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# PREFACE

A study of the Bible book Jonah is quite fascinating. Who does not know the history that is told there? For centuries these events have appealed to the imagination.

Familiarity with this material seems to take away the challenge of renewed study. Generally speaking, you already know what it is all about. Yet, through careful reading of this Bible book, you come across an increasing number of surprises.

Therefore, in dealing with of the text of Jonah, the emphasis is laid upon what is actually written there and what the meaning is for us today. The main section consists of "Text notes," followed by "Comments for today." These are preceded by an "Introduction" with a general overview of the text to be dealt with, and the whole is brought to completion with a "Summary." The "Tips for study" and the "Discussion aid" which follow, attempt to enhance the value for personal or group Bible study.

A different method is used for the first and last chapter. Chapter 1 deals with matters that refer to the book of Jonah as a whole, while chapter 7 deals with the meaning of the sign of Jonah to which the Lord Jesus refers in the New Testament. These chapters are, however, also rounded off with "Tips for study" and a "Discussion aid."

For the content of these outlines, I am indebted to various commentaries, especially those of H.W. Wolff and A.S. van der Woude. I have also referred to the notes I made during Hebrew lectures that dealt with the Book of Jonah. It was there that my interest for this Bible book was aroused. I have also been helped a great deal by the stimulating comments made by the *Committee for Outlines of the League of Reformed Women and the League of Reformed Bible Study Societies*. Mrs. A.E.H. van der Kolk deserves a special mention. She not only operated as contact person on behalf of the committee but also relieved me of much work.

I hope that the study of this book may contribute to a deepening of our life in relationship with God.

*Harderwijk, January 1994*

*H. J. Room*

# JONAH'S COMMISSION AND FLIGHT

Jonah 1: 1-3

## 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;

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?