

Jonah 2:8

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

They that observe lying vanities forsake their own mercy.

Analysis

They that observe lying vanities forsake their own mercy. This brief, proverbial statement contrasts true worship (Jonah's prayer to Yahweh) with idolatry. "They that observe lying vanities" (meshamerim havlei-shav, מְשַׁמְרִים הַבְּלִי־שָׁו) uses shamar (שָׁמַר), meaning to keep, guard, or observe—often used for keeping God's commandments. The irony: people "keep" (devote themselves to) havlei-shav (הַבְּלִי־שָׁו), "lying vanities" or "worthless idols."

Hevel (הֶבֶל) means vapor, breath, or vanity—something insubstantial and fleeting. It's Ecclesiastes' key word: "Vanity of vanities... all is vanity" (Ecclesiastes 1:2). Shav (שָׁו) means falsehood, deception, or worthlessness. Together, havlei-shav describes idols as utterly empty, false, and powerless—they cannot help, save, or deliver. Psalm 31:6 uses identical language: "I have hated them that regard lying vanities: but I trust in the LORD."

"Forsake their own mercy" (chasdam ya'azovu, חַסְדָּם יֵאָזְבוּ) uses chesed (חֶסֶד), the rich Hebrew word for covenant love, loyal kindness, steadfast mercy—God's faithful commitment to His people. The possessive "their own mercy" (chasdam) suggests that God's chesed belongs to them, is available to them, yet they abandon it by choosing idols. This echoes Jeremiah 2:13: "My people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water."

The statement applies to literal idol-worshippers (perhaps Jonah contrasts himself with the pagan sailors who converted in 1:16) but also to anyone who trusts anything other than God for salvation, security, or satisfaction. False gods include

money, power, pleasure, reputation, or religious performance. All are hevel—vapor that cannot save. Only Yahweh's chesed delivers.

Historical Context

Idolatry pervaded the ancient Near East. Nations worshiped gods of wood, stone, and metal—images carved by human hands yet credited with divine power. Israel constantly struggled with idolatry, adopting Canaanite Baals, Asherah poles, and other pagan deities. The prophets repeatedly denounced idols as powerless, empty, and unable to save (Isaiah 44:9-20, Jeremiah 10:1-16). Jonah's statement affirms monotheistic faith—only Yahweh is real, powerful, and merciful. All else is vanity.

Related Passages

Psalms 19:1 — Heavens declare God's glory

Colossians 1:16 — All things created through Christ

Study Questions

1. What "lying vanities" do modern people observe (devote themselves to) instead of trusting God's mercy?
2. How does trusting anything other than God constitute forsaking the mercy available to us in Christ?
3. In what ways can religious performance itself become a "lying vanity" if divorced from genuine faith?

Interlinear Text

מְשַׁמְרֵי יָם	הַבָּלִי	שׁוֹאֵל	חֲסֵדָם	יַעֲזֹבוּ:
They that observe	vanities	lying	their own mercy	forsake
H8104	H1892	H7723	H2617	H5800

Additional Cross-References

Psalms 31:6 (Parallel theme): I have hated them that regard lying vanities: but I trust in the LORD.

Jeremiah 2:13 (Parallel theme): For my people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water.

2 Kings 17:15 (Parallel theme): And they rejected his statutes, and his covenant that he made with their fathers, and his testimonies which he testified against them; and they followed vanity, and became vain, and went after the heathen that were round about them, concerning whom the LORD had charged them, that they should not do like them.

Jeremiah 10:8 (Parallel theme): But they are altogether brutish and foolish: the stock is a doctrine of vanities.

1 Samuel 12:21 (Parallel theme): And turn ye not aside: for then should ye go after vain things, which cannot profit nor deliver; for they are vain.

Jeremiah 16:19 (Parallel theme): O LORD, my strength, and my fortress, and my refuge in the day of affliction, the Gentiles shall come unto thee from the ends of the earth, and shall say, Surely our fathers have inherited lies, vanity, and things wherein there is no profit.