

## JEREMIAH ... WHO FOUND SERMONS IN UNUSUAL PLACES

Arise, and go down to the potter's house, and there I will cause thee to hear my words. (Jer. 18:2)

Dr. Frank Boreham, whom I met in Australia, was a remarkable author and a great friend, but above all else, he was a seer—a visionary—able to find a sermon anywhere. Michelangelo looked at a discarded block of marble and saw imprisoned within it an angel. Dr. Boreham could look at a tree, see a telephone post, and then discourse on the miracle of communication. On the summit of Mount Hobart in Tasmania he talked to a small spring bubbling out of the ground. "Little Spring, from whence have you come?" "Ah," came the reply, "I have arisen from the deep, deep mountain." "And where are you going?" "Sir, I am on my way to the deep, deep sea." "Why?" asked the interrogator. "Sir, I cannot help myself. I am going from the deep mountain to the deep sea, because 'deep calleth unto deep.'" The scholarly author, then in his inimitable manner, discoursed on the amazing grace of God, which calls from the divine heart to the depth of a sinner's soul. The revered doctor was unique, a genius. He would have enjoyed fellowship with Jeremiah, who also found sermons in unusual places.

## The Gracious Purpose ... Deciding

"Then I went down to the potter's house, and, behold, he wrought a work on the wheels" (Jer. 18:3). Perhaps it is to be regretted that modern technology has revolutionized the pottery industry. What once was a work of art has been spoiled by a mass production of clay articles. What once took patience and time to complete, is now made in moments at a minimum of the original cost. Not too long ago visitors to the Middle East were able to watch as potters displayed the craft of their ancestors. A simple shed was erected close to the area where the special clay was

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found; and there the workman sat at a contraption that had wheels, discs, water, and the pedals by which the machine was operated. It was a fascinating sight to watch the man as he molded the clay into a pliable ball, and then placing it on the spinning disc, gently pressed with his fingers until a desired object appeared. Occasionally, the substance was unresponsive, and the man abruptly squeezed the clay into a ball, and commenced his procedure again.

Dr. Thomson described what he saw in Palestine:

There was a potter sitting at his frame and turning the wheel with his foot. He had a heap of the prepared clay near him, and a pan of water at his side. Taking a lump in his hand, he placed it on the top of his wheel (which revolved horizontally) and smoothed it into a low cone, like the upper end of a sugar loaf. Then, thrusting his thumbs into the top of it, he opened a hole down through the center, and this he constantly widened by pressing the sides of the revolving cone with his hands. As it enlarged and became thinner, he gave it whatever shape he pleased with the utmost ease and expedition. When Jeremiah was watching the potter, the vessel was marred in his hand and he made it again; another vessel as seemed good to the potter to make it. I had to wait a long time for that to happen, but it happened at last. From some defect in the clay, or because he had taken too little, the potter suddenly changed his mind, crushed his growing jar into a shapeless mass of mud, and beginning anew, fashioned it into a totally different

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vessel. (W. M. Thomson, The Land and the Book [London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1910], 518)

Jeremiah stood beside the potter and watched as the man lifted the clay. The slimy mud was not only unattractive, it was helpless. Yet the potter saw not what it was, but what it could become. That which appeared to be useless could be transformed into an object of beauty. As the prophet watched he heard God speaking: "O house of Israel, cannot I do with you as this potter? saith the LORD. Behold, as the clay is in the potter's hand, so are ye in mine hand, O house of Israel" (Jer. 18:6). It is wise to remember that people come into the world with nothing; they will take nothing out. It should be a source of gratitude that God, who is the Master Potter, can lift people from their mediocre surroundings and make them into treasures to adorn celestial palaces: "He raiseth up the poor out of the dust, and lifteth the needy out of the

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dunghill; That he may set him with princes, even with the princes of his people" (Ps. 113:7-8).

Moses was specially trained for his leadership of Israel. Over a period of forty years he learned military strategy in Egypt; in the wilderness as a shepherd he learned the value of patience. Without such experiences, he could not have succeeded in his task of leading Israel among hostile nations toward the Promised Land. Moses became what God meant him to be. Could the same be said of us?

The Grievous Problem ... Disappointing

"And the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hand of the potter" (Jer. 18:4). Something was wrong; the displeasure on the face of the workman was clearly visible. Jeremiah watched intently. The potter was examining the clay; evidently a gritty substance was resisting the pressure of his fingers. Small lumps and indentations were spoiling the appearance of the new creation. The vessel could not be completed when the clay was unresponsive. The potter was wasting his time. Suddenly the man crushed the clay within his hands until it became once again a shapeless mess. Jeremiah stirred uneasily. Then he heard the whisper of the Lord: "O house of Israel, cannot I do with you as this potter?" The prophet knew God would not be satisfied with imperfection; weaknesses within the human clay were thwarting His purposes. Jehovah was apparently wasting time trying to do the impossible. The prophet frowned; the future of his people was being threatened. Would God crush Israel? Jeremiah seemed to be as a statue—cold, solemn, and breathless. Had Jehovah run out of patience?

Paul would have sympathized with the ancient prophet, for he also was aware of the folly of his nation. Writing to the Christians in Rome, the apostle said, "I say the truth in Christ, I lie not, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Ghost, That I have great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart. For I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh" (Rom. 9:1-3). Both Jeremiah and Paul were afraid their brethren would be rejected by the Lord.

When Daniel spoke to the king of Babylon, he said, "The God in whose hand thy breath is, and whose are all thy ways, hast thou not glorified" (Dan. 5:23b). "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Heb. 10:31).

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The Glorious Patience... Deciding

"So he made it again another vessel, as seemed good to the potter

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to make it" (Jer. 18:4b, emphasis mine). Jeremiah breathed an intense sigh of relief; there was still hope for his decadent brethren. The potter detected and removed the hindering substances and began again the task of transforming the unattractive clay into an object to be admired. Slowly his thumbs were inserted into the spinning clay, and as the prophet watched, the skillful artisan's second attempt began to succeed. The potter smiled. He might have thrown away the unyielding clay, but that would have been an admission of defeat. He had spent much time on the marred vessel; it could not be abandoned while there was hope of completing his task. It was worth a second chance!

Simon Peter would applaud that decision. When the Savior heard the disciple's vehement denials, and heard the crow of the cockerel, He looked at the disappointing follower with enduring compassion. Subsequent actions proved He was attempting to restore His guilty disciple.

John Mark, who wrote the second Gospel, would have found consolation in Jeremiah's testimony. The young enthusiast had left his colleagues on the first missionary journey made by Paul and Barnabas (see Acts 13:13) and later was probably blamed when the two leaders quarrelled over his reinstatement (see Acts 15:37-41). He had failed in his duty, ruined a team of Christian workers, disappointed his church and mother, and, probably in his own estimation was the chief of sinners. Yet later, even Paul recognized the boy was only a piece of clay that the Master Potter refused to abandon. The Lord made him into another vessel through which the word of God reached the entire world.

The illustration could be increased a thousand times, for all Christians are aware of failures that temporarily ruined their Christian efforts. Broken vows, moral lapses, uncompleted assignments, and deadly apathy at one time or another have assailed every member of the family of God. Had not God "made us again" we should have been overwhelmed by despair.

#### The Great Pleasure ... Delighting

The first phase of the work had been completed; both the potter and the prophet were smiling. The workman with his special tools pressed an attractive pattern into the pliable clay, and it only remained to place the article into the kiln. The heat would harden the clay and make it

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durable and ready for service. It might carry water from the well or contain food for hungry people. Perhaps in special circumstances it would hold flowers to delight viewers. It might not be worth a great amount of money, but its usefulness would guarantee a place in a home. Fulfilling a mission, it would become dirty, but loving hands would restore its attractiveness. Today, archaeologists dig on many ancient sites and even broken pieces of pottery are considered to be treasures that link the ancient and modern worlds.

Among my possessions is a broken pot that an Israeli friend lifted from the sea close to the site of ancient Caesarea. It is only a piece of ordinary pottery, but it is a window through which I see people who lived thousands of years ago. It tells of careful hands that made a relic, an enduring part of a civilization soon to disappear. There is also a glass vase that a young lady gave to the leader of a party of tourists to which I belonged. Evidently, desiring to please the American and perhaps earn a monetary gift, she presented him with the artifact from a nearby archaeological site. It might even have been stolen, for many of the local boys after dark make their own discoveries. My friend accepted the gift, but after the donor's departure, said, "Who wants this?" I quickly replied, "I do," and that glass vase is among my precious collectibles. Age has greatly increased its value. If the maker could have foreseen the future, he would have been astonished.

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With great care the Master Potter made us for His glory. His greatest joy in eternity will be the realization that He did not waste His time! When millions of redeemed people sing "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to redeem us by His blood," even the Savior will rejoice that He made us again when we were unworthy of attention.

Have Thine own way Lord; Have Thine own way;  
Hold o'er my spirit absolute sway.  
Fill with Thy Spirit, `Till all shall see  
Christ only, always, living in me.

ÄA. A. Pollard

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