

The following is a rough transcript, not in its final form and may be updated.

## The Pouting Prophet

### Jonah 4:1-3

**Intro:** We have all heard of Doubting Thomas, the disciple who was incredulous when told that Jesus had risen from the dead. “Oh, I doubt that!” said Thomas. Maybe not in so many words but doubt the news he did; and this moniker has stuck with him ever since, even though he fully repented of his doubts. Today in our study, we won’t be looking at a doubting disciple but rather a pouting prophet. But, Jonah does more than just pout. Although he is a Hebrew, a member of God’s chosen people and a prophet chosen by and in service to the God of Israel; by his words, actions and attitudes, he shows signs of being a disciple of a more malevolent spiritual force.

So, after much wrangling, which involved a great storm, a great fish and on the face of it, a pretty great prayer of repentance, God finally convinced Jonah to do what He commissioned him to do in [1:2](#). Jonah arrives in Nineveh and begins to declare the specific message that God had given him to share with the inhabitants of that notoriously wicked city. Understand, Jonah is willingly risking life and limb to preach about God’s wrath and imminent judgment that’s about to fall on this city. Apparently, he’s convinced that God will protect him as he preaches and then God would visit the city with some form of cataclysmic destruction. This was the only logical outcome in Jonah’s mind as this aggressively belligerent Assyria represented an existential threat to the national security of Israel. The imminent destruction of Nineveh was exactly what Jonah wanted to happen and expected to happen.

But God had other plans. Despite the fact that Jonah’s message wasn’t very lengthy, intellectual or even eloquent, it was the Word of God and as such, it possessed the power to change men’s hearts and that’s precisely what it did in Nineveh. The people of Nineveh believed God ([3:5](#)) and that’s the first necessary step towards true repentance. But they didn’t stop there – they not only provided outward signs of repentance (fasting, sackcloth, sitting in ashes) but the king himself insisted that their outward sins be matched with turning from their evil ways (inward repentance). This wasn’t just for a small group of believers in Nineveh. It was for the whole city, from the least to the greatest! They were so intent on showing God their true repentance that

they even included their livestock in participating in it.

So, because Nineveh repented, God relented. God refrained from bringing the judgment of His just wrath against their sin because they turned from their evil ways and from the violence that was the predominant character of their society. The miracle of Jonah's survival inside the great fish is surpassed by the miraculous faith and repentance of an entire city, and a large one at that! The complete revival of such a large, localized population had never been witnessed or recorded in the history of the world before or since. But, God's Word had been declared and it had done its powerful work in Nineveh and the entire city had turned from sin to faith in the goodness of Jonah's God.

There's likely never been an example of God's dealings with men that could give more cause for rejoicing than the story of Jonah. The Book of Jonah is a story about God's mercy. There has been great mercy extended to Jonah. We saw God's mercy also extended to the pagan sailors on the ship going to Tarshish. And now, the greatest gift of mercy has been extended to Nineveh. Because the city repented, God postponed the judgment Jonah had declared.

If there had ever been a cause for rejoicing, certainly these 3 evidences of God's mercy should provide it. We would expect Jonah to be leaping with joy and thanksgiving. But that's not what happened. Instead, we find Jonah pouting, sulking and angry. In fact, he was just angry, he was violently angry. And worse yet, he was angry with God!

**1** – This is strange because normally the preacher would be pleased if some in the congregation repented. If the entire congregation repented, he would be ecstatic! But, there's something in this whole scenario that displeased Jonah. And it's not just strange; it's very strange because Jonah is very upset over the success of his own preaching.

We shouldn't overlook the intensity of Jonah's anger because the language in the original Hebrew is strong.

There's a play on words here in the original Hebrew that is both brilliant and tragic. It's seen in the use of the Hebrew root ra'ah that can have 3 possible meanings. It can refer to 1) something morally bad; 2) a bad thing that befalls someone (disaster/discomfort); or 3) to something that's considered to be bad (displeasing), either generally or because it's morally wrong and is

displeasing to people or to the Lord. All three senses of this Hebrew word are used between [3:10](#) and [4:1](#). The Ninevites' have turned from their evil (ra'ah), so the Lord turns from bringing on them the disaster (ra'ah) they deserve ([10](#)). You would hope that Jonah, who just received the lavish mercy and forgiveness of the Lord for his own evil ([ch2](#)), might break out in a prayer of thanksgiving. Instead, we see that the Lord's mercy is displeasing (ra'ah) to him and exceedingly so. Jonah considered it gravely wrong for the Lord to show such mercy and grace to such a wicked people. He was scandalized by the inclusiveness of God's mercy. (Youngblood).

So, Jonah is angry. He had obeyed God, doing what God wanted; but God hadn't done what Jonah wanted. Jonah had told the Ninevites that judgment was coming in 40 days, but it hadn't come. He felt betrayed. He felt that God had let him down by not destroying the city as he had predicted. Obviously, Jonah didn't have the slightest interest in the Ninevites. He should've been happy at their deliverance but instead; he was displeased that God had not wiped them from the face of the earth. If God had destroyed the city, he probably would have returned home delighted. What does Jonah do in his anger? To his credit, he has a bit of a prayer meeting in which he goes to God to voice his exceeding displeasure. It's here, in Jonah's prayer, that we begin to understand the reasons behind his previous actions as well as get a glimpse of the misunderstanding he has about God and the darkness that is still in his heart.

**2-3** – Now we begin to see for the first time why Jonah fled from the Lord and the commission He gave him in [ch1](#). It wasn't out of fear that the Assyrians would harm or kill him for his preaching. It was because he was afraid that his preaching would actually result in the Ninevites repenting and the Lord graciously forgiving this people. As Jonah begins to explain this, he reveals a shocking depth of self-centered blindness. In his prayer, he recites some of the most precious truths about the Lord's character that the Israelites have ever experienced as a people.

In fact, Jonah uses language from one of the darkest times of Israel's history: when they build a golden calf and bow down before it in worship ([Ex 32:1-6](#)). It's in that passage, when the Lord forgives His sinful people; that we first read that He is a God who relents from disaster ([Ex 32:12, 14](#)). In this same context, just 2 chapters later, when the Lord renews the covenant with Israel-you know, the one they had just broken-that we first hear that He

is a God who is merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth (Ex 34:6). Jonah's own undeserving, sinful countrymen had benefitted from this mercy and grace and yet, when the Lord shows this same mercy and grace to others, he's beside himself with an anger so deep, he wants to die! "If God's going to forgive people that I think are too wicked to deserve it, I don't want to live in such a world." Jonah's reaction to God's grace: "Over my dead body!"

In Jonah's anger towards God we see 3 significant things. 1<sup>st</sup>) He tried to justify himself in his own eyes and in the eyes of God. Meaning, he tries to justify his previous disobedience. "This is why I refused to go to Nineveh when you first called me; what is more, I was right in refusing." The truth is: we all do this. Things don't turn out like we wish, so we try to justify our disobedience. The problem with this is that, as humans, we're not capable of passing judgment on the appropriateness or inappropriateness of the outcome of our service to God, nor are we responsible for it. We are only responsible for obeying the whole will of God.

2<sup>nd</sup>) thing is a little harder to explain, though easy to see. In his anger, Jonah tried to turn God against God. Or to say it another way, he tried to quote God's word back to Him in his warped desire to show that he, Jonah, was right and that God was wrong (v2). "God, is that not what You have said? And if it is, why did You send me to Nineveh with a message You never intended to fulfill? Is it not true that I am the consistent one and You are in the wrong?"

This audacious accusation of Jonah's is frightening in itself; even more so because of what it parallels. What's the most infamous of all attempts to turn the Word of God against God? It would have to be Satan's use of Scripture in his temptation of Christ. Jesus rebuffed Satan's first temptation to turn stones into bread by quoting from Deut 8:3: "It is written: 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God'" (Mt 4:4). Satan retaliated by quoting some Scripture of his own. He took Jesus to a pinnacle of the temple and challenged him to throw himself down, saying, "It is written: 'He shall give His angels charge over you, and in their hands they shall bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone'" (Mt 4:6). This was a direct quotation of Ps 91:11-12, but Satan used it incorrectly, as Jesus points out. Jesus' reply shows that it's not possible to use one verse of Scripture to overthrow another, as the Bible clearly states,

“You shall not tempt the Lord your God.” (Mt 4:7; Deut 6:16).

Satan attempted to use the Word of God to justify evil and show that the path God had set for Jesus was not right. This is what Jonah was doing. So at no point is the diabolical nature of his rebellion more evident than here. In trying to justify himself and prove God wrong by Scripture, Jonah looks more like Satan’s disciple than God’s prophet. This should be a serious warning to all believers for we have our own tendencies to self-justification.

It is possible to study Scripture intently and even memorize passages and still be in opposition to God and His will. In fact, it may even be a way of disobeying Him. This was exactly the case with the Pharisees in Jesus’ day. These men knew the Law; they studied it at length and prided themselves in keeping even the smallest detail of it. The problem was; they only focused on passages that fit their agenda; that contributed their holier-than-thou attitude. In short, they only studied the Law to have biblical evidence on hand to justify their sinful behavior. With this as their spiritual focus; when the God of the Bible stood before them, they not only didn’t recognize Him, they killed Him.

Using God’s Word to tempt God is a danger which threatens all Christians. Any time the believer thinks he has God’s Word in his back pocket to be used as needed, he commits this sin. It’s the attitude of the “scholar” who dissects Scripture to use it against Scripture; of the theologian who distorts a text to construct some false doctrine, or of the simple Christian who only opens his Bible to find arguments against other Christians who don’t hold the same views as him, arguments that show how far superior his position is over theirs. It’s for good reason the Bible shows us that this attitude of Jonah is that of Satan. This should foster great caution in us as we read and use the Bible. It’s not a neutral book that you can read to pull arguments from. It’s an explosive power which must be handled with care. We will be judged according to the contents of God’s Word; not on how well we knew it but on how well we’ve responded to it and how well we’ve used it.

Now, this doesn’t mean that we should leave the Bible alone and not study it. We avoid the danger Jonah fell into by faithfully applying this formula: When we find ourselves reading the Bible to find verses and passages that justify our own behavior, we are wrong and are in danger. But, when we read the Bible and find verses that expose our sin and thus, draw us

increasingly closer to God, who will forgive our sin and cleanse us from all unrighteousness, then we're on the right track and will find blessing. Scripture is clear in teaching us that we're not righteous, that we have no means of justifying ourselves, that we have no possibility of disputing with God, and that only a gracious act of God can save us. If we stick to this truth, reading the Bible is useful and healthy and will produce fruit in our lives.

3<sup>rd</sup>) Jonah asked for death again. It's hard to understand the prophet's apparent death wish. When he had run from God and God had caught up to him in the storm, he thought it would be better to die than obey. He asked the sailors to throw him overboard. Now, having obeyed, he's still unhappy and says once more that he'd rather die and get it all over with. It's possible to obey God but to do so with such a level of unwillingness and anger that, in our minds, the obedience is no better than disobedience.

So, what is Jonah's problem?" He should've been happy; he's angry. He's just been instrumental in bringing the gift of salvation to thousands yet; he prefers death. He claims to be aware of God's grace and mercy, which he himself had experienced; but he resents God for it and says that he would've preferred wrath to fall on Nineveh.

One thing wrong with Jonah is: he's still not reconciled to the will of God. He's been opposed to God's will from the beginning and ran away because of his opposition. God pursued him and had brought him to the point of obedience. He had even experienced the marvels of God's grace while in the belly of the great fish and had repented of his sin with one of the most moving prayers in all Scripture. Yet, in spite of all this, his attitude hadn't changed. He was still unwilling to see the people of Nineveh saved, and he resented the God of mercy for having saved them.

Christians often act the same, even when we're apparently obeying God. We're doing what we think we should do, living the life we think a Christian should live. But secretly we're unhappy and angry with God for requiring this from us. This is the reason many Christians look and act miserable most of the time.

Second, Jonah had forgotten God's mercy to him. How could Jonah have forgotten it so quickly? It was but a few days before this that he was up to

his eyeballs in pre-chewed fish food. He had renounced God. It would've only been right for God had renounced him. But God showed him great mercy in bringing him to repentance, in saving him and recommissioning him to preach in Nineveh. But there was that long journey across the desert, and man's memory is short. Because Jonah had forgotten God's mercy, he was ill-prepared to appreciate it when God showed the same mercy to others.

We must remember this when we find ourselves wondering, somewhat regretfully, why God does not judge someone else for his sin. When we do that—as we all do—we are also forgetting that we were once where that other person is now and that we wouldn't be where we are now if it were not for God's great mercy to us.

Third, Jonah was angry because he didn't know God as well as he thought he did. No doubt he was proud of his knowledge of God. He was a Jew, after all, and the Jews had received an accurate revelation of God which the pagans didn't have; they had the Law and the record of God's dealings with man in history. Plus, Jonah was a prophet—not just any Jew, but one who'd studied the Law, who'd been commissioned directly by God and given special revelations by Him. If anybody knew God, it was Jonah! But did he? He knew something of God, but he did not know God well enough to grieve over sin as God grieves over it or to rejoice at the repentance of the sinner. No, Jonah was more like the older son of Christ's parable, who sulked while the father celebrated and felt cheated by the prodigal's return.

Today, as Christians living in this crazy world, we sometimes find ourselves wishing that the Lord would return, usher in the final judgment, and escort us, His people, into heaven. We're grieved when others mock our belief in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Coming. We just wish Jesus would come. We don't understand His delay. That's because we don't understand God well enough. Peter knew folks who thought like this and he wrote an explanation to them in his 2<sup>nd</sup> epistle (3:3-4,8-9).

Peter explains the delay of God's judgment by God's mercy, saying that Jesus' return is delayed so that all whom God desires to call to faith in Him might be born, have the gospel preached to them, and believe. Aren't you glad that Jesus didn't return before you were born and believed in Him? Then rejoice that His delay makes it possible for salvation to come to

countless others. God is a God of judgment. But He's also a God of mercy. We need to know Him as that. Do you? Would you like to?

We have a tendency to count the days but God is counting souls and He will not return until everyone who is open to His grace has had the opportunity to experienced His grace. 😊