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

**AMOS-005. RIPE FOR GATHERING by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1. Thus hath the Lord God shewed unto me: and behold a basket of summer fruit. 2. And He said, Amos, what seest thou? And I said, A basket of summer fruit. Then said the Lord unto me, The end is come upon My people of Israel; I will not again pass by them any more. 3. And the songs of the temple shall be howlings in that day, saith the Lord God: there shall be many dead bodies in every place; they shall cast them forth with silence. 4. Hear this, O ye that swallow up the needy, even to make the poor of the land to fail. 5. Saying, When will the new moon be gone, that we may sell corn? and the sabbath, that we may set forth wheat, making the ephah small, and the shekel great, and falsifying the balances by deceit? 6. That we may buy the poor for silver, and the needy for a pair of shoes; yea, and sell the refuse of the wheat? 7. The Lord hath sworn by the excellency of Jacob, Surely I will never forget any of their works. 8. Shall not the land tremble for this, and every one mourn that dwelleth therein? and it shall rise up wholly as a flood; and it shall be cast out and drowned, as by the flood of Egypt. 9. And it shall come to pass in that day, saith the Lord God, that I will cause the sun to go down at noon, and I will darken the earth in the clear day: 10. And I w ill turn your feasts into mourning, and all your songs into lamentation; and I will bring up sackcloth upon all loins, and baldness upon every head; and I will make it as the mourning of an only son, and the end thereof as a bitter day. 11. Behold, the days come, saith the Lord God, that I will send a famine in the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord: 12. And they shall wander from sea to sea, and from the north even to the east, they shall run to and fro to seek the word of the Lord, and shall not find it. 13. In that day shall the fair virgins and young men faint for thirst. 14. They that swear by the sin of Samaria, and say, Thy God, O Dan, liveth: and, The manner of Beer-sheba liveth; even they shall fall, and never rise up again."*

*Amos 8:1-14*

There are three visions in the former chapter, each beginning as verse 1. This one is therefore intended to be taken as the continuation of these, and it is in substance a repetition of the third, only with more detail and emphasis. An insolent attempt, by the priest of Beth-el, to silence the Prophet, and the fiery answer which he got for his pains, come between. The stream of Amos's prophecy flows on, uninterrupted by the boulder which had tried to dam it up. Some courage was needed to treat Amaziah and his blasphemous bluster as a mere parenthesis.

We have first to note the vision and its interpretation. It is such as a countryman, a dresser of sycamore trees would naturally have. Experience supplies forms and material for the imagination, and moulds into which God-given revelations run. The point of the vision is rather obscured by the rendering summer fruit. Ripe fruit would be better, since the emblem represents the Northern Kingdom as ripe for the dreadful ingathering of judgment. The word for this (qayits) and that for the end (qets) are alike in sound, but the play of words cannot be reproduced, except by some clumsy device, such as the end ripens or the time of ripeness comes. The figure is frequent in other prophecies of judgment, as, for instance, in Revelation 14:14-20.

Observe the repetition, from the preceding vision, of I will not pass by them any more. The first two visions had threatened judgments, which had been averted by the Prophet's intercession; but the third, and now the fourth, declare that the time for prolonged impunity is passed. Just as the mellow ripeness of the fruit fixes the time of gathering it, so there comes a stage in national and individual corruption, when there is nothing to be done but to smite. That period is not reached because God changes, but because men get deeper in sin. Because the harvest is ripe, the long-delayed command, Put in thy sickle is given to the angel of judgment, and the clusters of those black grapes, whose juice in the wine-press of the wrath of God is blood, are cut down and cast in. It is a solemn lesson, applying to each soul as well as to communities. By neglect of God's voice, and persistence in our own evil ways, we can make ourselves such that we are ripe for judgment, and can compel long-suffering to strike. Which are we ripening for--the harvest when the wheat shall be gathered into Christ's barns, or that when the tares shall be bound in bundles for burning?

The tragedy of that fruit-gathering is described with extraordinary grimness and force in the abrupt language of verse 3. The merry songs sung in the palace (this rendering seems more appropriate here than temple) will be broken off, and the singers voices will quaver into shrill shrieks, so suddenly will the judgment be. Then comes a picture as abrupt in its condensed terribleness as anything in Tacitus--Many the corpses; everywhere they fling them; hush! We see the ghastly masses of dead (corpse is in the singular, as if a collective noun), so numerous that no burial-places could hold them; and no ceremonial attended them, but they were rudely flung anywhere by anybody (no nominative is given), with no accustomed voice of mourning, but in gloomy silence. It is like Defoe's picture of the dead-cart in the plague of London. Such is ever the end of departing from God--songs palsied into silence or turned into wailing when the judgment bursts; death stalking supreme, and silence brooding over all.

The crimes that ripened men for this terrible harvest are next set forth, in part, in verses 4 to 6. These verses partly coincide verbally with the previous indictment in Amos ii. 6, etc., which, however, is more comprehensive. Here only one form of sin is dealt with. And what was the sin that deserved the bad eminence of being thus selected as the chief sign that Israel was ripe and rotten? Precisely the one which gets most indulgence in the Christian Church; namely, eagerness to be rich, and sharp, unkindly dealing. These men, who were only fit to be swept out of the land, were most punctual in their religious duties. They would not on any account do business either on a festival or on Sabbath, but they were very impatient till--shall we say? Monday morning came--that they might get to their beloved work again.

Their lineal descendants are no strangers on the exchanges, or in the churches of London or New York. They were not only outwardly scrupulous and inwardly weary of religious observances, but when they did get to business, they gave short measure and took a long price, and knew how to turn the scales always in their own favour. It was the expedient of rude beginners in the sacred art of getting the best of a bargain, to put a false bottom in the ephah, and to stick a piece of lead below the shekel weight, which the purchaser had to make go up in the scale with his silver. There are much neater ways of doing the same thing now; and no doubt some very estimable gentlemen in high repute as Christians, who give respectability to any church or denomination, could have taught these early practitioners a lesson or two.

They were as cruel as they were greedy. They bought their brethren as slaves, and if a poor man had run into their debt for even a pair of shoes, they would sell him up in a very literal sense. Avarice, unbridled by the fear of God, leads by a short cut to harshness and disregard of the claims of others. There are more ways of buying the needy for a pair of shoes than these people practised.

The last touch in the picture is meanness, which turned everything into money. Even what fell through the sieve when wheat was winnowed, which ought to have been given to anybody, was carefully scraped up, and, dirty as it was, sold. Is not nothing for nothing an approved maxim to-day? Are not people held up as shining lights of commerce, who have the faculty of turning everything into saleable articles? Some serious reflections ought to be driven home to us who live in great commercial communities, and are in manifold ways tempted to learn their ways, and so get a snare unto our souls, by this gibbeting of tempers and customs, very common among ourselves, as the very head and front of the sin of Israel, which determined its ripeness for destruction.

The catalogue of sins is left incomplete (compare with chapter ii.), as if holy indignation turned for relief to the thought of the certain judgment. That certainly is strongly affirmed by the representation of the oath of Jehovah. He can swear by no other, therefore He swears by Himself; and the excellency of Jacob cannot with propriety mean anything else than Him who is, or ought to be, the sole ground of confidence and occasion of boasting to the nation (Hos. v. 5). He gives His own being as the guarantee that judgment shall fall. As surely as God is God, injustice and avarice will ruin a nation. We talk now about necessary consequences and natural laws rendering penalties inevitable. The Bible suggests a deeper foundation for their certain incidence--even the very nature of God Himself. As long as He is what He is, covetousness and its child, harshness to the needy, will be sin against Him, and be avenged sooner or later. God has a long and a wide memory, and the sins which He remembers are those which He has not forgiven, and will punish.

Amos heaps image on image to deepen the impression of terror and confusion. Everything is turned to its opposite. The solid land reels, rises, and falls, like the Nile in flood (see Revised Version). The sun sets at midday, and noon is darkness. Feasts change to mourning, songs to lamentations. Rich garments are put aside for sackcloth, and flowing locks drop off and leave bald heads. These are evidently all figures vividly piled together to express the same thought. The crash that destroyed their national prosperity and existence would shake the most solid things and darken the brightest. It would come suddenly, as if the sun plunged from the zenith to the west. It would make joy a stranger, and bring grief as bitter as when a father or a mother mourns the death of an only son. Besides all this, something darker beyond is dimly hinted in that awful, vague, final threat, The end thereof as a bitter day.

Now all these threats were fulfilled in the fall of the kingdom of Israel; but that day of the Lord was in principle a miniature foreshadowing of the great final judgment. Some of the very features of the description here are repeated with reference to it in the New Testament. We cannot treat such prophecies as this as if they were exhausted by their historical fulfilment. They disclose the eternal course of divine judgment, which is to culminate in a future day of judgment. The oath of God is not yet completely fulfilled. Assuredly as He lives and is God, so surely will modern sinners have to stand their trial; and, as of old, the chase after riches will bring down crashing ruin. We need that vision of judgment as much as Samaria did when Amos saw the basket of ripe fruit, craving, as it were, to be plucked. So do obstinate sinners invite destruction.

The last section specifies one feature of judgment, the deprivation of the despised word of the Lord (vs. 11-14). Like Saul, whose piteous wail in the witch's hovel was, God ... answereth me no more, they who paid no heed to the word of the Lord shall one day seek far and wearily for a prophet, and seek in vain. The word rendered wander, which is used in the other description of people seeking for water in a literal drought (iv. 8), means reel, and gives the picture of men faint and dizzy with thirst, yet staggering on in vain quest for a spring. They seek everywhere, from the Dead Sea on the east to the Mediterranean on the west, and then up to the north, and so round again to the starting-point. Is it because Judah was south that that quarter is not visited? Perhaps, if they had gone where the Temple was, they would have found the stream from under its threshold, which a later prophet saw going forth to heal the marshes and dry places. Why was the search vain? Has not God promised to be found of those that seek, however far they have gone away? The last verse tells why. They still were idolaters, swearing by the sin of Samaria, which is the calf of Beth-el, and by the other at Dan, and going on idolatrous pilgrimages to Beer-sheba, far away in the south, across the whole kingdom of Judah (Amos v. 5). It was vain to seek for the word of the Lord with such doings and worship.

The truth implied is universal in its application. God's message neglected is withdrawn. Conscience stops if continually unheeded. The Gospel may still sound in a man's ears, but have long ceased to reach farther. There comes a time when men shall wish wasted opportunities back, and find that they can no more return than last summer's heat. There may be a wish for the prophet in time of distress, which means no real desire for God's word, but only for relief from calamity. There may be a sort of seeking for the word, which seeks in the wrong places and in the wrong ways, and without abandoning sins. Such quest is vain. But if, driven by need and sorrow, a poor soul, feeling the thirst after the living God, cries from ever so distant a land of bondage, the cry will be answered. But let us not forget that our Lord has told us to take heed how we hear, on the very ground that to him that hath shall be given; and from him that hath not, even that he hath shall be taken away.