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

**JONAH-003. THREEFOLD REPENTANCE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1. And the word of the Lord came unto Jonah the second time, saying, 2. Arise, go unto Nineveh, that great city, and preach unto it the preaching that I bid thee. 3. So Jonah arose, and went unto Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceeding great city of three days journey. 4. And Jonah began to enter into the city a day's journey, and he cried, and said, Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall he overthrown. 5. So the people of Ninoveh believed God, and proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them even to the least of them. 6. For word came unto the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, and he laid his robe from him, and covered him with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. 7. And he caused it to be proclaimed and published through Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying, Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything; let them not feed, nor drink water: 8. But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily unto God; yea, let them turn every one from his evil way, and from the violence that is in their hands. 9. Who can tell if God will turn and repent, and turn away from His fierce anger, that we perish not? 10. And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil, that He had said that He would do unto them; and He did it not."*

*Jonah 3:1-10*

This passage falls into three parts: Jonah's renewed commission and new obedience (vs. 1-4), the repentance of Nineveh (vs. 5-9), and the acceptance thereof by God (ver. 10). We might almost call these three the repentance of Jonah, of Nineveh, and of God. The evident intention of the narrative is to parallel the Ninevites turning from their sins, and God's turning from His anger and purpose of destruction; and if the word repentance is not applied to Jonah, his conduct sufficiently shows the thing.

**I. Note the renewed charge to the penitent Prophet, and his new eagerness to fulfil it.**

His deliverance and second commission are put as if all but simultaneous, and his obedience was swift and glad. Jonah did not venture to take for granted that the charge which he had shirked was still continued to him. If God commands to take the trumpet, and we refuse, we dare not assume that we shall still be honoured with the delivery of the message. The punishment of dumb lips is often dumbness. Opportunities of service, slothfully or faintheartedly neglected, are often withdrawn. We can fancy how Jonah, brought back to the better mind which breathes in his psalm, longed to be honoured by the trust of preaching once more, and how rapturously his spirit would address itself to the task. Duties once unwelcome become sweet when we have passed through the experience of the misery that comes from neglecting them. It is God's mercy that gives us the opportunity of effacing past disobedience by new alacrity.

The second charge is possibly distinguishable from the first as being less precise. It may be that the exact nature of the preaching that I bid thee was not told Jonah till he had to open his mouth in Nineveh; but, more probably, the second charge was identical with the first.

The word rendered preach is instructive. It means to cry and suggests the manner befitting those who bear God's message. They should sound it out loudly, plainly, urgently, with earnestness and marks of emotion in their voice. Languid whispers will not wake sleepers. Unless the messenger is manifestly in earnest, the message will fall flat. Not with bated breath, as if ashamed of it; nor with hesitation, as if not quite sure of it; nor with coldness, as if it were of little urgency,--is God's Word to be pealed in men's ears. The preacher is a crier. The substance of his message, too, is set forth. The preaching which I bid thee--not his own imaginations, nor any fine things of his own spinning. Suppose Jonah had entertained the Ninevites with dissertations on the evidences of his prophetic authority, or submitted for their consideration a few thoughts tending to show the agreement of his message with their current opinions in religion, or an argument for the existence of a retributive Governor of the world, he would not have shaken the city. The less the Prophet shows himself, the stronger his influence. The more simply he repeats the stern, plain, short message, the more likely it is to impress. God's Word, faithfully set forth, will prove itself. The preacher or teacher of this day has substantially the same charge as Jonah had; and the more he suppresses himself, and becomes but a voice through which God speaks, the better for himself, his hearers, and his work.

Nineveh, that great aggregate of cities, was full, as Eastern cities are, of open spaces, and might well be a three days journey in circumference. What a task for that solitary stranger to thunder out his loud cry among all these crowds! But he had learned to do what he was bid; and without wasting a moment, he began to enter into the city a day's journey, and, no doubt, did not wait till the end of the day to proclaim his message. Let us learn that there is an element of threatening in God's most merciful message, and that the appeal to terror and to the desire for self-preservation is part of the way to preach the Gospel. Plain warnings of coming evil may be spoken tenderly, and reveal love as truly as the most soothing words. The warning comes in time. Forty days of grace are granted. The gospel warns us in time enough for escape. It warns us because God loves; and they are as untrue messengers of His love as of His justice who slur over the declaration of His wrath.

**II. Note the repentance of Nineveh (vs. 5-9).**

The impression made by Jonah's terrible cry is perfectly credible and natural in the excitable population of an Eastern city, in which even now any appeal to terror, especially if associated with religious and prophetic claims, easily sets the whole in a frenzy. Think of the grim figure of this foreign man, with his piercing voice and half-intelligible speech, dropped from the clouds as it were, and stalking through Nineveh, pealing out his confident message, like that gaunt fanatic who walked Jerusalem in its last agony, crying, Woe! woe unto the bloody city! or that other, who, with flaming fire on his head and madness in his eyes, affrighted London in the plague. No wonder that alarm was kindled, and, being kindled, spread like wildfire. Apparently the movement was first among the people, who began to fast before the news penetrated to the seclusion of the palace. But the contagion reached the king, and the popular excitement was endorsed and fanned by a royal decree. The specified tokens of repentance are those of ordinary mourning, such as were common all over the East, with only the strange addition, which smacks of heathen ideas, that the animals were made sharers in them.

There is great significance in that believed God (ver. 5). The foundation of all true repentance is crediting God's word of threatening, and therefore realising the danger, as well as the disobedience, of our sin. We shall be wise if we pass by the human instrument, and hear God speaking through the Prophet. Never mind about Jonah, believe God.

We learn from the Ninevites what is true repentance They brought no sacrifices or offerings, but sorrow, self-abasement, and amendment. The characteristic sin of a great military power would be violence, and that is the specific evil from which they vow to turn. The loftiest lesson which prophets found Israel so slow to learn, A broken and a contrite heart Thou wilt not despise, was learned by these heathens. We need it no less. Nineveh repented on a peradventure that their repentance might avail. How pathetic that Who can tell? (ver. 9) is! We know what they hoped. Their doubt might give fervour to their cries, but our certainty should give deeper earnestness and confidence to ours.

The deepest meaning of the whole narrative is set forth in our Lord's use of it, when He holds up the men of Nineveh as a condemnatory instance to the hardened consciences of His hearers. Probably the very purpose of the book was to show Israel that the despised and yet dreaded heathen were more susceptible to the voice of God than they were: I will provoke you to jealousy by them which are no people. The story was a smiting blow to the proud exclusiveness and self-complacent contempt of prophetic warnings, which marked the entire history of God's people. As Ezekiel was told: Thou are not sent ... to many peoples of a strange speech and of an hard language... . Surely, if I sent thee to them, they would hearken unto thee. But the house of Israel will not hearken unto thee. It is ever true that long familiarity with the solemn thoughts of God's judgment and punishment of sin abates their impression on us. Our Puritan forefathers used to talk about gospel-hardened sinners, and there are many such among us. The man who lives by Niagara does not hear its roar as a stranger does. The men of Nineveh will rise in the judgment with other generations than that which was this generation in Christ's time; and that which is this generation to-day will, in many of its members, be condemned by them.

But the wave of feeling soon retired, and there is no reason to believe that more than a transient impression was made. It does not seem certain that the Ninevites knew what God they hoped to appease. Probably their pantheon was undisturbed, and their repentance lasted no longer than their fear. Transient repentance leaves the heart harder than before, as half-melted ice freezes again more dense. Let us beware of frost on the back of a thaw. Repentance which is repented of is worse than none.

**III. We note the repentance of God (ver. 10).**

Mark the recurrence of the word turn, employed in verses 8, 9, and 10 in reference to men and to God. Mark the bold use of the word repent, applied to God, which, though it be not applied to the Ninevites in the previous verses, is implied in every line of them. The same expression is found in Exodus xxxii. 14, which may be taken as the classical passage warranting its use. The great truth involved is one that is too often lost sight of in dealing with prophecy; namely, that all God's promises and threatenings are conditional. Jeremiah learned that lesson in the house of the potter, and we need to keep it well in mind. God threatens, precisely in order that He may not have to perform His threatenings. Jonah was sent to Nineveh to cry, Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown, in order that it might not be overthrown. What would have been the use of proclaiming the decree, if it had been irreversible? There is an implied if in all God's words. Except ye repent underlies the most absolute threatenings of evil. If we hold fast the beginning of our confidence firm unto the end, is presupposed in the brightest and broadest promises of good.

The word repent is denied and affirmed to have application to God. He is not a son of man, that He should repent, inasmuch as His immutability and steadfast purpose know no variableness. But just because they cannot change, and He must ever be against them that do evil, and ever bless them that turn to Him with trust, therefore He changes His dealings with us according to our relation to Him, and because He cannot repent, or be other than He was and is, repents of the evil that He had said that He would do unto sinners when they repent of the evil that they have done against Him, inasmuch as He leaves His threatening unfulfilled, and does it not.

So we might almost say that the purpose of this book of Jonah is to teach the possibility and efficacy of repentance, and to show how the penitent man, heathen or Jew, ever finds in God changed dealings corresponding to his changed heart. The widest charity, the humbling lesson for people brought up in the blaze of revelation, that dwellers in the twilight or in the darkness are dear to God and may be more susceptible of divine impressions than ourselves, the rebuke of all pluming ourselves on our privileges, the boundlessness of God's mercy, are among the other lessons of this strange book; but none of them is more precious than its truly evangelic teaching of the blessedness of true penitence, whether exemplified in the renegade Prophet returning to his high mission, or the fierce Ninevites humbled and repentant, and finding mercy from the God of the whole earth.