

The Potter and the Clay

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—Isaiah 64:8*

THE LESSON OF THE

potter and the clay is interwoven through many scripture passages. In these word pictures, God portrays the peculiar interest and intimate relationship he has with his people and shows to us in a

most beautiful way how “we are his workmanship.” (Eph. 2:10) The Prophet Isaiah, in our theme text, gives us the principal thought of this lesson, speaking prophetically of the relationship of the church and their Heavenly Father.

AN ANCIENT ART

The art of making pottery, or earthenware, is one of the most common and ancient of trades and is still done today. Although more modern techniques are employed now, the basic principles of pottery-making remain the same as they have for millennia. It is abundantly evident in the scriptural account that the Israelites used earthenware

vessels as they wandered in the wilderness, and they later carried the potter's trade into the land of Canaan. The Israelites themselves had no doubt practiced the art of pottery-making while in Egypt, probably making some of the pottery used by the Pharaohs and other high-ranking officials. This is indicated in Psalm 81:6. There is later a royal establishment of potters at Jerusalem referred to in I Chronicles 4:22,23. It is believed that the "potter's field" of our Lord's day referred to in Matthew 27:10 received its name because of its use in ancient times as the pit from whence the clay was taken. It evidently was also a place where imperfect and broken pottery unfit for royal use was discarded. Isaiah 30:14 seems to refer to this arrangement.

The process of pottery-making which was evidently most commonly practiced in ancient Israel was a very simple operation. The clay, when dug, was trodden by men's feet so as to form a paste. (Isa. 41:25) It was then placed by the potter on a horizontal wheel beside which he sat and shaped the vessel with his hands as the wheel turned, adding water as needed to make the clay more pliable. Jeremiah 18:3 refers to this use of the potter's wheel. After being formed and shaped, the vessel was then smoothed and engraved with certain cutting tools. Finally, it was glazed and put into the kiln where it was baked to the proper hardness. These basic facts concerning the ancient art of pottery-making should be kept in mind as we consider how God used it as an illustration of certain aspects of his divine arrangements.

A PICTURE OF MANKIND

We read in Romans 9:21, “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?” (*Weymouth New Testament*) It is clear from this verse and its surrounding context that Adam and his race are pictured as the “clay” in the hands of the potter in the apostle’s illustration. The unfitness of this human clay for any purpose through Adam’s disobedience is the teaching of the Scriptures. (Isa. 64:6,7; Rom. 3:10-12,23) However, the Bible also teaches us that God provided a remedy for the healing of this unfitness through Jesus, who redeemed the human family, and that ultimately there will be vessels of great honor and of lesser honor in the kingdom.—I Pet. 3:18; I John 2:1,2; Matt. 6:10

NATURAL AND SPIRITUAL ISRAEL ALSO PICTURED

In Jeremiah 18, God through the prophet shows how the nation of Israel was a vessel of honor unto God so long as it served him and the Mosaic Law properly. God said to Jeremiah, recorded in verses 2-6, “Arise, and go down to the potter’s house, and there I will cause thee to hear my words. 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. Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying, O house of Israel, cannot I do with you as this potter? saith

the LORD. Behold, as the clay is in the potter's hand, so are ye in mine hand, O house of Israel." Israel, as a vessel, was marred in the hand of the potter when she failed to submit to the law of God. However, in due time, Jeremiah says, the potter would make again another vessel from the same clay.

We believe there is a great lesson here beyond that which Jeremiah could understand. It seemed for a time that fleshly Israel would be the means by which the Abrahamic Covenant would have its fulfillment. In due time, Jesus their Messiah, indeed, came unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel and gave them the opportunity to become the spiritual seed of promise. (Matt. 15:24) As a nation, however, they rejected him, and he declared, "Your house is left unto you desolate." (Matt. 23:38) As a vessel of honor, Israel had become marred in the potter's hand, and so they were cast off. Then God "made it again another vessel, as seemed good to the potter to make it." That new vessel of honor in Jeremiah's prophecy is spiritual Israel—Jesus and his church, the body of Christ. Our theme text of Isaiah 64:8 suggests that God, since Jesus' death and resurrection, is creating another beautiful vessel from this human clay, and it will take an entire age in his divine arrangement to complete this vessel of great honor and glory—his church.

While the great Master Potter has been busy forming this beautiful vessel of honor represented in the church, we see Satan was hard at work making a counterfeit vessel unto his own praise and honor. This is represented primarily in the great ecclesiastical systems of the world, designed in such a way to deceive the masses of the people. How glad

we are to know that this vessel which has been formed by the hand of Satan will soon be broken. Christ shall “rule [Greek: tend as a shepherd] them with a rod of iron; as the vessels of a potter shall they be broken to shivers.” (Rev. 2:27; Ps. 2:7-9) This is in contrast to the way the true church is being developed as a vessel of honor in the hand of the potter. Psalm 139:15 says, “My substance was not hid from thee, when I was made in secret, and curiously wrought in the lowest parts of the earth.” The members of the true church are known only to God and to one another. The world, however, lying in ignorance and blind unbelief, cannot see nor understand anything about this beautiful vessel unto honor that is being “curiously wrought in the lowest parts of the earth” by the hand of God.

THE POTTER’S FIELD

We recall in Matthew 27:3-10 the account of how our Lord was betrayed for thirty pieces of silver—the price of a slave at that time—and that this was just enough to purchase the potter’s field. (see Exod. 21:32; Zech. 11:12,13) As previously stated, the potter’s field probably got its name from ancient times when there was a royal establishment of potters at Jerusalem, referred to in I Chronicles 4:23. It was the area where the clay pits were located, of which various royal vessels were made. Although the potter’s field had long since ceased to be used in connection with pottery making, its name continued unto Jesus’ day. It was considered then only as a mostly worthless piece of ground, no doubt containing many pits and marshes of miry clay suitable only as a place to dump refuse or, as it was

used after being bought for thirty pieces of silver, a place to bury strangers who could not afford a decent interment.—Matt. 27:7

We see in this a beautiful picture. The whole human family currently are strangers from the favor of God. Being reckoned as dead in Adam they are all represented as buried in the miry pit of the potter's field. Just as ancient Israel's potter's field once produced vessels used in the royal courts, our first parents were formed from clay, from the elements of the earth, and prepared and shaped into beautiful vessels of honor—created in the moral image and likeness of God. (Gen. 1:26,27) When sin entered in, however, they were cast off from God's favor and placed under the condemnation of divine judgment. The earth also was cursed on their behalf. (Gen. 3:6-19) It is in this miry pit of sin and death the human family has been brought forth and resided. "I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me." (Ps. 51:5) The whole earth is a potter's field for the entire human family, all of whom have fallen from divine favor.

We see that our Lord Jesus, through the shedding of his own precious blood on Calvary's cross, has bought back the potter's field. (Eph. 2:13; I Pet. 1:18,19; Rev. 1:5) In due time the human family will be lifted up out of the miry pit and shaped into vessels of honor under the mighty and loving hand of our God. When the plans of the great potter shall be fully accomplished, every creature in heaven and in earth shall be heard ascribing praise and thanksgiving, honor, dominion, majesty and might "unto him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb."—Rev. 5:13; 7:12

A PERSONAL LESSON

We want to further apply this picture of the potter and the clay from a more personal standpoint. We recall our text in Isaiah 64:8, speaking prophetically of the church, declares the position of each one of us. "Now, O Lord, thou art our father; we are the clay, and thou our potter; and we all are the work of thy hand." There is no illustration in the Bible that could better picture this close relationship that we have with our Heavenly Father and the tender care and interest that he has in us. As clay in the potter's hand is completely under his control as to the kind of vessel to be wrought, so only by the complete submission of ourselves to God's will can he shape us into a vessel unto honor, truly praiseworthy, reflecting the glory and majesty of him and his dear son Christ Jesus.—Heb. 12:9; James 4:7; I Pet. 4:1,2

Just as a potter seeks out the pure clay from which to make his vessels, so our Heavenly Father has been seeking out from amongst mankind those who search for him with all their heart—those who "seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him, and find him." (Jer. 29:13; Acts 17:27) "I waited patiently for the LORD; and he inclined unto me, and heard my cry. He brought me up also out of an horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock, and established my goings."—Ps. 40:1,2

In ancient times, clay was tempered with water to make it more pliable in the potter's hands. Water is often used as a symbol of Truth, and so it is that as clay in the hands of the great potter, we must be saturated with the water of Truth. This life-giving water must have more than just a surface effect in

our lives. It must penetrate to the heart condition, because only by it being fully absorbed can the great potter work with us “both to will and to do of his good pleasure.” (Phil. 2:13) How important it is then that we not allow anything to prevent us from being refreshed daily at the fountain of Truth, and thus keep ourselves in a proper pliable condition before God.

It was also necessary that all foreign objects such as stones, pieces of wood, or anything that was not part of the clay be removed by the potter so that it would not mar the vessel. The Lord is purging out of our lives the dross of sin that we may indeed be shaped into vessels unto honor. Paul wrote, “If a man therefore purge himself from these [impurities], 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) Our Heavenly Father, in his love and wisdom, is giving us experiences from day-to-day that are calculated to point out the sins and impurities that must be purged out of our lives. It is most important then that we do our part in this matter by learning and applying the lessons of experience that God gives us. “Those whom the Lord loves he disciplines.”—Heb. 12:6, *WNT*

MADE INTO A VESSEL OF HONOR

The ancient potter would take the lump of clay, put it on the potter’s wheel, and he would first shape it into the type of vessel that he had in mind to make. Then he would engrave upon it, with the use of certain cutting tools, the design or artwork with which he wished to *(Continued on page 36)*

(Continued from page 31) beautify it. When God saw our heart condition and accepted our consecration, he in effect lifted us out of the miry pit and set us upon the potter's wheel. The world would think of these experiences merely the result of happenstance, but to us they represent the providential leadings of the Heavenly Father. If we submit to the turning of the wheel of his providence he will indeed be able to shape us into a vessel of honor.

After we have been generally transformed into the image likeness of our Master and pattern Jesus, then comes the work of the fine details of character that must be worked out gradually in the life of each one of us. This is where God, as the Master Potter, uses special tools to engrave our characters and to work out these details. If we have need of patience, God has a special tool for that—experiences that are designed to help us develop patience. If we have need of self-control, surely he also has special tools that he can use to help us along these lines. Gradually then, we are able to reflect Christ's image likeness more and more as our characters are developed and made beautiful under the loving hand of the great potter. "Whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son." (Rom. 8:29) We should also remember that God engraves each of his vessels separately. We each need special and unique experiences, those which will best work out our individual character requirements and which will best help us deal with our own particular needs. Only our loving Heavenly Father knows what is best for each of us.

Next, the ancient potter would glaze the vessel with a substance designed to smooth and harden the

surface and to generally beautify its appearance. Many people in the world have an outward polish or shine that seems to indicate a good character, but many times we learn that it is only a surface appearance. With the church, however, the “glazing,” or outward appearance, that we manifest to others should truly represent the character within. Let us be sure that our conduct and appearance before others gives evidence of our inward faith, conviction, and character.

FIERY TRIALS NECESSARY

The final process in pottery-making is that of baking the vessel in the kiln, this being required to permanently fix its condition, to harden it and make it strong enough to perform its required duties as a vessel. So the Heavenly Father crystallizes our characters through fiery trials designed to firmly fix us in the character likeness of Christ. When we stop to consider, God intends to entrust to us all the responsibilities that go with the high exaltation to the divine nature, and all the responsibility of the kingdom work. Surely he will only be able to use those who have been tried, proven, and found worthy. Thus we should, as Peter states, “think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you.” (I Pet. 4:12) Rather, if God is permitting us to have severe trials, fiery trials, let us rejoice and be glad that in his love and wisdom he is fixing our characters and proving us in this way.

The ancient potter knew just how hot to make the furnace, and exactly how long to leave the vessel in it. God knows that about us too. He knows just

the proper kind of trials to give each us and will not permit any experience to be more than we can bear. (I Cor. 10:13) As the firing of the vessel was the final process, it seems to picture that these special fiery trials would come after we have reached a considerable degree of spiritual maturity, in the latter part of our Christian lives.

As we think of the trials that we are having, or may have in the future, we should always remember that we are in the potter's hands and that it is he who is carefully and lovingly preparing us for kingdom use. He has given "his angels charge over" us. (Ps. 91:11) If we keep this in mind, we will be able to pass through our trials successfully, and indeed, rejoice in tribulation, knowing that it comes to us by the will of God.

GOD'S WILL, NOT OURS, BE DONE

Do we ever question the Heavenly Father, or try to avoid some of the experiences he gives us? Have we ever thought in our minds that he has permitted some things to happen to us that were unnecessary? "Shall the clay say to him that fashioneth it, What makest thou?" (Isa. 45:9) Let us never question the Father's leadings, but let our faith be strong enough to accept each lesson we get in the school of Christ as necessary for our learning and development. If we are finally found to be a vessel unto honor and worthy to be used to his praise in the kingdom, it will be because of the merciful and loving care of the great potter, our Heavenly Father. What a privilege it is to be among those who are being thus formed as vessels of honor who, if found "faithful unto death," will be used eternally to bring

glory to the loving and worthy name of the Master Potter.—Rev. 2:10

In concluding our lesson, let us remember the words of the 139th Psalm. “O LORD, thou hast searched me, and known me. Thou knowest my downsitting and mine uprising, thou understandest my thought afar off. Thou compassed my path and my lying down, and art acquainted with all my ways. For there is not a word in my tongue, but, lo, O LORD, thou knowest it altogether. Thou hast beset me behind and before, and laid thine hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain unto it. Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; Even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me. If I say, Surely the darkness shall cover me; even the night shall be light about me. Yea, the darkness hideth not from thee; but the night shineth as the day: the darkness and the light are both alike to thee. For thou hast possessed my reins: thou hast covered me in my mother’s womb. I will praise thee; for I am fearfully and wonderfully made: marvellous are thy works; and that my soul knoweth right well. My substance was not hid from thee, when I was made in secret, and curiously wrought in the lowest parts of the earth. Thine eyes did see my substance, yet being unperfect; and in thy book all my members were written, which in continuance were fashioned, when as yet there was none of them.”

“How precious also are thy thoughts unto me, O God! how great is the sum of them! If I should count them, they are more in number than the sand: when I awake, I am still with thee. Surely thou wilt slay the wicked, O God: depart from me therefore, ye bloody men. For they speak against thee wickedly, and thine enemies take thy name in vain. Do not I hate them, O LORD, that hate thee? and am not I grieved with those that rise up against thee? I hate them with perfect hatred: I count them mine enemies. Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.” ■