

Chapter 1

Sailing The Sea of Selfishness

Lesson: The Joy of Unselfish Leadership

“But Jonah ran away from the
Lord and headed for Tarshish.”
(*Jonah 1:3a, K.J.V.*)

Now, what was he thinking? Jonah knew he couldn't run away from God, yet he tried anyway, and sadly, so do we. The Bible declares the futility and impossibility of such an undertaking:

“Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, You are there; if I make my bed in the depths, You are there.”

(Psalms 139: 7-8, N.I.V.)

This psalm can be very encouraging when you need to know that God is near, but it can be very disheartening when you're trying to get away from God. Jonah knew he served an omnipresent God; there was truly nowhere for Jonah to go, and yet he defiantly tried. Jonah heard the command of God to go to Nineveh but he responded as if he hadn't. He never answered

“Yes” or “No”, as a matter of fact, he never said anything. *He just left.* Without any acknowledgement at all, Jonah simply turned and walked away. But where was he going?

Was he going to seek counsel or advice from a trusted friend? Was he going to reason with God or to second-guess Him? Was he going to a quiet place to be alone with God and attempt to diplomatically change His mind? No, he didn't want any counsel, he wasn't second-guessing anything, and there was no reasoning, he just decided he wasn't going. He was going his own way. He had already made up his mind and determined in his heart to refuse God's command. He was not about to serve God in Nineveh. He opted to do his own will over God's will.

Didn't God understand how he felt? Didn't God know who these heathens were? Didn't God know what they were guilty of? Wasn't he justified in his decision not to go? God's way was just *too* hard; it would require a complete sacrifice of what Jonah wanted. And what exactly did Jonah want? Nothing less than to see the entire city of Nineveh destroyed. If Jonah was to be a successful servant, he would have to completely surrender his own will for the will of God, and he was not ready to do that.

Jonah's particular struggle reminds me of my own, I too had great difficulty surrendering. When God called my wife, Theresa and I to pioneer a new church in my hometown of Elizabethton, Tennessee, I remember saying; “I'll go anywhere, God. I'll go to Texas, Alaska, Maine, California, Asia, Africa, South America, and even Antarctica - but *not* to Elizabethton, Tennessee!” I didn't want to see it destroyed, I just did not want to go back to Elizabethton, so I know from my own personal experience, that going God's way is

not always easy. Going our own way may appear the easiest way to go because we *think* we know what is best for ourselves, but our way is selfish, always based on the “me first” mentality. We think, “I’ve got a better idea, God. I know what’s best for me.” But we very seldom do. When God tells us to do something or go somewhere it’s not always *our* best interest that’s at stake, sometimes it’s for the sake of others. This was true for Jonah as well. God didn’t tell Jonah to go to Nineveh for Jonah’s benefit, God had the entire population of Nineveh’s best interest at heart, every man, woman and child’s physical life, as well as their spiritual well being was at stake. Jonah had to learn as we do, that real joy is found in obeying God’s will, no matter who benefits from our obedience, we only have to look through God’s eyes of compassion and mercy to know that this is true. Of course when we obey, we sacrifice the chastisement for disobedience, which is always a benefit to ourselves.

Sailing the Sea of Selfishness

Because of Jonah’s desperate attempt to disobey and not serve God in Nineveh, he is rather roughly ushered into an unforgettable series of events and experiences. Have you ever found yourself in the same boat? When God has called us as Christians to serve Him, it is practically impossible to disobey and not pay. “Sailing the Sea of Selfishness” always has a price, and believe me the cruise is not all it’s hyped up to be. It turns out to be an expensive, insensitive, and lonely excursion. Trying not to serve God in His way and instead choosing to go our own way brings three principles to the surface of this murky “Sea of Selfishness”

and it didn't take Jonah long to realize that going his own way was going to cost him something, and that's the first principle we need to learn:

Principle #1: *The Way of Selfishness is an Expensive Way.*

"But Jonah rose up to flee into Tarshish from the presence of the Lord, and went down to Joppa: and he found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid the fare..."

(Jonah 1:3, K.J.V., emphasis added).

Selfishness is costly, and one of the things we end up sacrificing when we go our own way is our joy, this forfeiture is definitely a treasure lost. But the absence of joy isn't the only price we pay, make no mistake about it, there is always a hefty price tag that comes with carrying out our own selfish actions. *It will* cost you to go your own way. In some instances, the cost may not be instantly apparent; it may be like going on a shopping spree and pulling out your credit card. It may not hurt you at that precise moment but trust me, the bill is coming, and it must be paid.

The payment for Jonah's disobedience came out of Jonah's very pocket. God didn't pay for it and he didn't have someone else finance it for Jonah. *Jonah* paid the appointed fare. What God orders He pays for. When we obey God, He finances the journey. For example: When God told Pharaoh to let His people go, He led Moses and the Israelites out of Egypt with their pockets fully loaded with silver and gold (Exodus 12: 35-36). When God told Elijah to prophecy famine and drought against the land and against wicked King Ahab, God picked up the tab for all Elijah's meals, by sending ravens with dai-

ly food to sustain him (I Kings 17:6). When the tax collectors came to collect what Jesus and Peter had to pay, God provided the tax money in the mouth of a fish (Matthew 17:27). When we follow and obey what God tells us to do, He will pay. When we follow our own selfish way, He will not. We have to foot our own bill.

So it is with all of us. I have discovered that God will not finance my journeys outside of His divine will for my life. I don't remember which one of my Bible College teachers first spoke these words to me, but I have never forgotten them; "Where the finger of God points, the hand of God provides." As the years have passed, I have learned their unchanging truth and have shared their wisdom with others. When finances come to a screeching halt in our ministry or personal endeavors, I have learned to stop and pray. Ultimately somewhere along the way, I have made a wrong turn, and have ended up going my own way instead of the way God had appointed.

God always has a better idea. Isaiah 55:8-9 states empathically that God's ways are higher than our ways, and His thoughts higher than our thoughts. God's plans are always higher, purer, more noble, and better than ours. You may have some great dreams and hopes for your future, but rest assured that God's plans are even greater for you. The greatest and most fulfilling joy is not found in great wealth, but in a life pursuing God's purposes. When He gives wealth and blessings, there is no sorrow attached to it (Proverbs 13:7). The story of Joseph in Genesis is a great example of how God's plans are with a greater purpose in mind. Joseph had big hopes and huge dreams. He saw himself as a big star and his brothers as smaller stars bowing down to him (Chapter 37 verse 9).

You see God's plans are always greater because they are not motivated by pride, nor are they hindered by opposition, and His plans are not delayed or dependent upon anyone's approval. When we say "Yes" to God's plan, we will always be glad we did!

Joseph may have thought his dream was to benefit him, but years later he discovered that God's plans were bigger and better than he could have ever imagined. Joseph saw his brothers bowing down to him, but it was God's intent and purpose for Joseph to actually serve his brothers. Joseph was to lead his family, not lord over them. God's plan was greater because it was one of provision not just power. God's plan was better because it wasn't just about Joseph, but an entire nation, which ultimately saved Joseph's family as well. Because Joseph did it God's way, he became "a father to Pharaoh" and an instructor of national leaders! (Genesis 45:8, Psalms 105:22). You see God's plans are always greater because they are not motivated by pride, nor are they hindered by opposition, and His plans are not delayed or dependent upon anyone's approval. When we say "Yes" to God's plan, we will always be glad we did!

But Jonah didn't, he said "No!", he paid the fare, and attempted to go on his own rebellious and determined way, however, he didn't get far before the merciful hand of God intervened in his self-destructive journey. In an obvious attempt to gain Jonah's attention, God sent a great wind upon the sea. This tempestuous wind fueled a great storm so violent that it threatened to break the ship apart, and even the seasoned sailors, those with much maritime ex-

perience, were full of fear and apprehension. Each sailor began to call upon his own god for a miraculous deliverance from the raging tempest. Since the sailors were from various nationalities and religions, I'm sure they had a wide and diverse roll call. Since their gods weren't listening, they became even more terrified and started throwing the ship's cargo into the stormy waves to lighten the ship and keep the bow above the turbulent waters. Uh....excuse me, but where is Jonah?

Where was Jonah in the midst of this horrifying obvious display of God's dissatisfaction with his selfish decision? The wind was boisterously howling, the ship itself was fiercely being pitched back and forth by huge angry waves, the wood was cracking, and splitting, threatening to break apart, the sails were violently ripping, and the poor, horrified sailors were screaming and hollering, praying as loudly as they could in hopes that their gods would hear their cries for mercy and deliverance above the noise of the raging tempest. But there was no sign of Jonah. Had he possibly been thrown overboard with one of the ships violent rolls? Uh...no!

"But Jonah had gone below deck, where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep

(Jonah 1:5b, N.I.V.).

Where was Jonah? He was sleeping. Wow! Can you imagine? Sleeping through a storm that God Himself had "hurled" (Jonah 1:4, N.A.S.) unto the sea. I believe the operative word here is "hurled". The very word "hurl" sends a message of thrusting with enormous vigor, or to throw with great violence, or pro-

found force. What a storm that must have been! And yet, Jonah lay sleeping. This brings us to our second principle.

Principle # 2: *The Way of Selfishness is an Insensitive Way*

“How can you sleep? Get up...” (Jonah 1:6, N.I.V., emphasis added). The captain wanted to know how Jonah could possibly be so insensitive to sleep at a time like that. He wanted him up! And not just up, but up and doing something to help the others on the ship. *“Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us, and we will not perish”* (vs. 6, emphasis added). The captain’s question was a very good one. *“How could you possibly be so insensitive in the midst of this storm, do you not care what happens to any of us?”* The captain was understandably upset with Jonah’s selfish behavior. His selfish ways had put the entire boat in jeopardy.

Some have argued in Jonah’s defense, suggesting that Jonah didn’t know that the storm was his fault or that it was God’s dealing with his rebellious and stubborn way. However, in verse 10, scripture tells us that indeed he did know, and had already told the sailors. Read what it says: *“They knew he was running from the Lord, because he had already told them so”* (N.I.V.). What audacity! Everyone was about to lose their lives as a result of Jonah’s disobedience, and yet he still refused to go God’s way and proudly announced his stubborn rebellion to the sailors on board.

As we read on to the end of Chapter One, we see that the sailors actually had more compassion and caring about Jonah than Jonah had for them.

When Jonah admitted that the storm was his fault, the sailors asked him what they should do to calm the sea and he told them to throw him overboard. When the men heard this, they refused and instead tried to row against the storm and head back to shore. Jonah was a servant of the one true God who created “the sea and the land” (vs. 9). Jonah was the one who should have been full of mercy and compassion, and yet these men who worshiped false gods had more consideration, more kindness, and more compassion than Jonah did, how truly sad. Selfishness makes us that way. How often do leaders misrepresent the heart of God?

Jonah had gone below deck, away from everyone, he had isolated himself and separated himself from everyone on board, and yet they were willing to save his life. Why did he choose to isolate himself? He was running away from the Lord. He had closed his heart and eyes to his Lord and Master and though he had proudly announced it, he must have felt lonely and depressed in his disobedience and rebellion, though it did nothing to cause him to change his mind. This brings us to our third principle.

Principle # 3: *The Way of Selfishness is a Lonely Way*

Why is selfishness lonely? Because by its very nature selfishness demands isolation. There are two common reasons why people selfishly isolate themselves, first, for protection. They want to protect themselves. The selfish person is so wrapped up in himself that he polarizes himself in order to avoid getting hurt. If he becomes a loner, he can avoid the potential rejection

that often comes with commitment and involvement. Through isolation, many seek safety from hurt, shelter from commitment, a sanctuary from responsibility, and refuge from loss. This is why some leaders are so unaccountable and isolated.

Secondly, to isolate oneself, that person must also exalt himself or herself. They put themselves above everyone and everything else. Jonah had exalted himself above God's will and plan, and above all the others on board ship. Jonah felt his selfish way was so much more important than anyone or anything that he had the right to jeopardize the others. Jonah's selfish, exalted actions brought others into terrible peril. The effect of our selfishness on those around us is sometimes hard to measure.

Sometimes its effect is not readily noticeable, sometimes lying dormant; its depth is not easily recognized. It is certain, however, that we are seldom alone in the result of our actions, our life decisions affect others drastically. Selfishness may be a lonely experience, yet we are often not alone in the consequences. The married alcoholic may cling to his bottle, but his wife suffers too. He may isolate himself, but his children feel and experience the loss. The same is true of many, if not all, addictive behaviors.

Young people who enter into premarital sexual relationships are not alone in their consequences. They have other eyes, often younger, watching them, learning from their damaging selfish example, brothers, sisters, and schoolmates who need and desire a role model and 'hero' to look up to. Then there is also the often unspoken about emotional and physical effects of promiscuity upon their life and the future of both parties in the relationship. Not to mention the more obvious ones.

Ministers who live in hidden sin, thinking their failures aren't going to hurt anyone else are only hallucinating. When they finally are forced to their senses, they discover that their "secret" sins aren't secret anymore, and their failure has cost them their family and their church. Not only have they shattered their own lives, but they have broken their loved one's hearts, and stabbed their trusting community in the back. As if that were not enough, they have caused an undeserved suspicious shadow to loom largely over the *entire* body of Christ.

Husbands and wives who break the covenant of marriage to commit the selfish act of adultery are only deceiving themselves if they think their sin will not affect their family. Many have chosen divorce above reconciliation, bitterness above forgiveness, and have sadly discovered that divorce doesn't just affect the husband and wife, but that parents, children, relatives, and friends suffer too. Selfishness is a lonely way. There is no private sin, the Bible says be sure your sins will find you out. There is always a price to pay for going our own way. The Bible teaches that a husband is to love his wife unselfishly, even sacrificially, just as Jesus loves us and gave Himself for us! (Ephesians 5:25)

Sometimes God will send a storm into our life to save us from ourselves. Sometimes He will send a storm to turn us around, to give us a chance to change our minds to turn our hearts back toward His will. There are those who would question whether God is ever behind the winds of adversity in our lives? The answer is yes. There is in scripture abounding evidence to support this truth. So was the case with Jonah, the wayward prophet, God was definitely and actively involved in his wind of adversity.

How did Jonah, or for that matter how can we, become so insensitive to God that we can “sleep” through our storms of adversity, never learning, or choosing to be obedient to His will? Jonah demonstrates his insensitivity to God’s direction in three ways. Before Jonah had “gone below” and closed his eyes to sleep he had to:

- A. *Close his mind to God’s will.*** Going to Nineveh was God’s will for Jonah, yet, Jonah headed for Tarshish. He closed his mind to Nineveh, and to what God wanted and he made other plans. When we push God’s will out of our minds we also close our mind to God’s plan. If you and I are to be successful in ignoring God’s plan for our lives, we must close our minds to our own Nineveh’s, and choose to go our own selfish way.

- B. *Close his eyes and ears to the storm of God’s dealing.*** If we are going to go our own way, we must become insensitive to God’s dealings in our lives. This process of desensitizing is called, in scripture, “hardening your hearts and stiffening your necks”. When a person says “no” to God again and again, that man’s heart becomes colder. We do not always reject God’s dealings by flatly saying “no”. On the contrary, often the storms of life are God’s dealings and most of the time we blame the storm on someone else, or on the devil! Often we will even request that God deliver us from the storm - never for a moment examining our lives for signs of disobedience.

C. Close his heart to Nineveh and the sailors' needs for God's love and mercy. When a man sees that a brother has a need and has no compassion on him, John asks, "how can the love of God be in him?" (John 3:17, K.J.V.). Jonah completely disregarded the fact that his disobedience put everyone in a bad predicament: the city of Nineveh and the sailors on the boat. It didn't matter if everyone drowned, or died in God's judgment. Jonah decided to disobey God at any cost, even the loss of other people's lives. We lose love and compassion in the selfish exchange for our own way.

When Jonah finally awoke from his sleep, he acknowledged his blame to the sailors, and accepted the responsibility for the storm. He finally realized what his disobedience had done to them (Jonah 1:12). Yet, stubbornly, Jonah continued to refuse to do God's will. He may have been talking to the sailors, but he was still ignoring God. Jonah was *not* going to Nineveh. When the sailors asked him what must they do to stop the storm, he could have said, "Take me to Nineveh.", but instead, his rebellious and prideful voice said, "Take me up, and cast me forth into the sea" (Jonah 1:12, K.J.V.). *He would rather drown than go to Nineveh!* God didn't want to kill Jonah. He just wanted to save Nineveh. It wasn't God's idea to throw Jonah overboard; it was Jonah's. He was probably shouting as his stubborn body was being tossed into the turbulent air, and over the side of the boat, into the stormy sea, "*I will not go! I will not go! I will not...gulp...gulp...I will...gulp...gulp...not...g...u...l...p.*" What profound stubbornness!

The danger with running away from the will of God in our own lives is that it develops a slow but steady insensitivity toward God and the things of God. Do we really want to just “go on with life” without the joy of knowing that we were in God’s will and plan for our lives? I don’t, and I hope and pray you don’t either.

Jonah’s choice not only cost him financially, but it also cost him emotionally. He lost his compassion, and his concern. He didn’t care about the other’s distress or care about doing anything to help alleviate it. He was so wrapped up in his own selfish attentiveness that he became oblivious to plight of the others. When we go our own selfish way we become insensitive and uncaring. Sailing on the “*Sea of Selfishness*” eventually makes us apathetic and indifferent to the hopes, difficulties, and needs of others. It causes us to leave relationships and drift away from people that God has intended and called us to serve with joy and gladness in our hearts. If you and I want to find real joy and abundant provision we will only find it on the path of *selfless service*. We will pay too high of a price if we runaway from serving the others that God has ordained and called us to serve as leaders. The danger with running away from the will of God in our own lives is that it develops a slow but steady insensitivity toward God and the things of God. Do we really want to just “go on with life” without the joy of knowing that we were in God’s will and plan for our lives? I don’t, and I hope and pray you don’t either.

Are you going God’s way? Maybe I’m a little strange, but I believe we all really do long to. Most

Christians would say, "Sure, I'm going God's way!" But if we really took the time to think about it and answer it truthfully, would we really say "Sure, I am."? We can be genuinely saved, love the Lord, and still oppose God's way in our life, our business, our home. After all, remember Jonah was a child of God.

Perhaps you too are a reluctant missionary, an unwilling teacher, an unenthusiastic evangelist, a disinclined pastor, or a hesitant lay witness. Perhaps you've heard the voice of God call you to service. and you've ignored His voice of direction. If you felt the warmth of the Holy Spirit call you, then He has called you to be faithful to that. Whether it's to serve your spouse, your children, your church, your community, or the people on your job, remember ultimately you are serving Him. Do not run from your calling and purpose. Do not do as Jonah did and fail as a leader. You will know the fullest joy when you serve. Jonah failed the test of servant leadership, but we don't have to. A servant must have an unselfish heart, Jonah certainly had the opposite, but we can choose to love. Let me encourage you to say, "YES!" to the Lord. You'll be glad you did.

As hopeless as things may look for Jonah at this point, God's grace and forgiveness is awesomely impressive. Just wait; you'll see what I mean.