

A Study of the Minor Prophets
The Book Jonah – Lesson 2 – Chapter 1

- I. Structure: The book of Jonah has two major sections built around God's two calls for Jonah to go and preach in Nineveh. In chapters 1–2, Jonah chooses to flee from the Lord rather than carry out his commission and ends up in the belly of the fish, from which the Lord delivers him. In chapters 3–4, Jonah obeys the Lord, and the people of Nineveh repent and are spared from judgment in spite of Jonah's strenuous objections. The symmetry between the two sections reflects the literary artistry of the book and serves to highlight the contrast between Jonah's thankfulness for his own deliverance from death at sea and his anger over the sparing of Nineveh.
- II. Chapter 1:1-17: The story begins with Jonah's refusal to obey his prophetic commission. Jonah is to go to Nineveh and preach against the city because its wickedness has come to the Lord's attention and will not go unpunished. Instead of "rising" and "going" as commanded by the Lord, Jonah arises to flee by going to Joppa and boarding a ship to Tarshish. Jonah's real intention is to flee "from the Lord's presence." The prophet's own confession in 1:9 that the Lord is the Creator of both the "sea and the dry land" reflects the futility of his flight.
- III. In verses 4–16, the Lord sends a fierce storm to get the attention of his wayward prophet. The storm demonstrates the Lord's control over Jonah's life even outside the Promised Land. The threefold repetition of the verb "to go down" (yarad) in chapter one describes Jonah's descent as he flees from the Lord. Jonah "went down" to Joppa; then he "went down" to board the ship (v. 3); and then he "goes down" into the hull of the ship (v. 5). His downward descent eventually leads to Jonah being thrown overboard into the sea and then "going down" (yarad) toward Sheol, the abode of the dead (2:6). Running away from God leads Jonah to the brink of death, and it is only the Lord's rescue via the fish that keeps Jonah from descending to a grave at the bottom of the sea. Then he "goes down" into the hull of the ship (v. 5). His downward descent eventually leads to Jonah being thrown overboard into the sea and then "going down" (yarad) toward Sheol, the abode of the dead (2:6). Running away from God leads Jonah to the brink of death, and it is only the Lord's rescue via the fish that keeps Jonah from descending to a grave at the bottom of the sea. The repeated verb "to fear" (yara') reflects a movement in the opposite direction for the pagan sailors aboard the ship with Jonah. The sailors "were afraid" (yara') because of the terrible storm, and each of them cried out to their different gods (v. 5). Their fear intensifies (lit. "they feared a fear") in verse 10 when they learn of Jonah's identity and that he is fleeing from the God of heaven who made "the sea" and "dry land."
- IV. The irony of this opening episode in the story of Jonah is that the pagan outsiders are much more spiritually attuned and sensitive than the prophetic insider. The sailors come to fear the Lord, while Jonah remains hardened in rebellion. While the sailors frantically cry out to their gods, Jonah is asleep in the bottom of the ship.