

# Jonah

Nineveh was northeast. Tarshish was west. When God called Jonah to preach repentance to the wicked Ninevites, the prophet knew that God's mercy might follow. He turned down the assignment and headed for Tarshish instead. But once God had dampened his spirits (by tossing him out of the boat and into the water) and demonstrated His protection (by moving him out of the water and into the fish), Jonah realized God was serious about His command! Nineveh must hear the word of the Lord, and so Jonah goes. But though the preaching is a success, the preacher comes away angry and discouraged, and must learn firsthand of God's compassion upon sinful men.

## INTRODUCTION

Jonah reveals the power of God in nature (1-2; 4) and the mercy of God in human affairs (3-4). The prophet learned that "salvation is of the Lord" (2:9), and God's gracious offer extends to all who repent and turn to Him. Jewish nationalism blinded God's covenant people to an understanding of His concern for the Gentiles. Jonah wanted God to show no mercy to the Ninevites, but he later learned how selfish and unmerciful his position was.

The name Jonah comes from *Yonah*, the Hebrew word for "dove."

## AUTHOR

The first verse introduces Jonah as "the son of Amittai." Nothing more would be known about him were it not for another reference to him in Second Kings 14:25, as a prophet in the reign of Jeroboam II of Israel. Under Jeroboam, the borders of Israel were expanded "according to the word of the Lord God of Israel, which He had spoken through His servant Jonah, the son of Amittai, the prophet who was from Gath Hepher."

Gath Hepher was three miles north of Nazareth in lower Galilee, making Jonah a prophet of the northern kingdom. The Pharisees were wrong when they said, "Search and look, for no prophet has arisen out of Galilee" (John 7:52), because Jonah was a Galilean. One Jewish tradition says that Jonah was the son of the widow of Zarephath whom Elijah raised from the dead (see 1 Kin. 17:8-24).

## DATE & SETTING

Jonah was a contemporary of Jeroboam II of Israel (782-753 b.c.) who ministered after the time of Elisha and just before the time of Amos and Hosea. Israel, under Jeroboam II was enjoying a period of resurgence and prosperity. Conditions looked promising after many bleak years, and nationalistic fervor was probably high. During these years, Assyria was in a period of mild decline. Weak rulers had ascended the throne, but Assyria remained a threat. By the time of Jonah, Assyrian cruelty had become legendary. Graphic accounts of their cruel treatment of captives have been found in ancient Assyrian records, especially from the ninth and seventh centuries b.c. The repentance of Nineveh probably occurred in the reign of Ashurdan III (773-755 b.c.). Two plagues (765 and 759 b.c.) and a solar eclipse (763 b.c.) may have prepared the people for Jonah's message of judgment.