

The Potter's Broken Vessel

Jeremiah 18, 19.

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I feel and judge very distinctly that there is a special character in this present time through which we are passing. The great powers which are destined to fill out the action of Christendom's closing day are practising themselves, each in its several sphere, with great earnestness and skill. I mean the *civil* and the *ecclesiastical*.

I do not doubt but that, for a season, the ecclesiastical will prevail. The *woman* is to *ride* again for a while — a prophetic symbol, as I believe, signifying ecclesiastical supremacy. And this present moment is marked by many efforts on the behalf of that which takes the place of the Church, or of the ecclesiastical theory, thus to exalt itself; and she is so adroitly directing those efforts that success may speedily await them, and then the blood of the saints may flow afresh.

The *civil* power, however, is anything but idle. The wondrous advance that it is making every day in the cultivation of the world proves great skill and activity on *its* part. It is largely boasting itself, showing what it has done, and pledging what further it means to do.

At this moment each of these powers is abroad in the scene of action, and the minds of men are divided between them. In some sense they are rivals. There is the *commercial* energy, and there is the *religious* energy; the one is erecting its railroads and making its exhibitions; the other is extending its bishoprics, building its temples, multiplying its ordinances, and the like. The attention of the children of men is divided between these things; but the saint who knows the cross of Christ as the relief of his conscience, and the reason of his separation from the world, is apart from them both.

I doubt not that the civil power will have to yield the supremacy for a time, and the woman will ride again, though her state and greatness will be but for a little; for the civil power will take offence, and remove her.

If we, in God's grace, keep a good conscience towards Christ and His truth, we may count upon it that no inheritance in the earth is worth, as people speak, many years' purchase. If we consent to become whatever the times would make us, of course we may go on, and that, too, advancing with an advancing world.*

*I speak simply of things as they are on the earth. I know that at any time, independently of them, the saints may be taken up to meet the Lord in the air.

I have been sensible lately how much the spirit of Jeremiah suits these times. He lived in the daily observation of evil. Iniquity was abounding in the scene around him, though it was called by God's name, and was indeed His place on the earth. The house of prayer had become a "den of thieves," though they still cried, "The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, are these." He knew that the judgment of God was awaiting it all, and he looked for happy days which lay in the distance, beyond the present corruption and the approaching judgment. Over all this *corruption* Jeremiah *mourned*; *against* it all he *testified*; and, like his Master, he was hated for his testimony. (John 7: 7.) He was, however, full of faith and hope; and in the strength of that (anticipating the future) he laid out his money in the purchase of Hanameel's field. (Jer. 32.) All this was beautiful — the present sorrow over the corruption of the daughter of his people, faith's certainty of the coming judgment, and hope's

prospect of closing crowning glory.

This is a pattern for our spirit. And I observe another feature of power in the prophet. He was not to be seduced from the conclusions of faith by occasional fair and promising appearances. (See Jer. 37.) The Chaldean army had broken up their camp under the walls of Jerusalem because of the arrival of the Egyptian allies. This circumstance flattered the Jewish people into hopes; but Jeremiah left the city, because he would still hold to the conclusions of faith — that Jerusalem was doomed of God in righteous judgment.

All this is a fine exhibition of a soul walking by the light of God, not merely through darkness, but through darkness which seemed to be light.

All seems to be quiet around us at present, and even more than that, things are greatly and rapidly advancing, as far as all the accommodations of social life extend. But the moral of the scene, in the eye of faith, is more serious than ever. The apostate principles of man's heart are but ripening themselves into their most fruitful and abundant exhibition. There is something of rivalry in the different powers that are in action just at present. The secular and the religious are apart to a great extent. Each has its respective worshippers; but ere long confederacy will take the place of rivalry, I believe. The world must, even for its own ends, adopt religion for a time, that man's system may grow solid, as well as extended and brilliant, and propose itself as that which has earned a title to conform all and everything to itself.

Separation is the Christian's place and calling - *church* separation — separation because of heavenly citizenship and oneness with an already risen Christ. Abraham's separation was very peculiar; it was twofold. He was separated from the *natural* associations of Mesopotamia, "country, kindred, and father's house," and from the *moral* associations of Canaan, or its iniquity and its idols.

In the thought of these solemn truths, beloved, may the Lord Himself be more real and near to us! May the hope of His appearing be found lying more surely and calmly in the midst of the affections and stirrings of our hearts! All was reality with Jeremiah, to whom I have referred. The present corruption was a reality to him, for he rebuked it and bewailed it; the approaching judgment was a reality to him, for he wept at the thought of it, and deprecated it; the final glory was a reality to him, for he laid out his money upon it. He had occasional refreshments of spirit. His sleep, and the dream that accompanied it, in Jer. 31, was, as he says, "sweet unto him." It was a moment on "the holy hill" to him; for a light from the kingdom, or the glory, visited him. He had likewise revelations, and he could speak and write of them — but not only as thus refreshed and gifted in spirit; he was real and true in moral power. He testified against this "present world" unto suffering, and laid out his money, his expectations, and labours, on "the world to come."

It was this which completed his character, and all would have been poor without it. We may speak of Christ, and teach about the kingdom — one's own soul knows it well; but to witness for Him against the world, and to be rich towards God, this is to fill out and realize our character as saints. We may covet these elements of the Christian character. Some of us, if one may speak, are but *half* Jeremiahs. We can *talk* of Christ, but can we *suffer* for Him? We can *teach* about the kingdom, but can we *lay out our money* upon it?

All this may admonish us, beloved, but I have another word in my heart just at present also.

The parable of the potter, in Jer. 18, 19, was designed to let Israel know that, though brought into covenant, they were still within the range and reach of the divine judgments, and that such judgments would overtake them because of their sins. In John Baptist's time, Israel is found in the like character of

self-confidence. If in Jeremiah's day they would say, "The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, are these;" in the Baptist's day they said, "We have Abraham to our father." But John, like Jeremiah, would again teach them that, though in covenant, judgment could reach them. In the Lord's ministry we find the same. Israel still boasted. They talked of Abraham being their father, and of God being their Father (John 8), but we know how the Lord again and again warned them of the coming judgment. All this has a lesson for our learning.

Christendom or Babylon has taken this ancient place of Israel. *She trusts in security in spite of unfaithfulness.* She boasts in the Lord, though her moral condition be vile. She says, "I sit a queen, and am no widow, and shall see no sorrow" (Rev. 18: 7), though blood, and pride, and all abominations, stain her. But Rev. 18 is another action. Like that of the prophet in the potter's house, it teaches the unfaithful one that the doom of the broken vessels, or of the millstone cast into the sea, awaits her. This is for our learning. God never sanctions disobedience. He did not go into the garden of Eden to accredit Adam's sin, but to bring relief in the way of grace for it. So, in the gospel, He utterly condemns sin, while delivering the sinner.

Nor does He ever commit Himself to His stewards. He commits Himself to His own gifts and calling (Rom. 11: 29), but never to His stewards. They are always held responsible to Him, and disobedience works forfeiture. Christ is the only Steward that ever stood and answered for Himself in the *conditional* place, and in this respect, as in every other, He is the moral contradiction of man. In the temptation (Matt. 4) the devil sought to inspire the Lord with confidence in spite of disobedience. He partially cited Ps. 91, quoted the *promised security*, omitting the *required obedience*. But he was utterly defeated. The Lord in answering cited Deut. 6, and acted accordingly; for in that chapter obedience is declared to be Israel's ground of security. In this way did Jesus keep His own blessings under Psalm 91, and His Israel's blessings under Deut. 6. But all other stewards, in their several turn and season, have failed, and Babylon's boast, which we have already listened to, is a lie.

All this may now-a-days be had in our remembrance seasonably; for we live at a time when Babylon is filling herself afresh with this boast, just before her overthrow, when she is to meet the doom of the millstone. (Rev. 18: 21.) For the boast of "the eternal city," as she calls herself, only the more awfully signalizes her for the judgment of God. It is a favourite thought with her, that while other churches tremble for their safety, she is above such fears — she is God's city, and has His walls around her. This is imposing; but, when considered by the teaching of the Word, it only the more distinctly declares what she is, and witnesses her more advanced ripeness for the judgment of God. Because this boast is defiance. It is not faith in God, but disavowal of His rights and authority. It is the denial of her subjection to Him, of her stewardship or place of being answerable to Him and His judgment. This boast of being "the eternal city" so far identifies her with the Babylon that says, "I sit a queen, and am no widow," and it leaves her for the doom of the potter's vessel in the valley of the son of Hinnom, or of the millstone in the hand of the angel. "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." (See Jer. 19: 11.) J. G. B.

The people of God should wait with the girdle and the lamp, which are the beautiful standing symbols of their calling, till the Lord appears — that is, with minds girt up unto holy separation from present things, and with hearts brightened up with the desire and expectation of coming things. J. G. B.