

Vessels of the Great Potter

*“Arise, and go
down to the
potter’s house, and
there I will cause
thee to hear
my words.”*

—Jeremiah 18:2

JEREMIAH FOLLOWED THE

Lord’s directions found in our opening text. He said, “Then I went down to the potter’s house, and, behold, he wrought a work on the wheels. And the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hand of the potter: so he made it again another vessel, as seemed good to the potter to make it.”—vss. 3,4

One of the important lessons of this allegory is that God, who is pictured in this case as the potter, does not deal in an arbitrary manner with individuals or nations—the “vessels” he is creating. The responsibility rests upon them—the “clay” in this illustration—to allow themselves to become vessels fit for the Lord’s use. They must yield themselves under his masterful hand to work in harmony with his plans for mankind, including themselves. Their usefulness to God depends upon the heart attitude they allow to develop in themselves, and their responsiveness to his direction throughout their entire relationship with him.

The context of this chapter in Jeremiah clearly shows that God reserves the right to extend or withhold blessings, or to administer punishments and rewards, according to the behavior of the “clay” as it resides in his hands. That is, his actions are a direct result of the obedience or disobedience of those involved, according to their free will, and not based on a pre-determined outcome on the part of the Lord.

ELECTION AND FREE WILL

In the sixteenth century, the doctrine of “Election” came into common acceptance in Protestant Europe, primarily through the teachings of John Calvin. His viewpoint on this subject led to the teaching of predestination in the most complete sense. However, the Calvinistic view of election is not compatible with the Word of God, for our Heavenly Father does not interfere with the free will which he has given to each human being. From the very beginning, God had a design for his human family, and he is successfully carrying it out. Indeed, part of his design for man is that all, eventually, will have the opportunity, and great privilege, of cooperation with him, but each will have to do so willingly.

It was God’s will that all his intelligent creatures would become acquainted with him and his magnificent character, and each one be given an opportunity to serve him freely, from the heart. They would thereby receive inexpressible blessings such as only he can bestow upon them. Furthermore, it is the Heavenly Father’s desire that every creature in heaven or upon earth, created or yet to be created, worship and obey him and his righteous laws because they love them, and are in full heart-harmony with righteousness.

Light is cast upon our subject of the vessels of the Great Potter by the words of the Apostle Paul. "Has not the potter rightful power over the clay to make out of the same lump one vessel for more honourable and another for less honourable uses?" (Rom. 9:21, *Weymouth New Testament*) In other words, there are many vessels being produced by the Master Workman, some to great honor through their more important usage, and some to less honor comparatively, but still to some important purpose in his plan of the ages.

Once again, however, we must guard against the erroneous thought that human beings are under the control of a divine being which arbitrarily governs everything they do. If this were so, God's creatures would be like robots which have nothing to say about their destiny. This thought of predestination is not a correct premise, and is not taught in the Bible. On the contrary, the lesson of Jeremiah, chapter 18 shows that the attitude of the individual determines whether he will eventually be formed as a vessel of great honor, or one of lesser honor. Additionally, the particular use for which a vessel was designed very often determined whether it had special honor or not. In Old Testament times, some clay vessels were used for very menial tasks, while others were decorated with beautiful designs and colors, and used as splendid ornaments in the home.

VESSELS OF A POTTER

Potter's vessels are spoken of in the Scriptures on numerous occasions. They contain certain illustrations in connection with the professed people of God. In certain parts of the world men and women can

be seen gathered around a well or spring of water, drawing water for the needs of their family. The vessels which they use may hold several gallons of water. They must be sturdy and clean, and are often decorated with painted or embossed designs.

The keeping of these vessels clean would be of utmost importance. From them would be dispensed pure water for cooking and drinking, as well as for washing. For these functions—so essential for life—the containers must always remain pure and uncontaminated, lest life-threatening disease should result. Thus, to be designated as vessels of honor would require, at a minimum, that they be clean at all times.—Isa. 52:11

As one would walk down a pathway toward the well, even if a stranger, he could say to the person carrying a vessel of water, “Would you please give me a drink?” More often than not, the one bearing the vessel would gladly set it down, and allow the thirsty individual to take a drink. This vessel of honor dispensed a life-giving liquid, which aptly illustrates the people of God. First, they must be clean and pure, made so by the precious blood of Christ. (I John 1:7) They hold within themselves the pure water of life, which they freely share with all who desire to partake of it to quench their thirst. (John 4:14) The vessels holding this water are formed from clay—earthen vessels. (II Cor. 4:7) Nevertheless, they are vessels of honor because of the way they are used. Thus, footstep followers of Christ have been selected from material taken from the earth, and are being transformed into vessels fit for the Master’s use.

Continuing this illustration, when several vessels were made at one time, the potter did not make a

decision as to which would be a vessel of more honor or less honor from the outset. What determined their position of honor was the way they yielded to the potter's hand while being formed, and their intended use by those to whom they eventually belonged. Here is another distinctive lesson. We should examine ourselves as to whether we are striving earnestly with all of our ability to become a vessel of honor. We must scrutinize our character to see if we are endeavoring to exercise a generosity of spirit which would be willing under every circumstance to nourish and sustain any who might thirst for a sip of water from our vessel. There is no higher honor at the present time than to be used by God to dispense the water of life. The Lord's people are to continue, even today, to be engaged in doing just that, to the best of their abilities.

OLD TESTAMENT "VESSELS"

Near the close of the sixth creative day, or epoch, the Great Potter took some of the elements of the ground, and he formed it into the body of a man. He breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man, who God named Adam, became a "living soul," or being. (Gen. 1:26,27; 2:7) Adam was a beautiful vessel, described by the psalmist as "crowned . . . with glory and honour." (Ps. 8:4,5) He was a perfect human being. Sadly, however, Adam's disobedience and the resulting penalty pronounced upon him by God began to take effect, and the vessel which had been wrought in perfection became marred and imperfect.—Gen. 3:17-19

One of the first men chosen by God from the human family to become a vessel of honor, in a very

extraordinary and special way, was the patriarch Abraham. The call of Abraham to leave his home and his family to migrate into a land of God's choosing, known only to God, showed that the Great Potter's intention was to work with a very particular kind of clay. Here we find that faith was a necessary ingredient to be incorporated into the material God would select to use for the creation of his vessels.—Heb. 11:6,8

After Abraham's death, God dealt in turn with his seed—Isaac and Jacob—who were also part of the same original lump of clay from which God had formed Adam. They were his posterity. Later, the Lord made a further choice of Abraham's descendants, stating that the nation of Israel was to be his chosen people, selected for their "fathers' sakes." (Amos 3:1,2; Rom. 11:26-28) God gave them many experiences and lessons which were designed to prepare, fashion, and mold them for a particular service he had in mind. It was God's plan to produce from Abraham's seed a heavenly class, spoken of as "stars of the heaven."—Gen. 15:5; 22:17

The lump of clay from which the Potter desired to form this vessel, the nation of Israel, was composed of mixed materials. It had to be ground, and reground, time and again, through the leading and discipline of the Lord over the centuries, to make it more workable in his hands. However, because of a lack of faith, many times it proved not pliable enough for the Potter's purpose. Nevertheless, certain individual vessels among the nation of Israel were formed to God's great pleasure during the Jewish Age. The Apostle Paul gives a partial listing of these honorable vessels in Hebrews, chapter 11, a group we refer to as "Ancient Worthies."

NEW TESTAMENT “VESSELS” OF GREAT HONOR

Although the work of developing these Ancient Worthies was a great one, a still grander work began with our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ. Here was a vessel, perfect in every aspect, created as was Adam, in the image and likeness of God—the human likeness of the Creator. Then came the calling of the apostles, and other disciples of Jesus—a work that has proceeded throughout the entire Gospel Age. These would prove to be gloriously artistic vessels—of the very highest honor—called to glory, honor, and immortality!—Rom. 2:7

There are many illustrations in the Scriptures to depict the followers of Christ—his disciples. They are spoken of as: “the body of Christ;” “the Lamb’s wife;” “little flock;” “heirs of God;” “Abraham’s seed;” and the “more than conquerors.” (I Cor. 12:27; Rev. 21:9; Luke 12:32; Rom. 8:17,37; Gal. 3:29) These “vessels,” even in their preparatory stages, are additionally “called the sons of God. . . . Beloved, now are we the sons of God.”—I John 3:1,2

We remember the occasion when Saul of Tarsus was struck down on the Damascus road, and called to become a follower of Jesus. (Acts 9:1-6) Ananias was given the wonderful privilege of lending assistance and comfort to this former enemy of the Early Church, whose life had once been dedicated to wiping out the followers of Christ. It is understandable that initially Ananias was reluctant to accept Saul as one called of God. However, when the Lord said to him, “Go thy way: for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel,” Ananias was ready to follow the Master’s bidding.—vss. 13-17

“CHOSEN” VESSELS

In times past, when one desired a particular kind of vessel, he would often go to the potter's house and ask him to pick out a special vessel. Perhaps it would be for a gift, or for some other special occasion or use. Once the purchaser indicated the purpose of the vessel, the potter would then go look over his shelves where he stocked his inventory of completed wares. Because of his great expertise, the potter would nearly always be able to pick out a vessel which would specially suit the particular desires and requirements of the customer. This is what is meant by the thought of a “chosen vessel.”

An inexperienced purchaser of vessels might not be able to tell the difference between the value or usefulness of one vessel versus another, but not so with a craftsman such as the potter. Likewise, our Heavenly Father, the Great Potter, never makes mistakes. When Saul of Tarsus was selected by God as a chosen vessel, we can be certain that he was very special. This was not an arbitrary choice. God made this decision because he knew that Saul had qualities which could be used in his service, such as faith, loyalty, zeal, honesty, and love. Consequently, we have learned through the subsequent pages of the New Testament what a talented person he was, and how faithfully he laid down his life, using his abilities to the praise and honor of the Heavenly Father.

Thus it has been with the selection of all the kingdom vessels. This is the way it was with Saul of Tarsus, Simon Peter, and all the rest of the apostles. So it was with Mary Magdalene, Mary and Martha of Bethany, Lazarus and with each one who has been called to walk in Jesus' footsteps. We are chosen

vessels unto God, and we are speechless when it comes to offering our thanks and appreciation to him for that great honor and privilege.

GOD IS WORKING IN US

We read, “It is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure.” (Phil. 2:13) The Heavenly Father knows we have weaknesses and shortcomings. He knows that we have been born “in sin” and “shapen in iniquity.” (Ps. 51:5) With great patience and understanding he deals with our mind and will, and with the motivations and intentions of our heart. He works the clay of our being in his own skillful way, magnificently fitting, preparing, and shaping it for a special place as a chosen vessel in the glorious temple of God. Each of the members of the completed body of Christ will be unique and different, as “one star differeth from another star in glory.” (I Cor. 15:41) Each one who is “called, and chosen, and faithful” will be beings of extraordinary beauty, within and without.—Rev. 17:14

The choicest products of pottery, china, porcelain, or other forms of ceramic-type material receive special molding and shaping by their designer and creator—in the case of our lesson, the potter. After all the lines have been carefully studied and beautifully fashioned, there is still one more very necessary step that must be taken before the item is useful. The material making up the vessel is still soft and delicate. It can crumble very easily, or become marred and spoiled. Before it is valuable, it is necessary for it to be fired, or baked, in an extremely hot kiln.

In this all-important part of the process, the vessels are never exposed directly to the raw flame,

such as is produced by a bonfire. They are carefully placed in an oven where the heat is regulated to an ideal temperature for the purpose of hardening the clay. From this rather severe treatment, the pottery benefits a great deal. It becomes sealed and firm, less apt to crumble, and able to withstand its designed usage. Likewise, our Heavenly Father, after he has shaped and transformed us according to our perfect pattern—the Lord Jesus Christ—places us into the oven of affliction and tribulation, in order that we might be made strong and useful to him.

In this stage of development some of the vessels may crack under the extreme temperature. The potter does not discard them if this occurs. Too much work and love has gone into the design and creation of the piece for him to simply reject the vessel. There is a special cement, which we can liken to the healing balm of the Holy Spirit, with which cracks can be resealed. Then, it goes back into the kiln for another period of firing, after which it is examined again for flaws. More cement is used if another imperfection is discovered, and the process continues. Our Potter has great patience and skill, and he also has a particular end in view. Therefore, he is willing to work long and hard, lovingly and patiently, to make us into the vessel he desires.

VESSELS OF GOLD AND SILVER

The Apostle Paul told us, “In a great house there are not only vessels of gold and of silver, but also of wood and of earth; and some to honour, and some to dishonour [that is, less honor].” (II Tim. 2:20) In this important lesson we think that the gold vessels could appropriately represent the “little flock,”

and the silver vessels might picture those less faithful, referred to in the Scriptures as a “great multitude.” (Rev. 7:9-14) In Romans 9:22, we read concerning some that God will show his displeasure, and “make his power known,” as he endures “with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction.” Here the Scriptures evidence the fact that there will be some who do not submit to the correction or the craftsmanship of the Heavenly Father, even after they have been subjected to the tremendous heat more than one time. There is a sobering lesson in this for us.

In his words to Timothy, Paul continued, “If a man therefore purge himself from these [imperfections], he shall be a vessel unto honour, sanctified, and meet for the master’s use, and prepared unto every good work.” (II Tim. 2:21) Summing up, the apostle advises us to “follow righteousness, faith, charity [love], peace, with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart.” (vs. 22) We must be clean vessels if we will be used to serve the Lord, and then we are to be filled with the pure, living water of God’s precious truth, which we are to share with any and all who will thirst for and receive it.

A MEANINGFUL STORY

There is a story told concerning some clay that lay on the ground of a field, with no distinction from all the other dirt which surrounded it. It was coarse and commonplace. It was, however, resting high up on the bank of a river, and so it was very proud of its own importance. It listened as the trees spoke of their increasing glory when they leafed out in the Spring. It heard the flowers in

their bright colors congratulate each other on their loveliness, and the melody that the river made, as it rejoiced in its majesty. The clay then began to conclude that it was something special too.

One day, all of a sudden, the clay found itself being dug up out of the bank, placed in a cart, and transported to a small shed. There a potter placed it on a whirling wheel which spun it around until it nearly fell off. Finally, the potter pressed down hard and roughly until it began to think, "Surely this pain and misery will be worthwhile, because I will become a beautiful object of art." Soon, however, it was placed inside a very hot oven, and the clay gave up all hope. To its great surprise, this was not the end. The potter took the vessel out of the kiln and stood it alongside a pool of clear water. The vessel, now completed and ready for use, could hardly wait to see what would happen next.

It glanced curiously down into the water to see its reflection, and what it saw was a shock! It discovered that it was just an ordinary flowerpot. How disappointed it was. This, too, however, was not the end of the story. Soon a lady picked up the flowerpot and took it inside a greenhouse. She instructed the gardener to plant a beautiful scepter of regal lilies in the pot. Then she carried it into a great building, where many people were gathered together. All marveled at what a beautiful treasure had been formed.

How similar we are to the plain little flowerpot, as we are used to display the regal lilies of truth. Paul said, "God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure

in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us.”—II Cor. 4:6,7

Soon the vessels of the heavenly kingdom will be complete, and the kiln of fiery experiences will end. Perhaps just a small finishing stroke here, and a little polish there, will bring out the full beauty. Then one glorious day, “in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye,” we will be transformed into spiritual vessels, and taken into that marvelous temple, where we will hear our Father’s voice say, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant: . . . enter thou into the joy of thy Lord.”—I Cor. 15:51,52; Matt. 25:21 ■