

God as the Merciful Potter – Part 2 of 2

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恵みに富みたもう陶器師なる神 2

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Jeremiah

18:1 The word which came to Jeremiah from the Lord, saying,

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

18:3 Then I went down to the potter's house, and, look, he wrought a work on the wheels.

18:4 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.

18:5 Then the word of the Lord came to me, saying,

18:6 Oh house of Israel, cannot I do with you as this potter? says the Lord. Look, as the clay is in the potter's hand, so are you in mine hand, Oh house of Israel.

Jeremiah

29:11 For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the Lord, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end.

Today, I'd like us to think about the same subject we discussed last week, 'God as the Merciful Potter'. This last verse was a wonderful message from the Lord, which was sent through Jeremiah.

Jeremiah

29:11 For I know the thoughts that I think toward you.

No one can truly say to others, "*I know the plans I have for you*", because it is the Lord who actually has the plan. He knows the "*plans for well-being, and not for calamity, in order to give you a future and a hope*". I guess that after all, the Bible was given to us to recognize this fact. The Bible was written to give a future and hope to wretched and unwise humans. We should pay attention to three things.

First is the ever-lasting plan of God to give us his blessing. Second are the conditions required for His plan to be accomplished. Third is question of whether we are facing the recreation or destruction.

The ever-lasting plan of God for His blessing is explained in verse 4, which we just read;

Jeremiah

18:4 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.

This verse is about creating a vessel from clay, which, needless to say, symbolizes us: humans. The verse implies that the vessel must satisfy the intentions of the Lord and must make Him rejoice. Clay has absolutely no value unless it is formed into a shape that meets the intentions of the potter. The potter, who is the Father God will never be satisfied unless we, the clays are transformed into the same image of the Son of God, the Lord Jesus.

Paul also explained the purpose of the Lord in his epistle to the Romans.

Romans

8:29 For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren.

Three kinds of vessels

The Lord is still working inside you and inside me to fulfill one ultimate purpose: to transform us to the image of the Son, the Lord Jesus. According to verse 4, from Chapter 18 of Jeremiah, there are three kinds of vessels: the failed vessel, the other vessel and the good vessel made according to the intentions of the potter.

Failed vessel. According to verse 4, the potter was working on the clay to form a vessel, but became ruined in his hand. If we only look at this particular sentence, it seems very cruel. It may seem like a desperate situation and that there is no hope left for the clay. "My life is ruined. My life is failed just like a broken vessel. My life has been a succession of failures and I have no hope left". The failed vessel represents such situations.

Then, there is another vessel, as is in the verse 4, "*the vessel he was working on with the clay was ruined in the potter's hand, so he remade it into another vessel that seemed appropriate to him*". When we read in Jeremiah that the Lord God made it again another vessel, some of us may understand it that the Lord God created some other vessel which fulfills his intention.

The Lord chose some other persons to serve Him. "The Lord does not care about me. At least, the Lord does not look favorably on me but on some other persons." You might come to think this way. However, thinking this way is of course, wrong.

Third kind of vessel is the good vessel, which was made exactly as the potter wanted.

'*So he remade it into another vessel that seemed appropriate to him.*' Because the Lord always does

what is best for us, the vessel that seemed appropriate to Him must have been absolutely the best one. The Lord God can take the clay out of any failed vessel, knead it again and remake it into a new vessel which serves His will.

2 Corinthians

5:21 For he has made him to be sin* for us, who knew no sin. that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.

(*)According to the original Bible, He actually embodied all sins, or all sins were concentrated on Him.

It is written that Jesus was made to be sin. If this is applied to the allegory in Jeremiah, Jesus was ruined as the failed vessel, squeezed in the potter's hands and finally killed to eventually be remade as the new vessel. However, Jesus did not just die - He was resurrected. He came back to life as the victor who governs everything forever.

Our hearts must be occupied with a new nature, which is the life of Jesus. It is more important than anything for us to be transformed into the image of Jesus. Paul wrote in his letter to the Galatians, Chapter 2, Verse 20:

Galatians

2:20 I am crucified with Christ...

Now, he was taken out of his normal life.

2:20 ...nevertheless I live. yet not I, but Christ lives in me. and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.

Three conditions

Isn't this one of the most important testimonies? There are three conditions for us to be vessels that meet the intentions of the Lord God, that is to say, to be transformed into the image of His Son, Jesus. As I mentioned in the previous sermon, according to the first condition the clay must obey the potter. Secondly, a pottery wheel must be used, and finally, the nature of the potter matters.

All of these three conditions must be met. The clay must obey the potter. The clay, of course is chosen by the potter. Clay cannot choose its potter. The potter understands that the clay doesn't have much value as is. The Lord God does not inquire too deeply into our nature, knowing that we are useless anyway. It is because He knows what will happen to us in the future. After all, the Lord chose us knowing how terrible we were. As we totally obey the Lord more and more, we will become disappointed in ourselves. We have to admit that there is nothing good in us.

However, the Lord God mercifully chose us knowing how miserable we are, and thus the Lord will never be disappointed by us. There are some conditions for us to be transformed into vessels, which satisfy the intentions of the Lord, that is to say, to be transformed to the image of His Son, Jesus. The first condition is that the clay obeys the potter, as I just said.

Secondly, a pottery wheel is necessary. What is the pottery wheel in our daily lives? It is the circumstances we have to live with everyday.

By listening to someone talking about the Bible, we may learn so-called spiritual lessons. We also can read the Bible and have intimate fellowship with Jesus through our prayers. However, we will only be changed into the image of Jesus through the ordeals and sufferings of our daily lives.

Clay must be placed at the center of the pottery wheel, otherwise it will never make a good shape. We can understand the intentions of the Lord by learning from the Bible, but to be transformed to the image of the Lord, we have to be placed on the pottery wheel, which is the experience in our daily lives. The pottery wheel never stops—it is spinning all the time.

The pottery wheel has to be constantly turning, otherwise even the best potter cannot make a vessel. Sometimes, because the potter kneads the clay too strongly, the clay wants to get away from the pottery wheel.

Jeremiah visited the home of the potter and he witnessed that same person kneading the clay and then revolving the pottery wheel. This implies that trying to escape from the pottery wheel is actually the same as trying to get away from the hands of the Lord.

The Lord stands at every corner of our daily lives and show us the right direction. Let's not forget that it is not the pottery wheel itself but the hand of the potter, who is the Lord, that crushes us and gives us our pain. Needless to say, all pains and sufferings are given to us by the Lord God so that He can mold and reform us into the image of His Son. There are also many different kinds of pottery wheels. We should not question the intentions of the Lord and not attempt to change our circumstances to our own will.

As I said earlier, the potter is of course the Lord Himself. The God in the Bible will revive all failed vessels. The Lord God, the Lord we believe in, has His own plan which cannot be affected by anything. The Lord never starts what He cannot complete.

The Lord has all the wisdom, patience, blessing, love and strength required for His own purposes. Our Lord is the God of hope and can never be disappointed by anything. The message that Jeremiah is sending toward us is, “The Lord can do”.

Seven examples of recovered vessels

So far, we have seen that what we consider to be a new vessel is actually the vessel that was once totally broken and then recreated. Those vessels are remade by the Lord. Let's look at seven examples from the Bible to understand how the Lord disciplines humans that once fell into sin and failed their lives, but recovered thanks to the Lord. Re-creation by the Lord God, His work to remake the vessels, is not like refurbishing something or temporary repair. It is the work of totally new creation and rebuilding. Recreation comes only after death, darkness and desperation.

Let's begin by looking at Adam and Abel.

The first man, Adam, committed the first sin, and because of that, all created things were cursed. The whole human race was put under the curse of the Lord. What did the great potter do to them? Did he give up saying, “I can't help them and there is nothing I can do”?

No, the God in the Bible would never do such thing. The Lord stretched out His hands to pick up the wrecked clay and worked on it. The Bible states that one of Adam's son, Abel, was good and “*the Lord looked favorably upon Abel*”.

Although he inherited a sinful nature from his father, Adam, he was recreated in the hands of the Lord, the great potter, and he was so recovered that the God admired him. Jesus said that Abel was a righteous man. In the Gospel according to Matthew 23:35, Jesus called him “righteous Abel”.

As the second example, let's look at Abraham.

In the Bible, men of great faith never tried to hide their weaknesses or imperfections. We can see from the Bible that Abraham was also a miserable clay. Abraham disguised his wife as his sister.

Abraham, because he wanted a child desperately, took a mistress without trusting the Lord. What was the consequence? The Lord God did not speak a word to him for 13 years after that.

Was there anything good in Abraham? Nothing. Just like all other humans, Abraham was one of the miserable and useless clays. However, the great potter did not cast him off. Actually, the failed vessel Abraham became a great believer and later came to be known as “the father of faith”. The Lord of

almighty called Abraham 'my friend' and even said, “*Should I hide from Abraham what I'm about to do?*”

Genesis

18:17 And the Lord said. Shall I hide from Abraham that thing which I do;

Abraham was reformed into the image of the Lord, which fulfilled the intentions of the potter.

Let's look at the third example, Jacob.

Jacob too was just an ordinary clay. He used contemptible means to take the right of the first son from his brother Esau. Jacob even lied to obtain the blessing of the first son. He also did not rely on the Lord to choose his wife, but rather he chose her himself.

He also deceived Laban and cheated him out of all his money. Jacob indeed was this kind of man. He was nothing but a miserable clay. However, he was placed on the pottery wheel and reshaped in the hands of the potter into a new vessel which satisfied the potter's intention. The image of the Lord God was projected onto the face of Jacob. The Lord God was so proud of this newly created vessel. Now, how was Jacob changed? His name was listed along with the name of the Lord God. God was proud to be called 'the God of Jacob'.

The fourth example is the prophet Elijah.

It is written in 5:17 of James, that '*Elijah was an ordinary person just like us*'. This means that Elijah was made of the same material, the same clay as other people. It is written in the Bible that Elijah collapsed in total despair under a juniper tree. He desperately wanted to die and prayed to God to take his life away. Although he was characterized by his courage in his pursuit of faith and he was known for being very obedient, he was no different from many other clays at the beginning.

However, Elijah too was reshaped in the hands of the Lord to a vessel that satisfied His intentions. He did not die, but was taken up to heaven alive. It is also very well known that he met Jesus with Moses on top of the high mountain. Elijah was totally transformed into the image of the Lord.

The fifth example is David.

David of course, belonged to the chosen people. He believed in the Lord and had never questioned the God's will. He lived the first half of his life according to the guidance of the Lord. However, the day came when his faith was broken. David committed the sin of adultery then committed the sin of murder soon after. If we don't realize what is hidden deep in our minds, we would wonder why such a sincere believer committed dreadful sins like these.

What did the Lord God say about him? Did He say 'I have no hope in David anymore. I will give him up and forsake him'? No, this is the last thing that the God of the Bible would say. The great potter grabbed the broken piece of this vessel in His hands and then placed it on the pottery wheel. David must have been full of pain. Psalm 51 depicts the scream of David that was squeezed out from the bottom of his soul.

Psalms

51:3 For I acknowledge my transgressions. and my sin is ever before me.

51:12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation. and uphold me with your free spirit.

However, David was totally recovered and God later testified, *"I have found that David, the son of Jesse, is a man after my own heart"*. I can't think of any better words to praise a man.

The sixth example is Peter.

Peter was also a vessel made of poor materials. Did he also make a lot of mistakes in his life just like the others? Was Peter just another piece of useless clay? Peter stressed, *"Even if I have to die with you, I will never deny you!"* He was so confident when he pledged to Jesus this way.

However, it was just a few moments later that Peter denied Jesus, saying that he didn't know such a person. We see that Peter was an ordinary man just like us after all. Let us see what happened to this failed vessel. He was handed over to the great potter and he was remade into the vessel which met the intentions of the potter.

When we read the sermon Peter made at the Pentecost, when we think of the eloquent testimony he made for the Lord Jesus at his own trial and when we read all epistles he wrote, we understand that Peter was transformed into a magnificent vessel which fulfilled the intentions of the Lord. Peter had the blessing of the Lord and was changed to the image of the Son, the Lord Jesus.

Let us use Mark as the last example, the author of the Gospel according to Mark.

This man called Mark was raised in a Christian home in Jerusalem. Jesus visited his home very often in Mark's childhood. Mark was truly a lucky man who, since he was an infant, had the chance to see Jesus in his own eyes and listen to the words He spoke. One day, Mark decided to serve Jesus and volunteered to participate in the great mission trip of Paul and Barnabas.

He witnessed and experienced the works of the Lord everywhere. He continued his trip, but it was not so pleasant. The trip was never easy. One day, when he could no longer stand the hardships of the trip, he left Paul and Barnabas behind and fled back to Jerusalem. This kind of act is mentioned in Luke 9:62.

Luke

9:62 And Jesus said to him. No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.

They won't be lost. However, they will never be used. Not only did Mark look back, he also ran away. He stepped out of the pottery wheel. He must have regretted it later, thinking back on what he did.

"I am a betrayer. I am an absolutely useless man. Paul and Barnabas are having conflict with each other because of me. They can't work together anymore and it is my fault." He must have blamed himself so much.

The potter, who was the Lord God, did not cast out this failed vessel, but took it up in his hands. The great potter completely reshaped this vessel into a new one. Later, Paul, who used to despise Mark as useless man, wrote in his letter to Timothy, *"get Mark and bring him with you"*. The letter proves that Mark became a man of God.

Furthermore, the Lord commanded Mark to write one of the four gospels in the Bible, the Gospel according to Mark. No one can tell how many people were saved and returned to the Lord by the Gospel according to Mark, how many Christians were blessed by this book. Mark was transformed into a vessel which carried out the will of the potter. Isn't it so wonderful that the Lord as the potter has limitless wisdom and patience, that He is holding each one of us in his hands just like clay on a pottery wheel?

Abel, Abraham, Jacob, Elijah, David, Peter and Mark; they were all remade as new vessels, recreated vessels. The God as the potter says, *"Can't I transform you into the image of the Son, the Lord Jesus?"* When we think of these newly remade vessels, recreated vessels, we realize the Lord is the God of Hope, and it urges us to worship Him.

Broken vessels

Now, I would like to talk about the vessels that were totally broken and could not be recovered.

So far, we have seen seven vessels that were newly remade by the potter. Now, I want to look at four vessels that slipped out of the potter's hands and totally broke into pieces. I honestly feel like stopping the sermon here so that we don't have to look deep into the dark side. However, the Bible consists of the

words from the God and thus, does not only show the bright sides of the humans. Some vessels slipped out of the hands of the God, broken into pieces and ended up without ever being recovered.

The following four people are examples of such vessels: Cain, the brother of Abel; Esau, the brother of Jacob; Saul, the enemy of David; and Judas of Iscariot, who once belonged to the disciples of Jesus. Why are there so many failed vessels in the Bible, which is made up of the words of God? First of all, it is to explain the reasons why they could not be recovered, or contrarily, to compare the recovered vessels with the failed ones.

The second reason is there to urge us to decide which way to proceed: the way toward the recovery or toward the destruction.

Now, let's begin with the case of Cain.

1 John

3:12 Not as Cain, who was of that wicked one, and slew his brother. And wherefore slew he him? Because his own works were evil, and his brother's righteous.

Cain was a religious man. He believed in the existence of the Lord and never failed to make offerings to the Lord. However, he was motivated to do so in order to avoid the anger of God and because he expected benefits in return. He neither rejoiced in making offerings nor made offerings of his own will.

Why couldn't Cain be recovered but just perished? It was because he did not recognize his own sins at all. He didn't understand himself; actually, he did not even want to understand himself. He believed that he was righteous and he was proud of himself; thus, he didn't need the savior to sacrifice Himself for him. Even if right before Cain slew Abel, he was told that 'he was a sinner just like murderers', he would never have accepted it.

He was not conscious of his own sins. There is nothing that the Lord God can do for such people. Abraham, Jacob, Elijah, David, Peter and Mark — these people realized their sinful nature and that their lives were miserably failed, and thus admitted the absolute necessity of the Savior.

What Cain did was totally opposite. Even the most excellent potter cannot make use of clay like this. Even if, just like David, someone committed murder, they still have hope if they cry out to the Lord as David did; "I know my own iniquities. My sins always lay in front of me. I stood against you, I committed sins, I took an awfully wrong attitude in front of you, I did terrible things." There still is hope to hear the Lord testifies, *'This is a person after my own heart, who will carry out all my wishes.'*

The second broken vessel is Esau.

Esau was a typical man who had no respect for spiritual authority.

Genesis

25:31 And Jacob said. Sell me this day your birthright.

25:32 And Esau said. Look. I am at the point to die. and what profit shall this birthright do to me?

25:33 And Jacob said. Swear to me this day. and he swore to him. and he sold his birthright to Jacob.

25:34 Then Jacob gave Esau bread and pottage of lentiles. and he did eat and drink, and rose up, and went his way. thus Esau despised his birthright.

The Chapter 12 of Hebrew describes this story in more detail.

Hebrew

12:15 Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God. lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled;

12:16 Lest there be any fornicator, or profane person, as Esau, who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright.

12:17 For you know how that afterward, when he would have inherited the blessing, he was rejected. for he found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears.

In the land of Israel back in these days, firstborn sons were determined to be the heads of the whole family and serve the Lord God. Firstborn sons had the privilege of being their family's priests and they had to practice all of the spiritual rituals within the family. As the priests of the family, the firstborn sons were responsible for leading the family members to the presence of the Lord God.

However, as recorded in chapter 25 of Genesis, not only did Esau disregard the birthright, but he despised this privilege granted to him. Even the greatest and the most excellent potter cannot reform such a person.

The third example of the broken vessel is the King called Saul.

What do we know about this man? He was the enemy of David. He lacked the faith and humility to rely on the Lord. The Lord God spoke to him through Samuel the prophet, but he refused to obey the God. He did not trust the Lord. There is no way for the potter to handle this kind of clay as He wants. He ended up killing himself. For the Lord God to reform us into the shape of His will, we need to have faith, obedience and belief.

For the fourth and the last broken vessel, let's think about Judas.

Judas did not truly recognize the incomparable privilege of being with the Lord Jesus, the Son of God for three and half years. Isn't it such a wonderful privilege if we can just live together with Jesus and converse with the Lord every day? Although Judas was invited to have communion with Jesus, he lost everything just for thirty silver coins. Judas did not realize the wonderful privilege of being allowed to have direct communion with the Lord Jesus.

1 Corinthians

1:9 God is faithful, by whom you were called to the fellowship of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord.

We should always keep in our minds that each one of us is invited by Jesus and is greatly privileged to have individual conversation with Him. For the Lord God, the great potter, to transform us, the miserable clays, into the image of His Son, it is extremely important that we deeply recognize this amazing privilege given to us.

Shouldn't we use this privilege to deepen our communion with Jesus? Judas despised the privilege that was granted to him. How did his life end? He killed himself. Just like him, when we refuse to have sincere and intimate communion with Jesus, we are committing spiritual suicide and thus, the Lord will not be able to form in us the image of His Son. The Lord, the great potter, is present at the center of our gatherings.

And the Lord knows each one of us. The Lord, of course, understands what kind of materials we are made of. Nevertheless, the Lord will never be disappointed in us. The Lord never loses hope for us. He will never give up on us. With His limitless patience and love, the Lord God holds us in his hands until we are transformed into vessels that meet His intentions.

Do we clearly see, using the eyes of our hearts, that the Lord is willing to give us His everlasting blessing? Are we the obedient clay placed on the pottery wheel of the potter? It will be extremely painful. But, as Paul said,

Romans

8:18 For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.

We may or may not be appreciated by others. We might be admired by others or misunderstood by others. These things are totally meaningless as long as we are vessels that fulfill the intentions of the Lord. The Lord God's plan is to give us His everlasting blessing. What kind of plan is it?

Let me conclude by reading some related verses.

He must increase, but I must decrease.

I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me.

This mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory:

My little children, of whom I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you.

But we have this treasure (i.e. The Lord Jesus) in earthen vessels.

Always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body.

For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.

While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal.

For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son.

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.

End