



# International Bible Lessons Commentary

Uniform Sunday School Lessons Series

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## **Jonah 1:1-17** **New Revised Standard Version** **May 7, 2017**

The [International Bible Lesson](#) (*Uniform Sunday School Lessons Series*) for **Sunday, May 7, 2017**, is from **Jonah 1:1-17** [Some will not study the entire chapter].

**Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further** follow the verse-by-verse *International Bible Lesson Commentary*. **Study Hints for Discussion and Thinking Further** will help with class preparation and in conducting class discussion: these hints are available on the [International Bible Lessons Commentary](#) website along with the *International Bible Lesson* that you may want to read to your class as part of your Bible study. You can discuss each week's commentary and lesson at the [International Bible Lesson Forum](#).

**(Jonah 1:1) Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying,**

Jonah spoke the word of the LORD (Jehovah or Yahweh). Jonah was God's prophet in Israel and preached to the Israelites and to the Assyrians. His preaching led the Assyrians to repent; unlike the Israelites who did not repent even when God sent them other prophets (such as

Amos and Hosea). Not once did the Israelites quit worshiping the golden calves set up by Jeroboam when the kingdom of Israel divided from the kingdom of Judah. The name Jonah means “dove.” The name Amittai means “the truth of God.” Jonah is mentioned as a prophet in 2 Kings 14:25 — “He was the one who restored the boundaries of Israel from Lebo Hamath to the Dead Sea, in accordance with the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, spoken through his servant Jonah son of Amittai, the prophet from Gath Hopher.” Jesus referred to the importance of Jonah and applied Jonah’s experience to His death and resurrection — Matthew 12:39-41 “He answered, ‘A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now something greater than Jonah is here.’” As we teach about Jesus from the Bible, we pray that many in our generation will not be condemned by the men of Nineveh who repented at the preaching of Jonah, for we have Bibles and the preaching of Jesus.

**(Jonah 1:2) “Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.”**

In the time of Jonah, Assyria was a great nation and Nineveh was the capital city. Jonah would have gone to Nineveh during the reign of Jeroboam II between 786-746 BC. The Assyrians were enemies of Israel, and in 722 BC as punishment for their sins, God sent the Assyrians to punish and destroy the kingdom of Israel, the northern kingdom, and scatter the ten tribes of Israel among the nations. In Hosea 10:14-15, God had warned the Israelites in advance that He would destroy them if they did not repent — “The roar of battle will rise against your people, so that all your fortresses will be devastated — as Shalman devastated Beth Arbel on the day of battle, when mothers were dashed to the ground with their children. So will it happen to you, Bethel, because your wickedness is great. When that day dawns, the king of Israel will be completely destroyed.” Prior to Jonah’s preaching in Nineveh, the wickedness of the Assyrians had come before the LORD as in the time of Sodom and Gomorrah. See Genesis 18:20-21 — “Then the LORD said, ‘The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me. If not, I will know.’”

**(Jonah 1:3) But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD.**

Not wanting to serve the LORD as a prophet any longer, Jonah went in the opposite direction from Nineveh toward Tarshish in Spain, because he knew God would be compassionate and merciful toward his enemies (see Jonah 4:2). Jonah wanted to be as far away as possible from where God wanted him to go. Joppa was an Israelite seaport on the Mediterranean Sea. Jonah thought he could disobey God without suffering consequences. Sinful impulses often lead us into senseless behavior. He knew from the Psalms that he could not really escape God's presence (Psalms 139:7-8), but he thought he could resign as a prophet and stop serving God whenever he wanted to quit.

**(Jonah 1:4) But the LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up.**

God let Jonah run away from Him. Perhaps giving Jonah time to come to his senses, repent, and turn around. But Jonah paid his fare and boarded a ship for Tarshish. Some who disobey God try to do something else rather than openly rebel and reject God: Jonah tried quiet rebellion and desertion. Jonah chose what he hoped would be a long, leisurely, restful cruise far away from his responsibilities to God. But Jonah was a prophet of God and God knew what was best for all concerned; therefore, God began to do what He needed to do so Jonah would repent, return to him, and do God's will. "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand

slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). We see this fact demonstrated many, many times in the Old Testament. God did not want Jonah, the sailors, the Israelites, or the Ninevites to perish, and was patient until His patience ceased to be a virtue and divine justice was required.

**(Jonah 1:5) Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried to his god. They threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea, to lighten it for them. Jonah, meanwhile, had gone down into the hold of the ship and had lain down, and was fast asleep.**

Jonah began to rest right away by going below and falling into a deep sleep. The sailors did not know the truth about the true God, so as the storm grew fiercer each one cried out for their idols to save them. As Jonah slept, they worked as hard as they could to save the ship and themselves. They did not know that the spiritual weight of the prophet’s sins, not the weight of their cargo, was sinking them. They did not know that only the true God could save them; so, God used His reclaiming punishment of Jonah to teach them through Jonah the truth about God and lead them to worship the true God.

**(Jonah 1:6) The captain came and said to him, “What are you doing sound asleep? Get up, call on your god! Perhaps the god will spare us a thought so that we do not perish.”**

Perhaps Jonah slept from weariness and the thought that he could relieve his burdens of guilt and sin in forgetful sleep. As with many sinners, Jonah slept in his sin and maintained a sense of false security until awakened by the captain and told of his danger and the solution “Call upon your God!” The pagan captain told Jonah of the way to avoid perishing. He did not know the true God or that Jonah had offended the true God, but he would soon learn and come to believe in the true God. Perhaps God inspired the captain to tell Jonah the truth that would save him, all the sailors, and the ship.

**(Jonah 1:7) The sailors said to one another,  
“Come, let us cast lots, so that we may know on  
whose account this calamity has come upon us.”  
So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah.**

Jonah might have felt too guilty to pray, but the sailors knew that their prayers were not being answered and they wanted to know who was responsible for their prayers not being answered and their dire circumstances. They came to conclude that this sudden unusual storm, without any signs of approaching and so unusual in their experiences on the sea, was punishment for someone’s sin, and they wanted to know the guilty person. God used the casting of lots by these pagan sailors to achieve His purposes (this does not mean casting lots is the way to discern God’s will). The sailors demonstrated a greater compassion for Jonah than Jonah had for the whole city of Nineveh, and unlike Jonah in Nineveh, their lives were in great danger.

**(Jonah 1:8) Then they said to him, “Tell us why this calamity has come upon us. What is your occupation? Where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?”**

In order to be just, these sailors held court to determine Jonah’s guilt and how they should rightly respond. They did not want to do wrong to Jonah just because the lot fell to him. Jonah’s work was “prophet of God.” Jonah had come from receiving and refusing to obey a direct command from God (that’s what his fleeing really meant). He did not want to lead pagans to God (those in Nineveh especially). He was from Israel. He was a “Hebrew”: “the people of God.” He would soon learn that God loved everyone.

**(Jonah 1:9) “I am a Hebrew,” he replied. “I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.”**

These foreign sailors knew Hebrews. In the Old Testament, Hebrews contrasted themselves to foreigners. Jonah told them the true name of the true God: (LORD is a translation of Jehovah or Yahweh). The true God was totally different from their pagan gods, for the LORD is the God of heaven. He made the sea that was threatening them and the dry land that could save them from death, if they could only reach it.

**(Jonah 1:10) Then the men were even more afraid, and said to him, “What is this that you have done!” For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them so.**

They did not know what it meant for Jonah to run away from the true God until they experienced God’s judgment against Jonah that God designed to lead Jonah back to obedience. They knew they suffered from Jonah’s punishment. They wondered how Jonah could flee from and disobey so great a God as the Creator of heaven and earth. They all soon learned that this was impossible. Their fears would eventually lead them to faith in and worship of the true God. They learned from Jonah’s experience how serious it was to disobey or turn from obedience to the true God; therefore, these men turned from their paganism to worship the LORD. After fearing the destructive power of the sea, they soon learned to fear the Lord more than those things that God had created, and by God’s grace God saved them and they came to worship the true God in faith.

**(Jonah 1:11) Then they said to him, “What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?” For the sea was growing more and more tempestuous.**

The sailors knew Jonah was a prophet, and they wanted to know what God wanted them to do in order to obey God and be freed from the punishment of Jonah that so



terrified them. When they learned about the true God, they wanted to obey Him. The sea got increasingly rougher to show that God expected immediate obedience.

**(Jonah 1:12) He said to them, “Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you; for I know it is because of me that this great storm has come upon you.”**

Jonah went to sea to escape obeying God, and through the sea God punished him and led him to repent. Such punishment can be called “the Lord’s discipline.” Similar to a parent who disciplines a child (not to make him suffer, but to save him). Jonah admitted the fault was his, and he deserved the punishment they too were suffering because of him. He said the solution was for them to obey God and throw him into the sea.

**(Jonah 1:13) Nevertheless the men rowed hard to bring the ship back to land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more stormy against them.**

Once again, we see the compassion of these pagan men for Jonah, as expressed in their desire to save him and themselves from certain death. They did not want to hurt Jonah, so they frantically tried to row back to land. They were willing to put their lives at risk, even sacrifice their lives, to save Jonah. But only God could and would save them, which God proved to them as the sea grew wilder. At some point, those who would be saved learn that their best

works, even when motivated by compassion and concern for others, will not save them. They must go to God in obedient faith for Him to save them, which these men eventually did.

**(Jonah 1:14) Then they cried out to the LORD, “Please, O LORD, we pray, do not let us perish on account of this man's life. Do not make us guilty of innocent blood; for you, O LORD, have done as it pleased you.”**

The sailors turned from praying to their old gods and turned to praying to the LORD that Jonah and the storm had revealed to them. They wanted to do God's will and wanted to be certain they were doing God's will; so, they prayed that if they were mistaken they wanted God to forgive them if indeed Jonah were an innocent man and they had misunderstood God's will. They wanted to please God; they wanted God to do as He pleased – such was their total submission to God, and their desire to obey the LORD of heaven and earth no matter what God required. They prayed for God's will to be done as they sought to do the will of God when they threw Jonah over the side of the ship.

**(Jonah 1:15) So they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea; and the sea ceased from its raging.**

The sailors did what God and Jonah willed, and they immediately experienced God's approval and benevolence when the raging sea became immediately calm – as immediately calm as it had become immediately raging earlier. In a similar way, Jesus calmed the sea, and the disciples probably knew the story of Jonah, which increased their amazement at what Jesus had done. (Matthew 8:6). God proved to the sailors He was the one true God and that He would answer their prayers. They learned that they should always obey Him. They learned that indeed they had obeyed Him when they threw Jonah overboard.

**(Jonah 1:16) Then the men feared the LORD even more, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.**

Without Jonah intending to care spiritually for these Gentile sailors, God used Jonah to lead these pagan sailors to faith in Him, even as He would use an obedient Jonah to lead the Ninevites to repentance, prayer, and faith in the true God (at least for a time). In some sense, Jonah represented the rebellion of the people of God, who refused to be priests to the nations (see Exodus 19:5-6). The sailors represented the typical pagan who came to believe in and obey God after they learned the truth about God. In Jonah's day, the people of Israel would not listen to Hosea, Amos, or Isaiah; therefore, the Assyrians destroyed Israel in 722 BC. These sailors serve as a startling contrast to not only Jonah but also to Israel

because they turned from their idols, made vows, worshiped and resolved to serve the Lord. In their efforts to express their faith in God, they made sacrifices to the LORD. These pagans turned to faith in God, along with the repentant Jonah, and they learned that God expects obedience from everyone.

**(Jonah 1:17) But the LORD provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.**

God could have kept Jonah afloat and fed him morsels of food brought to him by seabirds or have saved him in many other ways. But God wanted to use Jonah's three days and three nights in the belly of a large fish as a demonstration that Jesus could use later to describe His dying and being in the tomb for three days before He rose from the dead — God saved both Jonah and Jesus from disaster, giving everyone good reasons to trust the true God. Only a miracle kept Jonah alive in the belly of the fish for three days. Only a miracle allowed Jesus to preach to those in spiritual prison after being buried in His tomb (see 1 Peter 3:19 — “By which also he went and preached unto the spirits in prison.” Only a miracle raised Jesus from the grave three days after his burial. Just as God preserves the baby in the mother's womb without air, God could easily preserve Jonah in the great fish and Jesus in the tomb without any need for either of them to have “natural” access to air.

## Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further

1. How did the sailors determine who was responsible for their calamity? Can you always learn the truth or will of God this way? What are some better ways to make decisions?
2. After the sailors asked him who he was, how did Jonah describe himself?
3. After the sailors learned who Jonah was and what he had done, how did they feel and what did they do eventually after they learned the truth about God?
4. Why do you think they asked Jonah what they should do? What did they do after Jonah told them what to do?
5. What are some of the ways the sailors appear to be morally superior to Jonah, even though they were pagans?

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