

Jeremiah 18:2-6 (Jane J. Leake) 131668

Clay and Stone: Babylon the Great and the New Jerusalem, Chapter 2: The Nation of Clay (18:2-6)

"Arise, go down to the potter's house.... Then I went down to the potter's house, and, behold, he wrought a work on the wheels. And the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hands of the potter; so he made it again another vessel, as seemed good to the potter to make it.... Behold, as the clay is in the potter's hand, so are ye in mine hand, O house of Israel." (Jer. 18:2-6).

One day long ago I stood watching two children at their play. Someone had given them a lump of plastic clay, and had told them that they could mold it into any form they liked; and then if they could not bring out of it the ideal vessel which their minds had formed, they could roll it down again into a shapeless lump, and begin the work again. It seemed an endless amusement to those two young potters. With eager eyes fixed on their work, and hands bedaubed with the plastic clay, they thought and planned, they formed and marred, and reformed, vessel after vessel.

Now, when God speaks of Israel as clay in His hand He does not only mean that their bodies were all made out of the dust, but that their moral state should have been like the plastic clay in the potter's hand. The nation should have been subject to His rule, pliable to His hand, willing to be formed into a holy people and a kindom of priests. He had His great ideal to work out; but, alas! the clay— that is, the moral nature of man— had been tampered with in Eden, and the chosen nation was ever a marred vessel.

You will easily understand by this that the clay does not only picture the feeble human body in which your spirit dwells, but also your moral nature. Do you pause and say, "What does 'moral' mean"? Let me try to explain it, for unless your mind thoroughly grasps its meaning you will not understand our present subject. When we speak of the heart being tender, we do not mean by the heart the great muscle which is pumping the blood through the body— that is material; but we mean the affections. The affections, and the passions, and the virtues are moral qualities. You cannot see, or touch, or hear, or taste, or smell a moral quality. It is a force which none of your five senses can detect. It is in a way your character. A cruel word may wound your affections; it does you a moral injury, just as a stone might do your body a material injury. Love and hatred are moral qualities. You cannot see or hear or touch them, yet they put matter in motion very often. The one may use a person's arms to caress you, the other may use the same arms to give you a blow. Law is a moral force. You cannot see, or feel, or taste, or smell, the law. None of your senses can detect it. It is in the mind of God; but when He speaks, you hear it, and the mysterious law comes into force.

I have a dim recollection, long years ago, of having been near a convict prison, and of having seen a number of men in chains a very sad sight for anyone to see. I was told that those men were convicts. They had broken the law. Now, if the law has no form or shape, and you cannot feel it, how could it be broken? You see, law is a moral force. It exists surely enough, and can bring terrible consequences on those who break it. Its force is over the "moral" part of man.

A man hates another man, which is a moral force, and it causes him to throw a stone at the other man, which kills him. That is murder. The law "Thou shalt not kill" has been broken, and the law puts judgment in force, and the man is executed. But suppose a stone rolls off the top of a cliff and falls on a man on the beach, and kills him. The stone is not guilty; there is no moral force in the stone. It is simply a material substance; it kills the man by accident, as we say. A man may kill another by accident. God set up the cities of refuge in His land, in which such persons could take refuge. They were not morally guilty.

It is over the moral part of man, alas! that Satan has got power. He has made him a sinful creature, and sin has brought in the judgment of God upon the body and soul, which is death.

We learn from the Word of God that all that happened to Israel as a nation is recorded for our instruction and our warning. Jehovah brought this nation out of Egypt with a strong arm and great miracles; He delivered them from the power of Pharaoh and set them free from slavery; and all He asked in return was that they should cease to be idolators like all the other nations of the earth, and should love Him and trust Him. Instead of this they murmured and complained all the way He led them. Why was this? To understand it we must look back at what had happened in Eden, and remember that the nation was formed of thousands of men and women formed out of the clay, vessels marred by the Power of Evil, who had possessed himself of the affections and the confidence of the race God had created. Thus the will of man had been corrupted and the heart of man had been set upon himself, and the doubt and distrust of God which Satan had planted in Eve was in the heart of each dweller upon earth. The earth was still the Lord's. The world, as the moral sphere within man, had become Satan's.

Jehovah loved His nation; He knew well why they doubted Him, and He bore with their murmurings and loaded blessings upon them. But grace could do nothing with the clay nation; it was always a marred vessel; so Jehovah asked them, if they had His law, would they keep it? That pleased the self-esteem which they had inherited from Eve. "Yes," they said; "we will stand or fall by the law." Well, in the end the holy law smashed the clay vessel all to pieces, as we shall see, for it brought in the judgment of Jehovah upon it. God tried prophets, and judges, and kings, but all to no purpose. No form of government could mold that nation into a holy nation, or into a kingdom of priests, a vessel meet for the Master's use. Satan reigned as prince over Man's moral nature, and whatever God sought to make of His nation, he marred it.

So this clay nation kept on rebelling against Jehovah, hating Him and doubting Him, till one day Jehovah said to His prophet Jeremiah, "Arise, and go down to the potter's house, and there will I cause thee to hear My words." Jehovah was going to give His servant what we call an "object lesson." He was to learn by a picture what God thought of His clay nation. "Then I went down to the potter's house," writes the prophet, "and behold, he wrought a work on the wheels. And the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hand of the potter; so he made it again another vessel, as seemed good to the potter to make it."

Little thought that potter, as his work went wrong that day, and he had to roll his plastic clay into a lump again, and mold another vessel from it little thought he that you and I, over two thousand years afterward, should read of his misfortune, and learn that he made another vessel from that same lump of clay. He pleased himself that potter, for the clay was his, and the skill was his, and the ideal was his. He re-made the marred vessel as he pleased to make it. Little thought he, as the grief-scarred prophet stood and watched him, that the eyes of Jehovah, too, were on the working of his busy hands. But a voice from another sphere spoke to the listening prophet. "O house of Israel," it cried, "cannot I do with you as this potter? Behold, as the clay is in the potter's hand, so are ye in my hand, O house of Israel. At what instant I shall speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, to pull down, and to destroy it; if that nation.... turn from their evil, I will repent of the evil that I thought to do unto them.... 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." The prophet gave the message, but the people answered. "We will walk after our own devices, and we will every one do the imagination of his evil heart."

Alas! for the clay nation, the self-will of Eve was in it. It had been molded under judges, remolded under prophets, remolded under kings; but still the vessel had been marred in the hands of the great Potter. He had given His people their own land, their own city, their wondrous temple; but all had been in vain. A kingdom of priests and a holy nation was not to be formed out of clay. The clay was His; but the great Adversary caused the work to be marred in His hands, and alas, the once plastic clay was growing stiff and hard in the great Potter's hands, and every time He remolded it, it grew stiffer and harder. Vainly He cried to it by priest and prophet, "Harden not your hearts." It refused His pleadings, it stoned His messengers, it slew His prophets, and at length refused all impress from His hands. And what happened then? We shall see.

One day not so very long ago there sat down in my drawing-room an elderly man. His face was wrinkled, his hair was gray; his eye, dark and keen, flashed full of eager greed as he discussed business matters with me. But the gold once within the grip of that trembling and wrinkled hand, his whole being seemed to change. He became instantly another man. His features relaxed, his eye softened, and his conversation became interesting. There was something about him that drew out your interest, in spite of yourself. The conversation turned upon serious matters, upon the future of the soul; and I shall not soon forget the expression of that face, as, turning from my gaze with drooping head, the words, "Dark, dark— all dark beyond!" came from his quivering lips.

"Dark, dark— all dark beyond!" How often have those words rung in my ears since then. And why do I tell you of him now? Because he was a sherd of the clay nation which is the subject before us.

"A sherd of the clay nation?" do you ask? Yes; he was of the house of Israel, the nation composed of men and women made out of the dust, of whom Jehovah said He could once form them as the potter molded his clay. There he sat, a stranger in a strange land— without a city, without a temple, without a land. I spoke of Israel's hope—a glory-crowned Messiah. He raised his head, and his eyes flashed— not now with greed, but with a strange, earnest look in them. "HE WILL COME," he said; "MESSIAH will surely, surely come." I spoke of Christ, the Passover Lamb of God's providing. His head dropped again, his face grew sad; he shook his hoary head slowly. "Impossible," he said, "that a Victim chargeable with the offense could bear the sin of man."

Poor old man! He has left his golden thousands since then, and he has passed into the darkness of which he wailed; unless, indeed, in the infinite mercy of Jehovah, a ray of light from a risen and glorified Messiah reached his poor soul ere it passed away. And why was he, like thousands more of his race, a stranger in a strange land, with a desolate heart, and with a golden idol ever before him?— unbendable, unchangeable, a broken sherd, that could not be made whole again? What had happened that Jehovah no longer cared for His nation, no longer molded and remolded the willful, distrustful people? How is it that the people are no longer one lump, so to speak, but that hard sherds are scattered about amidst all the nations of the earth?

Jeremiah's second object-lesson will explain everything to us. Look at him—that much afflicted prophet! His face haggard and scarred with suffering, his eyes swollen with weeping, his gaunt form emaciated with fasting. Look at him; he has gathered around him a few of the elders of Israel, the ancients of the people. By no word of mouth does he answer their queries as to Jehovah's frown or favors— the time for that has passed; but silently he leads the way through the gates of the royal city of Jerusalem, down the rugged mountain slopes, and into the vile valley of Tophet. No weapon is in his hand, no mystic scroll, no symbol of his prophetic mission, but he carries with him a "potter's earthen vessel."

In that foul valley which they enter, fires are burning, for there refuse of the great city is consumed. It is a valley of destruction, and of purification by fire. The dust crumbles under their feet, charred fragments lie on every hand, smoke-wreaths darken the air; and there, in that foul Gehenna, the prophet pauses, and with quivering features, that tell out but half the anguish of his heart, he casts from his hand with desperate force that "potter's earthen vessel." It is hard, it is brittle, that bottle; its character has changed from the soft, plastic clay which once it was, into that hard brittle substance, for in an instant a hundred fragments are flying hither and thither, and ere the sound of the crash has died away, the voice of the mournful prophet rings out amidst the wreck, crying. "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; and they shall bury them in Tophet, till there be no place to bury" (Jer. 19). The marred clay nation was to be destroyed once and forever. There was to be no more remolding, for the hearts had grown too hard, the wills too defiant and the law which they had accepted, and had broken, would bring down judgment upon them.

These are solemn words—"cannot be made whole again." They are God's words. Does it not look as if Satan had triumphed forever, and that not only man as man is ruined, but also God's own special nation?

Yes; it does. But, Oh! let it speak to us! Let us own how by nature our wills are defiant to God, how our hearts are cold towards Him, that we are far more ready to listen, like Eve, to the suggestion of the enemy, than to trust and honor our Creator. How can you account for sin and death if something has not gone wrong between man and his Creator? What should we know about it were it not for the inspired volume which our God has had written for our learning? We know what misery sin has brought in its train. A holy and loving Creator never formed such a world of woe.

And then look! look at the sherds of the clay nation. They are to be found in every land. The broken clay nation cannot be made whole again. Its moan goes up from ruined homes, from secret torture-chambers, from bloody pogroms— still hard, still unbendable, still refusing its

murdered Messiah. If the Bible is not to be believed, how do you account for all this?

The Lord Jesus is speaking to us from heaven today. "How shall we escape if we neglect so great salvation?" (Heb. 2:3). "Today, if ye will hear His voice, harden not your hearts" (Heb. 4:7). His right it is to rule in those affections of yours. His right it is to be trusted and worshipped. His power, if you turn to Him, will displace the tempter from his throne within, and will place Himself there for your salvation.

And if these words are reaching one who has been like backsliding Israel, ever refusing to bow to God's chastening discipline, revolting again and again, listen afresh, I entreat you, to the Great Master Potter's words: "O Israel, thou hast destroyed thyself, but in Me is thine help." (Hos. 13:9).

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