

# (Jonah) Sour Grapes

by John Vissers

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*Jonah's disappointment with God reveals a deeper issue of truncated theology, where we make God conform to our smug prejudices and turn God's word against God to justify our own actions and attitudes.*

**Duration:** 39:06

**Scripture:** Jonah 4:1

**Topics:** "Jonah", "God's Mercy", "Disappointment with God"

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## Description

John Vissers explores Jonah's profound disappointment with God after the repentance of Nineveh, highlighting Jonah's anger and resentment towards God's mercy. Despite being a prophet who experienced God's grace, Jonah struggles with the reality that God chose to spare the Ninevites, leading him to question God's fairness and withdraw from his mission. Vissers emphasizes the contrast between Jonah's self-centeredness and God's compassion, urging listeners to reflect on their own responses to God's unexpected actions. The sermon concludes with a call to embrace God's grace and celebrate His mercy rather than succumbing to bitterness and disappointment.

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## Transcript

Our reading tonight is from the book of Jonah, chapter 4, verses 1 to 9, as we continue in our study, and I would invite you to turn there at this time. Jonah, chapter 4, verses 1 to 9. Starting to read then at verse 1 of the fourth chapter. But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry.

He prayed to the Lord, O Lord, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. Now, O Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.

But the Lord replied, Have you any right to be angry? Jonah went out and sat down at a place east of the city. And there he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade and waited to see what would happen to the city. Then the Lord provided a vine and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head, to ease his discomfort.

And Jonah was very happy about the vine. But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the vine so that it withered. When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah's head so that he grew faint.

He wanted to die and said, It would be better for me to die than to live. But God said to Jonah, Do you have a right to be angry about the vine? I do, he said. I am angry enough to die.

May God bless this reading of his word to us this evening. Let's bow together in prayer, shall we? Let your gospel come now, O Lord, not simply with words but also with power, with full assurance, and with deep conviction. Through our Lord Jesus Christ we pray.

Amen. The book of Jonah ends on a sour note, really a very sour note. It's really a very remarkable, or rather remarkable conclusion to an incredible story.

And let's just be reminded about what has happened. Think about what has happened throughout this book. A Jewish prophet named Jonah received a commission to go to Nineveh to preach the Lord's message there.

In receiving that message, he realized that he didn't want to go, and so he headed in the opposite direction. He boarded a ship for Tarshish. On the way, however, the Lord intervened through the crack of thunder, through the wind, through a storm that caused and created havoc in the seas.

The boat was in danger of going down, and so Jonah was tossed overboard. And into the sea he went, and there he was swallowed by a great fish. And after three days, and after three nights, and after a lot of soil searching, Jonah's finally spit up on the beach.

And he decides at that point that it's probably better to begin to see things God's way. And so when the Lord asks him now a second time to go to Nineveh to preach the Lord's message there of judgment, he goes. He goes to Nineveh.

He obeys the commission. And the response to Jonah's mission to Nineveh, as we saw last week, was really very extraordinary. The people of Nineveh believed God.

They repented of their sins. They prayed for mercy, including the king, including the nobles who together issued a public decree that there should be fasting and that there should be prayer. And at the end of chapter 3, we see that God had compassion on them, and the threatened destruction of the city was averted.

Now tonight we come to Jonah's response to all of this. And what was Jonah's response? Well, one can imagine a series of responses that might indeed have been possible. One could imagine, for example, Jonah's delight at the success of the mission which he had undertaken.

You remember how difficult this mission was. The city was large. He needed a very definite strategy to reach the city.

He was a foreigner. He had a difficult message to proclaim. And so he might have responded with delight when he saw that he was successful in the mission.

Or one could imagine Jonah's gratitude for the change which was so evident in the city. I mean, here was a city caught up with crime and violence, a city in decline, a city standing under the judgment of God. And here it was transformed into a place of peace and a place of prayer.

And so one could imagine that Jonah would have been grateful. One could imagine Jonah's relief. I mean, after all, he was sent into this city to preach a message of judgment that in 40 days the city would be

destroyed, and then in response to that message the people repent and the city's not going to be destroyed.

Jonah's relieved that not only has he delivered the message effectively and successfully, but the response has come so that there will not be any destruction. Or one might even imagine Jonah's joy at the salvation of the people of Nineveh. I mean, after all, Jonah was a prophet.

He was in the preaching business, and what should thrill his heart more than to see the people responding to the message that he brings? But as our text indicates this evening, Jonah responded in none of these ways. Jonah was angry with God. And Jonah resents what has happened.

And Jonah finds that the time fuse does not work on the prophetic bomb that he's planted in Nineveh. I mean, he went to Nineveh. He brought the message.

He expected that within 40 days the judgment would come, that the city would be destroyed, but it doesn't turn out that way. There's an interesting wordplay in the text here that plays on the Hebrew word for bad, and it kind of runs like this, that Jonah believes that the bad behavior of the Ninevite should lead to a bad end, but instead he's the one who ends up feeling badly about the whole situation. Jonah's disappointment with God is palpable.

Things have not turned out as he had hoped, as he had planned, and it proves to him that, in fact, he was right all along in running from God, as he did at the beginning of this story in Jonah chapter 1. Sour grapes. And so I want to suggest to you this evening that chapter 4, this concluding chapter in the book of Jonah, provides us with two remarkably different responses to the situation in Nineveh, Jonah's anger and God's compassion. And tonight what we're going to do is focus on the first, that is, Jonah's response to the whole situation, and then next Sunday evening as a kind of concluding postscript to this series in the book of Jonah and in preparation for the Lord's Supper, we'll look at the character of God's compassion as it's revealed to us in this chapter, chapter 4 of the book of Jonah, and we'll look at the theme of a wideness in God's mercy.

But tonight let's focus, let's concentrate, let's consider Jonah's response and try to understand what it means, what we can learn from it as Christians, as people seeking to live in obedience to Christ in our day. Now the first thing I want us to notice is that Jonah is disappointed with God. And this comes out very clearly in verses 1 to 4. Chapter 4 opens with a very clear statement about Jonah's psychological disposition and about his emotional condition.

He's greatly displeased, it says, and he became angry. Jonah's anger burns deeply within him to the point that he complains bitterly against God. His disappointment with God is so deep, so profound, so disturbing, that in fact we read in verse 3 that he feels it would be better for his life to be taken away.

It is better for me to die than to live. He can't stand it anymore. He wants simply to die.

Now Jonah's angry at God. Why? Jonah is angry at God because God has shown compassion to the city of Nineveh. Jonah is angry at God because God has shown mercy to the people of Nineveh.

Jonah is angry with God because God did not follow through on the threatened judgment that was to come upon Nineveh. God did, in fact, what Jonah was afraid God might do all along, that is, he might save the people of Nineveh. And that's the reason, of course, that Jonah ran from God in the first place.

That's the reason he ran from the call of God in Jonah 1, verses 1 and 2, in the opening part of this book. He knew that God was gracious. He knew that God was slow to anger.

He knew that God was abounding in love. He knew that God, the God of Israel, was a God who would relent from sending calamity in the face of repentance, in the face of faith. And he knew that God would act exactly like God acted.

And even though Jonah had witnessed the mercy of God to the heathen sailors in chapter 1 when they were saved and when they came to faith, and even though Jonah had experienced the mercy of God himself in chapter 2 in the midst of his own despair, facing death itself, having been rescued from the clutches of death, even though he's seen the mercy of God at work, even though he knows the character of God, even though he's experienced the grace of God in his own life, he cannot abide the fact that God saves the people of Nineveh in chapter 3. And he lets God know about it in no uncertain terms at the beginning of chapter 4. Now, one might look at Jonah's anger. And one might say that perhaps he's really upset because he's been discredited as a prophet. I mean, after all, he's brought this message of imminent judgment to Nineveh.

The people have repented. The judgment is averted. In fact, the word that Jonah brings does not come to pass.

And so he could be upset because his prophetic role has been undermined. But I think if you look at the text more carefully, you'll see that that's not really the problem. Because there's something more profound.

There's something deeper going on in Jonah's soul at this point. Jonah is angry, I want to suggest to you, because God did not measure up to Jonah's theology. He thought God should have destroyed the Ninevites.

After all, they deserved it. They were evil. They were engaged in all of this violent and evil activity.

And so they deserved to die. And he thought that's what God ought to do. But underlying Jonah's anger is his pious prejudice and his narrow-minded nationalism.

Because God, you see, in Jonah's mind had chosen Israel. Israel was God's people. Israel was the chosen people of God.

And that's all that mattered. The people of Nineveh were beyond the pale. They were unclean heathens whom God ought not to embrace.

Jonah didn't want to go there in the first place. And now that these people have been saved, Jonah's nose is out of joint. On the basis of what Jonah knew of God, of course he had every reason to suspect that things would turn out exactly as they did, but Jonah doesn't quite get it.

His idea of God is somehow limited. If ever there was a case for rejoicing, surely it's the story of God's dealings with Nineveh. I mean, one should think that Jonah would be weeping with tears of joy and thanksgiving for the way in which God worked among the people of Nineveh and the way in which his preaching was used by God to avert disaster.

But what does Jonah do? He yells at God. He complains bitterly against God, and he tries to justify his earlier decision to run away from God. It's almost as if Jonah is curling up here in a kind of fetal position

and telling God that he really wants to die because, in fact, things have turned out exactly as he knew they would turn out all along.

In short, Jonah is not reconciled to the will of God. He's forgotten God's mercy to him, and he dares to turn God's word against God to justify his own disobedience. A number of years ago, when I was on summer holidays, I took Scott Peck's book with me, *The Road Less Traveled*.

I mentioned Scott Peck's other book this morning in *The Message, The People of the Lie*. Scott Peck began to write that book when he was not a Christian. He later became a Christian.

But he begins that book with three blunt words, a three-word, very blunt sentence. It begins with this sentence, *Life is difficult*. And I suggest to you that if the book of Jonah could be reduced to a single sentence, at least from Jonah's perspective, that's what it would be.

Life is difficult, and to that Jonah might add, God is not fair. This past week, I was reading a book that I had read a few years earlier. I was dipping into it again.

It's by Philip Yancey. It's called *Disappointment with God*. And it deals with the reality of what do you do when you feel that God has let you down, when you're disappointed by circumstances, when you're disappointed by experiences, when somehow the experience of your life does not measure up to the understanding that you have of God and the way that you think God ought to work in your life.

Sometimes things don't just work out the way we expect. We plan and we hope for something that never happens, or something that we least expect blindsides us, or God answers our prayers. But God does so in a way that not only we don't expect, but quite frankly, we don't like.

And when this happens, I suggest to you that we often do exactly what Jonah did. First, we get angry with God. We get angry at God.

We express that anger often in our relationships with others, perhaps with a spouse, perhaps with our family, with our children, with our parents, with our friends. We get angry at the world, and like Jonah, we kind of want to curl up in a kind of fetal position and just withdraw from the world. And secondly, we try to justify ourselves as Jonah did.

I mean, we can always justify our actions and our attitudes when things don't work out the way that we want. Jonah tried to justify his earlier disobedience. And all of us, I think, if we're honest with ourselves, are wonderful at rationalizing and justifying our actions in the face of things that don't work out the way that we want.

We pick up our marbles and we go home. We run from God, and we can give every good reason as to why we are doing so. And then thirdly, we turn God's word against God.

Notice what Jonah does here. More often than not, our disappointment with God comes from a kind of truncated theology. God disappoints us when our real experience does not measure our imagined idea of God.

God was bigger and different than Jonah's limited understanding. And it's often the same with us. We get mad at God when God doesn't do what we want.

We make God conform to our smug prejudices and our empty traditionalisms and our exclusive solidarity. And we even make it worse by turning God's word against God and trying to argue with God and demonstrate to God that God ought to be different than the way God is. We use the Bible the same way that the devil used Scripture to tempt Jesus.

This is the way that James Boyce puts it in his little book on Jonah and I think it's very apt. He says, Jonah tried to turn God against God. Or to put the same thing in other language, 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.

This is what he was doing in verse 2, for he was probably thinking of Exodus 34, 6 and 7, as he argued. The verses in Exodus say, And the Lord passed before Moses and proclaimed, The Lord of the Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin. Now, said Jonah, is that or is that not what you have said? And if it is what you have said, why did you send me to Nineveh with a message that you never intended to fulfill? Is it not true that I, Jonah, am consistent? I am the consistent one and that you, God, are two-faced and wrong.

The voice goes on, Each reader of the book of Jonah should find this frightening. It is frightening in itself and it is also frightening because of its parallels. What is the most infamous of all attempts to turn the word of God against God? It is Satan's attempt to quote scripture in his temptation of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus had replied to Satan's first temptation to turn stones into bread by quoting Deuteronomy 8.3. It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God. But Satan immediately retaliated by quoting some scripture of his own. He took Jesus to a pinnacle of the temple and challenged him to throw himself over, saying, It is written, He shall give his angels charge concerning thee.

And in their hands they shall bear thee up lest any time thou dash thy foot against a stone. It was a quotation of Psalm 91 but he used it wrongly as Jesus next pointed out. Jesus replied that it is not possible to use one verse of scripture to overthrow another.

And the Bible clearly says, Thou shalt not put the Lord by God to the test. Satan was using the Bible, the very word of God, to justify evil and to show the course that God had set for himself was not right. And this is what Jonah was doing.

So at no point is the diabolical nature of his rebellion more evident than here. In seeking to justify himself and prove God wrong by scripture, Jonah took his place as Satan's own spiritual progeny. You see, the danger is always there for all of us as believers to try to argue with God and to try to argue against God and to turn God's word against God in an effort to try to justify our own actions and our own attitudes.

And then Jonah, of course, ends in depression and in despair. And that's often how it is with us as well. Some of us may be experiencing those feelings tonight, anger at God, self-justification, desire to escape.

They are symptoms of someone who is not at peace with God in the depths of their souls. But secondly, notice then Jonah's decisive withdrawal from Nineveh in verse 5. Verse 5, Jonah went out and he sat down at a place east of the city and there he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade and waited to see what would happen to the city. Now I haven't studied a lot of psychology.

I took some undergraduate psychology and some graduate psychology when I was studying for the ministry and I've read a bit since then. It seems to me, however, that Jonah here is a classic passive-aggressive personality. I mean, his anger and his aggression are manifested in his withdrawal from the situation.

He picks up his marbles and he goes home. Jonah made his point with God and now he quits Nineveh assuming that his mission is over. And what does he do? He builds a little shelter to protect himself.

And he becomes now a spectator. He withdraws from the city and he goes to the east side of the city and he builds a shelter. He no longer wants to be an actor in the unfolding of this drama and so he sits there and likely he's waiting for the city to be destroyed.

I mean, surely he must be thinking to himself that God has been persuaded by his argument, by the power of his argument, by the depth of his disappointment. I mean, surely God can see that Jonah's case is airtight here and that God should in fact go through with the imminent judgment and destruction of Nineveh. As one of the commentators puts it, this peevish prophet still harbors some hope that the city might be destroyed.

And so he goes out of the city and he sits there and he waits for it to happen. A few years ago there was a movie that came out called Leap of Faith. I don't know if any of you saw it.

It was a movie which starred Steve Martin, comedian Steve Martin. It is not, in my humble opinion, the greatest of movies and it's not the greatest, the greatest acting by Steve Martin. In fact, some would say that they've never seen Steve Martin particularly as a great actor.

But nevertheless, it's an interesting little movie. Martin plays the character of a fellow named Jonas Nightingale. Notice the name.

A two-bit hustler who's become a rather successful but eccentric evangelist and a fraudulent faith healer. And as long as Jonas Nightingale is in charge, as long as he's in control of what he does, things run smoothly. He puts on a great show.

He goes from town to town. He puts on this great show. People come and he makes lots of money.

But near the end of the movie, something very strange happens. A teenage boy with whom he's had some association, he's the younger brother of a woman who plays a central role in the story. That teenage boy comes one evening to Jonas Nightingale's meeting.

And he slowly gets up out of his wheelchair and he walks to the front of the auditorium. He begins to walk. And without any explanation and to the astonishment of everyone present, including Jonas Nightingale, this young man is truly healed.

He truly begins to walk again. And Jonas Nightingale is scared. It scares him.

And what does he do? He runs. You see, it was all right. It was okay as long as he was in control and things were being manipulated according to his plan and the way that he wanted.

But when God really intervened, when God really worked, and when this young boy began to walk, he couldn't handle it anymore. And so he runs in panic. And I want to suggest to you that's something like what is going on here in Jonah.

And it's something that often happens in our own lives. Most of us are happy to serve God on our own terms. As long as God fits into our ideology, as long as God fits into our theology, as long as God does what we want, as long as God fits into our lives.

But should God require more of us than we are willing to give? Or should God surprise us by doing something we don't expect? Or should God challenge our parochial worldview and our narrow-minded nationalism? Or should God save someone? Heaven forbid that we don't think that God really deserves to be saved. Or should God indicate to us that He is indeed the sovereign Lord of our lives, then like Jonah, many of us can't handle it anymore. And we get mad, we get angry at God, and we run.

You see, we don't want to have anything to do with a God, many of us, that we can't manipulate, that we can't control, that we can't make conform to what we really want out of life. A God who does things our way, but the God of the Bible and the God of the book of Jonah and the God who worked in Jonah's life and the God who saved the people of Nineveh is the sovereign Lord who does what He wills and who's far greater than our petty parochial view of who He might be. And then thirdly and finally, notice Jonah's discontent under the unpredictable plant in verses six to nine.

This is a phrase I've borrowed from Eugene Peterson who's written a book on Jonah called Under the Unpredictable Plant. While Jonah's waiting for the city to be destroyed, the Lord provides a vine and He makes it grow up over Jonah to give Jonah shade and shelter. And the text says that Jonah was very happy about this.

Now the interesting thing is that this is the first time in the entire book, in the last chapter, finally Jonah gets happy. And what does he get happy about? He gets happy about this little vine that grows up over his shelter to give him shade from the scorching heat and the sun. And perhaps Jonah's happy because he's comfortable.

Perhaps he's happy because he thinks maybe God, after all, is going to have some mercy on him. Perhaps Jonah thought that God had finally seen it, Jonah's way. But Jonah's portrayed here in these verses as being very petty.

As being very self-centered. As having turned in upon himself. As really being childish.

And even the happiness seems somehow like a childish happiness. And, in fact, it doesn't last very long. Because the next day, God sends a wind which chewed the vine until it withered.

When the sun rose, it says, God provided, notice God provided a scorching wind. And the sun blazed on Jonah's head so that he grew faint. And now what happens? Jonah's anger surfaces again.

This time, he's angry about the fact that this vine was eaten away. I mean, earlier in verse 3, he was angry at God because God had saved the people of Nineveh. And now he's angry because this vine that was given for his shade is taken away.

God points out to Jonah that Jonah is more concerned about that vine than he is about the people of Nineveh. You see what's happened? His whole world has shrunk so small that he's angry enough to die because a little bit of comfort has been taken away from him. And the last picture we have of Jonah in this book is of a petty prophet who's caught up in his own little world of despair, the ultimate end of those who run from God.

And I suggest to you that the same thing happens when we let our disappointment with God run wild. Unresolved anger burns deeply within us until it infects every part of our lives, turning us into peevish and petty people. Jonah's anger and refusal to accept the will of God has led him now into the ultimate dead end of despair.

And the bitterness and the jealousy and the anger have festered to the point that he can no longer function as a human being, let alone as a person of faith, let alone as a prophet called by God. There's a remarkable parallel to this story in the New Testament in the parable of the prodigal son in Luke chapter 15. All of you know the parable well.

After welcoming back his prodigal son, the father throws a party to celebrate. And when the older brother comes home and sees what is happening, the text says, and I quote, he refused, he became angry rather, and he refused to go in. He became angry and he refused to go in.

And even when the father came out, you remember, to plead with him, to tell him that everything that he had belonged to him, still he would not come in. He refused to join in the celebration. The older brother was angry and jealous and bitter, and rather than rejoicing in the salvation of his younger brother, he was preoccupied with the pettiness of his own jealousies and his own bitterness and his own world.

And the parable ends precisely like the book of Jonah ends. The parable ends with the older brother outside of the house refusing to go in to the party. And the book of Jonah ends with Jonah outside of the city, angry at God, caught up in his own despair, refusing to join in the joy and the celebration that the people of Nineveh have been saved.

The tragedy is, of course, that many of us as believers get caught up in that kind of a world. God does not want us to respond like the older brother or like Jonah to his saving grace, to his saving work, to his sovereign work in the world and the lives of other people. Instead, he invites us to celebrate.

He invites us to rejoice. He invites us to open our eyes and to see who he really is and what he wants to do in the world to increase our vision, to see what God, by his sovereign grace, is doing. Perhaps in our flight from God tonight, some of us find ourselves closed in with our world closed in around us, standing outside the house of celebration, standing outside the city of salvation, maybe sitting under an unpredictable plant.

God is beckoning you like God beckoned to Jonah and like God beckoned to the older brother in that parable to come in, to come home, to come into the house, to come into the city and to turn the sour grapes of disappointment into the wine of salvation and joy. Let us pray. Father, we acknowledge before you tonight that sometimes we can get caught up in our own worlds, in our own lives, in the pettiness of our own concerns and lose sight of your sovereign working in the world.

We confess tonight that Jonah lurks in all of our hearts, whimpering his insidious message of smug prejudice and empty traditionalism and exclusive solidarity. Father, help us to hear your beckoning voice tonight so that we might truly experience the joy and the celebration which is there for those who come and do not run from you but run to you. In Christ's name we pray.

Amen.

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