

"A Vessel... Meet for the Master's Use"**T. Austin-Sparks:**

"These were the potters... there they dwelt with the king for his work" (1 Chronicles 4:23).

"But now, O Lord, thou art our father; we are the clay, and thou our potter; and we all are the work of thy hand" (Isaiah 64:8).

"The word which came to Jeremiah from the Lord, saying, 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 his work on the wheels. And when the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hand of the potter, 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 in the potter's hand, so are ye in mine hand, O house of Israel" (Jeremiah 18:1-6).

"And (thou) shall say unto them, Thus saith the Lord 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" (Jeremiah 19:11).

"And they took counsel, and bought with them the potter's field, to bury strangers in" (Matthew 27:7).

"And they gave them for the potter's field, as the Lord appointed me" (Matthew 27:10).

"But the Lord said unto him (Ananias), 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" (Acts 9:15).

"Or hath not the potter a right over the clay, from the same lump to make one part a vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour?" (Romans 9:21).

"And he that overcometh, and he that keepeth my works unto the end, to him will I give authority over the nations: and he shall rule them with a rod of iron, as the vessels of the potter are broken to shivers; as I also have received of my Father" (Revelation 2:26,27).

This is a small selection of the Scriptures which bear upon this one matter of the potter and his vessel, and the one thing which arises from them is that every vessel made by the potter is an expression of his mind. When you look at any vessel made by an intelligent potter you look through the vessel and see the mind of the one who made it. There is a thought in the form of that vessel, and that, of course, is especially true of God.

You may know that pottery has a very long history, and we are now in possession of pottery that was made six thousand years ago. Men were making pottery before Abraham was born, and, as we have seen, it has a very large place in the Bible. I had a long list of other passages of Scriptures on this subject, but would not trouble you to look at them.

Let us first look at some of the general features of the passages which we have read.

Firstly, God is represented as a potter.

Secondly, humanity is represented as the clay.

Thirdly, Israel is represented as a vessel chosen by God for a purpose on the earth.

Fourthly, the Church is represented as a vessel chosen by God from eternity for a heavenly purpose.

Fifthly, individuals are spoken of as vessels. Some individuals, like the Apostle Paul, are chosen for a special purpose.

Sixthly, the pattern of God's vessel is His Son, Jesus Christ. The Scripture says that the Church is "foreordained to be conformed to the image of his Son" (Romans 8:29), so that His Son is the pattern to which God is working.

Seventhly, the intelligent worker on the wheels of the potter is the Holy Spirit. He is the driving power of God's purpose.

Eighthly, the wheels themselves are the wheels of circumstance and experience.

Well, those are some general things coming out of these Scriptures, but, as we are laying the foundation for our consideration, we will now come close to the Bible.

We read a verse in 1 Chronicles 4 which referred to the potter's field, in which there was the potter's house. The potters lived there, in that field and in that house, for one thing only - to make pottery for the king. The kings - David and Solomon - evidently kept a large band of potters, and the many vessels used in the king's house which were of clay were made in that field. It was to that field and to that house that the Lord sent Jeremiah. David and Solomon had gone long ago, but the potter was still busy in his house in the same field. There were evidently very many potters in the days of David and Solomon, but when we come to Jeremiah it seems that there was only one potter at work.

That potter's field had a very tragic history. Our passage in the Gospel by Matthew tells us a very sad story. The potter's field was still there, but the potter's house and the potters were all gone. Judas betrayed his Master for thirty pieces of silver, and when he discovered what he had done, he went back and threw the silver at the feet of the rulers, who said: 'This is the price of blood. We cannot give it any place in the sanctuary.' Then they had a meeting to consider what they should do with the money... "and they took counsel, and bought with them the potter's field". That same potter's field, which had come right down through history and had had a glorious day, was now bought with the price of the Blood of Jesus Christ. That had been prophesied by the prophet Zechariah. The price of a servant, of a bond-slave, was thirty pieces of silver, and that was the price that they put upon the Son of God. What a tragic end to the potter's field!

When we come to the prophecies of Isaiah there are quite a number of references to the potter and the clay, and we read the final one. Israel is saying: 'Thou art the Potter and we are the clay.' I expect you know what is the message of the prophecies of Isaiah - the message of Divine sovereignty over Israel and the nations. Those prophecies began with the great vision in chapter six, when Isaiah said: "In the year that king Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up." Uzziah was one of the great kings of Israel after David and Solomon, and when this greatness was dead the prophet saw another greatness - "the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up". When all earthly government fails, the government remains in the hands of the Lord. When the sovereignties of this world die, there is a sovereignty that never dies. The Lord still remains sovereign over all things.

When you go on to Jeremiah that sovereignty is concentrated upon this chosen people, Israel. Here it is a matter of God's rights in this particular people... "O house of Israel, cannot I do with you as this potter?" The Lord has absolute right to do as He wills with His own people. When the Lord says: 'I have chosen you', that is not only His initiative, but His absolute authority. When the Lord chooses a vessel, that choice carries with it His absolute authority. That sovereign authority will work for the vessel, or will work against it. It depends upon whether the clay will yield to the sovereignty of the Potter. If we yield to the mind of God, His sovereignty will work for us, but if we resist, that sovereignty will break us. We cannot get away from the sovereignty of God. That can be a very wonderful and blessed thing, but it can also be a very terrible thing.

When I have said that I have just given you the whole of the prophecies of Jeremiah. You may not like this book and if you had your choice you would perhaps select Isaiah before Jeremiah, but if you will read the book of Jeremiah with this one thought in mind it will be a great inspiration. Over the book is written: 'Cannot I do as I will? saith the Lord.' No one can argue with God. No one can challenge God's right or question the will of God. God says: 'I am the Lord. I will do as I want to do.' That will be a very good thing for all those who are on God's side, but it will be a very bad thing for those who are in opposition to Him.

Well, that is the book of Jeremiah in a word.

You pass through the sovereignty of God in Matthew 27 - the sovereignty of fulfilled prophecy in the potter's field - and you come to the ninth chapter of the Book of the Acts. There the Lord is saying to Ananias about Saul of Tarsus: "He is a chosen vessel unto me." Here, then, we have the principle that God does choose certain people for certain special purposes. Such vessels may have to go through many sufferings and afflictions, but if ever the sovereignty of God was seen in the life of a single man, it was in the life of the Apostle Paul. We said that God's choosing means God's authority, and sooner or later our attitude toward chosen vessels will prove to have been our attitude toward God.

We pass from Paul as a chosen individual vessel, and we come on to more common ground which brings us all

in. We would not put ourselves in the same category as the Apostle Paul, and would hesitate to think that we are chosen vessels to fulfil some special purpose in history. Of course, that may be true of some of you - the end will tell whether it is true - but whether it be true or not, when you come to the second letter to the Corinthians, you are on right ground. Remember: it is to Corinthians that the Apostle is writing. Thank God, then, for the message to Corinthians! To all the Corinthians, and to all like them, the Apostle says: "We have this treasure in earthen vessels" (2 Corinthians 4:7) - and what earthen vessels we are! We are very poor clay indeed, but the Word is: 'In this poor clay, these earthen vessels, we have a treasure, and the excellency is not our excellency - it is the excellency of God.'

"We have this treasure" - as one version puts it - "in vessels of fragile clay." I wonder what was in Paul's mind when he wrote that! You may get some idea of what he was thinking about if you look at the context. He gives a list of all the things that the vessel has to endure, the many persecutions and the trials that the vessel has to go through, but although it is a vessel of fragile clay and has to go through everything that would be calculated to destroy it, it is not destroyed. It just goes on burning because of that treasure within it.

You know, Paul only had the Old Testament as his Bible. Has your memory lighted upon what may have been in his mind? There are a lot of references to the Old Testament in this letter to the Corinthians, but in this case I think perhaps he was thinking about Moses and the bush which never burned. Any small match put to it might have consumed it and if you had passed by the next day you would have seen nothing but charred ashes. But this fire went on and on and on and the bush was never consumed. The earthen vessel had a treasure in it: it was the Lord. Come what may, if the Lord is in the vessel, it will not be destroyed. The testimony will go on. So Paul says: "We are... pursued, yet not forsaken."

We pass from that to Paul's letter to Timothy, and there he says: "In a great house there are... vessels... some unto honour, and some unto dishonour"... 'If a man will separate himself from those vessels unto dishonour, he shall be a vessel unto honour' (2 Timothy 2:20,21).

Here, then, the Apostle introduces the great law of separation from everything that God cannot accept, and says: 'If you do that, you shall be a "vessel... meet for the master's use, prepared unto every good work".'

Therefore we are called to be vessels suitable for the use of the Lord, and our suitability depends upon our separation from all that which is not honourable to the Lord.

We have only one remaining reference: that in the Book of the Revelation. "And he that overcometh... to him will I give authority over the nations: and he shall rule them with a rod of iron, as the vessels of the potter are broken to shivers." I do not pretend to understand what that means, but it does seem to say this: That there will be a people who will be like a rod of iron, by which the rebellious nations shall be broken to pieces like a potter's vessel. I say that we cannot understand that, but there it is in the Bible, and what it says is just this: That in the end the nations which have continued to reject God, who have resisted all the patience and love of God, who have known of Him and have refused to have Him as their God, will be broken to pieces like a potter's vessel, and the instrument that God will use will be those who are here called 'the overcomers'.

That is a very broad survey of something of what the Bible says about the potter, the clay and the vessels. It is only a beginning, the laying down of a foundation, but do not allow your anticipation of what is yet to come to rob you of the value of what has been said. You have a lot of empty pages in your notebooks yet, but do not be so anxious to get them filled up that you do not go over what you already have. We are not giving just Bible teaching, but are working our way into the mind of God. There is a lot of instruction in what has been said, a lot of comfort and encouragement, and a lot of strength to be taken from it, but there is also much warning. We are not only occupied with teaching in the Bible. We are in the presence of the revealed mind of God and to come into that is a great responsibility.