

THE GOSPEL OF ANOTHER CHANCE

Jeremiah 18:4

Jeremiah had been a very faithful minister. For years he had been preaching a message of love and of righteousness. He sought to help his people avert the calamity that was coming upon them because they had turned their backs upon God. He had done his best to awaken their consciences and to show them God's way. Now it seemed as if all his 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 mistakes and faults and failures and sins.

Jeremiah was discouraged. He realized that his labors had been unavailing and fruitless. It seemed as though he were a protest and nothing more. He felt like someone who was trying to rescue a man from drowning, but in spite of all his efforts he was only thrusting him deeper in the water. He began to ask the question, "What is going to happen to these people?" He wondered if they would be cast aside on the rubbish heap as a nation that was of no use to God. What a pitiful sight to see a strong man lose hope!

In the midst of his discouragement and while he was brooding on the failures of his people, God told Jeremiah to go down to the potter's house and there he would receive a helpful message. This command came to Jeremiah when he was in special need of encouragement and enlightenment in the most trying phase of his ministry. God wanted to show him that his despondency was not justified, because although the people had refused to become what they might have been still they might become something. In other words, there is never a time when men should lose hope. Although people may be broken by adversity and marred by sin, still, under God, there is always hope.

In obedience to God's command, Jeremiah immediately went to the potter's house. As he went along he thought how different the course of Israel and the flow of her national life would have been if only God's will had been supreme. He had chosen them to be a light to the Gentiles, but, alas! they were darkness. In their unwise choice and evil deeds they had foiled the divine plan and frustrated the divine purpose. It was exceedingly difficult for him to understand how the wise and gracious purpose of God could possibly be accomplished through a people who so constantly ignored His purpose and rebelled against His will.

Presently the prophet arrived at the potter's house and found him faithfully engaged in his daily work. This incident is a splendid reminder that ordinary scenes and secular work may be eloquent with divine teaching to any whose hearts are ready to receive it. As Jeremiah gazed intently upon this faithful workman, it seems to me that he must have noted at least four things.

I. A Person.

This person is the potter. He was an intelligent and capable worker. He wrought his work of molding the clay into a vessel with apparent ease and speed. The wheel revolved at the pressure of the potter's foot and his fingers manipulated the clay. Jeremiah marvelled at the simplicity of it all, but marvelled most of all that such a commonplace incident could become a channel for so great a message.

He watched the potter take a piece of clay and place it upon the revolving wheel and begin to shape it into a beautiful and useful vessel. But just before it was completed and ready to be hardened in the oven, something concealed in the clay resisted the potter's touch and the vessel was marred. Jeremiah expected the potter to take another piece of clay, which was less faulty and mold the object he desired, but to his surprise he gathered the clay that was marred and after kneading it in his hands placed it on the wheel, and under his touch the clay again found shape

until it was perfected and finished. Then God said to him, "Behold, as the clay is in the potter's hands, so are ye in mine hands, O house of Israel."

Now the potter represents God. He is an illustration of the interest, attention and power of God. As the potter had taken the marred and broken clay and made the vessel again, so God would give Israel another chance. When God cannot make of us what He would, He is still patient to make of us what He can. We have sinned and come short of the glory of God. Still God has not cast us aside as useless vessels. There is in this much reason for hope and encouragement. He would still make the best He can of us.

II. A Plan.

As Jeremiah closely observed the potter at his work, he realized that he was working with a certain ideal in his mind. The ideal was invisible to the onlooker, and it was very real and definite. So God has a plan for every life. He has a pattern for every character and an ideal for every soul. He does not do anything without a plan or a purpose. There is some definite, desirable and beautiful ideal which God wishes us to realize. Each life is going to be successful in proportion as it fulfills the plan God has for it. If God has a plan for every life, it is certainly the height of wisdom to discover that plan. Things do not go well in any life that is outside the circle of the will of God. There is no more comforting assurance than the fact that God is steadfastly working for the accomplishment of His divine purposes.

Before the potter shaped his vessel, he had the plan for it in his mind. When he took the clay and put it on the wheel and held his hand upon it while he turned the wheel, he wrought by a plan. Before a building is erected, the plan for it is in the mind of the architect or carpenter. Before a bridge spans the river, the plan for it is in the builder's mind. 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 secret of his spirit. Before the sculptor lifts his mallet and chisel on the shapeless marble, the vision rises sweet and lovely in his illumined mind. Before we were born into this world, God had a plan for your lives and mine. We never know fully what God is getting us ready for so we ought to pray, "Father, prepare us for what Thou art preparing for us." Because God has a plan for each of our lives, we must place greater emphasis on personal responsibility. We might well emulate Jonathan Edwards who said, "Resolved, first, that every man should live always at his highest and best for God. Resolved, second, whether any other man in the world strives to do so or not, I will, so help me God." Above every other quest, let us seek to find His plan for our lives and to follow his plan with unwavering fidelity.

III. A Probability.

It is quite probable that God's plan will be marred by man. One shudders at the thought that a frail human being can and often does mar the plan of God. Man needs always to remember that responsibility is ever the price of privilege.

Jeremiah observed that the vessel was marred not because of the lack of skill on the part of the potter but because there was some stubborn resisting quality in the clay that would not yield to the deftness of the potter's hand. So we may utterly fail to realize God's ideal. However, we recognize that there is a great difference between us and a lump of clay. The clay is passive, powerless and helpless in the hands of the potter. It has no power of will, no liberty of choice and no possibility of decision. Just as it is possible and even probable that the clay will resist the touch of the potter, so it is likewise probable that men will refuse to yield to the Great Potter and obey Him. It is our glorious, but also our

terrible, prerogative that we are endowed with the power of choice. We can oppose the Divine Potter. We can joyously submit to God or we can wickedly oppose Him. Right here is the highest dignity and also the greatest danger of our lives. We can say "No" to God and thus mar His plan for our lives.

1. Nations mar the plan of the Divine Potter.

- (1) Israel did it.
- (2) Egypt did it.
- (3) Assyria did it.

Each of these defied the law of God and went down to disaster, defeat and doom.

- (4) Our nation is doing it.

Reverent obedience to the Holy Law of God made this nation great. Our ancestors were men and women of prayer. They believed the Bible and lived by it. They magnified obedience to God. They magnified the church. This nation became great because of its loyalty to God. It has been getting proud, self-centered, self-willed and rebellious. If it keeps on trying to get along without God, it will sink down to sleep in the cemetery of defeated nations. Religion is the determining factor of any civilization or nation.

2. Churches mar the plan of the Divine Potter.

The seven churches of Asia once radiated a glorious light which piloted the people into the right way. Then they became self-centered and their candlesticks were removed from them. Any church that presumes to defy Christ's plan is doomed. The only safe thing for a church to do is to obey Christ.

3. Families mar the plan of the Divine Potter.

Many great and strong families are broken, scattered and going from bad to worse. When selfishness dominates a family it is doomed to decay. Selfishness means the downfall of its possessor, whether it be a nation, a church or a family.

4. Individuals mar the plan of the Divine Potter.

David, Samson, Solomon, Saul, Peter, Mark, etc.

We have done it. Sin darkens the understanding, perverts the will, sears the conscience, changes affections and hurls reason from the throne. The Christian mars the plan of the Divine Potter when he is not pliant in the Potter's hand. The vessel is marred when there is secret sin, a stony heart or a sullen will that will not bend. Sometimes a church member attends the services, joins in the singing, gives to the support of the church, works in the church and is happy in his spiritual growth. Then, because of a lump of pride, a stiffness of will or a stone of sin his attendance ceases, his songs die, his giving stops and unhappiness comes. The vessel is marred and cannot be used.

IV. A Possibility.

Yea, the possibility that our marred lives may be made over again. The Potter does not throw away the marred vessel, but he breaks it and puts it on the wheel again and reshapes it. His skill is not to be baffled. He intends to give his ideal reality so he shapes and breaks until the clay takes the form he wishes. The truth that this conveys is that God will not easily let man go but exercises great patience and persistence with him. Just as the potter could not make what he might have wished with the clay but did the best he could with his materials so is God trying to do His best for us. If we refuse the best, He gives the next best.

Though we mar God's plan, He says, "Do not despair, I will give you another chance." Here is the glorious Gospel of Christ, the way of hope, light, and life; the way out of the bogs, the slough, the mire, and the night. The statement, "The vessel was marred" gives us the dark picture of sin. The assertion, "He made it again another vessel" is the glorious news of salvation. Some may say that man is no good; he has failed so many times. You are wasting your time over him. It is the devil that talks like that. God is able to make one a new creature by taking away the old stony heart and giving a heart of love. He has done it many times.

Yonder at the Jabbok ford where He found Jacob a supplanter and a cheat He wrestled with him and made him over again, leaving him a prince with God.

He made David over again and gave him another chance after his fall.

He gave Samson another chance.

He found Simon Peter, who had even denied him, somewhere near the open grave on the resurrection morning, and after giving him another chance, He left him the Apostle of Pentecost.

He made John Mark over again and sometime between the day when he impulsively left Paul and Barnabas and the times when Peter spoke of him as his son, and Paul described him as being profitable.

Yes, He has even made again you and me, Christian friend, Although we have faltered and slipped and strayed He says, "I will give you another chance." The Tragedy of the marred life is that it will never again be fully repaired and restored. It is better though that a life should be saved and made over though marred than that it should be utterly lost. God will make you over again and give you another chance if you will surrender your marred and sinful life to Him. Listen to the cry of a marred and sinful life: ---

"I've tried in vain a thousand ways,
My fears to quell, my hopes to raise;
And all I need, the Bible says,
Is Jesus.

My soul is night, my heart is steel,
I cannot see, I cannot feel;
For light, for Life I must appeal
To Jesus.

He died, He lives, He reigns, He pleads
There's a love in all His words and deeds;
All, all a guilty sinner needs
Is Jesus.

Though some will mock, and some will blame,
In spite of fear, in spite of shame,
I'll go to Him, because His name
Is Jesus."

This is the best news for you that ever came from heaven -- the news that Jesus died for every one of your sins -- past, present, and future. If you will trust Him He will not only save you, but make you over again. Thank God for a Saviour who is able to make you over again. Will you bring your marred life to Him to have it mended by Him who desires to give you another chance as we sing:---

"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."