1 Corinthians 15:47 (Jane J. Leake) 131667

Clay and Stone: Babylon the Great and the New Jerusalem, Chapter 1: The Clay Pit and the Vessel of Clay (15:47)

“The first man is of the earth, earthy." (1 Cor. 15:47).

Let us sit down together, and look at one of God's unseen realities.

There is a china vessel standing before me. It is a beautiful thing. Its shape is perfect; its substance is semi-transparent, and it is pure white—I was going to say as white as snow, but that would have been an exaggeration; a coat of arms is portrayed upon it in brilliant coloring; yet it is so fragile that the least blow would crush it to atoms. It is beautiful, and yet it is also useful, for it will hold anything I may choose to put into it. Perhaps if you looked at it you would say, "Yes, it is a pretty little jug, but I do not see anything very remarkable about it." No, I daresay not; but to me it is a talking jug. It has a voice all of its own, and it brings back to my mind, whenever I look at it, a lovely summer afternoon years ago.

I was staying for a few days in a village in the south of England. It was not a remarkably pretty village, though a range of hills bounded it on its north and west; but its ancient cottages were built of stone, and the few more modern houses of which it was composed were not very picturesque. These buildings had clustered round a large stone church, from whose gray tower, I have no doubt, the curfew bell had rung in days of yore. That which really gave the greatest interest to the place was the magnificent ruin of a castle, which covered one of the hills to the west of the village. It had once been a royal residence, and as I passed over its spacious courts, and climbed through its ruined portals, its stones were speaking to me of the uncertainty of all earthly glory.

Scenes of the past rose before me, and I saw in fancy the boy-king Edward ride through the spacious courtyard and up to that ancient gateway to receive a death-stab from a wicked woman, Elfrida; and then the dash of the startled horse down the court, through the outer gate before her servants could close it, over the sounding draw-bridge, and away and away round the castle hill, while the fainting boy clung to its mane in his vain attempt at escape. I heard the screams of the young brother, as he witnessed the murderous deed which placed a crown upon his youthful head.

There, in later days a captive princess, who should have been queen of England, had lived and pined and died. Those once gloomy dungeons, too, now open, to the light of day, had rung with the groans of starving men, barons of France, tortured to death by the wicked John. There on that ruined tower the royal standard of England had once floated, where now the cotton-grass and ivy waved in the flower-scented breeze.

But enough of the village and its castle, for you will ask, "What has that to do with your little china jug?" Not much. Yet it was there, in that quaint old village, that I first saw it; and the substance of which it is formed was lying quietly under one of those grass-grown hills, while all the terrible things I have named were happening above When first I took my rooms in the village, I had been greatly surprised to see all the men, when returning from their work in the evening, daubed from head to foot, with a sort of pure white mud. I could see that it was not chalk or lime that covered them, because the spots were greasy; but what it was I did not know, till one day I asked my hostess. "Those men work in the clay-pit," she answered. "Clay!" I replied, with a momentary surprise; for my eyes were only too well used to the sticky yellow stuff that is found near London. "Clay! What beautiful white clay!" "It is china-clay," continued my hostess; "there is a pit under one of the hills beside the castle, and the men of the place are employed in digging it out." "I shall go and see it," said I. "Go and see it!" cried the good woman, repeating my words with astonishment. "Why, you couldn't. It sticks to everything. Besides, there's nothing to see.”

I said no more, but the very next time I went out, I turned my steps towards the clay-pit. The road which led to the place was rather slimy, but I went on till I met a man daubed from head to foot with white.

He looked at me with very evident surprise, and stood still. "Is that the clay pit?" I asked, as I pointed to a tunnel in the side of the hill, where a railway car full of snow-white clay was standing. "Yes," he answered, "but you couldn't go no further!" I stood still, with my feet as white as his, and looked at the place with an interest which evidently perplexed him; but I had my own thoughts about it, of which he knew nothing.

So that was "the hole of the pit" whence my little jug had been "digged." Yes, centuries ago, while the royal standard of England was floating in its glory from the keep of the now ruined castle, the material of which my little jug had been formed had been lying quietly under the grass-grown hill; but now, when the proud castle was a ruin, that little piece of insignificant clay was a thing of beauty and of use. Why? Because it has been subjected to the skill of the potter, molded by his hand, made to his design, and then baked in the fire. Thus it has become a trophy of the potter's art.

But how came it out of the pit? A power not its own had brought it forth. How had it been changed from a helpless lump of plastic clay to its present form of beauty? A master mind had conceived its shape and master hands had molded it to that design. And how had it changed its fabric from the soft, sticky, plastic clay to the semi-transparent, solid material that could not be either bent or changed? The wisdom of the potter had subjected it to the fire, and, baked in the fire, it had changed its nature. Thus the thing that had been once only fit for the clay-pit was now formed to fill a place of honor in the house.

But that is not all that the little jug has to say to me. Indeed, if you will listen, it will talk to us all tonight. It will say, "Do not look upon me with contempt, as only a fragile little jug molded out of the clay. Are not all of ye vessels formed out of the clay? 'Look to the hole of the pit whence ye are digged' (Isa. 51:1). Did not a Power not your own bring ye forth? Did not a Master Mind conceive ye, and did not a Master Hand fashion ye out of the clay? Did not the Master Potter fit ye to hold the breath of life, and did not He breathe it into the vessel He had made,

and hence ye became living souls?”

True, little jug, true is thy lesson; and we are even more fragile than thou art, for since first I gazed upon thy tiny frame many a loved friend has yielded up the breath that was in him, and has fallen shivered into the dust again. Over us thunders a fiat that belongs not to thee, "Dust thou art, and unto dust thou shalt return.”

My young friends, do you think this is a gloomy thought? Well, it is at least true, and should be faced; but there may be more of brightness in our subject than you think at first sight. Let us see how it is that the vessel, man, framed by the Master Potter for a use so exalted as to hold "the breath of life," cannot retain it, but is become more fragile than the little white china jug now before us.

“She is very sorry ma'am—very sorry indeed," said a servant, as she displayed to her mistress a handful of broken china. "She is afraid to tell you herself, but she did not know that the picture rod was loose, and it fell upon this cup and smashed it to pieces.”

The mistress took the pieces ruefully in her hands, and did as everyone does who has broken anything—that is, slowly fitted piece to piece. What a change! Only a minute before and the fragile china cup which they called "Crown Derby," had been worth a guinea; yet now those broken pieces were of less account than the commonest earthenware vessel in the house. "They are of no good," she said sadly; "of no use at all. They must be thrown away.”

But could nothing be done to undo the mischief? Could not the pieces be put into a crucible, and melted down again? No; the fire could do nothing for the helpless sherds. Could they not be soaked in water till they should turn back again into plastic clay, and then be molded once more by the potter's art to a thing of use and beauty? No; the water could do nothing for the shattered sherds. Never again could they be welded into one piece. It is true they might be made a sham whole with cement, but the lines which all eyes could see would tell the truth that the glory of the cup was gone, that it was a broken vessel unfit for use. No power on earth could make it whole again. What! not all the skill of the scientists? No; the valuable cup was gone forever; the useless, worthless sherds alone remained.

Long ago, long ago, as our little talking jug has told us, a perfect vessel was formed out of the clay by the Master Hand. It was molded, and fashioned, and painted in perfect beauty, and was fitted and framed to hold "the breath of life." Never before had so wonderful a vessel been made out of clay, and when it was finished its Maker breathed into it the breath of life, "and man became a living soul" (Gen. 2:7). Where the trees waved their leafy branches in the glowing sunlight; where the loveliest of flowers carpeted the earth, and festooned the forests with garlands of crimson and gold; where the luscious fruits gave sustenance without labor; where the murmur of flowing waters sounded softly through the air,— there moved, and walked, and thought, and acted, this wonderful vessel made out of the clay.

Hark! What is this Voice of thunder that peals through the leafy shades of Eden? "Where art thou? What is this that thou hast done? Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.”

Broken is the goodly vessel—shattered the thing of beauty—spoiled is the Creator's work—and "dying thou shalt die" is the end of the potsherds of the earth. Man, the beautiful ideal of the great Master Potter, is gone: he can no longer hold that which he was formed to contain. The immortal soul must pass away, and death reigns grimly over the shattered sherds.

I remember reading, as a child, a story which deeply fascinated me. Some travelers, who were making researches in a faraway land, the name of which I forget, came upon a tomb hollowed out of the solid rock. It had been hermetically sealed, but as they burst open the long closed door a human body lay before them, on a stone table. It was perfect in shape and color, and clad in gorgeous robes of state. One moment they gazed entranced; the next, the whole body suddenly crumbled into dust—so suddenly that they could scarcely believe they had ever seen that which for one moment had met their sight. All that remained was a little heap of dust. "Dust thou art, and unto dust thou shalt return," peals over the vessels made out of the clay in which man lives.

But cannot the skill of man mend the broken vessel? Try it. Stand here by this bed of death. All that love can give, all that wealth can buy, is at your service. Send for the best of doctors. He comes; he has spent years in studying the marvelous mechanism of the vessel formed out of clay; he knows the use of drugs and their effect upon the human system; but he shakes his head sadly. "Mortal disease is here," he says. "I can alleviate, but I cannot cure.”

Send for the first of surgeons. He comes—steady-eyed and steady-handed keen and cool. He will underake the case. He will do all that he can to clear from the writhing frame the death that it holds. He draws back; he closes the wound he has made; he replaces his instruments. "I can do nothing," he says sadly, "the case is worse than I thought. She must die.”

Why do we die? Doctors will tell you that they do not see why the recuperative powers of the human body should fail. But surely enough they do. Alas! shattered is the goodly vessel, Man, and forfeited his human life. No; the potsherds of the earth cannot mend their fellow-potsherds.

But do not think that this is all. The ideal is gone, the sherds only remain. Do you ask, "What do you mean by the ideal?" I mean the perfect living creature which God made-morally perfect. Perhaps that word "morally" perplexes you? I mean, then, the perfect living creature which God made, the innocent soul which knew and reverenced its Creator, and in which there was no clash of self-will, or cruelty, or revenge, or hate. That lovely ideal character linked with, and belonging to, the vessel formed out of the clay has been lost.

Do you say, "Prove it"?

In a lecture-hall in one of the first hospitals in London, a professor of talent and renown stood addressing a large company of medical students. As he proceeded, his subject led him to refer to a part of the human body to which he could not assign any particular use. In the pride of his knowledge and of his skill he turned to his young hearers, and after expressing his doubt of the existence of a Creator, spoke of Him, "if He did exist," with a profanity which I dare not repeat here, ending with the words, "I could have done it better myself." There he stood, a dying man, in a dying human body formed out of the clay—a broken potsherd that could not retain life—his mind defiant, his heart hardened, pouring out from lips that must soon be stiff in death, epithets of scorn and contempt at the very idea of having had a Creator, and

haughtily claiming greater intelligence than his Maker. And all the while, though he knew it not, from far away, "down the aisles of the ages" rang the song of the prophet-poet: "Their works are in the dark, and they say, Who seeth us? and who knoweth us? Surely your turning of things upside down shall be esteemed as the potter's clay: for shall the work say of him that made it, He made me not? or shall the thing framed say of him that framed it, He had no understanding?" (Isa. 29:16).

From the heart that was formed to glow with the reverent love of its Creator, and with generous attachment to its fellows, well up bitter hatred and defiance to the one, and selfishness and cruelty to the other. From the mind that was formed to use, for the glory of its Creator, the wonderful mechanism of the vessel formed out of the clay, flashes out defiance and self-will to the one, and vices and passions that wreck the other. From the poor, wrecked body rises the wail of disease and suffering, the bitter fruits of sin and of mortality.

Need you any further proof that shattered is the goodly vessel formed out of the clay, forfeited the title to life, vanished the perfect ideal of the great Master Potter?

Whence came it all? Those only who use the Lamp of God can tell. A mighty power came in and broke what God had made out of the clay. He spoiled the work by poisoning the living soul, using the fiat of God to complete the wreck: "Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return."

All that we were—our sins, our guilt,

Our death—was all our own;

All that we are we owe to Thee,

Thou God of grace alone.

Thy mercy found us in our sins,

And gave us to believe;

Then, in believing peace we found;

And in Thy Christ we live.

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