

The Parable of the Potter

“O house of Israel, cannot I do with you as this potter? saith Yahweh. Behold, as the clay is in the potter’s hand, so are ye in Mine hand, O house of Israel” (Jer. 18:6)

The Creation narrative given through Moses describes the formation of man in these terms:

“Yahweh Elohim formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul” (Gen 2:7).

So, we find that there were distinct stages in the bringing into existence of a living, breathing man. Firstly, as a potter forms clay into an image suitable for his purpose, the elohic hands formed man from the 3-day-old dust of the ground. Then, into that organized clay form, the *ruach chayim*, or breath of lives was exhaled, causing that earth-man to become a ‘living soul’. Not an ‘immortal soul’, as some would have us believe, but a ‘living soul,’ styled by the Apostle, a ‘natural body,’ as distinct from a ‘spiritual body’:

“There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body. And so it is written, the first man Adam was made a living soul; the last Adam was made a quickening spirit ... the *first man is of the earth, earthy*; the second man is the Lord from heaven. As is the earthy, such are they also that are earthy: and as is the heavenly, such also are they that are heavenly. And as we have borne *the image of the earthy*, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly” (1Cor 15:44-49).

We then, in the natural state of things bear the ‘image’ of Adam (cp Gen 5:3), in possessing “earthy” bodies, natural bodies ultimately derived from the dust of the ground. And whether or not ‘in the twinkling of an eye’ we shall be made incorruptible, bearing the ‘image of the heavenly’, entirely depends upon how we make use of the things in this life – and the deeds performed in the natural body. Even as it is written: “we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad” (2Cor 5:10). Our ultimate destiny; whether it be to perish for ever, having been rejected by the Righteous Judge, or whether it be to bear the image of the heavenly in having our mortal frames transformed to become like unto his most glorious body (Phil 3:21), is governed by the manner of our conduct in this life. So it is, that use and development of the natural body, in this sense, forms the basis for the heavenly; if it is used in accordance with the Creator’s wishes, He will give it that necessary transformation.

THE POTTER’S PURPOSE

All of mankind being but dust, as clay before the Great Potter, it so pleases him to fulfill his purpose by dredging out of the mire of humanity individuals who might be so moulded as to be made suitable vessels for use in His house. And who are those selected to complain, or resist? So the Apostle enquired: “Shall the thing formed say to Him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus? Hath not the potter power over

the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour?" (Rom 9:20,21). Out of one lump, one race of men, the Great Potter has power to make both vessels to honour, and also to dishonour. Those who prove themselves to be amenable to His Purpose, being malleable in His Hand, will be made honourable vessels, and others who harden themselves before Him, who refuse to be shaped will be rejected.

This latter class is illustrated in the case of Pharaoh. Interestingly he was made a vessel suitable for the exhibition of Divine Glory, despite being a vessel of dishonour. Refusing to become honourable, his fleshly resistance was used by the Divine Hand to enable Divine Power to be displayed in judicial manifestation. Accordingly, "the Scripture saith unto Pharaoh, Even for this same purpose have I raised thee up, that I might shew my power in thee, and that my Name might be declared throughout all the earth. Therefore hath he mercy on whom He will have mercy, and whom he will, he hardeneth ... what if God, *willing to shew his wrath, and to make his power known*, endured with longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction: and that He might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which He had afore prepared unto glory, even us, whom He hath called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles:" (Rom 9:22-24).

Pharaoh was endured with longsuffering, in order that the riches of the Father's Glory might be bestowed upon the Israelitish vessels, and be mightily manifested in their deliverance. And those vessels that will be filled with glory in the Age to come, are those who do not become hardened in the Divine Hand, but who permit themselves to become so developed, molded and shaped as He Pleases. These are those who do not resist the forces and pressures exerted in order to form the necessary shape – and those pressures will duly come, for without them, the selected clay-man cannot be molded: "we must through much pressure (*Greek*) enter into the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22), is the Spirit's testimony, and that Divinely regulated pressure is designed to form us into vessels of splendor "meet for the master's use, prepared unto every good work" (2Tim 2:21).

ISRAEL AS CLAY IN THE DIVINE HAND

Israel were taken out from Egypt for such a purpose; yet they refused to comply. Rather preferring the abominations of the nations, they challenged the Potter's right and authority to make vessels out of them according to His Will. Thus, the prophet gave the rebuke: "Woe unto him that striveth with his Maker! Let the potsherd strive with the potsherds of the earth. Shall the clay say to him that fashioneth it, "What makest thou?" Or thy work, "He hath no hands?" (Is 45:9)

Again, the word of Yahweh came through Jeremiah, saying:

"O house of Israel, cannot I do with you as this potter? Saith Yahweh. Behold, as the clay is in the potter's hand, so are ye in Mine hand, O house of Israel. At what instant I shall speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom to pluck up, and to pull down, and to destroy it; if that nation, against whom I have pronounced, turn from their evil, I will repent of the evil that I thought to do unto them. And at what instant I shall speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to build and to plant it; if

it do evil in my sight, that it obey not my voice, then I will repent of the good wherewith I said I would benefit them” (Jer 18:6-10).

The latter part of this verse, to do with the Almighty altering an intended course of action in response to human repentance or rebellion, is often taken out of its context. On the basis of this passage, a “problem” is sometimes presented to us: how we can claim that the Father’s promises are sure and certain, if He will change what He does in reaction to man’s obedience or rebellion? So in a certain magazine, this “problem” was put to the present writer:

“in the OT first, it is made abundantly clear that *prophecies are generally conditional* even when it does not explicitly say so. Jeremiah 18 explains this in simple language”.

And again:

“it no longer makes good sense to maintain that since God promised a new temple with associated animal sacrifices through Ezekiel and that this has never to our knowledge been fulfilled that it must therefore still remain to be fulfilled in any literal sense in the future. What was promised to God’s people through Ezekiel was appropriate to them in OT circumstances but is no longer so to us after the coming of Jesus. This is a perfect example of the principle explained in Jeremiah 18. *God is free to change his mind ...* If this leaves us with a problem of how to deal with apparently unfulfilled promises then that is our problem and not God’s” (p 10).

The problem is, how to reconcile a belief in the certainty, and unchanging nature of the Father’s promises with Jeremiah 18, which ascribes change to the Almighty. The answer is seen when it is recognised that the above article is taking Jeremiah’s words out of their context – which is not to do with the dependability/certainty or otherwise of the Father’s promises, but is rather to do with a Potter seeking to mould nations/peoples, as clay under expertly guided pressure into vessels suitable for His Use.

The Potter has a Purpose, and He has graciously condescended to reveal that purpose to those who have ears to hear. And He requires nations to conform to His requirements – either to turn from iniquity, or to remain righteous. If a nation refuses to turn from its iniquity, as a potter squashes up the clay, even so the Creator will execute His judgments upon that nation. If they do turn under the pressure brought to bear upon them by hearing the prophetic testimony, the nation will be spared those judgments - the example of Nineveh being a case in point. But either way, whether they make themselves vessels to honour, or to dishonour, His Power will be made known, whether it be in benevolent, or judicial manifestation.

Accordingly, if a nation turns from conformity to the Potter’s guiding Hand, to become hardened against Him – it will be squashed up, and the clay re-moulded as the Potter sees fit. Either way, the Potter will be glorified, and His Purpose to make honourable vessels will be accomplished. The promises of the Father are steadfast and sure - the only “conditional” element associated with them, is not whether or not they will take place at all, but whether or not particular peoples will have a part with them.

And from the Apostle's use of this chapter in Romans chapter 9, it is evident that the same principles apply on an individual level, as well as a national. Those who refuse to be developed into honourable vessels will not by any means affect the Potter's purpose to form an array of such vessels; He will merely squash them up, and continue His work. They will not be amongst that splendid array - but an array there shall surely be!

THE CERTAINTY OF THE FATHER'S PROMISES

This being so, Jeremiah's words do not comprise a declaration that "that prophecies are generally conditional even when it does not explicitly say so," but is dealing with a specific case aspect of things, to do with the Father's refusal to destroy a repentant people (as in the case of Nineveh in the days of Jonah) - or refusal to bless an unrepentant people - and this is quite in Harmony with both his stated Character, and Purpose. Repentance is an essential prerequisite to inheriting the promises. A lack of repentance does not frustrate the promises - it merely excludes the ungodly from them. To conclude that because the threatened destruction of a people was averted by their repentance, that therefore all prophecy is of such a nature as that it may or may not come to pass is not rightly dividing the word of Truth.

It is a fundamental principle stated in both the Old and New Testaments that our Father is unchanging. Thus, Malachi spake to Israel of old: "I am Yahweh, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed" (Mal 3:6). And similarly, the Spirit through James spake to those in dispersion: "every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variableness, neither shadow of turning" (Jas 1:17).

There is no 'variableness' with him with whom we have to do, for of himself he states "I change not." By contrast to man, who is ever-changing, and notoriously unreliable, Yahweh does not "turn" away His light-stream of warmth and comfort, leaving his children in the shadows. He is faithful to perform that which He has promised. Accordingly, Moses encouraged Israel:

"Know therefore that Yahweh thy Elohim, he is Elohim, the faithful El, which keepeth covenant and mercy with them that love him and keep his commandments to a thousand generations; and repayeth them that hate him to their face, to destroy them" (Deut 7:9-10).

And again, reiterating the same point, Paul encouraged the separated ones at Corinth:

"God is faithful, by whom ye were called unto the fellowship of His Son Jesus Christ our Lord" (1 Cor 1:9).

"God is faithful." With him, there is no "variableness". He is Yahweh - he changes not. He keeps covenant and mercy - and the certainty of His Own faithfulness is a guarantee of this fact. And so the promises He made to the Fathers of old; the "exceeding great and precious promises" (2 Pet 1:4) made to those who are Abrahams' seed through faith are absolutely immutable:

“When God made promise to Abraham, because He could swear by no greater, He swore by Himself ... God, willing more abundantly to shew unto the heirs of promise *the immutability of His counsel*, confirmed it by an oath: that by two immutable things, in which it was impossible for God to lie, we might have strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us” (Heb 6:13-18).

So it is, that we can indeed trust with certainty in the prophecies and promises which Yahweh has revealed. They will surely come to pass - because Yahweh has declared them, and it is written: “my word that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in that whereunto I sent it” (Is 55:11). None of the words uttered by the Father shall return to him void: all shall accomplish their purpose in due course.

VESSELS TO BE BROKEN

The Kingdom of Judah by Jeremiah's day had degenerated to such a degree that the situation was irredeemable (cp 2 Chron 36:16). The pot had hardened itself to such an extent in the Great Potter's hand, that it couldn't even be re-moulded; it had to be shattered under the judgments of Yahweh; only then would the people come to submit themselves to Him. Accordingly, Jeremiah was commanded:

“Thus saith Yahweh, “Go and get a potter's earthen bottle, and take of the ancients of the people, and of the ancients of the priests, and go forth unto the valley of the son of Hinnom ... and proclaim there the words that I shall tell thee ... Then shalt thou break the bottle in the sight of the men that go with thee, and shalt say unto them, Thus saith Yahweh of hosts: Even so will I break this people and this city, as one breaketh a potter's vessel, that cannot be made whole again: and they shall bury them in Tophet, till there be no place to bury” (see Jer 19:1-13)

By this means would the power of Yahweh be made known; in the shattering of the people that refused to submit to him – rather like the example of Pharaoh, the Almighty's judicial power would be displayed in their shattering. Indeed, we find that a similar situation will arise when the Master comes to exercise his dominion over all the earth. Some nations will readily submit (cp Ps 72:10, Is 60:9), but others will harden themselves, bringing destruction upon themselves in daring to wage war upon the enthroned Lamb:

“the kings of the earth set themselves together against Yahweh, and against his Messiah, saying, Let us cast away their bonds from us. He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh: The Lord shall have them in derision. Then shall he speak unto them in his wrath, and vex them ... Yahweh hath said unto me, Thou art my son; this day have I begotten thee. Ask of me, and I shall give thee the heathen for thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession. *Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron; thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.*” (Ps 2:2-9).

Thus showing themselves to be vessels of dishonour, with their hearts as hardened as Pharaoh's of old, these peoples will present themselves to be suitable only for

destruction at the hand of Yahweh's anointed King. Here is a promise, which stands sure and certain; it shall come to pass in due time; and the question remains for us to decide for ourselves - are we going to submit ourselves to the pressures and trials that Yahweh brings upon us to develop us for His Purpose? Or are we going to stiffen ourselves in His hand, not believing in the certainty that He will bring to pass that which He has decreed? The choice is ours, and our eternal future depends on how we respond.

We come now to focus our attention on our Lord Jesus Christ, as shown in the emblems of bread and wine. The Master himself was developed by a life of trial and pressure: it is written: "though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered" (Heb. 5:8). He experienced the pressures of life, and permitted himself to be molded in the hand of the potter - his Father. In him, we have an example to follow: let us therefore heed his example, and submit ourselves to the Hand of the Potter, trusting that He knows the right pressure to place upon us, developing us to be fit for His Purpose.

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