**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**JONAH-002. LYING VANITIES by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"They that observe lying vanities forsake their own mercy."*

*Jonah 2:8*

Jonah's refusal to obey the divine command to go to Nineveh and cry against it is best taken, not as prosaic history, but as a poetical representation of Israel's failure to obey the divine call of witnessing for God. In like manner, his being cast into the sea and swallowed by the great fish, is a poetic reproduction, for homiletical purposes, of Israel's sufferings at the hands of the heathen whom it had failed to warn. The song which is put into Jonah's mouth when in the fish's belly, of which our text is a fragment, represents the result on the part of the nation of these hard experiences. Lying vanities mean idols, and their own mercy means God. The text is a brief, pregnant utterance of the great truth which had been forced home to Israel by sufferings and exile, that to turn from Jehovah to false gods was to turn from the sure source of tender care to lies and emptiness. That is but one case of the wider truth that an ungodly life is the acme of stupidity, a tragic mistake, as well as a great sin.

In confirmation and enforcement of our text we may consider:--

**I. The illusory vanity of the objects pursued.**

The Old Testament tone of reference to idols is one of bitter contempt. Its rigid monotheism was intensified and embittered by the universal prevalence of idolatry; and there is a certain hardness in its tone in reference to the gods of the nations round about, which has little room for pity, and finds expression in such names as those of our text--vanities, lies, nothingness, and the like. To the Jew, encompassed on all sides by idol-worshippers, the alternative was vehement indignation or entire surrender. The Mohammedan in British India exhibits much the same attitude to Vishnu and Siva as the Jew did to Baal and Ashtoreth. It is easy to be tolerant of dead gods, but it becomes treason to Jehovah to parley with them when they are alive.

But the point which we desire to insist upon here is somewhat wider than the vanity of idols. It is the emptiness of all objects of human pursuit apart from God. These last three words need to be made very prominent; for in itself every creature of God is good, and the emptiness does not inhere in themselves, but first appears when they are set in His place. He, and only He, can, and does, satisfy the whole nature--is authority for the will, peace for the conscience, love for the heart, light for the understanding, rest for all seeking. He, and He alone, can fill the past with the light in which is no regret, the present with a satisfaction rounded and complete, the future with a hope certain as experience, to which we shall ever approximate, and which we can never exhaust and outgrow. Any, or all, the other objects of human endeavour may be won, and yet we may be miserable. The inadequacy of all these ought to be pressed home upon us more than it is, not only by their limitations whilst they last, but by the transiency of them all. The fashion of this world passeth away, as the Apostle John puts it, in a forcible expression which likens all this frame of things to a panorama being unwound from one roller and on to another. The painted screen is but paint at the best, and is in perpetual motion, which is not arrested by the vain clutches of hands that would fain stop the irresistible and tragic gliding past.

These vanities are lying vanities. There is only one aim of life which, being pursued and attained, fulfils the promises by which it drew man after it. It is a bald commonplace, reiterated not only by preachers but by moralists of every kind, and confirmed by universal experience, that a hope fulfilled is a hope disappointed. There is only one thing more tragic than a life which has failed in its aims, and it is a life which has perfectly succeeded in them, and has found that what promised to be bread turns to ashes. The word of promise may be kept to the ear, but is always broken to the hope. Many a millionaire loses the power to enjoy his millions by the very process by which he gains them. The old Jewish thinker was wise not only in taking as the summing up of all worldly pursuits the sad sentence, All is vanity, but in putting it into the lips of a king who had won all he sought. The sorceress draws us within her charmed circle by lying words and illusory charms, and when she has so secured the captives, her mask is thrown off and her native hideousness displayed.

**II. The hard service which lying vanities require.**

The phrase in our text is a quotation, slightly altered, from Psalm xxxi. 6: I hate them that regard lying vanities; but I trust in the Lord. The alteration in the form of the verb as it occurs in Jonah expresses the intensity of regard, and gives the picture of watching with anxious solicitude, as the eyes of a servant turned to his master, or those of a dog to its owner. The world is a very hard master, and requires from its servants the concentration of thought, heart, and effort. We need only recall the thousand sermons devoted to the enforcement of the gospel of getting on, which prosperous worldlings are continually preaching. A chorus of voices on every side of us is dinning into the ears of every young man and woman the necessity for success in life's struggle of taking for a motto, This one thing I do. How many a man is there, who in the race after wealth or fame, has flung away aspirations, visions of noble, truthful love to life, and a hundred other precious things? Browning tells a hideous story of a mother flinging, one after another, her infants to the wolves as she urged her sledge over the snowy plain. No less hideous, and still more maiming, are the surrenders that men make when once their hearts have been filled with the foolish ambitions of worldly success. Let us fix it in our minds, that nothing that time and sense can give is worth the price that it exacts.

It is only heaven that can be had for the asking;

It is only God that is given away.

All sin is slavery. Its yoke presses painfully on the neck, and its burden is heavy indeed, and the rest which it promises never comes.

**III. The self-inflicted loss.**

Our text suggests that there are two ways by which we may learn the folly of a godless life--One, the consideration of what it turns to, the other, the thought of what it departs from.

They forsake their own Mercy, that is God. The phrase is here almost equivalent to His name; and it carries the blessed thought that He has entered into relations with every soul, so that each man of us--even if he have turned to lying vanities--can still call Him, my own Mercy. He is ours; more our own than is anything without us. He is ours, because we are made for Him, and He is all for us. He is ours by His love, and by His gift of Himself in the Son of His love. He is ours; if we take Him for ours by an inward communication of Himself to us in the innermost depths of our being. He becomes the Master-Light of all our seeing. In the mysterious inwardness of mutual possession, the soul which has given itself to God and possesses Him, has not only communion, but may even venture to claim as its own the deeper and more mysterious union with God. Those multiform mercies, which endure for ever, and speed on their manifold errands into every remotest region of His universe, gather themselves together, as the diffused lights of some nebulæ £oncentrate themselves into a sun. That sun, like the star that led the wise men from the East, and finally stood over one poor house in an obscure village, will shine lambent above, and will pass into, the humblest heart that opens for it. They who can say, as we all can if we will, My God, can never want.

And if we turn to the alternative in our text, and consider who they are to whom we turn when we turn from God, there should be nothing more needed to drive home the wholesome conviction of the folly of the wisest, who deliberately prefers shadow to substance, lying vanities to the one true and only reality. I beseech you to take that which is your own, and which no man can take from you. Weigh in the scales of conscience, and in the light of the deepest necessities of your nature, the whole pile of those emptinesses that have been telling you lies ever since you listened to them; and place in the other scale the mercy of God, and the Christ who brings it to you, and decide which is the weightier, and which it becomes you to take for your pattern for ever.