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The Potter's House

by T. Austin-Sparks

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"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 the clay was marred in the hand of the potter, he made it again another vessel, as seemed good to the potter to make it" (Jeremiah 18:1-4).

"For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God afore prepared that we should walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10).

As we read this so well-known illustration of God's workmanship seen in the house of the potter, to which the prophet was told to go, there are three possible effects that it can have upon us, depending upon which word we underline, where we stop, where we put the emphasis. There are three words which sum up this paragraph, and which of those words we choose and resolve into the message will decide a very great thing for us. It may affect our whole life.

Three Possibilities

There is the word 'marred'. "The vessel that he made... was *marred* in the hand of the potter". If we make that the word, then something of a spirit of hopelessness will come over us. We shall begin to find an inward sinking; we shall begin to say, 'Yes, I made a mess of things, I spoiled it all. There is not much hope for me - my life is marred, spoiled.' If you take that word and make it the message, it

will have one effect upon your life. Thank God, that is not the message; but there may be someone reading who has got there. Looking back on your life, you do so with very little gratification or pleasure; rather with regret, perhaps remorse. Maybe you fall into this mood, if you think of yourself as the clay. You feel there has been a breakdown; you have perhaps made a mess of things, or you have not fulfilled all the promise, all the possibilities. And that sense of failure, of lost opportunity, and much more in that direction, creates a shadow over your life. It makes you feel, 'Well, that is that. Now it is up to me to try and get through in some way and finish up as decently as I can.' That is a despairing outlook on life, and that will most surely be the result of putting your circle round this word, variously translated 'marred' or 'spoiled'.

There is another word here: "he made it again *another* vessel". If we put our line under that word and make it the message, that, too, will open the door to gloomy thoughts and considerations. We shall at once begin to say, 'Well, God has not been able to fulfill His original intentions where I am concerned. I have to be content with being His second-best; something other, something different, something that He really did not mean me to be. He is making the most and the best of a bad job. He is just working with me on an alternative line. So - well, that reduces me to being something of a misfit, not what I was intended to be.' You see the possibilities of putting your circle round that word 'another' vessel.

But then there is another phrase here: "as seemed *good* to the potter to make it." That introduces an altogether new possibility. If, after all, it is possible for Him to say, 'It is good, My work is good'; to find His own pleasure and His own satisfaction in it, that will certainly be far better and greater and higher than my greatest satisfaction could possibly be. His standard is so much higher than my best. If He can say, 'It is good', that surely opens up a new outlook and prospect, does it not? That introduces the triumph of His grace, in spite of everything. In spite of what we are and of all our failure and of all His difficulty with us, His grace triumphs. His wisdom triumphs over all the problems in us - yes, over all the setback that He may have encountered in us; His love overcomes all the difficulties that He has with us. If the end is that it is good in His sight - "as seemed good" - I say, that brings into view an altogether new situation.

These are the three possibilities that arise out of these words. We choose the third. That is the message that I want to bring to you.

A Story of Vessels Re-made

(1) The Earth

Our method will be to take the principle that lies at the heart of this, lift it for a moment out of its immediate context and setting, and see it in its larger relationship and application. The Bible opens with a 'potter's house'. It is a very big Potter's house, very much bigger than Jeremiah's. In it we find at first a shapeless, distorted, chaotic mass. It must present to view the aspect of utter hopelessness and impossibility: What can you do with that? It is simply said: "The earth was waste and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep" (Gen. 1:2). It is chaos. But the very next thing we see is the great Potter getting to work on the shapeless, distorted mass of clay. "He made it again", and when He stood back from the wheel of creation, of making again, He was able to look upon all things and say that "it was very good" (v. 31). That was God's verdict: 'It is very good.' The principle is of very large application, is it not?

(2) Adam and Abel

But then it is not long before we come to another breakdown, and once more the vessel is marred. We know the story of Adam's sin, by which he drew the whole creation into judgment, again under a curse. He himself came there: he was marred, spoiled; the creation came there. To the man God said: 'Because you have done this, the earth is cursed for your sake. Thorns and thistles shall it bring forth, and you shall eat bread by the sweat of your brow' (3:17,18). Well, we know something about that! To the woman He said other things; there would be suffering associated with her life and her function (v. 16). The clay is marred in the hands of the Potter, spoiled.

But does He throw it aside? Does He give it up? Does He say, 'It is hopeless, it is impossible - I can do nothing with this', and so discard the whole thing? That is not the God of the Bible. He has got poor stuff, poor clay, it is true; it is proved to be very poor stuff; but with that stuff He sets to work again, and He 'makes again another'. And out of that poor stuff we see a man emerging, named Abel: a man who stands in the Bible with much honour, whose name has come right down through the ages as of one who found the approval of God. The New Testament puts the clear approval of God upon Abel. No greater approval could be given than that the Lord Jesus should call him 'righteous': "Abel the righteous" (Matt. 23:35).

(3) Abraham

And then Abraham. I am always so glad that with these great men God never, never hides what poor stuff they were in themselves. He lets us see their flaws - the flaws in the clay. He lets us see their weaknesses; He lets us see them break down; He lets us see that, but for that mighty hand of His, they would make shipwreck like all the rest. They in themselves are no better stuff than others. But they are in His hands - these are men in His hands. And out of that clay, that same clay, the same clay that we are made of, there emerges this man Abraham. How much there is in the Bible that is of this character - 'It is very good, very good'; 'as seemed good unto the potter'.

(4) Jacob

And what shall we say about Jacob? No one needs to be told that Jacob was poor clay. We know. That name has become the synonym for human frailty, weakness, and worse. Yes, he belongs to that clay. But he is in the hands of the Potter; and when the Potter has done His work, He forever afterwards is proud to say: "I am the God of Jacob" - the God of *Jacob!*

(5) Elijah

Think of Elijah, and then hear what the apostle James has to say: "Elijah was a man of like passions with us" (James 5:17). Yes, the same stuff, the same clay; we know that even in his life there was breakdown. He showed his weakness under the strain, under the tension. But he stands in great honour with God. "He made it again". Out of that breakdown in Adam, out of that poor stuff that Adam's broken-down race represents, He has taken this one and that, and 'made it as it seemed good to the potter to make it'.

And so we might go through the whole of the Old Testament. The principle, you see, is at work everywhere. We might go on to look at the men who failed and who - to use the translation of the Revised Standard Version, which I rather like - were 're-worked'. In that version it says: 'He reworked

it'. "We are his workmanship", we have read in Ephesians. It would be difficult to know where to begin and where to finish with the men who broke down and whom He re-worked.

(6) David

But let us take one more from the Old Testament, who is quite an outstanding illustration and example - none other than David himself. We know the fifty-first Psalm. That Psalm is a Psalm of David - the cry of a heart overwhelmed with the consciousness of its failure, its breakdown, its sin. A great sob is rising out of that Psalm; and we know, from the history that lay behind it, that there was good cause for David to weep before God, confessing his sins, crying: "Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me" (v. 10). We know the tragedy of David's life, the breakdown. Oh, this clay was indeed marred in the hands of the Potter. He failed, he broke down; from one standpoint he became a tragedy. You are amazed that the man was capable of such actions - until you know your own heart.

But look again. Did God discard, did God cast away? God did not give him up. He made the vessel again, so that the David that comes down to us today is not the David of the failure, but another one. He is the David of honour, the greatest of Israel's kings, "the sweet psalmist of Israel" (2 Sam. 23:1), the David of our beloved Psalms - what should we do without the Psalms of David? And listen: "I have found David... a man after my own heart" (Acts 13:22)! Is it possible to say anything more, anything greater than that?

(7) Peter

If we pass out of the Old Testament into the New, at once there leap onto the stage men who embody this great principle. What about Peter? Did Peter break down? Was Peter poor stuff? In one breath - "If I must die with thee, I will not deny thee" (Mark 14:31), and in the next breath - 'I tell you I know not the man' (v. 71) - denying his Lord with oaths. We do not like talking about men in this way, bringing up their faults, but we have to see that dark side in order to see the marvel of Divine grace. Here is Peter: did that clay disclose flaws, seeming unworkableness, resistance? Hear him speaking to his Lord, to his Master: "This shall never be unto thee" (Matt. 16:22)! "Not so, Lord..." (Acts 10:14). There is something there in the clay.

But what a Peter we have today, have we not? That is not the Peter we have - the old story of the clay that broke down. Remember that! The Peter we have now is a very different Peter. Wonderful help and inspiration come from his two letters in the New Testament; we love to read them. We love to see him standing up on the day of Pentecost; we love to see him later, dragged before the rulers, standing on both his feet and challenging them with all courage and boldness. What a changed picture from that fireside denial in the courtyard, when his Lord was standing trial for His life! What a change! Yes: 'He re-worked it'; 'He made it again, as it seemed good to the Potter.' And we can only say, 'It was good, and it is good.'

(8) John Mark

Take one other example from the New Testament - a young man by the name of John Mark. He lived in Jerusalem, evidently in a godly home, in the very place where the Lord Himself and His disciples were wont to gather and to have their fellowship. They had no doubt wonderful times in that home; and John Mark lived there. The day came when Barnabas and Paul took this young man with them

on their great missionary journey (Acts 13:5b). From town to town and city to city John Mark saw the wonderful things that God was doing, beheld the wondrous works of the Lord. But it was strenuous going, it was costly; and, when he reached a certain point on the journey, he said, 'I am not going any further. I can stand no more of this, I am going home.' The narrative tells us that he left them and went back to Jerusalem (v. 13b). The clay has given out, it has broken down; the stamina been found wanting.

And that is not all. When he reflected upon it, I wonder what his thoughts were. I am quite sure that they were very gloomy reflections. 'Oh, I have made a mess of things!' And then, on a later occasion: 'To think that I have been the cause of separation between these two great men - Barnabas and Saul. I have been the occasion of their parting asunder and the end of their united missionary activity' (Acts 15:37-40). For that is indeed what happened over him.

Those are things which might well lead to gloomy reflections and a hopeless outlook. The clay seems to have been marred and spoiled. But that is not the end of the story. You know how the story finishes. Even Paul says: 'Bring Mark; for he is profitable to me' (2 Tim. 4:11b). There are some lovely things said about this young man in the end. He is recovered, restored, recommissioned, in full-time service; and it is he who has given us the beautiful book which goes by the name of the Gospel by Mark. And many scholars today believe that Matthew and Luke very largely built their Gospels upon Mark's, that Mark was the source of the others. So, there is a story! 'He made it again.'

The Triumphs of Grace

These are men who broke down in the process of being worked, but grace triumphed. The Potter did not discard the poor clay. So much depends upon how we interpret this Potter, does it not? Let us look at Him: who is He? This Potter is not a man. How differently men would deal with these people! This is God. He has the clay - yes, the poor stuff: and, as He is seeking to work it, He comes suddenly upon something in it that resists, that does not yield. For a moment He pauses, and says, Oh, what is this? What does He do? It is not the way of this Potter to say: We can go no further, we must give it up; all our intentions are impossible of realisation; we will just throw it aside and look for something better. Not this Potter! That is not the God of the Bible! Watch Him. He may be sorry that He has met that something, whatever it may be; He may for a moment have to pause; but then you see light come into His face, you see the smile of the triumph of His grace and of His wisdom, as He says: We will not be defeated; we will have something for our pleasure and satisfaction, whatever we find. That is the God of the Bible.

Behind all this there is one thought to which I want to come as quickly as I can. *God is a God of purpose.* And God does not undertake anything that He knows He can never achieve. When He starts something, He can perfect that thing: He has the resource, He has the wisdom, He has the patience, He has the grace, He has the love, He has the power. He can do it. He is the *God of hope*: that means the God who never despairs. It is something for our comfort.

Vessels Unretrieved

But we must always be perfectly honest and perfectly faithful. While all this is true in the Bible along the line that we have pursued, there is in it another line - the line of those who were spoiled and never re-made. It is a dark side - one hardly likes to look at it; but we must do so, in order to reach the point we have in mind. There were some spoiled and never re-worked. You can call them to

mind at once. There is Abel's brother, Cain; there is Jacob's brother, Esau; there is Saul, the first king of Israel. In the New Testament there is Judas. Yes, these are people who have gone out into the dark; there is nothing about them that is to God's pleasure.

But one mentions that for a purpose. To see the reason for this means two things. Firstly, it will explain their opposites; that is, it will tell us why these others did come out to the glory and praise of God. And, secondly, it will bring us to the door of hope and promise.

(1) Cain

Let us look at these men quite quickly. Cain. Why was he unretrieved? Why was he not reworked, made again? In him, it seems, a sense of *sin* was completely lacking. Cain was a self-righteous man, a self-sufficient man. Yet, withal, he was a man who had some religion. He brought an offering to God. If he had lived today, he would have gone to church. But his religion was either mere superstition, or else patronage. It was the religion of one who acknowledges God for fear that, if he does not, it will go ill with him - a sort of 'safeguard' religion. Oh, yes, you recognise God; you acknowledge that God is: but you have no sense of sin. It is, indeed, only too possible to be religious without having that essential consciousness of sin and of the need of a substitute who is your Saviour.

That is Cain. Cain was the man who did not know his own heart. If you had said to Cain, earlier on: 'Cain, it will not be very long before you commit the foulest murder: you will take the life of your own brother. By your act, your own brother will lie dead at your feet, his blood trickling into the sand.' What would Cain have said to that? He would never have believed it! But that was what was in him. He had no sense of sin. He did not know his own heart. And God cannot do anything with a condition like that.

You notice that all the men of whom I have spoken on the *other* side were men who had this deep consciousness of sin, men who believed in the law of sacrifice for sin. Men like David: "I acknowledge my transgressions... Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done that which is evil in thy sight" (Ps. 51:3,4); men with a consciousness of sin and of the need of a Saviour, every one of them. But Cain was not like that, and that puts him out of the hands of God. He can do nothing with that; He cannot re-work that.

Which brings us to this: The way of the purpose, the way of the glory, the way of the realisation, the way of the Divine satisfaction, is the way of the consciousness of sin. If you have that, it is a way of promise. That leads to the door of hope. The most hopeless person before God is the one who does not, in their heart of hearts, realise that they need what He has provided in His Son - a Saviour.

(2) Esau

Consider now Esau, Jacob's brother. We know about him. Here, again, there was a fatal lack. He lacked a sense of the supreme importance of things spiritual. The birthright brought him, or would have brought him, into the place of *standing for God*. The firstborn was supposed to stand for God, that is, to be God's representative. He was the priest in the family; he had to do with holy things. He it was that led the family into the presence of God. And much more was bound up with the firstborn and his birthright. But Esau, the Bible says - and this is the final condemnation of the man - "despised his birthright" (Gen. 25:34). That is, he lacked this essential consciousness of the supreme importance of things spiritual. And whatever else you may say of Jacob, that, at least, was not true of

him. He maybe stole the birthright, but he did at least recognise the superlative value of spiritual things.

And how much there was hidden in the veins of Esau! - a long, long history - the history of Edom. How that breaks out in the Bible story again and again! Think of Doeg, the Edomite, whose vile treachery resulted in the slaying of all the priests of God (1 Sam. 22). Yes, Edom and the Edomites are the descendants of Esau, and wherever you find them in the Bible you find an utter lack of the sense of the importance of spiritual things: holding spiritual things lightly and cheaply: thinking that a mess of pottage, to gratify some passing whim and pleasure, is more important than the things of God. God can do nothing with that. He never works that over again.

(3) Saul

We pass to Saul. Saul's fatal lack was of that spirit of meekness which trusts and obeys the Lord. That is how it came out in the end. The final downfall of Saul came about because, first of all, he did not trust the Lord. He was put to the test; he was given a magnificent opportunity of showing that he implicitly trusted the Lord; and he showed that he did not. His trust in the Lord would have led him to do a certain thing that Samuel the prophet, in the name of the Lord, had told him to do; and he disobeyed, because he did not trust. That is fatal. God cannot do anything with that. The kingdom was rent from Saul; he went out a marred and never re-made vessel. If God is going to do this thing, He must have in us that simple faith which trusts Him and obeys Him. It is the very least that He asks of us.

(4) Judas

And, finally, Judas. Many things can be said about Judas, but let us try and sum it up. Judas fatally lacked an adequate sense of the greatness of his opportunity. Just what would you give to have been called by Jesus Christ into the circle of immediate discipleship; to be with Him wherever He went, and to share His ministry; to be His companion, to be His helper? Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was here in the flesh, and here was a man called into fellowship with Him in His life and in the great purpose of God for which He came into the world: and then to throw it away for thirty pieces of silver! Yes, he was utterly lacking in a sense of the greatness of his opportunity.

We, every one of us, are called into the most honourable company and circle that this universe has - into living fellowship with God's Son, in life, in service, in companionship, in suffering for Him. That, all that, is the call for every one of us. Oh, what an opportunity! What an honour, what a privilege, what an unspeakable blessing! "Called into the fellowship of his Son Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 1:9) - that is Paul's phrase. If God is going to realise all His great designs, fulfill all His purpose, make out of this poor clay something that is pleasing to Him, that is good in His sight, you and I need to have this: a sense of the great, the immense honour that is conferred upon us, in being thus "called into the fellowship of his Son".

So there must be in us - not as in these men, Cain and Esau and Saul and Judas - an overmastering sense of the transcendent importance of eternal things. Eternal things must outweigh for us all other considerations in this life. To use a phrase of the Lord Jesus: 'Seek ye first the Kingdom of God' (Matt. 6:33). The things of the Kingdom of God shall be to us of such paramount importance that nothing is to be compared with them, or to come in their way. All else, however great, is worthless.

The kingdoms of this world - 'What shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul?' (Matt. 16:26; Luke 9:25) - which means lose the purpose for which Christ redeemed you.

No, we may be poor stuff, we may be very poor stuff; but, if there is in us and with us an overmastering sense of the transcendent importance of things eternal, He will 'make it again' a vessel that is good to the Potter - good. To think that, at long last, He might look upon His work in you and in me, and say, 'Through grace, it is very good'! That is the possibility, that is the prospect. May the Lord find in us the things that will make it not only a possibility, but an actuality.