

**Dedication**  
*To Kristine Anne  
embraced by the LORD  
light of Christ  
God's treasured dove and comfort*

**ZONDERVAN™**

*The NIV Application Commentary: Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*  
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# Jonah 1



**T**HE WORD OF THE LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai:  
<sup>2</sup>"Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me."

<sup>3</sup>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.

<sup>4</sup>Then the LORD sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up. <sup>5</sup>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. <sup>6</sup>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, and we will not perish."

<sup>7</sup>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.

<sup>8</sup>So they asked him, "Tell us, who is responsible for making all this trouble for us? What do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?"

<sup>9</sup>He answered, "I am a Hebrew and I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land."

<sup>10</sup>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.)

<sup>11</sup>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?"

<sup>12</sup>"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."

<sup>13</sup>Instead, the men did their best to row back to land. But they could not, for the sea grew even wilder than before.

<sup>14</sup>Then they cried to the LORD, "O LORD, please do not let us die for taking this man's life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, O LORD, have done as you

pleased." <sup>15</sup>Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm. <sup>16</sup>At this the men greatly feared the LORD, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows to him.

<sup>17</sup>But the LORD provided a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights.



JONAH WAS A GALILEAN prophet to Jeroboam II, who reigned over the ten northern tribes from 786–746 B.C., before their enslavement and dispersion at the hands of the Assyrians in 722.

Jonah successfully counseled him against the Syrian threat and prophesied his expansion of Israel to its former borders (see 2 Kings 14:25). He was from Gath Hopher (lit., "winepress" and "well") in Zebulun (about fifteen miles west of the Sea of Galilee).

Jonah 1 introduces the larger theme of death and life. It addresses the life and death of the wicked Ninevites, against whom Jonah is sent to preach, and the life and death of the pagan sailors, whose "ship threatened to break up" in the storm. At its center is the matter of the life and death of Jonah, who is thrown into a raging sea and is swallowed by a great fish. Jonah's struggle for life before God will be partially resolved in his prayer of thanksgiving (in ch. 2) and, later, in his dialogue with Yahweh (in ch. 4). The resolution of the Ninevites' struggle is resolved by Jonah's preaching, their repentance, and Yahweh's compassion (in ch. 3).

Chapter 1 resolves only the life and death struggle of the sailors. The sailors' terror in the midst of the storm has them frantically searching for a way to survive. Jonah's reluctant confession to them in the midst of their distress and his willingness to be tossed into the sea eventually result in the calming of the storm. His words also inadvertently result in the sailors' conversion to the worship of Yahweh (1:15–16). Even in reluctance and in the face of his certain death by drowning, Jonah fulfills Yahweh's call on his life by his witness to faith (see 1:9). Jonah testifies that God is the source of life, and he later states that to be separated from God's presence equals death (1:10–12; 2:4–5).

### **A Reluctant Prophet and Yahweh (1:1–3)**

THESE THREE VERSES are full of detailed action, drawing us into the story. The word of Yahweh comes to Jonah in verse 1 (and will come to him a second time in 3:1). Yahweh tells him to preach against the wicked city of Nineveh,

but Jonah runs in the opposite direction, heading for Tarshish. He goes down to Joppa, finds a ship, pays the fare, goes aboard, and sets sail. The detail gives readers the sense of being on board with him when Yahweh's great windstorm hits and threatens to break the ship apart.

"The word of the LORD came to . . ." (1:1) is a formulaic phrase used when Yahweh speaks directly to a prophet or to someone asked to participate in Yahweh's mission in a special way. When the phrase is used again in 3:1, Yahweh repeats his instructions in more detail.<sup>1</sup>

"Jonah" means "dove." In Genesis 8:10–11 the dove Noah sent out from the ark returned with the branch of an olive tree—an enduring symbol of peace and compassion. Thus, the "dove" may symbolically imply Yahweh's attempt to rescue Nineveh from destruction and judgment through forgiveness and mercy. The "Dove" (Jonah) of peace will be his agent.

In the Old Testament doves also moan and lament (Isa. 38:14; 59:11) as Jonah does in chapter 4. Furthermore, they are birds of sacrifice (Lev. 5:7, 11), just as Jonah is in chapter 1 to save the sailors. Finally, the psalmist longs to be a dove ("a *jonah*") to flee from the terrors of death (Ps. 55:4–8).<sup>2</sup> Jonah flees like a dove in chapter 1 from the terror of Nineveh.

Jonah's command is to preach in Nineveh, a "great" city as well as a wicked one. In fact, the phrase "great city" occurs three other times in the book: 3:2, 3; 4:11.<sup>3</sup> The implication is that such a "great," important, and large city (albeit wicked) is worth Yahweh's trouble to save.<sup>4</sup>

Nineveh was on the east bank of the Tigris River (near Al Mawsil or Mosul), about 550 miles northeast of Jerusalem (220 miles north of Baghdad). It was not a great city until the reign of Tiglath-Pileser III (745–727 B.C.). In 701 B.C. Sennacherib (705–681 B.C.) made it the capital of Assyria and the most powerful city in the ancient Near East, with an urban perimeter of seven and one-half miles. In the same year he attacked Jerusalem. Nineveh fell to the Babylonians and Medes dramatically in 612 B.C. Its overwhelming greatness lasted about 150 years.

Jonah's word from Yahweh regarding Nineveh is to "preach against it, because [of] its wickedness" (1:2). The following is a summary of the references to Nineveh's character as demonstrated in the text, preceded by the name of the speaker.

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1. "The word of the LORD" (*wyby dbr-yhwh*) in this exact form occurs 83 times, primarily in Jeremiah (21 times), Ezekiel (41 times), and Zechariah (6 times).

2. See Sherwood, *A Biblical Text and Its Afterlives*, 241–42, for a discussion of proposals for the meaning of "dove."

3. The NIV translation in 3:3 is "important city."

4. For Nineveh's wickedness, see the introduction.

## Jonah 1

God: "Preach against it, because *its wickedness* has come up before me" (1:2).

God: "Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it *the message I give you*" (3:2).

Jonah: "Forty more days and *Nineveh will be overturned*" (3:4b).

Assyrian king: "Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up *their evil ways and their violence*" (3:8b).

Narrator: When God saw what they did and how they turned from *their evil ways, he had compassion* (3:10a).

Jonah, however, chooses to flee in the opposite direction (1:3). The first words of the phrase "Jonah ran away" and the first words in 1:2 ("Go") echo each other in Hebrew (lit., "rise and go"/Jonah "rose and fled"). The original language, in other words, more sharply contrasts what Yahweh asks Jonah to do with what he does immediately. Jonah knows that this call from Yahweh will not simply go away. He immediately grasps the radical and pressing nature of the call (4:2, "that is why I was so quick to flee") and thinks that only radical and immediate action will save him from God's call on his life.<sup>5</sup>

The reasons for Jonah's running are not explained until 4:2 and cannot be understood without historical background. Nineveh, the capital city of Assyria, was Israel's worst enemy and the bane of the ancient world. They were a powerful and well-developed civilization, known for their brutal and grisly treatment of their enemies. Jonah's response to Yahweh's directive can be understood as fear, rebellion, or moral opposition to Yahweh's mercy (as Jonah alludes to in 4:2). Jonah is not interested in participating in the redemption of this particular enemy.

It is, of course, impossible to run away from Yahweh. The expression in 1:3 means "away from the presence [*millipne*] of the LORD [in the temple]" (see 2:4, 7)—an expression used twice in this verse for emphasis. It is a common experience among people of faith to physically leave a place that reminds them of Yahweh in order to avoid the message they have heard in that place.

Verse 3 gives rise to two common questions: "Why Tarshish?" and "Why is Tarshish mentioned three times in one verse?" ("headed for Tarshish . . . that port . . . sailed for Tarshish").<sup>6</sup> Tarshish was a Phoenician city in southern Spain, just west of Gibraltar.<sup>7</sup> Tyre (north of Israel's coast) depended on the large merchant ships of Tarshish for shipments of silver, iron, tin, and lead

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5. Hendiadys of *qum lek* (1:2) should be translated "go immediately."

6. The word the NIV translates as "that port" is lit. "Tarshish."

7. Not to be confused with Paul's hometown, Tarsus, of Asia Minor. For a discussion of various viewpoints on the location of Jonah's Tarshish, see David W. Baker, "Tarshish (Place)," *ABD*, 6:331–33.

(Isa. 23:1–14; Ezek. 27:12, 25). It was known as the westernmost place in the Mediterranean world (Ps. 72:10; Isa. 60:9; 66:19; Ezek. 38:13).<sup>8</sup>

Interestingly, the narrative includes that Jonah “paid the fare.” This is detailed and economic story-telling, which moves the action along. The description of Jonah’s energy and action in fleeing, especially in verse 3, masterfully takes the reader for a ride with Jonah. It conveys more than information. By the time the sailors cry out, the reader has a sense of being on the ship with them, wondering what will happen next.

### **The Sailors and the Reluctant Prophet in Yahweh’s Storm (1:4–12)**

VERSE 4 TURNS our attention to the sailors and captain of the storm-bound ship and their situation in relation to Yahweh and Jonah. They are afraid because of the storm and cry out to their gods, and they then proceed to throw their cargo overboard (a radical action for freight haulers). The captain wakes Jonah to enlist him to pray, and the men cast lots and discover Jonah’s sin.

They interrogate him, hear his witness to Yahweh, and become even more terrified, since Jonah’s God is “the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land.” They chastise him for his foolishness in trying to run away from Yahweh (“What have you done?” 1:10). The pagan sailors seem to know the rules of relationship to gods better than Jonah. It is on account of this fleeing prophet that Yahweh is making the sea “rougher and rougher.”

In the end the sailors desperately ask Jonah what they should do to him “to make the sea calm down for us.” The sailors’ questioning and the urgency of Yahweh’s storm finally pry from Jonah a confession of guilt (v. 12), just as they had pried a confession of faith. He has, albeit under duress, fulfilled his calling as a true prophet of Yahweh by witnessing to the God of heaven, confessing his sin, and instructing the sailors to act. He has also taken a vital step toward his specific and difficult calling in that he offers himself as a sure sacrifice for their safety.

In verse 4, one can almost hear the creaking timbers as the stress of the pounding on the hull increases. The root *twl* (“hurl, send, throw”) is first used in this verse and three additional times in chapter 1, increasing the sense of power and danger in the situation:

1:4: Yahweh *sent* a great wind on the sea.

1:5: [The sailors] *threw* the cargo into the sea.

1:12: “*Throw* me into the sea,” he replied.

1:15: [The sailors] *threw* him overboard.

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8. For further references see Limburg, *Jonah: A Commentary*, 43.

Jonah is passive in verses 5–7. Exhausted from his struggle and decision to flee, he sleeps. He has temporarily escaped the pressure of God's word, but by fleeing he has also turned from the possibility of calling on his God.

The captain is puzzled how Jonah can sleep through the storm (1:6). All of those on board are searching for every possible means to end their deadly predicament, including the expectation that each one must call on his gods. Jonah's decision to run from God is now a matter of life and death for the sailors and their captain. His action has endangered them. This web of interrelationships is one of the lessons of the book. All of life is related before the Lord of life (who made the sea and the land). The prophet of Israel, pagan sailors, Ninevites, and in later verses, a fish, vine, worm, and cattle are all interconnected under God's caring purposes.

Jonah's deep sleep in the recesses of the ship reveals his indifference to his own life and the lives of others. To see such callousness so early in the development of the narrative distances many readers from Jonah. Jonah's aversion to the evil Ninevites is understandable, but his indifference to the life of his shipmates seems callous. The pagan captain speaks of their agitation: "How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god!" (1:6). Telling the story in this way converts even the pious reader to the perspective of the impious captain.

Jonah's deep sleep is the bottom of a quick slide from "a prophet in the presence of the LORD in Israel" to "deadly indifference in the hull of a sinking ship." The Hebrew uses the same word root to describe how Jonah "went down to Joppa" (1:3, *yarad*), "went aboard [the ship]" (1:3, *yarad*), and "had gone below deck" (1:5, *yarad*). When he falls into a "deep sleep" (1:5, *yeradam*), the Hebrew words are a play on similar sounds (*yarad/yeradam*). The second root (*radam*) is repeated by the captain, who says, "How can you sleep [*nired-dam*]?" Jonah's sleeping is the bottom of his flight from Yahweh (see further comments at 2:7). The captain tells Jonah to "Get up!"—in essence, to reverse his direction from "down" to "up." The captain uses the same word (*qum*) that Yahweh spoke to Jonah at the beginning (1:2; lit., "Get up and go").

Everyone in this book eventually calls on God: the sailors, Jonah, and the Ninevites. The Hebrew *qara*<sup>2</sup> is translated as both "call" and "cry out":

- 1:6: 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, and we will not perish."
- 1:14: Then they *cried to* the LORD, "O LORD, please do not let us die for taking this man's life."
- 2:2: He said: "In my distress I *called to* the LORD, and he answered me."
- 3:8: But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone *call* urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence.

The captain hopes what Jonah already knows, that his God is compassionate (see Bridging Contexts section of ch. 4). In the sailors' circumstance, they are not in a position to be particular. For them, one god is as good as another as long as it is a god that saves. The captain's request for Jonah to pray to his god is an incredible opportunity for Jonah to give witness to and demonstrate the power of the Lord of life, but he remains silent.

The captain implies a preliminary understanding of the existence of Jonah's God when he says, "Maybe he will take notice of us." The contrast is more striking in Hebrew because a more literal rendition is: "It may be that *haelohim*<sup>9</sup> will take notice." The verb "will take notice" is singular (as the NIV translates correctly); what is lost in translation is the plural subject *haelohim* (NIV simply "he"). The captain acknowledges the possibility that Jonah's God, the God of the Hebrews (*haelohim*), is the true God.

The sailors continue to take charge of the situation by casting lots to find the source of their calamity (1:7). As Yahweh has used the storm, he uses the lot-casting to expose Jonah to the sailors and bring him to face his calling as a prophet. The wind, the sailors, and the lots are each the agents of God for this purpose (see further comments at 1:17).

Although it is not seen in English, the interplay of Hebrew and Aramaic in the conversation shows that the sailors and Jonah are doing the best they can to communicate with each other. When speaking to each other, the sailors use an Aramaic expression: "Then the sailors said to each other, 'Come, let us cast lots to find out *who is responsible for [bešellemi]* this calamity.' They cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah." But when the sailors speak to Jonah, they say the same thing in full Hebrew: "So they asked him, 'Tell us, *who is responsible for [ba'ašer lemi]* making all this trouble for us?'" (1:8a). When Jonah uses the same expression to admit his fault, he uses the sailors' Aramaic: "I know that *it is my fault [bešelli]* that this great storm has come upon you" (1:12b).

When Jonah tells them who his God is (1:9), the sailors are terrified. Immediately they understand the cause of the storm and ask the equivalent of "Are you crazy?" ("What have you done?"). The tremendous storm is the primary evidence that Jonah's God is powerful. When he says that "the LORD [is] God of heaven, who made *the sea* and the land," they know they are in trouble. Who runs away from the God of the sea *on a ship*?

The sailors' five rapid-fire questions (1:8) continue the energy of their desperate work against the storm (praying to gods, jettisoned cargo, lots cast). They have discovered Jonah by lot and now need to know more, quickly. They seek a confession and confirmation, but Jonah doesn't give them a confession yet. He ignores this part, although he knows he is cornered.

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9. *haelohim* can be translated either "the true God" or "the gods."