

Jonah 1:1-3

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The LORD sends Jonah to Nineveh. But Jonah goes to Tarshish to run away from the LORD.

The book of Jonah begins by telling the reader that a message came to Jonah from God, saying *the word of the LORD came to Jonah*. The phrase *word of the LORD* refers to God's revelation (1 Kings 6:11; 16:1). In Biblical times, God often disclosed His will to some individuals who, in turn, were to relay the divine message to others (Hosea 1:1; Micah 1:1; Zephaniah 1:1). It would seem then that Jonah was a prophet. Here in this book, the person God chose as His prophetic voice was *Jonah*. Who was *Jonah*?

The prophet *Jonah* was *the son of Amittai*. Besides this simple statement, we know virtually nothing else about *Jonah* from the book of Jonah. Fortunately, three other biblical books mention him (2 Kings 14:25, Matthew 12:39–41; 16:4, and Luke 11:29–32). Among the three books, 2 Kings is particularly helpful in determining Jonah's town, tribe, and ministry.

According to the book of 2 Kings, *Jonah* was from Gath-hepher, a city in the tribal lands of Zebulun between the Sea of Galilee and the Mediterranean Sea (2 Kings 14:25; Joshua 19:13). This is located within the ancient kingdom of Israel, after it had split from the southern kingdom of Judah (1 Kings 12:16-19).

Jonah ministered as a prophet in the days of King Jeroboam II. This king ruled Israel from 793 BC to 753 BC. Through Jonah's ministry, the LORD encouraged King Jeroboam II and gave the nation a long period of prosperity, peace, and territorial expansion. It is likely that this time of prosperity was greatly aided by Jonah's ministry, as the primary military threat to Israel was the kingdom of Assyria, whose capital city was Nineveh.

Jeroboam II "restored the border of Israel from the entrance of Hamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, which He spoke through His servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet, who was of Gath-hepher" (2 Kings 14:25). It seems likely this is due to God causing Assyria to repent, and honor the God of Israel, as we shall see in this small book.

Although the reign of Jeroboam II was prosperous, it was on the doorstep of Israel's doom. Jeroboam's reign ended roughly thirty years prior to it being conquered by Assyria in 722 BC. This was an invasion from which it never recovered. Judah remained as a kingdom until it was conquered by the Babylonians in 586 BC. It was exiled to Babylon, but later returned. Israel was also exiled, but did not have an organized return as did Judah.

God's commission to *Jonah* was precise: *Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and cry against it*. The prophet received a twofold command. In the first, God used two consecutive imperatives: *Arise, go!* In the Hebrew language, the verb *arise* ["qûm"] is often used as an introductory verb to indicate urgency. In this case, the verb does not mean "to stand" or "to get up" as if someone

were lying down or sitting down. It simply means to get ready to act (see Numbers 22:20–21; Judges 4:14; 1 Kings 17:9). In such constructions, the verb that follows the introductory verb specifies the kind of action that is to take place. In our text, the main verb is to *go*. Thus, God asked *Jonah* to *go* immediately to *Nineveh the great city*.

The *city* called *Nineveh* was the capital of the mighty empire of Assyria. Assyria will conquer Israel in 722 BC. The threat of Assyria to Israel is likely the reason *Jonah* was reluctant to seek its benefit. *Nineveh* was on the eastern bank of the Tigris River. According to ancient Near Eastern standards, *Nineveh* was a fabulous and sizable city. That is why in our text, God described it as a *great city*. Today *Nineveh* is Tell Kuyunjik, located on the Tigris River some six hundred miles upriver from the Persian Gulf in northern Iraq.

In the second part of the command, God told *Jonah* what to do upon reaching *Nineveh*: *cry against it*. To *cry against* something is to preach against it. God called *Jonah* to proclaim a message of judgment to *Nineveh* and explicitly told him why he was to do so: *For their wickedness has come up before Me*.

The term translated as *wickedness* is “ra’ah” in Hebrew. Sometimes, it refers to calamity or misfortune, as in the book of Obadiah, where the LORD instructed Edom not to rejoice over Judah’s calamity (Obadiah 13). Here, however, it refers to sinful deeds, such as injustice and crime (Hosea 10:15; Jeremiah 41:11). This description fits *Nineveh* because it was a *city* of bloodshed, “full of lies and pillage” (Nahum 3:1). The people of *Nineveh* were persisting in their wicked deeds, which had *come up before* the LORD.

The verb translated as *come up* means to “go up” or “to ascend” (Genesis 19:28). In the book of Judges, it is used for the angel of the LORD who ascended back to heaven after completing his earthly assignment (Judges 13:20). Similarly, “Elijah went up by a whirlwind to heaven” (2 Kings 2:11). Here in our passage, it is *Nineveh’s wickedness* that went up to heaven. This is a figurative way of saying that the God of heaven was aware of *Nineveh’s* iniquities. *Nineveh’s* wicked behavior and actions caused God to send *Jonah* there to warn the people of His judgment.

That *Nineveh’s wickedness* went up *before the LORD* tells us that God knows everything. Although God’s throne is in heaven, He intervenes in the affairs of men on earth (Psalm 11:4). He saw *Nineveh’s wickedness* because His “eyes are in every place, watching the evil and the good” (Proverbs 15:3). Therefore, God wanted the Ninevites to know that He was aware of their evil actions and would judge them accordingly if they did not repent from their wicked ways.

The city of *Nineveh* was known throughout the ancient world for its treachery and cruelty in warfare (Nahum 3:1). The Ninevites wrongly thought that their power could justify their actions. So, they continually attacked smaller nations around them to consolidate their power (as they eventually did to Israel). But *Nineveh’s* wicked actions displeased the LORD. Therefore, He sent *Jonah* to *Nineveh* to warn the Ninevites of His judgment and commanded him to *go* there immediately.

Although *Jonah* heard the LORD's command, he did not respond appropriately. Instead of going to Nineveh, as the LORD had stated, *Jonah rose up to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD*. The term translated as *LORD* is Yahweh, the name of the covenant God of Israel (Exodus 3:14). It is the name that every Hebrew was to fear and serve (Deuteronomy 10:20).

Jonah obeyed the part of God's command to *arise* (v. 1). So, he *rose up*. But the ironic twist is that he did not go east, to Nineveh, where God had told him to go. Instead, he went west to *Tarshish*, the opposite direction. The place named *Tarshish* was probably in southern Spain. It was a port in the western Mediterranean known for its trade in exports and the farthest known geographical point of the Mediterranean (see map on side bar). So it was somewhat like Jonah being in Texas and God telling him to go to Florida, but instead he gets up and goes to California.

The statement that *Jonah fled from the presence of the LORD* does not mean that he went to a place where the LORD could not see him. The Bible affirms that nobody can flee from God's presence (Psalm 139:7). Jonah knew that, because he was God's prophet. The statement merely indicates Jonah's unwillingness to obey God's command. So, instead of going to *Nineveh*, he *went down to Joppa*.

Jonah departed on his sea journey to Tarshish from a seaport city named *Joppa*. It was located about fifty miles from Jonah's hometown of Gath-hepher. Joppa is just south of modern Tel Aviv on the Mediterranean (Acts 9:36). Today it is known as Jaffa and is one of the largest Israelite cities. Upon arriving at *Joppa*, *Jonah found a ship which was going to Tarshish*. With much determination, he *paid the fare* —whatever the cost for the ticket was —*and went down into the boat*.

Jonah decided that he would not go to *Nineveh* to preach to its people a message of judgment and repentance. The specific reason for his choice is given in the last chapter (Jonah 4:2). From that verse, we can interpret that Jonah understood that Assyria was a military threat to Israel, and did not WANT them to repent and be spared. He wanted God to destroy them, that Israel might then be safe from their aggression. Jonah apparently intended to get as far as he could go from Nineveh in order to thwart God's offer to spare them of being judged for their wickedness.

Since the *ship* going to *Tarshish* had room for an extra passenger, *Jonah went with them to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD*. But *Jonah's* deliberate choice displeased the LORD, the all-powerful God of the universe. God would soon thwart Jonah's plan to thwart His plan.

Biblical Text

¹The word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai saying,² "Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and cry against it, for their wickedness has come up before Me."³ But Jonah rose up to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. So he went down to Joppa, found a ship which was going to Tarshish, paid the fare and went down into it to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD.