MINOR PROPHETS BIBLE STUDY
THE BOOK OF JONAH

BACKGROUND: Jonah (dove) was the son of Amittai (truth) from Gath Hepher in Galilee (2 Kings 14:25). He prophesied during or shortly before the reign of Jeroboam II, the king of Israel. This makes it almost certain that the story of the book should be placed in the period of Assyrian weakness between the death of Adad-nirari III in 782 BC and the seizing of the Assyrian throne by Tiglath-pileser III in 745 BC. During this time, Assyrian was engaged in a life and death struggle with the mountain tribes of Urartu and its associates of Mannai and Madai in the north, who had been able to push their frontier to within less than a hundred miles of Nineveh. The awareness of their weakness and possible defeat could explain the readiness of Nineveh to accept Jonah’s message.

OCCASION AND PURPOSE: Until the 19th century, Jonah was regarded as history. Today, it is normally taken for granted that the historical truth of the book cannot be defended and that it is no more than a beautiful allegory or parable. The main argument against the historicity of the book is the alleged impossibility of Jonah’s surviving three days and three nights in the belly of the fish. Such a view, however, faces many insurmountable difficulties. For example, there is no evidence that any rabbi doubted its truth. Also, Jesus referred to the story of Jonah as something obviously historical (Matthew 12:38-41; Luke 11:29-30, 32). In addition, there are sufficient well-documented occurrences to show that a man could survive under the circumstances described in the Book of Jonah.

Jesus placed this miracle of Jonah’s survival alongside the even greater miracle of His own resurrection. What was the spiritual reason for so great a miracle? In spite of a widely held belief, Jonah was not sent to preach monotheism, the knowledge of the God of Israel, or even a higher ethic to the people of Nineveh. The repentance of the Ninevites was not as great a miracle as is often believed, for it did not involve any real change in their religion. The purpose of Jonah’s proclamation was to bring them to repentance. But the purpose of the book is to emphasize the essential teaching that the Gentiles should not be grudged God’s love, care and forgiveness. There is also the revelation to God’s people of His all-sovereign power and care. In Jonah’s day this had a special relevance to Israel over which the shadow of Assyria was falling and later to Judah as it faced destruction at the hands of Babylon. The Book of Jonah thus contains a picture of Christ’s resurrection and His mission to all nations!

ORGANIZATION:
1:1 – 2:10 The disobedient prophet
3:3 – 4:11 The obedient prophet