

**Series: OFF-TRACK—August 23, 2009**

**WORKING WITH GOD**  
**Jonah 3**

1. If you were to look closely at my left ear, you'd see a dent in it—and a thin line running through it. It's my **I was once a youth pastor** badge. Most youth pastor's have one--and there's always a story.

-**My** story—and I'm sticking to it--is that I was chasing Scott Montgomery, one of our youth after an event, to put ice down his back. He instinctively closed a door behind him—and I hit the edge of it at full tilt. It was an **orange** door—I remember because I had an orange stripe from my running shoes to my chest. In the last split second, I **saw** the door and turned my head. That's about the last I remember. As I was lying on the floor, stunned, trying to figure out **who** I was and **where** I was—I could hear the amazed whispers of the teens standing around me. "Oooo! **Gross!!** Look at his ear. Yuck! Is he awake?"

-The ER plastic surgeon's comment summarized the entire situation. "Oh my gosh! Your ear is completely bifurcated!" Shakespeare's opening comment in **Julius Caesar** took on a whole new meaning for me: "Friends, Romans, countrymen—lend me your **ears,**" 37 stitches later, my ear was no longer bifurcated! **Hearing** in that ear? Not so good!

- a. Most scars have a story behind them. You have scars on your body—and you have some magnificent stories! But I'm the only one who gets to tell the story today cause, see, I'm speaking!

-Some scars are reminders. I have a scar on my finger that reminds me, "Always carve **away** from yourself!" I have a long thin scar on my forearm that says, "Don't chase girls with squirt guns if they have long fingernails!"

- b. Scars come in all shapes and sizes. And some of the worst scars we have are on the **inside**—in our hearts, in our minds, or in our souls. Sometimes people we love and trust betray us—and it leaves scars. But sometimes we fail—**spectacularly**—and it scars us. Personal failure—especially if it's happened publicly—has a way of causing us to walk with a permanent limp.
- c. And that brings us to Jonah. As a prophet, he is mentioned in the book of 2 Kings—which means that he was known **all throughout Israel** as God's man. -Prophets like Jonah were...and are..**experts** in telling everyone else that **they** need to do what God says—no matter how tough it is. Prophets were activists. Radicals. Courageous. Bold. In your face. And **this** is the guy who runs away to the very place I'm guessing he'd stood opposed to. Even the captain and sailors put him to shame with their prayer and devotion.
- d. Imagine being Jonah—barfed up on shore by this giant fish--and then having people ask, "Oh my **word!** What happened to **you?**" And all he had to offer was the story of failure. How he had lost his money, never got where he was

going—and now was back on shore. Smelling so bad no one even wanted to get close!

2. Can God use failures? Scarred people? Well, this is where we get a glimpse into God's heart—the God of the Second Chance.

**Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: "Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you." Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go through it. Jonah began by going a day's journey into the city, proclaiming, "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown." (Jonah 3:1-4 TNIV)**

-Just a note here on historical accuracy. It says here that Nineveh was a **very** large city—in 800 BCE, second only to Babylon.

It's **inside** wall was about 8 miles in circumference. Know how Toronto has a GTA—much bigger than the city? The ruins surrounding ancient Nineveh had a **GNA**—a number of towns around it that depended on it for protection, commerce, etc.

- a. It's interesting that God doesn't cook up a new assignment for Jonah—he's called back to the mission he left. Just a note on this—anyone here **ever** taken a detour in life? God asked you to do something and you said, "Yes, of **course** Lord!" but never did. Or "Well—**maybe.**" Or "**Sometime.**" Or just plain, "No **way!**" God usually asks us to go back to the place where we defected! That's what it means to **re**-pent. Change your mind and start over.
- b. As I mentioned a few weeks ago, Nineveh was the capital of Assyria—whose army was noted for being the brutal—bloodthirsty. Sadistic. So, Jonah had that to look forward to as his destination—after a 550 mile walk through dangerous country. Getting there was one thing; getting inside the city—surrounded by an inside wall, 50 feet across, 100 feet high was another. In fact, you can visit the actual ruins near the city of Mosul in modern Iraq.

-Jonah was the only messenger to a population of more than 120,000 people. And these are people who speak Assyrian, not Hebrew. And Jonah's message was eight words in length. **Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.**

- c. Wouldn't you agree that what God asked Jonah to do should make the **No Way!** List of all times? How could one man who stinks like half-eaten fish do this all by himself? Some scholars say, "See, that's clear evidence that this story is myth, not actually true!"
- \*The prophet is defective
  - \*The walls are too high
  - \*There's a language barrier, a cultural barrier, and a religious barrier
  - \*The people are too wicked, too far gone.
  - \*There's not enough time

\*The message is way too short and non-specific. And you get the feeling that Jonah is a **very** unenthusiastic minister.

3. So...what happened? Well, we find out that God is the God of the impossible. The God of the Long Shot. Let's read on:

**The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. (Jonah 3:5 TNIV)**

-Do you get how **amazing** this is? No collapsing walls, no armies of Heaven, no thunder, lightning and plagues. Just...**Jonah**. And yet, one day into his obedience—and the miracle that no one would expect—**HAPPENS!**

These people who were far away from God, opposed to everything He stood for—**believed** what God said; that if things didn't change, their city had a **very** limited shelf life.

-And then **they** did what Jonah couldn't even get God's people, the Israelites to do; they repented. And they didn't just give lip service; they took action. They refused to eat or drink—and put on sackcloth—a coarse fabric woven from goat hair. I checked the weather around Mosul as I worked on this message. Can anyone guess what the temperature range was? 40-43 c! Anyone here ever had to wear wool in hot weather? **Itchy**—key word!

-And everyone, from the high profile leaders to the nobodies wore it. Can anyone here imagine Hillary Clinton, or Donald Trump—or, better yet, Paris Hilton wearing sackcloth!

- a. Well, it goes even further. The king of Nineveh finds out what's going on. I've read some of the pronouncements of these Assyrian kings—and the only thing bigger than their kingdoms was their egos! ***I am great! I am the greatest! I am God—Lord of all the nations!*** This egomaniac **believes** this lone prophet! Listen:

**When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. Then he issued a proclamation in Nineveh: "By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let people or animals, herds or flocks, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let people and animals be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish." (Jonah 3:6-9 TNIV)**

- b. That would be a **very** strange sight! This pompous king fires his cooks, puts on sackcloth—and humbles himself before God—and asks **everyone** to pray and give up their evil and violence.

-Even the **animals** are called to repentance! Dogs sometimes act repentant. Not cats. They don't care! And even the **animals** are wearing sackcloth! Even

goats! That would kinda freak you out if you were a goat, wouldn't it? One sniff of his back, "Hey! That's Freddy! I'd recognize his smell anywhere!"

-From what we can see, Jonah never asked **any** of them to do that. He didn't come in telling them that His God was bigger and better than theirs; he didn't tell them that they needed to stop their violence and change their ways. His message was, apparently, quite simple! **You've got 40 days before judgment strikes!**

4. The best surprise of all in this story is what God does next.

**When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened. (Jonah 3:10 TNIV)**

-Remember the definition of a **tragedy**? It's a story that ends in death and meaninglessness and judgment and failure. This story is like that closing scene in the movie, **A Christmas Carol**, where Scrooge is jumping on the bed and giving away his money. Hope and new life **wins** the day. Love wins. God wins.

- a. You see grace all through this story. Jonah defects, but he can't hide from God. The sailors have their lives threatened—but meet and worship God. Jonah hits bottom—and in desperation—calls out to God. God delivers him—via a great fish who swallows him and barfs him up on shore. God delivers **everyone**—sailors, Jonah—and **Nineveh**. Sin City. The most powerful and wicked city of that day. God overcomes every impossible obstacle—and wins the day.

-I don't think Jonah **ever** expected them to repent. We'll actually talk more about this in the next installment—but Jonah's secret is that he didn't **want** them to repent—and get spared! He never thought they would **actually** turn away from their bloodshed—any more than the Nazis would've in 1940. But they **did!** And God showed mercy to people who had **never** shown an ounce of mercy to **anyone!**

- b. You need to know that in **all** that God is up to in this world—which sometimes seems so sad and hopeless—**LOVE WINS!** Joy wins. Hope wins. Life wins. You'd **never** think that in looking at our world, would you? It would seem that lust wins. That hate wins. That poverty and injustice and hopelessness and greed and excess all win. And if we choose to believe that—the joke is on us.

-The joke is on people who fail—and refuse to believe that God can use failures and scars. That scars are something to be ashamed of—and that when you fail—and we all do—you have to limp for the rest of your life.

-The joke is on people who refuse to believe that God can do the impossible. The joke is on people who would trade **Our** God—immense, all powerful, loving and gracious **beyond** belief—for religion; for little pious acts and tiny measurable goals.

- c. See, our whole world system operates on the basis that the joke is on the gullible—people who have faith in the face of the impossible. It's not. The joke is ultimately on the skeptics—the people who are **too** smart, **too** savvy, **too** important—and **too** busy to engage in what they think is an impossible mission.

The joke is on those who have grown too sophisticated to believe that ***all things...ALL THINGS...are possible with God!***

5. See, the deal is that when God calls us to do something—we think that the idea is brand-spanking new with us—and that making it happen is all up to us. Truth is—when God calls He has ***already been at work***—sometimes for decades. Even centuries. Want to hear about how God may have been at work in Nineveh—even before Jonah showed up?
  - a. First, Nineveh itself had experienced two devastating plagues in the years immediately preceding Jonah’s visit. In cultures like that—people didn’t just see stuff like that is happening by chance; they saw it as evidence that some God, somewhere—was displeased. Imagine a walled city, no medical care, no sanitation--and a plague on the loose!
  - b. There’s another interesting factor that ***may*** have played a part. The one thing we do know about the God of the Bible is that he sometimes addresses people’s misplaced worship by judging their gods.

The most powerful example of this is that all 10 plagues God used to cause the Egyptians to release their Israelite slaves were judgments on Egyptian gods. -Did you notice how careful the author is to tell us that it was a ***great fish*** that swallowed Jonah and deposited him on shore? A scholar by the name of Bernard Ramm notes that sculptures have been found in the palace in Nineveh of one of the main gods worshiped in that whole area, called ***Dagon***. Dagon was half-fish, half-human.

-Think about the impact of Jonah, who spent three days in the belly of a great fish, showing up in a city that worships a god who is half-fish, half human. Add to that their recent experience with two devastating plagues—and his message that they’ve got 40 days until the Lord of all brings judgment.

-Now, I realize that there is some speculation in all of this—but ***does*** it make sense in the light of the Ninevite’s dramatic response to Jonah’s simple message. The point? God is God. He ***never*** wastes anything—and you and I can be assured that when we go ***anywhere*** He’s called us to go--***He’s*** been there first!

6. Let me say it again. This is a book, ultimately, about God. God has a mission on this planet—not just to rescue a small, select group of people who already like Him and use His Name. His mission is to redeem ***everyone***—even people whose lives and actions are a total contradiction to everything He stands for. When we see people who oppress, murder and appear to hate God, our prayer tends to be, “Go for it, Lord! Turn them into little twitching blobs of grease! Do to ***them*** what they’ve done to ***others!***
  - a. But here’s the deal; God ***hates*** what we do to each other. He hates greed. He hates killing. He hates starvation, slavery, oppression, prostitution of every sort. He hates dishonesty and jealousy and gossip and pride and theft. But He ***loves*** people—even people who do this stuff. Which is good—because, see—that includes ***me!*** Don’t act shocked—it includes ***you***, too! When we say,

“**Nuke them all!!**” God could ask, “Well, how far do you want me to take this—cause I see what’s in **your** heart!” “Oh, well, not **that** far...only the really bad ones.” God says, “Really? **Really?**”

- b. And the **truth** is—I’m Jonah; God says go East—sometimes I go West. I look for Wall Street, or Bay Street—or Easy Street—when I should be on his mission. I get scared. I hide—when I should be open.. I sleep when I should pray. I’m the cause of more storms than I would like to count. But I’m also Nineveh. Sometimes there’s a part of me that thinks that power and violence are the answer. Not the violence of nuclear weapons—but the violence of words and force. Sometimes by doing nothing, I give non-verbal assent to oppression, slavery, dishonesty and injustice.
- c. I’m not just Jonah off-mission; I’m not just Nineveh—I’m Jonah—who obeys—and **that’s** good—but does it half-heartedly and with the wrong spirit. See, I tend to want justice for everyone—except for those I hurt, those I wound, those I cheat! Can anyone relate—or am I just standing up here in my underwear? -This is a **phenomenal** story about the turning of the tables. The irony of how God works. The prophet—God’s voice to the people of that day—stumbles through this story—off-track. And every situation he stumbles into—God uses! God uses his stumbling to help sailors come to God; God uses a great fish to both save **his** life—and speak powerfully to people who **worship** this ridiculous god who’s half human, half fish.

-God does what **no one** expects, works in impossible ways in impossible situations through impossible people—to **redeem** and **restore!** Why? Because God is God. Because God can use **anything!** And He’s the God of the **second chance!** Third chance. Fourth chance. Fifth chance.

-The deal is—the second chance comes only when we repent—when we go **back** to the place where we lost our way. Last Thursday, I went to Oakville to meet someone for lunch. I got **off-track**. Lost. It was messy; jammed with traffic—but to get where I needed to be—I had to go **back** to here I lost my way. I lost an hour—but I **got** there. And for Jonah to hear God a second time—he had to go **back** to where he paid his fare and left for Tarshish.

7. And that brings up something else. God’s primary call in our lives is not **stop! Stop doing that! Stop thinking that! Just STOP!** Don’t get me wrong, there’s a place for the word **stop!** But the word ‘stop’ has ‘go’ at it’s core—in God’s vocabulary. We stop running so we can return. We stop using people so God can use us. We stop destroying our lives—so God can save life. Stop is a redemptive word—that enables us to **GO!**

-If you’re mowing the lawn and you need to **go** to the store—you can’t mow your way to the store. You have to **stop**. If you’re going to **Go** into sobriety, you have to **stop** getting drunk. If you’re going to **Go** into following Jesus—you have to **stop** following Buddha or Mohammed or Elvis—or yourself. If you want to **go** into helping people—you have to **stop** hurting them.

- a. Here's the amazing thing. God's call to **GO** isn't usually to Las Vegas or Wall Street or Hollywood or Calcutta--some foreign place where nobody knows us. God's call to go usually involves **being** what Jesus asked us to be—salt and light—where we already are. And that's sometimes what makes it tough—because that's where we most often screw up. People **know** us there! And that means **going** involves some humility. Humility is good, right?
- b. And **going** means believing in the God of the impossible. That He is bigger than anyone's **No way!** List. That He works in ways too varied to count—and too subtle to pick up on.

-God's mission here is all-inclusive. His plan is to restore **everything**. If you're serving this planet—and the people on it in a helpful way—you can and should do that for the glory and honor of Jesus. If you're restoring health to people, animals, green zones or rainforests—and being a good manager of the resources God has given—that **pleases** God and serves His purposes. If you're teaching children, helping give wise leadership, providing constructive jobs, being a kind neighbor or a kind parent or a kind sibling—that all counts. It **pleases** God.

-But the core message of the Gospel of Jesus is that the God of the Universe showed up here to offer his friendship and forgiveness and kindness and grace to people—and bring us **all** back to Him forever. If He's invited to inhabit our lives—**He** will give us power to love, to change, to believe—and to become all we were created to be. We are called to both **live** that message—and **tell** that message when there's an open door.

- c. It's funny, God sometimes calls us to go where we **aren't**. But He mostly calls you to **go** to where we already are—as **His** representatives. It should be reassuring to know that, apart from His Son, Jesus—who was perfect--all God can use—all He's **ever** been able to use is flawed people. The Mission God is on and calls us to join Him in, friends, is the most exciting, most powerful, most rewarding thing happening in the universe. Will you **go**?

- 8. There's one more powerful truth I see in this story. God can use our scars. Even the ones that come from personal failure. Now, some people are proud of their scars—but when they come from the **stupid file** of life, we're usually a little embarrassed?

-I have another scar between my eyes that fits that category. My best friend, Steve, was up at bat. Not realizing that the pitcher had already thrown the ball—I came up behind him to give some advice. When I woke up on the ground—my forehead leaking—I realized giving advice **while** someone is batting is not smart. My **family's** favorite story from my stupid file is...I'm not going to tell you!

- a. Now, I realize I'm speculating when I talk about Jonah's scars. However, I'm convinced that anyone who spent 3 days soaking in a fish's stomach acid would have some burns on them—as gross as that sounds. And it would make sense that God could use scars like that to convince the Ninevites that Jonah's story was real—and to respond the way they did.

- b. Whatever happened—I **do** know that God uses our scars. Now, our preference would be a wound free, trouble free, failure free, scar free life, wouldn't it? Won't happen. Everyone gets wounded in life. Everyone fails at something. Everyone runs into trouble. Here's the key question; have your wounds **healed**. Scar tissue usually means that the wound has healed. The alternative is an open wound—vulnerable to infection.

-Our body is such that outer wounds begin to heal almost immediately. But that's not true of inner wounds. Inner wounds are prone to being infected by fear, bitterness, hatred, suspicion, anger and jealousy. This stuff can rage out of control in our hearts and do a **lot** of damage. We will always have a scar that we're a little self-conscious of—but scars are evidence of healing. That you've lived a **real** life with **real** problems and flaws.

- c. Over time, I've found that most people can't relate to success stories—about someone's life has had this steady course--up and to the right. But they **can** relate to people who blow it, fail, and get scarred and broken by life. If we will be **vulnerable** and **real** enough to share our pain and show our scars—God shows up with power! Scars—symbolic of wounds that have healed, qualify us to speak into other people's pain.

-God came here, went to a cross—and said to his followers, "Go ahead—put your fingers into the nail holes in my hand; shove your hand up into my side." My wounds, my scars are **real**—and I will carry them for all eternity as proof that of my love. Proof that I **know** what it's like to be rejected, humiliated and murdered!" By His wounds—**we** are healed!

9. When Jesus left his disciples, he left them with these instructions. **GO!** And I would say that to myself—and to you. Go—not someplace different—but to your home, your school, your university, your neighborhood, your job—with the understanding that God is at work there. And He wants to use your life, even with it's flaws, in a redeeming way. He's the God of the impossible. He's at work **way** before we show up! He accomplishes what we think could **never** happen in the lives of people around us.

-There's one specific example of that in my life. Have I ever told you the story of Taylor North? Taylor lived just down the road from us in Pennsylvania. I heard of his reputation long before I met him. He had sold the original plot of land to the church I led years before—and then spent the next 20 telling everyone he was sorry he'd ever done something so stupid. His arm had been crippled due to an accident at work on the railroad—and then he gone through a messy divorce. Taylor was a bitter, crusty man.

- a. The church was growing—and the Board decided we needed more land—more parking. The problem was that Taylor North owned **all** the land around the church! And I was elected to go talk to him. **Gee—THANKS!**  
-So I did. I had never met him—but with his reputation, I was expecting a guy 9 feet tall who kinda looked like Goliath—and ate small pastors for lunch. Taylor **was** big—but we actually had a great visit. I gulped—and made my ask about buying more land. Taylor said, "I'll think about it." First miracle—Taylor met me

again and told me he'd decided to **donate** the land we needed in memory of his Dad.

- b. Taylor and I became friends—and I had this dream of seeing Him find grace and peace and hope. He even started coming occasionally to church with his girlfriend. But it seemed like there was never an opportunity to tell Taylor North that the God of the universe longed for his friendship. It went that way for **five years!**

-One night I got a call from the hospital. Without me knowing about it, Taylor North had gone in for surgery for colon cancer. He was in ICU—and was asking for me. So I went and saw him—and he told me about a vision he'd had—a near death experience. He said he saw himself leave the hospital bed—as a much younger man—then stop and wave. Taylor was a **really** tough guy—but he cried as he told this story. He'd bring it up every so often.

- c. One day as I was thinking about Taylor—praying. I thought, “I’m going to go and talk to him today about God’s grace because he’s not getting any better!” And there was this voice inside that warned, “Don’t do it!”

-Well, I went to see him. And at the end of our visit, for the first time, the door to his heart opened. He asked me what I thought about his experience in the hospital. I took a deep breath—and said, “Taylor—I believe God loves you—and that He gave you a second chance.” And as clearly as I could, I told Taylor about Jesus. It seemed like nothing happened--and then the door closed. I felt like a failure.

- d. I went to see Taylor a couple of weeks later—looking for an opportunity to bring up our previous conversation. Nothing! Again—I felt so bad. I knew I wouldn't have too many more chances.

-As I was about to leave, Taylor said, “How many times do you have to do it?” I said, “Do what?” Taylor said, “You know, ask Jesus to forgive you? I’ve done it every day since we’ve talked.” I said, “Just once, Taylor, just once. The life and forgiveness Jesus gives is a gift.” With tears streaming down his face, Taylor said, “I can’t believe He would accept someone like me!”

-That was one of our last conversations. One of the last things I did before we moved our family to Markham in 1992 was speak at Taylor’s funeral. And I told everyone, “Taylor stepped out of this life—right into the arms of God.”

- e. We serve the God of the impossible—and He’s **always** at work. Even in the people we think are farthest away. He works in unusual—sometimes **weird** ways. But then, He’s God! And He calls us to GO—with the assurance, “Don’t be afraid. **I’ll be with you!**”