

# Jonah 1: 1-3

## Jonah's Commission and Flight

### 1. Introduction

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The book of Jonah begins with a short opening scene in the first three verses. The mandate from the Lord is brief and the reason for it is clear. Jonah's reaction is just as clear. He does not hesitate and he asks no questions. Neither does he make any comment. When the Lord says he must prepare himself to go to Nineveh, Jonah gets ready, but in order to run away. The events develop rapidly. First is the mandate from Yahweh; but this section is closed with a repeated "to flee from the Lord." In this way the tension builds immediately. How will this end? What will happen to Nineveh? But, above all: how will the Lord react?

You can ask yourself the reason for Jonah's refusal to go to Nineveh. Why does he not simply stay in Canaan? Does he think he can escape from the Lord? Does he realize what he is doing or does he just panic? And why does he go to Tarshish?

### 2. Text notes

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#### Verse 1

The Lord's commission to Jonah is introduced in a characteristic manner. "*The word of the Lord came to Jonah.*" You come across this phrase frequently when a prophet is called to perform a task (e.g. 2 Samuel 7:4; 1 Kings 17:2,8)

Nothing is said about when or how the word of the Lord came to Jonah. One thing is clear - the initiative is the Lord's. With his word, God lays claim upon the life of his servant. It cannot be avoided. Amos experienced this claim of the Lord (Amos 3:8). Jeremiah also tried unsuccessfully to avoid it (Jeremiah 20:7-9).

#### Verse 2

Jonah receives instructions to warn Nineveh. Her evil has come to the Lord's attention. Do these words indicate the content of the message or do they form the reason why the Lord sent Jonah to Nineveh? On this point there are differences of opinion.

It is more probable that these words are the reason why Jonah is sent. In chapter 3:4 Jonah's message is different. Moreover, it is more in keeping with the terse style of the writer that nothing is announced until it is strictly necessary for the development of the story (cf. 3:2,4). Jonah is not sent needlessly. He receives a commission which previously has been determined by the Lord.

The wickedness in Nineveh is the unrighteousness done by the inhabitants. Chapter 3:8 identifies this as "their evil ways and their violence." Nahum too, summarizes the misery caused by Nineveh with the same words (Nahum 3:19). When he proclaims the fall of this city approximately one century later (Nahum 1:19). He brings these tidings as good news for God's people (Nahum 1:15). At that time Nineveh is the

capital of the Assyria which is oppressing God's people (Nahum 1:13). God's judgment over her over her is firmly determined, since much more has taken place in the meantime. In Nahum's time there is no way back for Nineveh; therefore the prophet need not go to Nineveh itself.

In Jonah's time events have not advanced that far. He must go to Nineveh in order to pronounce God's judgment because a limit has now been reached. The evil of Nineveh's inhabitants is great. God can no longer let it go unpunished. He has seen it, and its measure is full.

### Verse 3

Tarshish. Jonah prepares himself, but to flee to Tarshish instead. Opinions are divided as to where this city actually was situated. It is not the same as the Tarshish from which Paul originated (Acts 9:11; 22:3). Neither, on linguistic grounds is it likely to have been Tartessos. This city was situated at the mouth of the Gualdalquivir in Spain. Tarshish must be sought further west than Cyprus and Greece. We can draw this conclusion on the basis of an inscription of the Assyrian king Essarhaddon (681-669 BC), in which the name Tarshish appears in the series Cyprus, Greece, Tarshish. Evidently the place repeatedly referred to is one situated further to the west.

We must look for this place then, somewhere in the (middle or) western part of the Mediterranean Sea area. In the time of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, Tarshish was a renowned trading centre. It exported silver, iron, tin and lead. (Ezekiel 27:12) In any case, here Tarshish is meant to indicate a far distant place (Isaiah 60:9; 66:19). A certain rabbi, Jehuda, assessed the length of a journey to Spain as being one full year. Jonah left for the other side of the world, in the direction opposite to Nineveh. That is how far he wanted to be from the Lord and his commission. "Away from the presence of the Lord." Why does Jonah flee anyway? He is in no danger surely? Why does he not simply stay in Palestine? When we hear of someone fleeing we tend to think of a life threatening situation. The word which is translated as "to flee" can also refer to moving away from your homeland in order to build up a new life somewhere else. That is what we call emigrating and for this there need be no threat to life. An existing situation is experienced as impossible or undesirable and so a person leaves his present connections and settles elsewhere. In this way Hagar *flees* from Sarah, after she had been humiliated by her (Genesis 16:6,8). Jacob *fled* from Laban. That is to say, he departed in order to establish himself in Canaan. That he does this in secret, arouses Laban's wrath (Genesis 31:20,27). Israel *flees*, with Pharaoh's permission, out of Egypt (Exodus 14:5; cf. Judges 11:3, 2 Samuel 4:3). In this way Jonah flees from God. He does not want to fulfill his commission and so he no longer sees a place for himself amongst God's people. He deserts and emigrates away from the Lord. In so doing, Jonah draws the ultimate consequence of his refusal to obey. He underlines his resolute choice. He leaves the place where he may live under the protection of the Lord.

Does Jonah think that he can get out of God's reach? According to verse 10 he does know better. "Running away from the Lord" therefore means something else. These words are the opposite of "standing in the service of the Lord." They make it clear that Jonah deserts as servant of the Lord.

Why does Jonah not want to go to Nineveh? There has been much thought about this question. Is he afraid? Does he find such a mission so unusual? Does he see repentance and salvation for the Ninevites a possibility? Does he try to prevent heathen people from sharing in God's mercy, which is surely only meant for Israelites? Does he want to guard against this? Or does he want to prevent himself from appearing as a prophet whose word does not come true? In 4:2 Jonah himself gives the reason for his flight. There is maybe something of a retrospective excuse in this. In any case this is the motivation which functions in that chapter as a whole. In chapter 4 God's mercy is central. Chapter 1 offers no explanations. It describes the flight itself, paying no attention to the whys and wherefores.

Jonah prepares himself. The action comes thick and fast and indicates something of the nervous haste with which Jonah proceeds. A repeated "away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish" gives an indication of what is more than likely running through his head. Jonah goes down to the coast, to Joppa. This was an ancient harbour and is currently a suburb of Tel Aviv. He finds a ship that is setting sail to Tarshish. We have to think of this as a trade ship which could be rowed as well as sailed. Jonah pays his fare. Considering the distance and the length of the journey that must have been a considerable amount. After that he embarks and goes "down into the ship" (NASB). He is on a descending journey, a journey that eventually brings him literally into the depths of the Mediterranean Sea.

### **3. Comments for today**

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1. The Word of the Lord does not originate in yourself. It originates with God, not from below but from above. It comes to you with urgency and demands to be received and obeyed without question. God, with his Word, lays claim upon you as his servant with unavoidable power. Jonah discovered that, just as Amos and Jeremiah did. We can still know and experience that today.
2. Jonah is sent to Nineveh, an important city a long way from Israel. This makes clear that God is Lord over the whole world. Everything and everyone is subject to him and must obey him (Psalm 2; 33; 47; 59; 66; 96; 97; 104; 148). That is not only true of God's children in the land of Canaan, but all people are under his authority. It should be especially encouraging for us that he puts limits on their evil.
3. Turning your back on the Lord does not begin when you leave the church. The last is the consequence of the first. It begins when, in the service of the Lord, you refuse to fulfill the task which he has given you.
4. In Jonah 1:1-3 no reason is given for Jonah's turning his back on the service of the Lord, nor is any attention paid in the rest of chapter 1 to the reason why. It simply describes the flight. Apparently it is always absurd to desert the Lord's service and to leave him, no matter what reason you might use to excuse yourself.

### **4. Summary**

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Verses 1-3 of chapter 1 form a self contained and coherent unit. At the same time it lays the foundation for the following chapters. The most necessary information is revealed without delay. All the important elements, which are essential for a good

understanding of what follows, are present. We listened to the charge of the Lord and the motive for it. We became acquainted with the prophet and his attitude towards this charge. We heard something of the city around which the story is woven. Finally we had a look at the ship in which Jonah took flight. In this way these verses are an effective introduction to the whole book of Jonah.

## **5. Tips for introduction and study**

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1. In Jonah 1:1-3 the Lord's calling of his prophet is central. It is important not to discuss this fact with detachment. To avoid this you could discuss this theme in the light of the Heidelberg Catechism, LD 12, Q&A 32. We are in the service of the Lord as prophets, as well as priests and kings. Give concrete examples of when you notice that God's call is being avoided. Also try to give positive and concrete examples of your task as prophet, priest and king.
2. You can also give attention to the response to a call from the Lord on the basis of LD 49. This Lord's Day deals with our obedience to God's will, which alone is good. Also note that we must learn to compare ourselves with the obedience of the angels and not with each other.
3. The Lord becomes angry with the unrighteousness of the world. God's anger against sin and God's sovereignty are themes found throughout the whole Bible. Everything is in subjection to Him. That fact applies especially to God's own people, but God's control is over all mankind. Compare, for example, a few of the prophecies about the foreign nations which we can find, in Amos 1, 2; Isaiah 10:5-19; 13-21; 23; 24; 30:27-33; 34, and Jeremiah 46-51.
4. Is it possible to bring the oracle about Nineveh, found in the book of Nahum, into the discussion of this part of the Bible? Note then, especially the changed historical circumstances and the role that Nineveh has played against the people of God during that time.

## **6. Discussion Aid**

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1. In practice, we often have difficulty accepting that the authoritative Word of God also directs us to our own task and calling. Can you give examples of this?
2. From time to time it is useful to ask yourself if your attitude within your family, your congregation, and your social relationships, show signs of desertion. What does this mean in concrete terms?
3. What do you think of the view that studying the meaning of the book of Jonah is only useful when you deeply reflect upon the calling of all believers?
4. Must Christians assume that God's regulations are also valid for the lives of all people? Is it right to ask government and nation to recognize the commands of God? How would you manage that belief in your daily associations with other people? How does this belief connect with Jonah 1:1-3?