**THE EAGLE LIFE - STUDIES IN THE OLD TESTAMENT BY JOHN H. JOWETT**

**38. IRREVERENT FEAR by JOHN H. JOWET**

*"I fear the Lord, the God of Heaven, which hath made the sea and the dry land."*

*Jonah 1:9*

That is a seemingly sane expression of a very healthy piety. Here is a man contemplating the stormy heavens and the assembled wonders of the tempestuous seas. And his heart bows in reverence and in Godly fear. But is all this really happening? Who is the man? It is Jonah, and at the very moment he is speaking he is in flight from his appointed task. He has been commissioned to go to Nineveh, and he is deliberately turning his course to Tarshish. And he makes a profession of his religious devotion in the very season when he is abandoning his commission. Here, then, is a strange encounter. Here is piety and duty in conflict. Here is a song of loyalty wedded to an act of desertion. This man makes the ways of trespass resound with the notes of praise. This man fears the Lord and shirks his task.

How does such a strange association come about! What is the origin of this incongruous wedding? Can there be such a mongrel as impious piety? Yes, I think there can. Can there be such a perversion as immoral religion? Yes, I think there can. Was Jonah genuine when he declared his fear of the Lord? Yes, I believe he was. How, then, does it come about that a man can be singing a psalm while he is on his way to Tarshish? I think this is the explanation. Jonah's religion was in the realm of feeling, it was not in the realm of action. It centred in the emotions and not in the will. It was a matter of sentiment and not of obedience. It was a question of "feeling nice" rather than of "doing justly,'' and of "walking humbly with thy God." And that is the strange divorce which anyone can successfully accomplish in his own life. We can cultivate our emotions independently of our wills. Of course the emotions are counterfeit and delusive, but there they are, and it is the easiest thing in the world for us to assume that they are genuine, and so at length to believe in their reality. There is nothing which is so cunningly deceptive as artificial emotion. We can generate any amount of it, and when we are under its sway we can believe we are having a really good time. The emotional world may be our religious world, and as long as our emotions are lively we can believe ourselves alive.

And thus it comes about that we have indictments like this in the word of God. "Ye have given your tears to the altar, and ye have married the daughter of a strange god." Yes, and their degradation was seen in this, that they were sincere in both. They gave their emotions to the Lord, and they gave their wills to a strange god. When the notorious Pigott, who forged the name of Parnell, the Irish leader, was examined after his suicide, it was found that he was wearing a crucifix next to his skin. He was a living lie and he was hugging a crucifix. The crucifix carried his emotions, the lie expressed his will.

And thus it was with Jonah; he feared the Lord and he fled to Tarshish. But what is this fear worth which shirks its appointed task? It is devoid of all saving salt, and it adds itself to the forces of corruption. "The fear of the Lord is a fountain of life.'' How great is the contrast. One sort of fear is the ally of death, the other makes everything alive. One kills the sense of duty, the other quickens obligation and turns statues into songs.