

IN THE HANDS OF THE POTTER

"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." Jeremiah 18:4.

For years Jeremiah had been faithful in preaching a message of love and righteousness. He had done his best to awaken the consciences of the people and to show them God's way. To him it seemed that his strenuous efforts had hardened their hearts instead of softening them, and had blinded their eyes instead of opening them. The lives of the people were marred by weaknesses, failures, mistakes and sins. Their delinquencies cut Jeremiah deeply.

The prophet was disappointed and discouraged. He thought that his labors had been in vain. He concluded that he had been a protest and nothing more. He felt like someone who was trying to rescue a drowning man, but in reality was only thrusting him deeper into the water. He decided that God had done all He could and that there was no hope for the nation, but that God had given up the people for good. While brooding over the doom that was facing his people, Jeremiah was so discouraged that he was ready to quit. What a pitiable sight it is to see a strong man lose heart and hope!

In the most trying phase of his ministry, and when he was in special need of enlightenment and encouragement, God wanted to show His servant that his despondency was not justified. Although the people had refused to become what they should, and what God wanted them to be, still they might become something. Even though they had rebelled against God, there was still some hope for them. God wanted to teach Jeremiah that he should not lose hope. To a well-known pottery God sent Jeremiah not to preach a sermon, but to prepare one. This interesting and instructive story is a reminder to us that ordinary scenes and secular work may be eloquent with divine teaching to any whose hearts are ready to receive it.

It is easy to visualize Jeremiah in his loose-flowing robe walking slowly and softly out of the temple, through the Eastern Gate and down the slope into the Valley of Hinnom, thinking of how different the course of Israel would have been if only the people had obeyed God. Jeremiah must have recalled that God had chosen the Israelites to be a light to the Gentiles, but they had thwarted His will for them. He had purposed that through them His grace and blessing should flow to all of the heathen nations round about, but they had failed God when He had depended on them. It was exceedingly difficult for Jeremiah to understand how the wise and gracious purpose of God could possibly be accomplished through a people who so consistently ignored His purpose and rebelled against His will.

Presently Jeremiah arrived at the potter's house, entered his workshop and found him faithfully engaged in his daily work. He stood there and watched him closely as he worked. As the prophet gazed intently at this industrious workman, he must have noted at least four things.

I. A Person.

Jeremiah observed an intelligent and capable workman sitting at his bench, with a mass of clay near him, a basin of water by his side and a potter's wheel in front of him. He saw him take a lump of clay, moisten it, knead it with his hands, and then place it on the wheel which revolved at the pressure of his foot on the treadle. He also observed the potter's nimble fingers manipulating the clay on the revolving wheel as he made a useful vessel according to his own purpose and design. All of his energies were used in constructive work.

In this thought-provoking parable the potter represents God. He is an illustration of the interest, the attention and the power of God. As the potter is related directly to the clay in his hand, so is God related to man. God said, "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." God is the potter and man is the clay. When one beholds the potter at his work, he is certainly impressed with his right over the clay. Man is God's creation, His providence is the wheel on which man's life is fashioned, and at the end of life man is still in the hand of God. The message which God gave to His prophet in the potter's workshop was to the effect that the God of the Israelites was their Potter and they were His clay. He was doing His best to make them into vessels of honor for His use.

II. A Plan.

As Jeremiah stood watching the potter at his work, it was very obvious to him that the efficient workman had a certain plan or design in his mind. Even though the pattern was invisible to the onlooker, it was none the less real and definite. The plan in the mind of the potter regulated and determined everything that he did. When he took the clay and put it on the wheel and held his hand upon it as the wheel revolved, the potter wrought by a plan.

Before a building is erected, the plan for it is in the mind of the architect. Before a bridge spans the stream, the plan for it is in the mind of the builder. Before the artist touches the canvas with his brush, the picture is painted on the delicate walls of his imagination. Before the poet pens his inspiring lines, the thought is conceived in the sanctuary of his soul. Before the music is set in sharps and flats, the musician hears the song in the deepest recesses of his spirit. Before the sculptor lifts his mallet and chisel on the shapeless marble, the vision rises clearly and lovely in his illumined mind.

The sovereignty of the potter expresses itself in the pressure of his formative hand. Watch him as he is seated at the wheel, with a plan in his mind, and on the wheel in front of him he has placed some formless clay. The wheel begins to revolve and, as it turns, you see his hand moving and pressing, giving a little here and pressing a little harder there. What is that for? It is to bring into existence or reality the plan which is in his mind. In the fulfilment of this creative work two factors are all-important: first, the pressure of his formative hand upon the clay; and secondly, the pace of the revolving wheel. Let me remind you, also, that he is in control of both. He brings the pressure and he is in charge of the pace. The passion which dominated the heart of the potter is the perfection of the vessel. His glory depends upon the vessel that he makes. His reputation is at stake. He is very much concerned that there shall not be any flaw in the vessel that goes out of his hand.

Since a potter works according to plans, surely we can expect as much of God. Just as a potter plans every vessel that he makes, so the Divine Potter plans every human life. This is taught repeatedly in the Bible. God does not do anything without a plan and a purpose. He has a plan for every life. He has a pattern for every character and an ideal for every soul. He has a plan for your life and mine as certainly as He had one for Moses, David, Paul, Spurgeon, Carey, Judson and Livingstone. There is some definite, beautiful and desirable ideal which He wants each of us to realize. Each of us is going to be happy, successful and useful in proportion as it fulfills the plan God has for it. Have you discovered God's plan for your life? It is certainly the height of wisdom to do so. Things cannot go well in any life which does not conform to God's will. ~~It~~ pleads with you to give Him His rightful place in your life. Accept His plan because it is best for you.

III. A Probability.

It was obvious to Jeremiah that the potter exercised every precaution to prevent any marring of the vessel. He gave the clay every opportunity to become a useful vessel. As the vessel neared completion the potter examined it and discovered that it was marred. Something had thwarted his plan and frustrated his purpose. The vessel was not marred through the lack of skill on the part of the potter, but because there was some resisting quality in the clay that would not yield to the deftness of his hand. This defect in the clay might have been caused by any one of a number of things. The clay might have been lacking in consistency. It might have been too stiff. It might have had an air-pocket in it. It might have had a stone concealed in it that caused a blemish on the vessel.

Since the clay represents man, doubtless you have caught the idea. Perhaps there is a stone concealed in your life, some sin that has become a part of your very nature, and it is marring and ruining your life. Sin always mars the vessel, thwarts the purposes of God and frustrates His grace in the life. Some of God's children are on the shelf because sin came into their lives.

It is quite probable that God's plan for your life will be marred by you. The very weakest of us may thwart His purposes for our lives if we so desire. It is the highest dignity of life, as well as the greatest danger in life, that we can say "No" to God, and thus mar His plan for our lives. Have you refused to do some piece of work which He has given you?

IV. A Possibility.

Instead of tossing aside the clay in the marred vessel, the potter started over again. With the same clay he attempted to make another vessel as seemed best to him. He refused to permit his skill to be baffled. He intended to give his ideal reality, so he worked constructively until the clay took the desired form.

It is here that we come to the most glorious truth in this passage. It brings encouragement and kindles hope. It tells us that, even though our lives have been marred by mistakes, failures and sins, we need not despair. Marred lives can be remade. There is grace sufficient to take the worst backslidden Christian and make him what he should be.

However, it should be said that the marred life will never be all that it might have been and should have been. This thought was expressed by Hezekiah Butterworth in his poem entitled, "The Broken Pinion." He said:

"I walked through the woodland meadows,
Where sweet the thrushes sing;
And I found on a bed of mosses,
A bird with a broken wing.
I healed its wound, and each morning
It sang its old sweet strain,
But the bird with a broken pinion
Never soared as high again.

I found a young life broken
By sin's seductive art;
And, touched with a Christ-like pity,
I took him to my heart.

He lived with a noble purpose
And struggled not in vain;
But the life that sin had stricken
Never soared as high again.

But the bird with a broken pinion
Kept another from the snare;
And the life that sin had stricken
Raised another from despair.
Each loss has its compensation,
There is healing for every pain;
But the bird with a broken pinion
Never soars as high again."

Even though you have marred God's plan for your life, He says, "Do not despair, I will give you another chance." Thank God there is a way out of the bogs, the mire and the night. Just as the statement, "The vessel was marred," gives us the dark picture of sin, so the assertion, "He made it again another vessel," is the glorious news of salvation. Some may say of another, "That fellow is no good. You are wasting your time on him." It is Satan who gets people to talk like that. God is able to make a person into a new creature. He has taken the pieces of broken lives and made them over in many cases.

God has taken the marred lives of millions and made them again. He wants to do the same for you. Let Him show others what He can do for you and with you. Place your life in His hands and let Him mold it, make it, bless it and use it. He will make of it something far beyond anything you could possibly do with it. Completely surrender to His loving will now and let Him have His way with you. If you are not a child of God, receive Christ as your Saviour now and make a public profession of your faith in Him by coming to the front while we sing the simply hymn:

"HAVE Thine own way, Lord! Have Thine own way!
Thou art the Potter, I am the clay.
Mould me and make me After Thy will,
While I am waiting, Yielded and still.

Have Thine own way, Lord! Have Thine own way!
Hold o'er my being Absolute sway!
Fill with Thy Spirit Till all shall see
Christ only, always, Living in me!"

Out of this submissive response to the sovereign sway of the potter, there will come a vessel changed from glory to glory, till in heaven you take your place; till you cast your crowns before Him, lost in wonder, love, and praise.