of God is to ***redeem***—even people you may not like or think are redeemable; and the mission of God is to restore—even those things, those situations, those relationships the you are ***convinced*** are un-restorable. Beyond hope.

-Sometimes when we hear about the Mission of God—we think mainly involves traveling to another place.

The ***truth*** is that we as God's people have been called to God's mission. And every single person in this room has been ***called*** to be a part of God's mission. Not just on Sunday's where we're gathered—but Monday through Saturday where ***life*** takes us.

- I can guarantee you that right now, there are pieces of your world and mine that need to be restored. There are people in my world and yours—who need to be redeemed. People in whom God is at work ***right now***. And God isn't calling someone else...you know, ***who really knows something about this*** to do this—to influence, love, reach out, speak, reconcile. He's calling me—and He's calling you.

- b. My next step—and your next step—in God’s mission is probably to take the step we’ve both been avoiding. The one I’m afraid of. And the question is **WHY?** Why would God hound us, urge us, prod us to keep moving forward? To have difficult conversations we’d **rather** not have. To make sacrifices that we’re afraid to make? To be friends with someone we’re not sure we want to be friends with? Why would God ask us to step out on the limb, when we’re **certain** we can hear sawing noises behind us—and there’s a pond filled with alligators below us. You know—the **Indiana Jones** kind of stuff?

-It’s because God is determined to do good in this world, to restore relationships that have been lost, to use us to do it. He will be there—and He will change us in the process of using us.

7. We as God’s people need to make sure that we haven’t replaced God’s Mission in this world to restore and renew everything—with our own mission of just making life easier and more pleasant. If we have, see, we’re off-track. Did you know what whole gatherings of people like us sometimes seem respectable and devoted—but defect from what God is up to?

-And it happens at a personal level, too. In fact, it’s possible, this morning, that you’re not just running from the assignment God has given you; you’re running from God Himself. People do that, you know.

-Think about that for a minute. The God of the Universe, Creator of all, perfect in every way—perfect love and goodness and compassion. The One, to be truthful, who gives us **every single breath we breathe, every good thing we enjoy—the one who thought up every gorgeous sunset, every amazing rainforest, every fantastic experience we’ve ever had—and gave us the equipment to enjoy it!** He says—I love you and I want you as my friend! And many people run. Fast. In the other direction! And the question is—**WHY?**

- a. For the most part, it’s because we have this screwed up idea of God. People sometimes see God as this taskmaster with a big stick who’s on some kind of an ego trip —“**Ve haf vays to make you talk!**” His arch enemy, Satan, has been hard at work down through the hallways of time, spreading slander. Lying. Making us think that God is up to no good.

That instead of loving people, he uses them and spits them out—that the way to life is in the other direction! That life with God means if it’s fun, if it brings pleasure, if it tastes good, feels good—**STOP IT!**

-Instead of seeing how absurd that picture is, we run. God pursues us—much like a parent would pursue a child running into the street. We run because we’re afraid of God, really.

- b. Sometimes we run because we’re hurt. We’re in pain. One image nailed onto the walls of my heart took place when I was probably about 10 or 11. I was visiting Cliff and Randy, two good friends of mine, when to our horror, their Dad hit their dog as he was backing out of their driveway. The dog’s hind leg was

broken, and when they tried to pick it up and comfort it, this normally friendly dog snarled and tried to bite them.

-That image has helped make sense of something I've seen through the years; that hurt people tend to hate, snarl at—or even deny the existence of the very One who wants to heal them; comfort them and help them. If you blame God for the pain you're in, or for the junk you've experienced—it makes sense to create as much distance as possible. Someone once said, "Disappointment with God is really tough; disappointment without God is even tougher."

8. Well, I need to save the rest of Jonah's story for the next few weeks. His story, at the outside, appears to be this ridiculous story about a runaway prophet, a whale, and the deep blue sea. A joke, really. And the story is, in many ways, a comedy—but a **true** comedy and brilliantly written. And the ending is really quite unpredictable. There are some things we need to deeply, **deeply** consider from this first chapter alone.

a. I've already mentioned the first; God is on a mission to reclaim and redeem everyone and everything on this planet. If you belong to Him—you're part of it. My life isn't about me—and your life isn't about you. In fact, these gatherings here are about giving us what we need to spread out and accomplish what God's up to in all the places we find ourselves.

-We're either **on** mission, **on** track—or **off**-mission and **off**-track. And our obedience matters a **lot!** God always leads toward redemption and restoration.

-Want me to let you in on at least part of the ending of this story? I can tell you—I don't think it will spoil things for you. There were actually two reasons why Jonah ran from God. First, the Ninevites **were** scary, unpredictable people. He knew their reputation. But, by his own admission, Jonah's main reason for not going is that he **hated** them and he **wanted** God to judge them. Nuke the whole lot of them!

-Compassion for the victims of a hard world like ours is pretty easy. But for those who have never shown an ounce of mercy? Man! It's **hard** to have compassion for the bullies of the world, isn't it? But God does. And contempt—no matter how contemptible people are—will **always** take us far from God. Because, see, God is merciful, kind, filled with compassion.

This story isn't just about cruel foreigners. This is about us. This is about the teacher who hurt your child; this is about that person who is so **far** to the left...or the right—that you strain your neck even trying to see them. This is about the person who ripped you off. This is about your **EX**—whatever. Boss. Friend. Girlfriend. Partner. And God calls us to show the same grace to others that He's shown to us. Which, by the way, we **all** desperately need.

-And I just need to tell you—bitterness burrows deep into our hearts—to the point where we aren't even thinking straight about God, others, or ourselves. God's will is **always** to redeem—and restore. Is that your plan? If not—you may be running from God—and **His** plan to redeem and restore **everything**.

b. Sometimes the destination of our life is at odds with God's mission. Tarshish, if you'll remember, is symbolically the place where everyone thinks they want to go—adventure, fun, and **money!** The **good** life! And in North America, that's

where most people are headed. And it is **very** easy to trade the mission of God for that—thinking it's a better deal. Some do.

-Paul, an early leader in the church had a close companion, Demas, who after a life of faithful service—chose **that**. Last week Paul Penelton talked about finishing the race—and quoted these words from an early church leader—also named Paul:

The time of my death is near. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, and I have remained faithful. And now the prize awaits me...(2 Timothy 4:6-8 NLT)

-And then Paul writes these words:

Demas has deserted me because he loves the things of this life and has gone to Thessalonica. (2 Timothy 4:10 NLT)

And that's the last we hear of a man who was on mission, on target, on watch—then...OFF-TRACK. Think he found what he hoped he'd find? Thessalonica, Tarshish, Wall Street, Bay Street, Madison Avenue—Timmons--it's all really the same, isn't it? It's where most off-track people head for.

-If you're running from God—trying to escape His plans for you and his plans for those around you, purely out of compassion and grace, He may actually stop you somehow. God has had to stop me at times. Has anyone ever experienced whiplash—where you come to a full and sudden stop in the upright position? Yeah—that's what I mean. Be careful—cause, friends, God is God. I've found that sometimes He loves me too much to let me get where I think I want to go without a storm. And I think that's a good thing.

- c. One more thing. When we get off-mission, **everybody** loses. Jonah's defection had a drastic effect on everyone on the ship—and had the potential of killing **everyone** on that voyage. When God's people are off mission—all of creation is at-risk.

-And if you or I get off-base, off-target, off-mission—just **off**—we don't just jeopardize our own peace, and our own life—or even our own soul; what we do has a profound effect on those who watch us—and those whose lives we're called to love and help and restore. I have four children watching my life; I have a brother and his family—and a sister and her family—watching my life. I've lived on my street for 17 years—this month, actually. They're watching. You're watching. And you have vulnerable people watching you—whether you'll stay on mission or sell out.

-The amazing part of this story—and I'm **so** glad for this side of it—God is powerfully at work behind the scenes. And God somehow works around Jonah's ineptness—when he finally gets honest with **everyone**. Including God.

9. This morning, if you're running from God—if you're off-mission, off-target, off-base—I would **plead** with you—don't wait. Turn back! Be honest. Turn toward home—and toward a Father who desperately, jealously, generously and unconditionally **loves** you—and **loves** all He has made!