

Memory Verse: Jeremiah 31:21a "Set up road signs; put up guideposts. Take note of the highway, the road that you take."

Steve and Lily are huge Frank Sinatra fans. When Lily was young, she would make the over 50 crowd smile while she walked through the grocery store singing "Summer Wind." But, Frank's most well-known song, went like this:

"And now the end is near
And so I face the final curtain
My friend I'll say it clear
I'll state my case of which I'm certain
I've lived a life that's full
I traveled each and every highway
And more much more than this
I did it my way."

That song seems to characterize the times in which we live. When I think about God's plans for me, I picture empty nesting in a year, weekends spent out on the boat, getting my pastoral license and some travel. These things are all good gifts, and there's nothing immoral about wishing for a comfortable life in the right context. In fact, we should pray that God blesses us and his people. The problem arises when we wish for such temporary things more than the ultimate joy received through a life focused on Christ.

We often want God to be our life coach rather than our Lord. We want a pastor to give us three to five helpful tips on how to live an easier life, all the while forgetting that our mission is to exalt God. Instead of letting his glory shape our desires and ambitions, we too often expect him to reveal his minute-by-minute instructions for our lives. We crave the personal comfort of knowing our destined five-year plan over faithfully trusting him with the next five years.

Obviously, we see this attitude among non-Christian, but we also find it among Christians as well. I remember a time when a Christian friend came to see me for some guidance, and they were contemplating doing something that the Bible clearly says is a sin. And they said to me, "I know this is wrong, but I've made up my mind, and I am going to do it anyway." That sounds a whole lot like Frankie, doesn't it? "I did it my way!"

There are apparently a lot of Christians who believe in doing things "their way" these days. Articles reporting about a third of all American Christians say that premarital sex is okay, and about 15 percent say that adultery is okay, even though the Bible says that these things are not okay. It seems that lots of Christians are singing with Sinatra, "I did it my way." I understand this desire to do it my way. Once I learn a way to do something that is the way I do it. This goes especially for driving directions. Take going to Red Rock Camp for instance, I have gone the same way on the same roads for over 25

years. That was until a few years back... I was focused on getting to camp and kind of zoned out. Then honking erupted in front of me. You see I was so focused on my way that I missed the road construction sign letting me know my way had become a one way, in the opposite direction. But sometimes our way is going down the wrong way in one way. What no one else has done that?

Now maybe your story isn't going down the wrong street, but I am hoping your story doesn't end like Jonah's either. Most of us have heard the story of Jonah before, right? Generally, when we hear stories that we have heard so many times before, we tend to phase them out and begin to let our minds wander off to other things. I obviously get this way while driving too. The book of Jonah is just such a story. All of us have heard it. We know how God wanted to send Jonah to Nineveh, but Jonah ran from God, got swallowed by a big fish, and then finally went anyway. He preached to the people of Nineveh, they repented, and God saved the city from destruction. That's the story we've been told, and that's the story that we think we know. Now teens, pay attention we will be doing a deep dive into the Book of Jonah come May.

Before we dive into the story, let me provide the historical setting of Jonah. Jonah is a prophet in Israel in the 8th Century B.C. It was a good time for Israel. In fact, Jonah was a well-known and well-respected prophet. We call this book one of the minor prophets, yet it contains only one prophecy. It's really a book about Jonah and God. We know that our Lord loved this story because Jonah is the only minor prophet Jesus mentioned by name (Matthew 12:40). Second Kings 14:25 says that God "restored the territory of Israel from the entrance of Hamath to the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the LORD God of Israel, which He had spoken through His servant Jonah."

Jonah had prophesied that Israel would expand her boundaries, and look, now it had happened! There was excitement in the air. Maybe now God was going to bless Israel and let it finally become the most prominent nation in the known world.

On top of this, Israel was in the beginning stages of an economic boom that had not been known since the reign of King Solomon. So, Jonah was a celebrity. He had strong nationalistic tendencies, and on top of being patriotic, he had God on his side! Jonah was a prophet of God, and God was using Jonah to give Israel everything it had ever wanted. Things were going along quite smoothly. Or so people thought. Then Jonah's world was turned upside down when he received a message from the Lord.

Read Jonah 1:1-2: The Lord's word came to Jonah: "Get up and go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it, for their evil has come to my attention."

There was only one real problem during this time period. Israel was a great nation, but over in the east, across the desert, another nation, Assyria, was beginning to grow far stronger than Israel. The capital city of Assyria was Nineveh. The Assyrians, and the people of Nineveh in particular, were notorious throughout the region for showing no mercy to their enemies. They were known for doing some awful things to their victims, killing people in conquered cities by the thousands and then stacking their bones in piles outside the city gates. If you really want to know more about how awful the people of Nineveh were, sit down and read the book of Nahum. He goes into vivid detail about how the people of Nineveh treated their enemies. It wasn't pretty. And Jonah knew this. He knew that these were awful, nasty people and they had become the sworn enemies of Israel. And as the prophet himself explains later in the book of Jonah, he knew that if he went and preached this message of repentance to the Ninevites, they would repent. And God would forgive them. And Jonah wanted nothing to do with that. He wanted them to be destroyed. He wanted them to be wiped off the face of the earth. He wanted justice and condemnation to be poured out on his enemies. Jonah decided that he knew better than God did.

Read Jonah 1:3: So, Jonah got up—to flee to Tarshish from the Lord! He went down to Joppa and found a ship headed for Tarshish. He paid the fare and went abroad to go with them to Tarshish, away from the Lord.

Jonah did the only thing he could do he ran. And he tried to run as far away as he could. Nineveh is to the north and east of Joppa, where Jonah was. It's about 550 miles away. But Jonah goes the completely opposite direction from Nineveh. Scholars generally agree that Tarshish was in modern-day Spain, and it was as far as Jonah could go. This was considered the ends of the earth. He had taken things into his own hands and decided that he should go in the complete opposite direction from where God was leading him.

You know how the story goes, right? Jonah boards a boat, probably manned by people who happen to know nothing about the Lord. A great storm comes and threatens this boat. It's such a terrible storm that it causes these seasoned sailors to panic. They started throwing cargo overboard and throwing out whatever prayers they could to whatever deity they could think of. They finally went and woke up Jonah and told him to pray to his God. It was ultimately revealed that Jonah was the reason they were in such a mess. And they agreed with the prophet that they should throw him overboard. Before they did, however, they prayed, "Please, Lord, don't let us die for taking this man's life. Don't hold us accountable for killing an innocent man!" It's a sad thing, isn't it, when people who have nothing to do with the Lord show more compassion for someone than a man of God does, isn't it?

They throw Jonah overboard. And as soon as he hits the water, the sea goes calm. And God sends a great fish to swallow Jonah. Many people assume this was a whale of

some type. But there's no hint in the text here to tell us what type of fish it was that God sent to swallow Jonah. All we know is that God is God and He can use whatever means He chooses to get our attention. Even if it means living in the belly of a fish for three days.

At this point, we need to step back and look at the big picture here. We have the sea, the wind, the thunder, the great fish, and even the heathen sailors who didn't know the Lord – all of them obeyed God. All of them did what the Lord had commanded and were used by Him. On the other hand, here's the man of God – the one who had given the Lord a voice to the people – and he's doing everything he can to get out of doing God's work. Because Jonah had decided that what he wanted was more important than what God wanted.

The story continues. Jonah cries out to the Lord and after three days, the great fish spits Jonah out onto dry land. And Jonah starts walking towards Nineveh. After about a month-long journey, he arrives at the city, probably still smelling like fish. He arrives at his destination and preaches a sermon that is only five words in Hebrew it translates to: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown." When the people of Nineveh heard this, they were cut to the heart and they believed in the Lord. Everyone, from the king of Nineveh to the lowest servant – and even the animals – fasted and wore sackcloth as a sign of city-wide repentance and seeking God's forgiveness. And God spared them of their destruction.

I heard this story countless times as a child. And I must admit, it wasn't until I was an adult that I discovered that the story of Jonah doesn't end here with Nineveh's repentance in chapter 3. I think that's how we wish it had ended, though. It's how the story usually ends in children's Bibles. It would be so much easier to end the story here. It would definitely preach, wouldn't it? Jonah begins by running from God. Then he runs towards God. And then he ultimately runs with God. And we could remind ourselves that you can run away from God, but you can't outrun God. There – a nice three-point sermon wrapped up with a neat little bow. That's good stuff, isn't it?

But there's one more chapter. And in it, we discover that Jonah still doesn't get it. We also discover that Jonah has a pretty dark side. He thinks following God is really about providing his own comforts and his own desires. Because he wasn't getting what he wanted, Jonah became very angry and threw himself a little temper tantrum.

Read Jonah 4: But Jonah thought this was utterly wrong, and he became angry. 2 He prayed to the Lord, "Come on, Lord! Wasn't this precisely my point when I was back in my own land? This is why I fled to Tarshish earlier! I know that you are a merciful and compassionate God, very patient, full of faithful love, and willing not to destroy. 3 At this point, Lord, you may as well take my life from me, because it would be better for me to

die than to live.” 4 The Lord responded, “Is your anger a good thing?” 5 But Jonah went out from the city and sat down east of the city. There he made himself a hut and sat under it, in the shade, to see what would happen to the city. 6 Then the Lord God provided a shrub,[a] and it grew up over Jonah, providing shade for his head and saving him from his misery. Jonah was very happy about the shrub. 7 But God provided a worm the next day at dawn, and it attacked the shrub so that it died. 8 Then as the sun rose God provided a dry east wind, and the sun beat down on Jonah’s head so that he became faint. He begged that he might die, saying, “It’s better for me to die than to live.” 9 God said to Jonah, “Is your anger about the shrub a good thing?” Jonah said, “Yes, my anger is good—even to the point of death!” 10 But the Lord said, “You ‘pitied’ the shrub, for which you didn’t work and which you didn’t raise; it grew in a night and perished in a night. 11 Yet for my part, can’t I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than one hundred twenty thousand people who can’t tell their right hand from their left, and also many animals?”

Earlier, the sea, the wind, the thunder, the great fish, and even the heathen sailors all obeyed God. And now you add into the mix that the Ninevites and their animals, the leafy plant, the worm, and the hot wind all listened to and obeyed the Lord’s commands. But Jonah still didn’t. He was convinced that he was the one in the right. God was in the wrong. He was singing “I want it my way.”

But remember this is God’s story. Jonah is not the hero of the story. God is! At the beginning he is running from God; at the end he is arguing with God. In between he is praying and preaching. He’s no hero. He’s an anti-hero. This book is about God. We can see it clearly this way:

1. The fish is mentioned 4 times.
2. The city is mentioned 9 times.
3. Jonah is mentioned 18 times.
4. God is mentioned 38 times.

We are Johan! We don’t really want to accept God’s authority in our lives either. Who ultimately do you want directing your path? Do you want it to be God, who knows how to reach our final destination; or you and me, who aren’t even sure sometimes which way the road is going? If we want God to direct our paths, we’ve got to seek his will, and do things His way!

What is your Nineveh today? Nineveh is whatever pulls you out of your comfort zone. Nineveh is the place God calls where you don’t want to go. I wonder how many times we have turned following Jesus into something that’s just supposed to be comfortable. We pray things like “God, I hope you raise someone up to do something about the famine in Africa.” But hesitate in lifting a finger to do anything to help. We acknowledge that the only way to get people into a saving relationship with Christ is through

relationships, but we secretly think that the missionaries who have gone to places like Afghanistan, Pakistan, and other countries are...well...idealists and maybe a little bit crazy. Deep down, how many times do we think, “I’m glad they’re over there instead of me or my children or my grandchildren because I don’t want to have to make that kind of sacrifice”? Nineveh is the place God calls where you don’t want to go. Nineveh is danger. Nineveh is discomfort. Nineveh is whatever you hate that God loves deeply. What He desires for us is better than we can possibly imagine – even when it seems painful.

Jonah has decided to run from God. He heads for Joppa where he just “happens” to find a boat going where he wants to go. What are the chances? Isn’t that an amazing coincidence? It’s a long way from Joppa to Tarshish. It’s not like they had a boat leaving for Tarshish every day. When we decide to disobey God, there is always a boat going to Tarshish. When we decide to run from the Lord, Satan is happy to provide the transportation.

Think about the times we choose to disobey Jesus because of convenience. How many times have you chosen to talk about someone who has wronged you instead of to that person? But what does Jesus say to do in Matthew 18? He says deal with that person directly. How many times do we actually do this? How many times do we avoid this because we just don’t want to do it? When we do that, we’re committing the same sin that Jonah did – we’re announcing to the world that we know better than God does.

That last question that God asks Jonah kind of dangles in the air and it cuts right at our hearts. Jonah cared more about that plant that had died than he did about the Ninevites who were condemned because of their wickedness. When we’re more concerned about material things and personal comfort than we are about our neighbors who are walking in darkness...something is out of alignment. When we don’t allow our hearts to break for the things that break God’s heart, we are announcing that we know better than God does. We’re no better than Jonah was.

People may think we’re crazy sometimes. Our friends might not understand. I’m sure other Hebrews were upset with Jonah for preaching to their enemies. But there’s something more important than merely earning the approval of our neighbors. Jesus needs to shine through our lives. I don’t know about you, but I don’t want to look back on my life and wonder what would’ve happened if I’d really followed Jesus and didn’t keep him at arm’s distance when things got uncomfortable or undesirable. I don’t want to be known as a Jonah, only living out my faith when it’s convenient and it makes me happy.

The truth of the matter is – no matter how much we want to think this isn’t the case...following the Lord really isn’t about me. It’s not about you. It isn’t even about this

church building or the programs and services we provide. It's all about Him. It's all about His beauty. It's all about His majesty. It's all about His wondrous grace that He has willingly showered upon us. It's all about His ability to change a wreck like me and adopt me as His child.

Because God is God. You and I are not. God told Jonah to do a certain thing, and Jonah disobeyed. He did not do what God told him to. God viewed these actions as not trusting in Him and honoring Him as holy. God was with Jonah every step of the way. Though Jonah tried to leave the Lord, the Lord never left him. If you are going down the wrong way on a one way right now, God is there honking at you to wake up and go in the right direction. Amen

BENEDICTION: Father, we ask you to help us read our map this morning. You have given us your Word, the Bible, as a roadmap for life. You have given us your Son Jesus, Who told us He is the Way. You have given us Your Holy Spirit, whom Jesus promised would lead us into all truth. For all You have done for us and all You will do today, we praise you and thank you, in the mighty Name of Jesus Christ, Amen.