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

**JONAH-001. GUILTY SILENCE AND ITS REWARD by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1. Now the word of the Lord came unto Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, 2. Arise, go to Nineveh, that great, city, and cry against it; for their wickedness is come up before Me. 3. But Jonah rose up to flee unto Tarshish from the presence of the Lord, and went down to Joppa; and he found a ship going to Tarshish: so he paid the fare thereof, and went down into it, to go with them unto Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. 4. But the Lord sent out a great wind into the sea, and there was a mighty tempest in the sea, so that the ship was like to be broken. 5. Then the mariners were afraid, and cried every man unto his god, and cast forth the wares that were in the ship into the sea, to lighten it of them. But Jonah was gone down into the sides of the ship; and he lay, and was fast asleep. 6. So the shipmaster came to him, and said unto him, What meanest thou, O sleeper? arise, call upon thy God, if so be that God will think upon us, that we perish not. 7. And they said every one to his fellow, Come, and let us cast lots, that we may know for whose cause this evil is upon us. So they cast lots, and the lot fell upon Jonah. 8. Then said they unto him, Tell us, we pray thee, for whose cause this evil is upon us; What is thine occupation? and whence comest thou? what is thy country? and of what people art thou? 9. And he said unto them, I am an Hebrew; and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, which hath made the sea and the dry land. 10. Then were the men exceedingly afraid, and said unto him, Why hast thou done this? For the men knew that he fled from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them. 11. Then said they unto him, What shall we do unto thee, that the sea may be calm unto us? for the sea wrought, and was tempestuous. 12. And he said unto them, Take me up, and cast me forth into the sea; so shall the sea be calm unto you: for I know that for my sake this great tempest is upon you. 13. Nevertheless the men rowed hard to bring it to the land; but they could not: for the sea wrought, and was tempestuous against them. 14. Wherefore they cried unto the Lord, and said, We beseech thee, O Lord, we beseech thee, let us not perish for this man's life, and lay not upon us innocent blood: for Thou, O Lord, hast done as it pleased Thee. 15. So they took up Jonah, and cast him forth into the sea; and the sea ceased from her raging. 16. Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly, and offered a sacrifice unto the Lord, and made vows. 17. Now the Lord had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights."*

*Jonah 1:1-17*

Jonah was apparently an older contemporary of Hosea and Amos. The Assyrian power was looming threateningly on the northern horizon, and a flash or two had already broken from that cloud. No doubt terror had wrought hate and intenser narrowness. To correct these by teaching, by an instance drawn from Assyria itself, God's care for the Gentiles and their susceptibility to His voice, was the purpose of Jonah's mission. He is a prophet of Israel, because the lesson of his history was for them, though his message was for Nineveh. He first taught by example the truth which Jesus proclaimed in the synagogue of Nazareth, and Peter learned on the housetop at Joppa, and Paul took as his guiding star. A truth so unwelcome and remote from popular belief needed emphasis when first proclaimed; and this singular story, as it were, underlines it for the generation which heard it first. Its place would rather have been among the narratives than the prophets, except for this aspect of it. So regarded, Jonah becomes a kind of representative of Israel; and his history sets forth large lessons as to its function among the nations, its unwillingness to discharge it, the consequences of disobedience, and the means of return to a better mind.

Note then, first, the Prophet's unwelcome charge. There seems no sufficient reason for doubting the historical reality of Jonah's mission to Nineveh; for we know that intercourse was not infrequent, and the silence of other records is, in their fragmentary condition, nothing wonderful. But the fact that a prophet of Israel was sent to a heathen city, and that not to denounce destruction except as a means of winning to repentance, declared emphatically God's care for the world, and rebuked the exclusiveness which claimed Him for Israel alone. The same spirit haunts the Christian Church, and we have all need to ponder the opposite truth, till our sympathies are widened to the width of God's universal love, and we discern that we are bound to care for all men, since He does so.

Jonah sullenly resolved not to obey God's voice. What a glimpse into the prophetic office that gives us! The divine Spirit could be resisted, and the Prophet was no mere machine, but a living man who had to consent with his devoted will to bear the burden of the Lord. One refused, and his refusal teaches us how superb and self-sacrificing was the faithfulness of the rest. So we have each to do in regard to God's message intrusted to us. We must bow our wills, and sink our prejudices, and sacrifice our tastes, and say, Here am I; send me.

Jonah represents the national feelings which he shared. Why did he refuse to go to Nineveh? Not because he was afraid of his life, or thought the task hopeless. He refused because he feared success. God's goodness was being stretched rather too far, if it was going to take in Nineveh. Jonah did not want it to escape. If he had been sent to destroy it, he would probably have gone gladly. He grudged that heathen should share Israel's privileges, and probably thought that gain to Nineveh would be loss to Israel. It was exactly the spirit of the prodigal's elder brother. There was also working in him the concern for his own reputation, which would be damaged if the threats he uttered turned out to be thunder without lightning, by reason of the repentance of Nineveh.

Israel was set among the nations, not as a dark lantern, but as the great lampstand in the Temple court proclaimed, to ray out light to all the world. Jonah's mission was but a concrete instance of Israel's charge. The nation was as reluctant to fulfil the reason of its existence as the Prophet was. Both begrudged sharing privileges with heathen dogs, both thought God's care wasted, and neither had such feelings towards the rest of the world as to be willing to be messengers of forgiveness to them. All sorts of religious exclusiveness, contemptuous estimates of other nations, and that bastard patriotism which would keep national blessings for our own country alone, are condemned by this story. In it dawns the first faint light of that sun which shone at its full when Jesus healed the Canaanite's daughter, or when He said, Other sheep I have, which are not of this fold.

Note, next, the fatal consequences of refusal to obey the God-given charge. We need not suppose that Jonah thought that he could actually get away from God's presence. Possibly he believed in a special presence of God in the land of Israel, or, more probably, the phrase means to escape from service. At any rate, he determined to do his flight thoroughly. Tarshish was, to a Hebrew, at the other end of the world from Nineveh. The Jews were no sailors, and the choice of the sea as means of escape indicates the obstinacy of determination in Jonah.

The storm is described with a profusion of unusual words, all apparently technical terms, picked up on board, just as Luke, in the only other account of a storm in Scripture, has done. What a difference between the two voyages! In the one, the unfaithful prophet is the cause of disaster, and the only sluggard in the ship. In the other, the Apostle, who has hazarded his life to proclaim his Lord, is the source of hope, courage, vigour, and safety. Such are the consequences of silence and of brave speech for God. No wonder that the fugitive Prophet slunk down into some dark corner, and sat bitterly brooding there, self-accused and condemned, till weariness and the relief of the tension of his journey lulled him to sleep. It was a stupid and heavy sleep. Alas for those whose only refuge from conscience is oblivion!

Over against this picture of the insensible Prophet, all unaware of the storm (which may suggest the parallel insensibility of Israel to the impending divine judgments), is set the behaviour of the heathen sailors, or salts, as the story calls them. Their conduct is part of the lesson of the book; for, heathen as they are, they have yet a sense of dependence, and they pray; they are full of courage, battling with the storm, jettisoning the cargo, and doing everything possible to save the ship. Their treatment of Jonah is generous and chivalrous. Even when they hear his crime, and know that the storm is howling like a wild beast for him, they are unwilling to throw him overboard without one more effort; and when at last they do it, their prayer is for forgiveness, inasmuch as they are but carrying out the will of Jehovah. They are so much touched by the whole incident that they offer sacrifices to the God of the Hebrews, and are, in some sense, and possibly but for a time, worshippers of Him.

All this holds the mirror up to Israel, by showing how much of human kindness and generosity, and how much of susceptibility for the truth which Israel had to declare, lay in rude hearts beyond its pale. This crew of heathen of various nationalities and religions were yet men who could be kind to a renegade Prophet, peril their lives to save his, and worship Jehovah. I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel, is the same lesson in another form. We may find abundant opportunities for learning it; for the characters of godless men, and of some among the heathen, may well shame many a Christian.

Jonah's conduct in the storm is no less noble than his former conduct had been base. The burst of the tempest blew away all the fog from his mind, and he saw the stars again. His confession of faith; his calm conviction that he was the cause of the storm; his quiet, unhesitating command to throw him into the wild chaos foaming about the ship; his willing acceptance of death as the wages of his sin, all tell how true a saint he was in the depth of his soul. Sorrow and chastisement turn up the subsoil. If a man has any good in him, it generally comes to the top when he is afflicted and looks death in the face. If there is nothing but gravel beneath, it too will be brought up by the plough. There may be much selfish unfaithfulness overlying a real devoted heart.

Jonah represented Israel here too, both in that the consequence of the national unfaithfulness and greedy, exclusive grasp of their privileges would lead to their being cast into the roaring waves of the sea of nations, amid the tumult of the peoples, and in that, for them as for him, the calamity would bring about a better mind, the confession of their faith, and acknowledgment of their sin. The history of Israel was typified in this history, and the lessons it teaches are lessons for all churches, and for all God's children for all time. If we shirk our duty of witnessing for Him, or any other of His plain commands, unfaithfulness will be our ruin. The storm is sure to break where His Jonahs try to hide, and their only hope lies in bowing to the chastisement and consenting to be punished, and avowing whose they are and whom they serve. If we own Him while the storm whistles round us, the worst of it is past, and though we have to struggle amid its waves, He will take care of us, and anything is possible rather than that we should be lost in them.

The miracle of rescue is the last point. Jonah's repentance saved his life. Tossed overboard impenitent he would have been drowned. So Israel was taught that the break-up of their national life would not be their destruction if they turned to the Lord in their calamity. The wider lesson of the means of making chastisement into blessing, and securing a way of escape--namely, by owning the justice of the stroke, and returning to duty--is meant for us all. He who sends the storm watches its effect on us, and will not let His repentant servants be utterly overwhelmed. That is a better use to make of the story than to discuss whether any kind of known Mediterranean fish could swallow a man. If we believe in miracles, the question need not trouble us. And miracle there must be, not only in the coincidence of the fish and the Prophet being in the same bit of sea at the same moment, but in his living for so long in his strange ark of safety.

The ever-present providence of God, the possible safety of the nation, even when in captivity, the preservation of every servant of God who turns to the Lord in his chastisement, the exhibition of penitence as the way of deliverance, are the purposes for which the miracle was wrought and told. Flippant sarcasms are cheap. A devout insight yields a worthy meaning. Jesus Christ employed this incident as a symbol of His Death and Resurrection. That use of it seems hard to reconcile with any view but that the story is true. But it does not seem necessary to suppose that our Lord regarded it as an intended type, or to seek to find in Jonah's history further typical prophecy of Him. The salient point of comparison is simply the three days entombment; and it is rather an illustrative analogy than an intentional prophecy. The subsequent action of the Prophet in Nineveh, and the effect of it, were true types of the preaching of the Gospel by the risen Lord, through His servants, to the Gentiles, and of their hearing the Word. But it requires considerable violence in manipulation to force the bestowing of Jonah, for safety and escape from death, in the fish's maw, into a proper prophecy of the transcendent fact of the Resurrection.