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

**HOSEA-003. PHYSICIANS OF NO VALUE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"When Ephralm saw his sickness, and Judah saw his wound, then went Ephraim to Assyria, and sent to king Jareb: but he is not able to heal you, neither shall he cure you of your wound!"*

*Hosea 5:13 (R.V.)*

The long tragedy which ended in the destruction of the Northern Kingdom by Assyrian invasion was already beginning to develop in Hosea's time. The mistaken politics of the kings of Israel led them to seek an ally where they should have dreaded an enemy. As Hosea puts it in figurative fashion, Ephraim's discovery of his sickness sent him in the vain quest for help to the apparent source of the sickness, that is to Assyria, whose king in the text is described by a name which is not his real name, but is a significant epithet, as the margin puts it, a king that should contend; and who, of course, was not able to heal nor to cure the wounds which he had inflicted. Ephraim's suicidal folly is but one illustration of a universal madness which drives men to seek for the healing of their misery, and the alleviation of their discomfort, in the repetition of the very acts which brought these about. The attempt to get relief in such a fashion, of course, fails; for as the verse before our text emphatically proclaims, it is God who has been as a moth unto Ephraim, gnawing away his strength: and it is only He who can heal, since in reality it is He, and not the quarrelsome king of Assyria, who has inflicted the sickness.

Thus understood, the text carries wide lessons, and may serve us as a starting-point for considering man's discovery of his sickness, man's mad way of seeking healing, God's way of giving it.

**I. First, then, man's discovery of his sickness.**

The greater part of most lives is spent in mechanical, unreflecting repetition of daily duties and pleasures. We are all apt to live on the surface, and it requires an effort, which we are too indolent to make except under the impulse of some arresting motive, to descend into the depths of our own souls, and there to face the solemn facts of our own personality. The last place with which most of us are familiar, is our innermost self. Men are dimly conscious that things within are not well with them; but it is only one here and there that says so distinctly to himself, and takes the further step of thoroughly investigating the cause. But that superficial life is at the mercy of a thousand accidents, each one of which may break through the thin film, and lay bare the black depths.

But there is another aspect of this discovery of sickness, far graver than the mere consciousness of unrest. Ephraim does not see his sickness unless he sees his sin. The greater part of every life is spent without that deep, all-pervading sense of discord between itself and God. Small and recurrent faults may evoke recurring remonstrances of conscience, but that is a very different thing from the deep tones and the clear voice of condemnation in respect to one's whole life and character which sounds in a heart that has learned how deceitful and desperately wicked it is. Such a conviction may flash upon a man at any moment, and from a hundred causes. A sorrow, a sunset-sky, a grave, a sermon, may produce it.

But even when we have come to recognise clearly our unrest, we have gone but part of the way, we have become conscious of a symptom, not of the disease. Why is it that man is alone among the creatures in that discontent with externals, and that dissatisfaction with himself? Foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have roosting-places': why is it that amongst all God's happy creatures, and God's shining stars, men stand strangers in a strange land, and are cursed with a restlessness which has not where to lay its head? The consciousness of unrest is but the agitation of the limbs which indicates disease. That disease is the twitching paralysis of sin. Like the pestilence that walketh in darkness, it has a fell power of concealing itself, and the man whose sins are the greatest is always the least conscious of them. He dwells in a region where the malaria is so all-pervading that the inhabitants do not know what the sweetness of an unpoisoned atmosphere is. If there is a worst man in the world, we may be very sure that no conscience is less troubled than his is.

So the question may well be urged on those so terribly numerous amongst us, whose very unconsciousness of their true condition is the most fatal symptom of their fatal disease. What is the worth of a peace which is only secured by ignoring realities, and which can be shattered into fragments by anything that compels a man to see himself as he is? In such a fool's paradise thousands of us live. Use and wont, the continual occupation with the trifles of our daily lives, the fleeting satisfactions of our animal nature, the shallow wisdom which bids us let sleeping dogs lie, all conspire to mask, to many consciences, their unrest and their sin. We abstain from lifting the curtain behind which the serpent lies coiled in our hearts, because we dread to see its loathly length, and to rouse it to lift its malignant head, and to strike with its forked tongue. But sooner or later--may it not be too late--we shall be set face to face with the dark recess, and discover the foul reptile that has all the while been coiled there.

**II. Man's mad way of seeking healing.**

Can there be a more absurd course of action than that recorded in our text? When Ephraim saw his sickness, then went Ephraim to Assyria. The Northern Kingdom sought for the healing of their national calamities from the very cause of their national calamities, and in repetition of their national sin. A hopeful policy, and one which speedily ended in the only possible result! But that insanity was but a sample of the infatuation which besets us all. When we are conscious of our unrest, are we not all tempted to seek to conceal it with what has made it? Take examples from the grosser forms of animal indulgence. The drunkard's vulgar proverb recommending a hair of the dog that bit you, is but a coarse expression of a common fault. He is wretched until another glass steadies, for a moment, his trembling hand, and gives a brief stimulus to his nerves. They say that the Styrian peasants, who habitually eat large quantities of arsenic, show symptoms of poison if they leave it off suddenly. These are but samples, in the physical region, of a tendency which runs through all lire, and leads men to drown thought by plunging into the thick of the worldly absorptions that really cause their unrest. The least persistent of men is strangely obstinate in his adherence to old ways, in spite of all experience of their crooked slipperiness. We wonder at the peasants who have their cottages and vineyards on the slopes of Vesuvius, and who build them, and plant them, over and over again after each destructive eruption. The tragedy of Israel is repeated in many of our lives; and the summing up of the abortive efforts of one of its kings to recover power by following the gods that had betrayed him, might be the epitaph of the infatuated men who see their sickness and seek to heal it by renewed devotion to the idols who occasioned it: They were the ruin of him and of all Israel. The experience of the woman who had spent all her living on physicians, and was nothing the better, but rather the worse, sums up the sad story of many a life.

But again the sense of sin sometimes seeks to conceal itself by repetition of sin. When the dormant snake begins to stir, it is lulled to sleep again by absorption of occupations, or by an obstinate refusal to look inwards, and often by plunging once more into the sin which has brought about the sickness. To seek thus for ease from the stings of conscience, is like trying to silence a buzzing in the head by standing beside Niagara thundering in our ears. They used to beat the drums when a martyr died, in order to drown his testimony; and so foolish men seek to silence the voice of conscience by letting passions shout their loudest. It needs no words to demonstrate the incurable folly of such conduct; but alas, it takes many words far stronger than mine to press home the folly upon men. The condition of such a half-awakened conscience is very critical if it is soothed by any means by which it is weakened and its possessor worsened. In the sickness of the soul homoeopathic treatment is a delusion. Ephraim may go to Assyria, but there is no healing of him there.

**III. God's way of giving true healing.**

Ephraim thought that, because the wounds were inflicted by Assyria, it was the source to which to apply for bandages and balm. If it had realised that Assyria was but the battle-axe wherewith the hand of God struck it, it would have learned that from God alone could come healing and health. The unrest which betrays the presence in our souls of a deep-seated sin, is a divine messenger. We terribly misinterpret the true source of all that disturbs us when we attribute it only to the occasions which bring it about; for the one purpose of all our restlessness is to drive us nearer to God, and to wrench us away from our Assyria. The true issue of Ephraim's sickness would have been the penitent cry, Come, let us return to the Lord our God, for He hath smitten, and He will bind us up. It is in the consciousness of loving nearness to Him that all our unrest is soothed, and the heaving ocean in our hearts becomes as a summer's sea and birds of peace sit brooding on the charmed waves. It is in that same consciousness that conscience ceases to condemn, and loses its sting. The prophet from whom our text is taken ends his wonderful ministry, that had been full of fiery denunciations and dark prophecies, with words that are only surpassed in their tenderness and the outpouring of the heart of God, by the fuller revelation in Jesus Christ: O Israel, return unto the Lord thy God. Take with you words, and return unto the Lord, and say unto Him: Assyria shall not save us, for in Thee the fatherless findeth mercy. The divine answer which he was commissioned to bring to the penitent Israel--I will heal their backslidings, I will love them freely; if Mine anger is turned away from Me--is, in all its wealth of forgiving love but an imperfect prophecy of the great Physician, from the hem of whose garment flowed out power to one who had spent all her living on physicians and could not be healed of any, and who confirmed to her the power which she had thought to steal from Him unawares by the gracious words which bound her to Him for ever--Daughter, thy faith hath made thee whole; go in peace.