

PRACTICAL PRECEPTS  
—FOR CHRISTIANS—

*In  
The Potter's Hands*



*Pressures, Trials, And Fire  
In The Path Of Faith*

—Revised, 2005—

*“Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest  
against God? Shall the thing formed say to him  
that formed [it], Why hast thou made me thus?”  
(Rom. 9:20).*

When sorrows deep, and burdens, mount.  
And tears well up as from a fount,  
My child’s heart is wont to say  
“Wherein hast Thou thy love displayed?”

Thy rod I feel, the pressure builds,  
My Potter’s hand its strength doth wield,  
And I, an unformed lump of clay,  
Ask “Why hast Thou formed me this way?”

My Father’s heart, how must it ache,  
When I His love and grace mistake,  
For vengeance or a pleasure vain,  
When He doth keenly feel my pain?

How dare I reason—feeble mind!  
Or doubt the plan, wise and Divine,  
Which, using pressure, fire or flood,  
Would form a vessel honoring God?

*B. Short, 2002*

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## Preface

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

Many times in our lives our wise and loving Father allows events and circumstances that seem particularly hard or discouraging. No doubt each of us have at times wondered how it is that divine love could order such painful trials and testings—what possible purpose could be served by such difficulties and sorrows? Broken dreams, broken hearts, failure as husbands and wives, as parents, as children, as brethren in Christ; oh! how despondent thoughts flood in at such times!

Perhaps one has longed to serve the Lord Jesus effectively—desiring that this life would count for something and that there might be the joy of receiving His approval in that coming day of glory. Then the dark, menacing clouds of doubt because of past all too frequent and miserable failures loom on the horizon and once again the storm of discouragement breaks. Then comes the flood of questions: “How could He ever use me after I have so badly failed Him? He surely can't trust me to do anything for Him again so why not just give up.”

Maybe you're seeking to serve the Lord, feeling very clear that He has led you into a particular ministry, only to find such a host of trials and pressures that it now seems you must surely have missed His mind about entering into that service.

At these moments it seems almost impossible to be able to say in the confidence of faith; *“I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me”*. Beset with the howling winds of discouragement, we can easily fail to hear His tender and comforting words; *“I the LORD thy God will hold thy right hand, saying unto thee, Fear not; I will help thee”* (Isa. 41:13).

For all these reasons and more, we begin to think of ourselves as cracked, worthless vessels, without hope of being used of our blessed Lord. It is easy at such times for a discouraged soul to utter in the spirit of dear Peter; *“depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord”*. Yet the Lord surely would lovingly and gently rebuke such thoughts as being unworthy of His love and wisdom for each of His precious redeemed own. What a gentle admonition we hear from His blessed heart: *“If thou lovest courage in the day of trouble, thy strength is small”* (Prov. 24:10, JND trans.).

Remember what was said to Joshua when Moses had died

and he was chosen to lead God's beloved people into the promised land? "*Be strong and of a good courage; be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed: for the LORD thy God is with thee ...*" (Josh. 1:9).

Dear believer, you and I will never have the wisdom to decide when or where or how the Lord can best use us for His honor and for the blessing of others. Those decisions are made according to His sovereign will alone. Our part is to *present* ourselves as *living sacrifices, holy, acceptable to God*—not morally *conformed* to this world, but *transformed* from it, that we might be serviceable to Him.

It is in the *transforming* of ourselves into a vessel *meet for the Master's use* that we find often painful, difficult trials. In order that this forming be done *right* the touch of the *Master's hands* is required. We soon learn that while this *forming process* in our lives isn't always comfortable or easy, it is indispensable if we are to become what the Lord desires us to be.

Come with me then and let's visit together the *potter's house* following the prophet Jeremiah's steps. There we will watch the potter at work while seeking to learn how it is that a lump of sticky, apparently useless mud is turned into a beautiful, valuable piece of pottery—*a vessel ... meet for the Master's use, and prepared unto every good work.* (2 Tim. 2:21).

## **In The Potter's Hands**

### **Chapter One Obtaining The Material**

*The dull gray half-light of early morning dawn was slowly giving way to a brightening purple, orange and pink light in the eastern sky as the potter's family began to stir from their night's slumber. Wood coals in the fire pit that dominated the center of the large oriental family room were still, after the long night, radiating heat as one by one, each family member sleepily made their way to sit near its comforting warmth.*

*Before long, water was boiling, rice was cooking and dishes were filled with the simple, hearty breakfast meal which the family ate each morning. As the sky grew lighter, the room was filled with familiar sounds of conversation. Children's laughter punctuated the steady, quiet murmur of adult voices planning the day's work.*

*The sun had barely risen when a man emerged from the wood and stone building into the damp, cool September morning. Stopping near what appeared to be several large piles of bluish gray mud, he picked up a long stout bamboo pole that had a large wicker basket attached to each end. Placing it across his shoulders and selecting a pick, he started down a gravel trail that led towards the river.*

*It was there, near its banks, that he had found an excellent source of clay. The oriental master potter well knew the effort that would be required to extract that clay from the dark depths where it had been imprisoned since the dawn of time. But by the color and texture of this clay he also realized that once his skilled hands had painstakingly subjected the clay to the necessary procedures, it would produce beautiful and useful vessels of highly valued stoneware pottery.*

#### **Raw Clay**

In our high-tech age, little value is placed on hand craftsmanship. Not only is there scant interest in hand made production methods, in many cases—due to economic realities and manufacturing requirements (met through mass production)—it is unrealistic and unprofitable. Computerized, automated, manufacturing technology does things far faster, more economically,

and usually far more reliably than handcrafted objects.

Yet there still are crafts where the beauty and quality of true craftsmanship cannot be duplicated by assembly line mass production methods. Hand-built, hand thrown pottery created by a master potter, is one of these crafts.

In modern pottery processes, production innovations have made suitable clay bodies far easier to *compound* than to *dig* from the earth. Today, 50 lb. sacks of various types of refined, powdered clay are blended together according to carefully calculated formulas. When combined with water in an industrial mixer (called a “pug mill”), the result (requiring a minimum of physical labor) produces smooth, consistent clay bodies which produce uniform, predictable results.

It was not so in Biblical times (nor even in some areas of the world today). In those times the potter had to discover a vein of raw clay, often hidden deep below layers of unusable sand, rocks and dirt. Today in lands such as Korea, China and Japan, many pottery craftsmen still believe that only naturally occurring clay dug from the earth is capable of producing truly beautiful pottery.

Discovering and digging clay from the earth are, however, only the first steps of an involved process required to prepare natural clay for use in the potter’s hands.

### **Where The Material Is Found**

We learn from Genesis that God desired to have fellowship with His creature, man. He looked for it in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3:8), but sin had already caused Adam to hide from Him. Yet in Jn. 4:23 we learn that God wants more than fellowship—he looks for worship and praise. He will have a family before Him in love (Eph. 1:4; Heb. 2:13). He will have, we may say, many vessels which for all eternity will serve the ultimate purpose of satisfying His heart, rendering worship and praise to His well-beloved Son (Isa. 53:11; Rev. 5).

But, we may ask, from where will come such vessels of glory, praise and worship? Oh! how wonderful the answer!—from *raw clay* buried deep in the mire of sin.

What price His well beloved Son paid to extract that clay from such a horrible and miry pit. He who was infinitely rich became infinitely poor—that through His unspeakable poverty the redeemed might become eternally rich (2 Cor. 8:9). He must die that we might live and be formed into that which is

suitable to the glory and majesty of our Saviour God.

### **Dug From The Depths of Sin**

The depth from which a sinner (dead *in trespasses and sins* before God – Eph. 2:1) must be dug is infinitely greater than the depths from which potter's clay must be dug. Such a task could be accomplished by One alone—our Lord Jesus Christ. Having paid the terrible and infinite price (the shedding of His precious blood at Calvary—Jn. 19:34) to obtain the *clay*, He then becomes the *Master Potter*; and we, in the words of the prophet, become *the work of thy hand* (Isa. 64:8).

### **A Lump Of Clay Called Saul**

*“He brought me up also out of an horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock, and established my goings”* (Ps 40:2).

Saul of Tarsus provides a striking example of *raw clay* hidden deep in the bowels of this earth. The divine record of His life provides an impressive example of how the Master Potter forms a vessel *meet* for His use. Let's follow the account of Saul's life, observing as the *Master Potter* forms him into the Apostle Paul. May we learn from the beloved apostle's experiences valuable lessons for our encouragement and comfort.

Saul was, *touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless* (Php. 3:6). Yet, in his blind diligence to earn favor with God by zealously keeping the law, he was an enemy of God buried—unknowing and uncaring—deep in a *horrible pit of miry clay*.

At Stephen's martyrdom we get our first view of that lump of clay that God was going to *dig up* and *form* into a usable vessel. In Acts 7:58 we get our first look at Saul—a *young man*—as he guarded the clothing of those who stoned the beloved disciple.

Not long after, the measure of the depths from which Saul had to be dug is suggested in these statements: *“Saul was consenting unto Stephen's death”*, *“Saul made havock of the church”* and *“Saul, yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord”*. How great the abyss that separated Saul from the glorious and liberating light of the *Son* and from the hands of the Master Potter!

### **All Come From The Same Pit**

But it is good to remember that the pit from which the Lord dug Saul of Tarsus that day as he traveled to Damascus was no deeper than the one from which He has had to dig each redeemed soul—*enemies in our minds by wicked works* (Col. 1:21). Every one has a heart that is *deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it ...*” (Jer. 17:9). Each lump of *unredeemed* clay is buried deep in a moral darkness so great that though the *light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not* (Jn. 1:5).

Though Paul, through divine inspiration, says that he was the *chief of sinners* (1 Tim. 1:15), God reminds us that *all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God* (Rom. 6:23). We all have the same sinful nature passed on to us by our original father—Adam (Rom. 5:12). We are all, by nature, buried deep in our sins in the bowels of the earth.

### **Digging The Clay**

*“... bring back his soul from the pit, that he may be enlightened with the light of the living”* (Job 33:30, JND Trans.).

Thus it is that if raw clay is ultimately to become a beautiful and useful vessel, someone must go down, and at great effort, dig and remove it. Clay has no strength to free itself, no ability to climb out of that darkness into glorious liberating light and freedom. Oh! how infinitely far down our blessed Lord Jesus Christ had to go to get each lump clay from which He would form vessels serviceable to His glory and honor! Humbling Himself, He came down from that scene of indescribably glorious light and taking upon Himself the *form of a servant ... was made in the likeness of men*.

None could ever go as low as He, the Master Potter, must go to obtain that clay.

It is this One, the Eternal Son *which is in the bosom of the Father* (Jn. 1:18)—a place of infinite love and glory—who is found going down so low that He became subject even unto death—a death which was the lowest of all—the death of the cross (Php. 2:6-8).

*“For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich”* (2 Cor. 8:9).

## In The Potter's Hands

### Chapter Two Getting Better With Age

*The potter made many trips between the clay pit and his studio that day. With each trip he added the contents of the baskets to a large, growing pile of blue-gray mud outside his workshop—a mound of clay that had existed in varying sizes for many generations of the potter's family.*

*Normally he left the clay in the aging pile for several months (though some potters might leave clay to age for several years). He knew that the best pottery came from clay that had a flexible body—one that willingly bent to pressure from the potter's hands. In order to achieve this desirable flexibility, the raw clay had to sit for a period of time, exposed to all the atmospheric elements from which it had been hidden while buried deep in the pit.*

*The heat and light of the summer sun, the wind and rain of the fall, the snow and freezing temperatures of winter—all these elements combined together to produce the needed aging. Through this indiscernible process the clay was slowly changed—gradually becoming a material that would more readily yield to the pressure of the potter's touch.*

#### **Important, Unnoticed Work**

*“And Saul arose from the earth; and when his eyes were opened, he saw no man: but they led him by the hand, and brought him into Damascus. And he was three days without sight, and neither did eat nor drink.” (Acts 9:8,9).*

The lump of clay unearthed by the Lord on the Damascus road was brought into the presence of God *who commanded the light to shine out of darkness* (2 Cor. 4:6). But at that moment, Saul of Tarsus was far from a *completed vessel* capable of *fully preaching the gospel of Christ* (Rom. 15:9) or defending the faith—fighting *with beasts at Ephesus* (1 Cor. 15:32).

First he who had been so energetic against the faith, had to do *nothing*—nothing but *age (mature)* in his new faith. This *spiritual aging* began as he remained alone, fasting and unable to see, in the house of Judas (Acts 9:11). Here Saul began to acquire spiritually what potters refer to as *plasticity* and *pliability*—the quality clay needs to easily yield to the potter's touch.

How important that each believer desiring to be a vessel usable by the Lord first acquire the needed *aging*. This maturing of faith is normal, a necessary and important part of the new life in Christ. It is in this process we learn the importance and joy of subjecting our wills to the supreme, all-wise will of the divine Potter.

During this time of spiritual aging there may seem little outward change in a new believer's life. Saul—blinded and hidden from public scrutiny—was unable to do anything for his Lord, while he prayed and fasted in Judas' house. But that time was vitally necessary that this lump of clay be aged into a formable substance.

It is at this critical time that a new believer in Christ may be unwisely pushed into a place of public service—a ministry for which a *babe in Christ* is not yet spiritually aged enough to perform. How careful we must be—how much wisdom is needed—to know when to encourage a young believer into a place of prominent, public ministry for Christ!

### **The Importance of Repentance**

How did Saul—how does any believer— acquire that necessary pliable character which will easily yield itself to the Master Potter's formative touch? We believe it is first and foremost through the critical and painful process of *repentance*.

What deep and agonizing repentance that freshly dug clay went through during those three days a blinded Saul spent on his knees in prayer! There he, in the all-important curing process, began to realize who God is and who he, Saul of Tarsus, was. No doubt, as with Job, Saul was given to say in heartfelt reality of soul: "*I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes*" (Job 42:5, 6).

It was the *God of love* that brought forth Saul's cry, "*Who art thou, Lord?*".

It was the *God of all grace* that caused him to cry, "*Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?*".

It was the *God of light* that brought this proud Jewish zealot to repentance.

Now in Judas' house, the light was shining—quietly and unnoticed—on Paul, creating in him that indispensable texture which would easily yield to molding.

Repentance is vitally important—not only for salvation

(Acts 20:21), but it is also a lifelong process by which each redeemed soul is *properly aged* so as to be made easily formable according to the will of the Master Potter.

Repentance continued in the beloved apostle's life (and it ought to be so in each of our lives). It was not immediately after his experience on the Damascus road that Paul called himself the *chief of sinners* (1 Tim. 1:15), but at the end of a long and fruitful life of service for Christ—not long before he tasted martyrdom at the hands of the heathen tyrant Nero Caesar.

### **A Continuing Process**

The need for humility of mind and spirit that Paul urges on each believer is very much a part of the *aging process*—one of the happy fruits of repentance. True repentance, which requires a lifetime of soul exercise, provides the foundation for a lifetime of blessing.

*“Wherefore remember, that ye being in time past Gentiles ... without Christ ... aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ”* (Eph. 2:11-13).

*“Hearken unto me, ye that follow after righteousness, ye that seek Jehovah: look unto the rock whence ye were hewn, and to the hole of the pit whence ye were digged”* (Isa. 51:1, JND trans.).

Do you want to be a vessel of service for your blessed Lord and Saviour? Learn the secret of ongoing repentance.

### **Aging Can't Be Hurried**

Having seen the importance of aging in pottery and its vital importance in spiritual growth, remember there is no way to *hurry* or *sidestep* this process. Failing to allow time for aging leaves a clay body that even an experienced potter will find uncooperative—difficult to form into a useful vessel.

One time I mixed a bag of powdered clay and water in a pug mill. Immediately after it was mixed, I took some of the moist clay and tried to throw a piece of pottery on the wheel. I found it impossible. The clay would not respond to my pressure—it was sticky, inflexible, seemingly unwilling to be formed. I had tried to hurry its aging time and it was useless.

### **Aging Can't Be Forced**

Let's not push new believers (or ourselves) into service for the Lord before there has been time given for *spiritual aging*. The *root* has to be deep and sure if the *seed is to* grow (Matt. 13:20, 21). Usefulness for Christ will be greatly enfeebled without proper spiritual maturing.

John Mark is an example of improperly *aged clay*—taking up a service he was incapable of fulfilling, whether at the urging of Barnabas or through his own will (Acts 13:13, 15:37, 38). In the middle of his service he *returns* from Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem. We don't hear of Mark again until Paul gives commandment concerning him in Col. 4:10, and when commending Mark's *matured service* near the end of Paul's life (2 Tim. 4:11).

Don't rush, beloved young believer, into a public field of ministry. Such a desire is wonderful (Rom. 12: 1, 2) and some day the Lord may place you in that very service which is on your heart. But He will first allow a period of time when you are left alone with Him. There in His presence, quietly *aging* in order to acquire a *formable* character, you will become the kind of material that is truly ready for the Divine Potter's use.

### **Biblical Pictures Of Aging**

In Deut. 20 (vv. 5–8) we have a beautiful picture of the principle of *aging* before serving. Establishing a new house, reaping the fruits of a new vineyard, and experiencing the joyful delights of a new wife were all reasons that restricted a young Israelite from going to fight Jehovah's battles.

Morally the *aging* process provides a new believer with the necessary texture and character needed to walk the path of faith. A *new house* (enjoying our new standing in Christ), tasting the fruits of a *vineyard* (partaking of the joy of salvation), and enjoying the delights of marriage, (enjoying Christ's love personally), are all part of this vital process.

In the New Testament we see that Martha was busy serving (and that was good). But can we not say that Mary was spiritually aging as she sat at the feet of the Lord Jesus. Though she was apparently doing nothing worthwhile to outward appearances, Mary was *bearing* His words, and the Lord commends her for having "*chosen that good part*" (Luke 10:42).

Don't despise the *aging-curing* process in life and don't rush yourself (or another believer) through this crucial time!

## In The Potter's Hands

### Chapter Three Clay And Water

*A period of several months had now passed since the potter dug the clay. It was time for him to begin another cycle of pottery making. Shortly before beginning production the potter started removing quantities of the now well-aged clay from the storage pile. He placed the clay in large, wooden tubs that had been filled with water. There, immersed in water, the clay slowly began to dissolve into a thick soupy goo called "slurry".*

*Each day the slurry tubs were carefully stirred and more water added. As the the soupy mix was patiently stirred, undesirable pieces of grit, pebbles and vegetation began to slowly sink to the bottom of the tubs.*

*It was crucial that the clay body contain no debris or contaminants when it was thrown on the wheel. The smallest piece of grit, the tiniest rock, the merest speck of dirt, would mar the perfectly smooth and pliable surface of the clay as it spun on the wheel. The most insignificant foreign object or impurity striking the potter's hand during that process, would mar and ruin the soft, delicate wall of the vessel.*

*After several days of soaking and stirring the creamy slurry was carefully ladled from the tubs through a finely woven, durable fabric mesh. It was put into another large wooden vat where it was allowed to thicken as the excess moisture slowly evaporated. The water, stirring and screening all had done their work and now only pure clay remained.*

#### **Getting Rid Of The Grit And Dirt**

*"And, having received food, [Saul] got strength. And he was with the disciples who were in Damascus certain days ... But Saul increased the more in power, and confounded the Jews who dwelt in Damascus, proving that this is the Christ" (Acts 9:19, 22, JND trans.).*

Ananias came to Saul with the Word of the Lord: "*arise and be baptized and wash away thy sins*" (Acts 22:16). The grit and impurities of Saul the Jew—though a *Hebrew of Hebrews* (Phil. 3:5)—must be discarded through baptism. Saul had asked: *Lord, what wilt thou have me to do.* The first thing

he had to do was to publicly leave the ground of Judaism that had already been set aside by God. There was no longer any possibility of gaining blessing through *the works of the law* (Rom. 3:20). The cross of Christ was the result of God's final test of man providing the solemn conclusive proof that, by nature, man is beyond remedy. Because of the awful impurities of sin and sins—the clay body would never be formable in its natural state to become a vessel pleasing to God.

Thus, through baptism, Saul publicly confessed that he was done with the grit and impurities of the first man, done with human righteousness, and done with a religion that sought to gain God's favor through the efforts of the flesh.

As a young man, Saul sat at the feet of Gamaliel. Though well acquainted with the Old Testament scriptures, it was not until Saul was saved that the wonderful *water of the Word* that he had been acquainted with all his life began to separate the impurities of the flesh (religious though it may have been) from the *new man* he had become in Christ.

How was that accomplished? First, of course, through the redeeming, cleansing value of the precious blood of Christ shed at the cross (Jn. 19:34). Then the Spirit of God applied the *water* of the Word of God into which the newly dug and aged clay was completely immersed beginning the vital daily work of *practical sanctification*— separating clay from the grit and dirt which the flesh ever produces in each believer's life.

As the water began *softening*, the Spirit continually stirred. What a spiritual stirring must have gone on in Saul's soul—especially during those first three days of his blindness! Such soaking and stirring is vital for each believer to experience daily—*practical* separation from all that is of the flesh in order to leave a *body* formable to His will.

The Spirit's stirring was not instantaneous or a one time work in Paul's life; nor will it be so in ours. Notice that in 1 Cor. 15:9 Paul refers to himself as *the least of the apostles*. Later in Eph. 3:8 he calls himself *less than the least of all saints*. The *water* is having its wonderful cleansing and humbling effect filtering out the grit of pride of *Saul of Tarsus*. He undergoes more for shortly before the end of his life the beloved apostle refers to himself as *chief of sinners* (1 Tim. 1:15). This beautiful humility shows the importance and necessity of daily, practical purifying.

May the words of John Baptist be found true of each believer: "*He must increase, but I must decrease*" (Jn. 3:30).

### **Purifying By Water**

Each Christian who is a *new creation in Christ* (2 Cor. 5:17), still has (as did Paul) a fallen, sinful nature that we received from our father Adam. That nature is full of *grit, pieces of dirt, and impurities*. The only One who walked here without such impurities was our blessed Lord Jesus Christ. He, as perfect Man was like *fine flour* with no hint or spot of contaminant (Jn. 8:29)—perfectly submitted in every respect to the will of God (Heb. 10:7, 9).

But for a believer to have a *clay body* that is usable—*transformable* (Rom. 12:2) into that which is pleasing to God—the impurities of the corrupt flesh must be separated. The blood of Christ forever cleanses the believer from all stain of sin. The Word of God, when applied daily to heart and conscience, causes the *grit and dirt* of the flesh to be practically separated from—(sometimes referred to as *practical sanctification*). How important that each day we *soak* in that cleansing water of the Word, allowing the Spirit to stir our hearts and consciences while separating the *precious from the vile* (Jer. 15:19) in our daily, practical lives.

It must be emphasized again that reading the Bible *does not* wash a person's sins away. That only happens through personal faith in the shed blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. "*Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood*" (Rev. 1:5. See also 1 Pet. 1:19). However, daily, prayerful reading of the Bible will do for each individual believer, what the Lord Jesus does for His beloved church collectively: "*Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word*" (Eph. 5:25,26).

A very searching question is asked in Psa. 119:9 and it is one which each believer needs to answer for themselves. "*Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way? by taking heed thereto according to thy word*". Later in the same Psalm we read "*Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee*". Oh! how much we need daily washing with the precious Word of God as applied by His Spirit to separate the grit which is inconsistent with God's holy nature. Where it is done, *washing of water by the word* will result in a clay body that is usable and pliable for the Master Potter.

## In The Potter's Hands

### Chapter Four The Wedging Process



*The clay body, now free of impurities and air dried into a thick, moist mass, was ready for the next step in the pottery making process—the procedure of kneading and wedging the clay. This process (much like kneading bread dough)*

*required the potter to expend a great deal of physical effort, all the while carefully observing the effects on the clay.*

*During kneading the potter would, from time to time, pass the lump through a tightly stretched animal hide cord, cutting it in half. Then, with a vigorous slap, the two halves would be rejoined. Wedging the clay in this manner, when coupled with the kneading process insured that no air bubbles remained trapped within the lump of clay.*

*For the next several days the potter would spend long hours thoroughly working into various sizes clay balls which were to be thrown on the potter's wheel and shaped into an assortment of vessels.*

*No other action could expunge tiny hidden air bubbles that might be lurking deep within the clay body. Only the master's keen eye could rightly judge when the clay had endured enough kneading and wedging.*

*If he unknowingly missed even one air pocket it would quickly make its presence known at one of two critical and most inconvenient times. During the throwing process an air pocket would inevitably reveal itself in the smooth spinning contour of the clay surface. As the potter applied gentle pressure against the narrowing wall of clay, the air bubble that, though unnoticeable to the human eye, was gradually*

*being forced to the surface, eventually would come in contact with his fingers. The resulting very slight jolt would be enough to throw the wall of the vessel “out of round” and render the form useless, wasting the potter’s efforts.*

*Worse yet, if by chance an air bubble remained undetected, perhaps trapped in the base of the vessel, a pot might still be successfully formed. But later when introduced to the intense heat of the kiln, the air trapped within the hidden bubble would expand faster than the clay body where it was trapped. This rapid expansion of heated air, having no way to release from inside the hardened clay, would explode, shattering all or part of the container.*

*The violence of the explosion would not only ruin the pot that had contained the air bubble, but its flying shards, striking other perfectly good nearby pieces would often cause irreparable damage to them as well.*

*So it was that the potter diligently spent long hours kneading and wedging each the mounds of clay, insuring they were free of troublesome air bubbles.*

#### Getting Rid of Air Bubbles

*“Now when many days were fulfilled, the Jews consulted together to kill him ... but the disciples took him by night and let him down through the wall, lowering him in a basket. And having arrived at Jerusalem he essayed to join himself to the disciples, and all were afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles ... And he was with them coming in and going out at Jerusalem ... speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. And he spoke and discussed with the Hellenists; but they sought to kill him. And the brethren knowing it, brought him down to Caesarea and sent him away to Tarsus. The assemblies then throughout the whole of Judaea and Galilee and Samaria had peace ... and were increased” (Acts 9:23-31, JND trans.).*

That special vessel ordained to deliver the *mystery of Christ* (Eph 3:4) which had been hidden from past ages and to *complete the word of God* (Col. 1:25), must himself go through the kneading and wedging process before he could be used. No *air bubbles of pride* could be allowed as that vessel was formed for its divinely directed purpose.

No hidden air pockets could be overlooked for this *vessel*

that would have to withstand the most extreme *heat* of trials and persecutions for the blessed Name of Christ.

#### Somebody Becomes Nobody

Saul of Tarsus had been a *somebody* before he met the ascended, glorified Jesus on the Damascus road—Hebrew of the Hebrews (Phil. 3:5) and one who, as a young man, sat at the feet of the venerable teacher of Jewish law, Gamaliel. As a man in flesh, Saul was proud of his heritage, of his religion, and of his accomplishments. But pride found in the *earthen vessel* must be removed before it could ever be *meet for the Master's use*. Saul, favored, esteemed, gifted and zealous, must be brought very low.

His humbling began when that *great light above the brightness of the sun* revealed, to his consternation and sorrow, that in persecuting the despised followers of the lowly Jesus of Nazareth, he was in reality persecuting the divine Person of the risen Jesus, the Lord of glory. Thus began the removal of *air bubbles* of pride in that lump of clay.

He who had been the indefatigable persecutor of Christ's beloved body—the church—had, through those efforts, gained a name and a place of prominence among the elite of Jewish religious leaders. Perhaps Saul found satisfaction in the deferential treatment he was accorded by these haters of Jesus.

But when he began to proclaim that *Jesus is the Son of God*, Jewish favor and esteem quickly changed to dismay, then hatred, and finally, violence. Quickly turning against their once *favorite son*, the Jews determine to kill the *traitor*.

Now, instead of proudly marching *into* Damascus at the head of an eager group of zealots where admiring Jewish leaders gladly waited to receive him, Saul must escape for his life *from* the city. There is no display of miraculous intervention from heaven on his behalf. He is sent away at night, hidden in a basket and let down over the wall by the brethren—a more helpless, weak experience could hardly be imagined.

So it was that this special lump of clay—Saul of Tarsus—felt ever more deeply the Master's kneading and wedging.

#### Relentless Kneading

But yet more kneading was required for Saul. Come to Jerusalem to join the circle of fellowship there, the brethren rather than eagerly receiving him with open arms and flattering greetings (as he had been used to) feared him. They refused

to accept him until a brother they trusted —Barnabas— commended Saul to them. Hated by his enemies, not fully trusted at first by his new brethren—we see a thorough and continuing elimination of the air bubbles of pride.

Yet still the *Master Potter* continues kneading this clay, and Saul must yet endure more of it in order to become a vessel fully *conformable* to the Lord's perfect will.

Back at Jerusalem where he had begun his path of enmity against Jesus of Nazareth (when he guarded the clothing of those who murdered the mighty servant of Christ, Stephen) Saul is made to feel that same murderous Jewish hatred—but now directed at himself—arising from those who at one time had been his closest allies.

Saul might have thought that due to the severe Jewish persecution he had experienced in Damascus, at least once back in Jerusalem a wide field of service would be available to him.

Instead, he is quietly sent away to the seeming obscurity of his home in Tarsus. Not until then do the assemblies enjoy a period of peace and rest. Dear Saul was learning the removal of *air bubbles* from the clay body is a process that takes the soul very, very far *down* in humility before it can be successfully formed *up* into a useful vessel for the Master.

#### Air Bubbles In Us All

That the flesh in us can be so easily puffed up in pride and cause so much damage, both to ourselves and others, ought to be no surprise (1 Jn. 2:16). Unbelief in the goodness of God brought in the fruit of pride, causing Eve to follow the serpent's subtle suggestion that God was withholding something good from them—“*your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods*”. “*And when the woman saw that the ... tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat ...*” (Gen. 3:6).

The actions of pride form a long, sorrowful list with which we all, sadly, must identify. Those air bubbles of pride which we find in each of our hearts may produce *contention* (Prov. 13:10), *persecution* of the poor (Psa. 10:2), *rejection* of God (Psa. 10:4), *shame* (Prov. 11:2), *excess* (Isa. 28:3), *arrogance* (Jer. 48:29), *immorality* (Ezek. 16:49) and many other unhappy results.

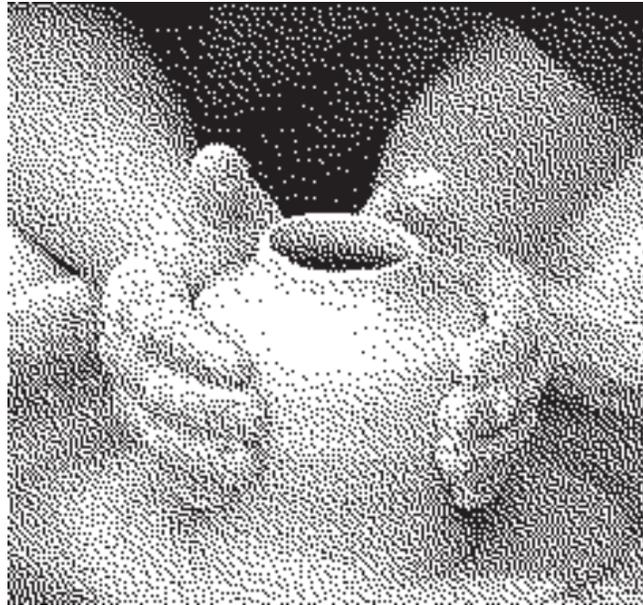
No vessel can be made *unto honour, sanctified, and meet for the master's use* if the Potter allows any harmful air

bubbles of pride to remain in the *clay*.

The moral kneading and wedging that God brings into our lives to rid us of pride isn't enjoyable. Circumstances through which we are allowed to pass are often difficult and painful. But these *kneading circumstances* are meant to rid us of pride—that which renders our life useless for His service.

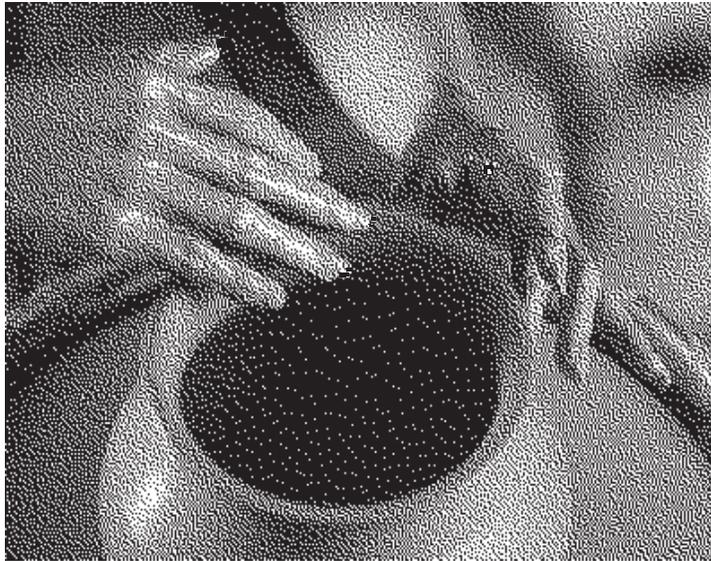
Unchecked pride causes irreparable damage in marriages, families and in the assembly among brethren *for whom Christ died*. Oh! may we humbly submit to this necessary moral kneading and wedging of the Master, doing so without being discouraged or rebellious.

*“Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby”* (Heb. 12:11).



## In The Potter's Hands

### Chapter Five Forming The Vessel



*There was an air of expectancy among the potter's family. Everyone had risen earlier than usual and the conversation seemed more animated, more energetic. The potter ate his breakfast quickly, immediately leaving for his studio with eager anticipation. This would be the first day of the actual pottery forming process—a time the potter particularly relished because of the joy he felt as his skilled hands formed the inert clay into the beautiful vessels that were pictured in his mind.*

*During this process, every member of the potter's family had a particular task assigned to them—each one an important part of the whole process. One was responsible to see that the various wedged spheres of clay were readily available as the potter needed them. Another carefully removed from the wheel the bat containing a newly created, wet, and easily marred vessel. Each was carried with great care to a special drying room for storage.*

*Another provided a constant supply of water, tools and other things the potter required. Removing excess clay as well*

*as marred vessels was the chore of yet another family member.*

*However, only one would be responsible for determining the final shape and use of each hand-thrown pot; that choice belonged to the master alone. He kept no notes, had no drawings, and looked at no pictures as he created each unique piece of pottery. Every pot created over each two-to-three week throwing cycle was unique—given form by the master's artistry and according to his will.*

*Though there was conversation during the throwing, it seemed muted as the master sat down at the potter's wheel, placed the first lump of clay on its circular top, and with his legs began kicking the heavy counter balance which formed the base of the wheel.*

*He skillfully added water to the spinning lump of clay, bent over it, and with his hands carefully and firmly positioned, began to exert a downward pressure. With a rapid, deft movement that appeared deceptively easy, the wobbling lump of clay suddenly, almost imperceptibly spun into center—so perfectly centered in fact, that the surface of the clay lump no longer appeared to be spinning.*

*With another swift, precise movement the potter pressed his thumbs together and down into the center of the clay, creating what appeared to be a large doughnut. Carefully bracing his arms, the potter, with his fingers, began to gently exert pressure both from the inside and the outside, pulling a wall of clay upwards, forming a tall cylindrical shape.*

*As the wheel spun, the potter was careful to keep his hands securely anchored and pressed against the vessel. This was important not only in the forming process, but to insure the clay would not follow its natural inclination to spin out of control, away from the center of the wheel and the potter's grip. His gentle, firm, yet unyielding pressure kept the vessel "in center" and under his control.*

#### Feeling Pressure

By nature, we don't like it much when the pressures of life bear down on us (*let him take up his cross and follow me*—Matt. 16:24). When feeling the pressures from outside or being constrained from the inside to walk a path not of our choosing we may, with Job and Peter say; "Lord why ... ? Why have You allowed these trials in my life?"

The Lord Jesus may allow difficulties from *outside*—the

world, our friends, our jobs, etc.—all to keep us *close to Him*, to restrain us from *spinning away* from His loving control. At other times He may allow pressures, thoughts, or fears from within to make us feel our helplessness and the need of His guidance. Oh! how very much we need that constant, unyielding, and loving pressure of the Potter's hands in our lives.

In Job 3, having lost everything including his health, dear Job finally gives in to the intense pressure he felt and six times in that chapter asks, “*why?*” or “*wherefore?*” Though he felt the very painful pressure of circumstances which were beyond his control, dear Job had yet to learn they were but pressure allowed from the Master Potter's hands—pressure that was forming him into that which was pleasing and glorifying to the Lord.

Without our blessed God's divine pressure and restrictions in our lives, we would act according to the natural bent of our own wills and find disaster—a formless lump of clay spinning out of control—*like sheep going our own way* (Isa. 53).

Every responsible parent understands the importance of discipline—of saying “no” at times—if their children are to be happy and satisfied. May we understand it better in our own lives when our all-wise and perfect Father *restrains* us from a path that would ultimately lead to unhappiness and ruin—a path ending in an damaged, unservicable vessel.

#### Questioning Why

The answer to our sometimes unbelieving question “why” is heard in the amazement and awe of the multitude as they bear testimony to the power and perfection of the Lord Jesus—“*He does all things well*” (Mk. 7:37, J.N.D. trans.). Why is some trial or difficulty happening to you? Because the Lord is allowing it in order to shape and mold you to what He wants and *He makes no mistakes*. Remember, the purpose of our Potter's pressure is not only *formative*, but also *protective*.

#### Spinning Out Of Control

According to a principle of physics—the law of *centrifugal force*—a mass that is spinning around a central axis will always seek to move away from that center. It is the natural instinct, if we may so speak, for a spinning object to do this, and so it is with us who are Christians.

Our old nature always moves away from (not nearer to) God. Cain began the movement (or, we might say, was the first

to prove the existence of that moral law of fallen man) in Genesis 4. Given a choice of repenting and staying in the presence of the only One who could grant forgiveness and blessing to him, Cain *spun out of control*, willingly going away from *the presence of the Lord* (Gen. 4:16).

Believers still have the flesh—that wicked, unredeemable old nature that wants to only follow its own will. “*All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way*” (Isa. 53:6). The tendency of our natural heart is to always seek to *spin away* from the Center, our blessed Lord Jesus Christ. When this happens we find ourselves morally *out of control*.

#### Pressures From Outside And Inside

We noticed that as the potter slowly pulled the cylinder up from the ball of clay, he had to exert pressure both on the *inside* as well as the *outside*. Even pressure from both directions is required if the wall of a clay vessel is to acquire the necessary strength, smoothness and thickness it needs.

It often seems that a believer the Lord is preparing for service in some special ministry is allowed to go through severe trials and difficulties (from *inside* and *outside*) as he or she is being formed for that work.

We see this happening in many Old Testament saints' lives such as Joseph, Nehemiah, Daniel, and others and in the New Testament we find the same. The Apostle Paul was beaten, hungry, the object of murderous plots—multitudes of pressures—yet all these *outside* trials were allowed by the Lord in the forming process of the beloved apostle's life.

Of the *inside pressures* Paul experienced we read, “*Besides those things that are without, the crowd of cares pressing on me daily, the burden of all the assemblies*” (2 Cor. 11:28, JND Trans.). Even Paul's spiritual children were allowed to bring pressure to bear upon this special vessel of God's ministry. He speaks to the Corinthians, “*I will very gladly spend and be spent for you; though the more abundantly I love you, the less I be loved*” (2 Cor. 12:15) and to the Galatians, “*I am afraid of you, lest I have bestowed upon you labour in vain*”.

#### Necessary Pressure

As much as we naturally would shy away from trials and difficulties in life, we must see that they are *allowed* by the loving heart and in the perfect divine wisdom of our Master

Potter. Let us never forget that it is those very pressures, uncomfortable as they may be, which are the means by which each *vessel of honor* is formed into something useful and beautiful for God. Oh! that we might remember when we feel the *pressure* of His loving hands it is because He is forming us into that which is pleasing to Himself!

*“Before I was afflicted I went astray: but now have I kept thy word ... It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I might learn thy statutes”* (Psa. 119:67, 71).

*“For day and night thy hand was heavy upon me ... thou shalt preserve me from trouble; thou shalt compass me about with songs of deliverance”* (Psa. 32:4, 7).



## In The Potter's Hands

### Chapter Six Trimming And Drying The Pottery



*As the potter finished each piece on the wheel, it was carefully removed to the drying room. During this time, the moist, delicate and easily marred surface slowly began drying. As it did, the clay became more firm and less vulnerable to damage from being mishandled. Though a large amount of moisture still remained in the clay body, after two or three days the vessels were strong enough to withstand being cut free from the piece of wood on which the potter had thrown them.*

*Each pot, still damp but more stable, was returned to the potter's wheel and carefully turned upside down. It was gently nudged back into center and secured with tiny balls of moist clay pressed against its rim. Selecting a tool with a metal triangle at its end, the potter held it against the base of the pot and began to slowly spin the wheel. Gently applying pressure, the tool peeled slender ribbons of excess clay away from the vessel. The trimming process was needed in order to carve a "foot" or "rim" for the pot—a foundation upon which the vessel would stand when being used.*

*After the foot had been carved, handles and lids were*

*created and added according to the need of each vessel.*

*When the pot had been trimmed to its final shape and had received all additional parts necessary to perform its intended function, it was taken back to another storage room and left to completely dry. When all the moisture was gone, the pottery was called “greenware”. In this condition, nothing more could be done to change the shape. Further, the greenware pottery was so delicate and fragile that if handled roughly, bumped or dropped, it would shatter into a thousand tiny pieces of dry, dusty clay.*

*In its greenware condition, any crack, chip or other damage could not be repaired. It was fit only to be tossed back into the “slurry tubs” where it would eventually dissolve once again into creamy, unformed mud. During the trimming and drying of the greenware, only the older and more experienced family members were allowed to handle the pottery. And they did so with the utmost care and gentleness.*

#### Purposes Of Blessing

The Master Potter not only desires that each of His children display the beauties and glories of His beloved Son, but knows exactly that service He desires each one to perform. He has, in perfect love and wisdom, put each lump of clay dug from the pit of sin, through the necessary cleansing, kneading and forming pressures as He sees best, all in order to create a vessel that might effectively glorify Him and fulfill His will.

Our Lord uses an infinite variety of “tools” (people, circumstances, even our mistakes) for the final work of trimming and finishing each vessel. This process though uncomfortable—even painful at times—is absolutely necessary in order that each be able to fulfill “*that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God*” (Rom. 12:2).

Consider the kinds of “trimming” that His dear servants (recorded in the Word of God) endured. Moses spent 40 years in the backside of the desert having all the pride, wisdom and ability he had attained in Egypt *trimmed* away. The result is found in Numbers 12:3: “*Now the man Moses was very meek, above all the men which were upon the face of the earth*”. How necessary such humility was when Moses led the proud, contentious children of Israel across the wilderness!

Joseph spent part of his life a slave and a prisoner in Egypt. The result is found in Gen 41:39-42: “*And Pharaoh said*

*unto Joseph ... Thou shalt be over my house, and according unto thy word shall all my people be ruled ... I have set thee over all the land of Egypt*". Before Joseph could be lifted up in glory in Egypt, he must go down in humiliation under those very unpleasant circumstances.

#### Pleasant And Unpleasant Trimming

If we were to turn to Hebrews 11 we would find a most interesting record of vessels who were formed and trimmed in trying, difficult circumstances. But it was so they might become examples of faith to us. Some were trimmed in what we might consider rather easy, comfortable conditions. Abraham was obviously a very rich man—so too was Isaac. But Jacob had more *trimming* to experience in order to become fully confident of Jehovah's care for him. Thus the record of Jacob's many, weary trials (*the trimming process*) is given in much greater detail than those of others (see Gen. 31:38-42).

Others of those worthy "vessels of honor" were *trimmed* and *finished* through the intense fires of awful trial and suffering—those such as are recorded in Heb. 11:35-39.

The one divinely inspired of the Spirit of God to write the epistle to the Hebrews (the Apostle Paul) was himself a vessel who knew what it was to go through the sometimes very painful trimming process. He was *trimmed* from all those things in which he, as a man in flesh could boast. All his attainments were of no value to God when He created out of Saul of Tarsus that *vessel meet for the Master's use*.

Through a variety of circumstances the beloved apostle was brought to record by divine inspiration that though he had been "*Circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee; Concerning zeal, persecuting the church; touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless*" — all those things were excess and useless clay and must be trimmed away by the Divine Potter.

Then, after his trimming process was completed we hear Paul conclude, "*But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord; for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ*" (Phil. 3:5-8).

### Tools With An Attitude

*“Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us”* (Heb. 12:1).

The Master Potter *trims* away our excess and unneeded clay so that we may effectively and victoriously run the race of faith. Each ribbon of excess clay left on the vessel only adds weight, hindering the one running. The Lord often uses people (rather than circumstances) to do this needed trimming. Some people used are not believers, but the *tools* that often cause the most pain from trimming are those whom we call our *brethren*.

When Lazarus was called forth from the grave by our blessed Lord Jesus, he immediately rose from among the dead and stood, alive, before that awe-struck crowd. But he needed *“trimming”*, for he was bound in *grave clothing* (see John 11:44) and unable to enjoy the liberty of *new life* that the Saviour had given him.

He who with power and authority commanded *“Lazarus, come forth”*, surely with another word might have loosed the grave clothing that bound him. But the Lord commands those standing there to *“Loose him, and let him go”*. It was a service (a service, we may say, of *trimming*) that they were responsible to carry out for one who was enjoying new life.

Thus, some of the *tools* which the Master Potter uses in trimming are other vessels of His. But when one piece of pottery is used of the Lord to trim another, the vessel being trimmed often has a great deal of trouble appreciating or accepting that what is being done is for his or her blessing. Too often when we get trimmed our eyes focus on the *tool* He is using rather than on Him who *holds* the tool. Sadly, impatience, frustration, and unhappiness with one another arise at the very time when the Lord is seeking to shape us into a beautiful vessel of His choosing.

Let's not be like the Israelites in the wilderness who, the moment Jehovah began to *trim* them by testing their faith at Marah—i.e., *what shall we drink*, Ex. 15:23-26—quickly started murmuring against a tool (Moses) He used for their blessing.

### Handle With Care

When the Lord chooses someone to be used as a tool in

the trimming process of another, He does not give that *tool* any liberty to be careless, sloppy, or thoughtless about how their trimming is performed. “*Let all things ye do be done in love*” (1 Cor. 16:14, JND Trans.). Love and compassion keeps the trimming process from becoming painful or discouraging (notice that in John 13 our Lord used a *towel*—not some rough, abrasive fabric) to wash the disciples’ feet. Where love is lacking, the *tool* itself (not the excess clay to be trimmed) can cause untold grief and heartache.

At times trimming takes the character of a *word in season* (Isa. 50:4) spoken to a struggling or weary vessel. If so, let that tool be found “*Speaking the truth in love*” (Eph. 4:15). The Master Potter Himself commanded His vessels to *love one another as I have loved you*. This leaves no excuse for the *trimming tool* to display a harsh, rough, or uncompassionate manner.

“*Charity (divine love) suffereth long, and is kind*” (1 Cor. 13:4). If we are called on to *trim* another, we must be sure that our every action is motivated and controlled by divine love. Remember how fragile newly formed vessels are—handle them carefully and lovingly! “*And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you*” (Eph. 4:32). The apostle tells us to “*bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ*” (Gal. 6:2). When doing so it is critical to *bear* another vessel with Christ-like care and tenderness.

Trimming requires not only love, but *wisdom* and that only comes from above from the “*Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning*” (Jas. 1:17).

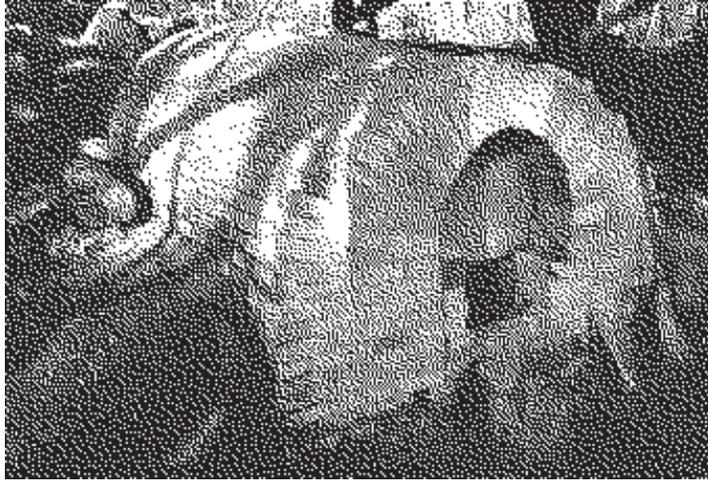
Whether speaking words of “*edification, and exhortation, and comfort*” (1 Cor. 14:3), or in some other manner, heavenly wisdom is necessary when trimming. Further, the character of the tool used to trim is described in Gal. 6:1: “*Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted.*”

If we are willing to be used as *trimming tools*, let’s make sure we are also willing to be guided *only* by the hands of the Master Potter in full submission to His will and divine love for the one being *trimmed*. May we indeed *bear* and *forbear*.

“*We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves.*” (Rom. 15:1).

## In The Potter's Hands

### Chapter Seven Fire And Clay



*A long time had passed since the potter finished adding handles, lids, spouts, and trimming each piece of pottery he had thrown. His efforts over the past weeks resulted in the creation of almost three hundred beautiful, unique pieces of pottery—all of various sizes and shapes, and intended for a wide variety of uses.*

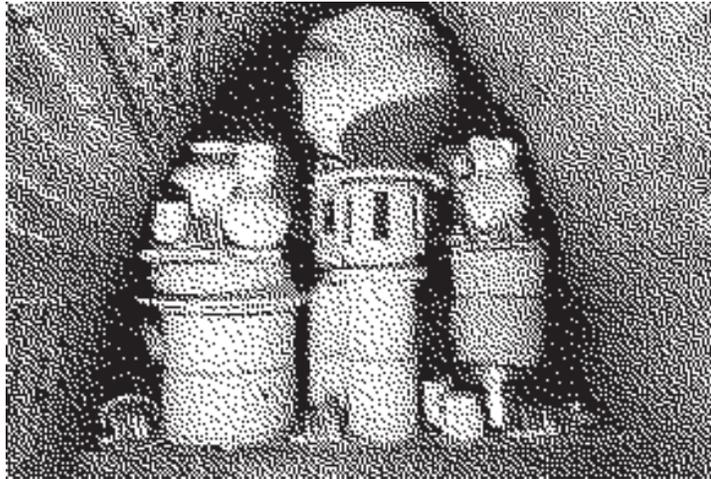
*Though some took longer than others, all the pieces were now thoroughly dry. Allowing the clay to dry was in itself a critical element of the pottery process. If a vessel that was not completely dry were exposed to the extreme heat of the kiln, the remaining moisture would expand unevenly causing its fragile walls to crack or explode under pressure.*

*But now all the “greenware” was completely dry and ready to be placed in the almost 100-foot long outdoor wood-fired kiln the potter had built on a hillside near his house. It had been constructed from previously fired bricks of clay, and contained several separate chambers into which the pottery was carefully stacked. Directly below each storage chamber was a “firebox” where the wood was burned, producing the heat needed to harden the greenware into biscuit-ware.*

*Before enduring the “biscuit fire” the pottery lacked the necessary strength to allow it to be glazed, decorated or used.*

*The potter carefully directed where each piece of pottery was to be placed in the kiln. When the first chamber at the bottom of the hill was filled, its fire door was sealed with bricks and wet clay and the next chamber began to be filled with more greenware. After all the chambers had been filled and their openings sealed, each firebox was loaded with wood. The fire was always begun in the bottom chamber so that each succeeding chamber received benefit from the updraft of heat flowing up the hill, towards the top-most chamber that was specially vented to release the smoke.*

*Large piles of wood that had been exactly cut and split to the proper length and width were neatly stacked by each firebox. It was dark and the family had retired for the night. The first fire would be lit very early the next morning, beginning a firing cycle which would take two or more days. During this time, the potter and his helpers would enjoy very little rest or sleep.*



*The morning broke bright and clear, alive with the noise of people scurrying to get ready for the biscuit fire. It was the responsibility of the master potter to do the firing just as he had done each step in the pottery making process. Carefully watching the “color” of the fire, he would have to determine when it had reached the appropriate temperature—the time to seal up the firebox and extinguish the fire.*

*If the fire were put out before it became hot enough, the vessels inside would still be too fragile to handle, breaking*

*easily during the final glazing process. On the other hand, if the potter allowed the fire to become too hot, the surfaces of the pottery pieces would become so vitrified (hardened) that they would not be able to hold the glazes with which they were to be covered.*

*A small peep hole in each firing chamber was the only way the potter could watch the color of the fire and know when the proper temperature had been reached. The hotter the fire, the more pale the color. At times the fire grew so hot it became almost white. So experienced and accurate was the potter's eye that he was able to determine within 3 or 4 degrees the exact temperature of each firing chamber by observing the fire's color.*

#### Christians Need To Be Hardened

*"Behold, I have refined thee, but not with silver; I have chosen thee in the furnace of affliction" (Isa. 48:10).*

There is a necessary hardening process that our all-wise God allows each of His children to pass through in order that we may be strengthened in the path of faith. In perfect wisdom and love, He knows exactly when to allow the heat of trials—and He knows too just how fierce the heat must be to strengthen the vessel for its intended service. Few believers are allowed to pass through this "*wilderness journey*" without experiencing at one time or another (perhaps at many different times) the vitally important, but often uncomfortable, heat of the "*furnace (kiln) of affliction*".

#### Conflict Is Not For The Weak

In the very midst of such trials, the loving grace of God is our never failing refuge. When Israel was delivered that Pass-over night from Egypt we read: "*And it came to pass, when Pharaoh had let the people go, that God led them not through the way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near; for God said, Lest peradventure the people repent when they see war, and they return to Egypt*" (Ex. 13:17). Newly redeemed Israel could not yet meet their enemies in the wilderness until they had been hardened by the fire of trials. Jehovah graciously kept them from "*seeing*" conflict until they had passed through enough "*heat*" to enable them to withstand and fend off the coming attacks.

In Deut. 20:8 we find that Jehovah's instructions to the

people as they prepared for battle include some interesting exceptions. One was for a man who was not yet brave enough to face conflict. "*What man is there that is fearful and fainthearted? let him go and return unto his house, lest his brethren's heart faint as well as his heart*". The field of strife was no place for a fragile, untested vessel which would easily crack in battle, so Jehovah in grace allowed that one to stay away from the battle.

#### Strengthened For Battle

Likewise we should not expect or encourage "newly formed" Christians (especially our beloved children), who have not yet experienced the heat of painful, but necessary strengthening trials, to enter the deadly serious arena of Christian conflict. In Christian warfare, these "new-born babes"—like "untempered steel"—often fail and break down.

John Mark (Acts 13:13, 15:38) provides a solemn example of this very thing. This dear young man had gone with Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey from Antioch. Feeling the hostility of the Jews towards Paul's gospel message and finding that the Gentiles were being brought into blessing—these circumstances were beyond his ability to endure. Thus in the heat of conflict the vessel broke and John Mark, leaving them, returned to his mother's home in Jerusalem. This was a vessel, not yet "tempered" by the heat of trials—one that failed in his service at the time when his ministry was needed.

We do not want such a thing to happen—to ourselves or other believers. How much we need the "heat of the kiln" and how little we appreciate it! Let us walk with the Lord in faith confident that He knows exactly how much heat each vessel needs, when that heat is needed, and how best to apply that heat to His vessel.

#### The Value Of Heat

*"That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ" (1 Pet. 1:7).*

There are many kinds of trials, difficulties and testings that Christians are called to pass through. Yet in each case, the end our loving and all wise Father has in view is the same—that we might be strengthened to display the beauties and

loveliness of Himself—our Lord Jesus Christ—in a world that hated Him, saw “*no beauty*” in Him (Isa. 53:2), and spitting in His blessed face, rejected and crucified Him.

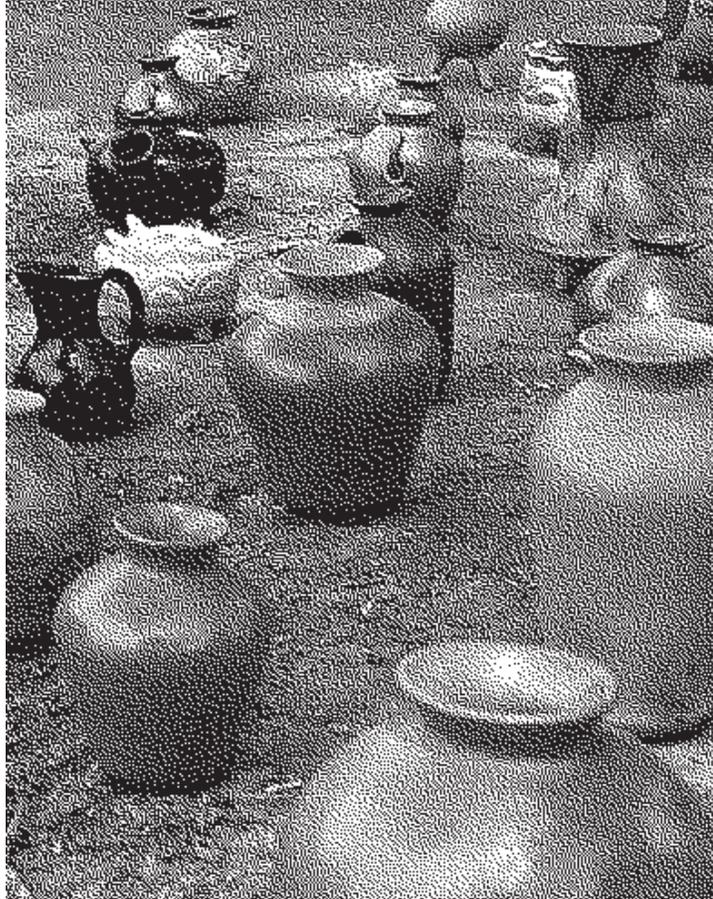
This is why Peter speaks by divine inspiration of our faith being “proved” by the *heat* of trials—something far more precious than the most valued things in this world (1 Pet. 1:7). When passing through trials and difficulties it may be hard to feel thankful for them—far easier to desire what might be found in this *present evil world* to bring some relief and comfort. But how wonderful to daily draw near to our precious Saviour and hear His blessed, encouraging whisper, “... *as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts*” (Isa. 55:9).

Are you feeling the heat of pressures and trials in your life, dear believer? Don’t be discouraged. Look to the Lord for the needed grace to endure the fire. He promises a full supply of *grace to help in time of need* (Heb. 4:16) and will give even *more grace* (Jas. 4:6) to help us through those times.

*“Count it all joy, my brethren, when ye fall into various temptations, knowing that the proving of your faith works endurance. But let endurance have its perfect work, that ye may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing ... Blessed is the man who endures temptation; for, having been proved, he shall receive the crown of life, which He has promised to them that love him”* (Jas. 1:2-4, 12 JND Trans.).

## In The Potter's Hands

### Chapter Eight Beauty From Ashes



*Two days after the biscuit fire was begun it reached the appropriate temperature, and its fires—one chamber at a time—were extinguished. The kiln was allowed to cool for another day before the firing chamber doors were unsealed and the newly hardened pottery carefully removed.*

*Now the last step in the pottery making cycle could begin—applying glazes to the drab looking biscuit-ware and subjecting the vessels to a much more intense heat which*

would result in unique, beautiful and useful finishes for each pot.

*The glazes always appeared dull and lifeless before being introduced to the extreme heat of the final fire—consisting of flat grays, muddy earth greens and browns, pale ochres and wan pinks. But the intense heat of the kiln would fuse these unattractive appearing glazes with the clay surfaces, creating a marvelous tapestry of sparkling, rich and vibrant colors. After the glaze fire, most every color of the rainbow might be found somewhere on the beautiful, glossy surfaces that quietly gleamed with gem-like luster, displaying new facets of beauty each time the piece was handled.*

*Those beautiful finishes, however, were not the only reason for subjecting the pottery to the final fire (intense heat reaching 2600-2700 degrees Fahrenheit). Such intense temperatures also vitrified the clay. When this happened the clay became so hardened that it was (and still is) referred to as “stoneware”—a condition in which vessels become impervious to moisture and are strong enough to withstand the heat of open cooking fires, baking ovens, or boiling liquids.*

*When the glaze firing cycle had been completed each piece of pottery would truly have become a “vessel unto honor ... prepared unto every good work”.*

*For many weeks previous to glazing, the potter's family had been diligently collecting and storing wood and rice ashes from their cooking and heating fires. To this collection were added the wood ashes of the recently completed biscuit fire. Along with carefully measured amounts of silica and other minerals, the ashes were a main ingredient of the glazes. Water was added, creating thick, soupy mixtures that were constantly stirred in the large dipping tubs. Introduced to high temperature fires, the seemingly worthless ash when combined with the other glaze ingredients produced brilliant, sparkling stoneware colors.*

*However, before glazing, bees' wax —melted in another large container—was applied to the bottom rims of each vessel and the rims and edges of covered containers. This formed a protective coating that repelled the glaze, but quickly burnt away in the early stages of the fire. These thin unglazed edges kept lids from fusing to the containers they covered and insured that none of the glazed vessels would be permanently melted to the inside wall of the kiln or shelves.*

*As in all preceding cycles, the master potter was wholly responsible for the glazing process. He determined how much glaze was to be applied, whether it would be dipped or poured on the object, in what combinations it was to be applied, and what other decorations of iron oxide, cobalt or other materials he would add with bamboo brushes.*

*The glaze application—dipping each piece into the tubs of glaze, or pouring glaze over the pottery—appeared deceptively simple. But the process required the experience of one who knew exactly what colors each glaze would produce and which of the pottery pieces would be best complemented by those particular hues. He also had to instinctively know how long to keep the pottery submerged in the liquid glaze. Successfully combining more than one glaze on a vessel also required consummate skill, while the infinite patterns formed as various blends of glazes were poured over a pot could only be achieved by an experienced craftsman.*

*After the glazing was completed and each pot thoroughly dry, the potter took them one by one and turning them slowly on a wheel, added his final decorations with a bamboo brush.*

*The whole process took several days to complete and then, once again, it was time to load the kiln. The potter directed exactly where each pot was to be placed in the various kiln chambers. Chemical reactions from the various glaze combinations as they melted left marked visual effects on nearby vessels and could cause unexpected changes in their glazes. Thus, unerring wisdom was required to know whether the effects produced on other vessels would be beneficial or detrimental.*

*Unlike the biscuit fire where vessels could be stacked against each other for support, no area of the freshly glazed surfaces were allowed to touch another pot. Should that happen, the glaze would permanently fuse together the surfaces of two pots, ruining them both.*

*Once all the pottery was loaded into the kiln and the chambers sealed, the final fire was begun. Knowing the exact temperature of this fire was especially critical for a variation of even 5 degrees at 2700 degrees Fahrenheit could mean the difference between a sparkling, beautiful surface and one marred by an “orange peel” texture containing dull, uninteresting patches of scorched color. The potter’s eye, constantly*

*gauging the intensity of the fire, was the only means by which the proper time to seal the chamber and extinguish the fire might be determined.*

*Five days later, the potter and his family eagerly unsealed the now cool kiln chambers and unloaded the finished pottery. There were many exclamations of surprise and delight as each piece, now glowing with remarkable beauty and luster, was placed on the ground where all could view the results of the potter's skill. How beautiful they all looked! Each one with a special purpose and function to fulfill, each one alight with its own unique color and shape, each one bearing silent yet eloquent testimony to the wisdom and ability of its creator—each one now truly “meet for the master's use”.*

#### Experiencing The Fire

Though each believer tastes in measure *the trial of your faith* (1 Pet. 1:7), perhaps none have felt it as deeply as the beloved apostle Paul. Yet it was *by* those very fires that he was hardened, becoming serviceable for Christ in the midst of conflict; it was *because* of them that Christ *was magnified* in Paul. To look at Paul the apostle was to see a beautiful display of Christ in *an earthen vessel*. Our gracious God desires to bring about this same display of Christ in each of our lives. He is *bringing many sons to glory*—each one bearing the glorious *image* of His well beloved Son.

Our Father never intends that the fire of trials and testings consume us, but rather that they be the means by which each of His dear children display the *beauties* and *loveliness of Christ*.

The *kiln* practically did in Paul's life what John Baptist, upon beholding *the Lamb of God*, concluded must be done in each of our lives—*He must increase, but I must decrease* (John 3:30). The apostle was enabled to say with joy, “*God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ ... I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus*” (Gal. 6:14, 17). Those marks, like the beautiful decorations of the finished pottery, bore testimony, not to Paul, but to the glory of the finished work of Christ.

However, even as the glaze (before it endures the fire) is unattractive to look at, so the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ to natural sight is despised. Yet those hours of agony our blessed

Saviour endured at Calvary have resulted in eternal *marks* of glory and beauty that each vessel may now bear in testimony to His *finished work* and His *glorious Person*.

“*He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord*” (2 Cor. 10:17).

#### Beauty Formed In The Fire

All that Paul had once been as Saul of Tarsus he counted worthless (Phil. 3:8-14) that Christ might be glorified in and through him. The fires of trials reduced his natural advantages to nothing, while causing the beauty of Christ to shine in his life.

Few have ever suffered for Christ—have ever felt the fire’s intensity—as did Paul when he went through the *furnace of affliction*. What terrible heat he experienced! —“*in labours more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequent, in deaths oft. Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep; In journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen ... by the heathen ... in the city ... in the wilderness ... in the sea ... among false brethren; in weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness*” (2 Cor. 11:23-27).

Yet the extreme fire through which the beloved apostle passed caused Christ to become the supreme Goal and sole Object of his life. Let us repeat once more the beautiful moral progression of his life as he *decreases* in view of the Lord’s majesty and glory. He begins in 1 Cor. 15:9 by calling himself the *least of the apostles*. Later, in Eph. 3:8 he looks at himself as *less than the least of all saints*. Then, near the end of his life (1 Tim. 1:15) he is divinely inspired to characterize himself as the *chief of sinners*. At the same time the glory of the One who met him on the Damascus road *increases* from a *light from heaven* (Acts 9:3) to a *light above the brightness of the sun* (Acts 26:13). Christ *is everything* (Col. 3:11). The Lord Jesus is the *glaze* that covers, giving his varied and magnificent glory to the vessel that has been passed through the heat.

#### Feeling The Heat

We also are made to feel the heat of the kiln in our lives though probably not in the measure Paul felt it. Still, such *trials*

and *provings* are those valuable times of strengthening “*of your faith ... tried with fire*” (1 Pet. 1:7). When feeling the heat, how comforting to remember that it is being carefully and untiringly observed by the *Master Potter’s* eye. He knows perfectly when each vessel has received the exact amount of heat needed to enable its display of the beauties and glories of Christ. And though we may often get discouraged and down-cast in the furnace, how good to remember those three faithful servants (Dan. 3) who in the midst of such terrible heat, were comforted by the presence of *the Son of God* with them. “*Thus saith the LORD that created thee ... and he that formed thee ... Fear not ... When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee ... when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned*” (Isa. 43:1,2).

#### Beautiful Ashes

We also may experience for a time (or perhaps all during our Christian pathway) trials and afflictions which answer to the *messenger of Satan* (2 Cor. 12:7-10) that buffeted the beloved Apostle. The Lord saw fit to allow *a thorn in the flesh* in his life to insure that it was Jesus Christ—His glory, grace, strength and power—not Paul’s, which would be displayed and used. Paul prayed that it might be taken away and received an answer of encouragement that caused him joy—*my grace is sufficient for thee, for my strength is made perfect in weakness*. Paul immediately, in the lovely attitude of full submission to the *heat of the fire*, replies *most gladly therefore will I glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me*. Thus, the beloved apostle submitted fully and countless myriads of believers have been blessed by the beauty that the Father’s furnace brought from the ashes of Paul’s *thorn*.

Perhaps we too, finding some circumstance of our lives so difficult, hope of realizing any joy or blessing from it is lost. Nothing profitable in the pile of ashes these particular circumstances have produced seem destined to provide anything of profit. Yet when those very *ashes* of trials and failures are mixed with the *water* of the Word of God, *submission* to, and *faith* in Him, a glaze is created which the fire of trials will turn into a most a beautiful, Christ-like finish for the earthen vessel.

God also uses the ashes of failures, as He did with David, Jacob and so many other saints recorded in the Bible, to bring about the most desirable and beautiful finishes to those vessels

He has created for His pleasure (Rev. 4:11) and for some special ministry or service while in this scene.

In the most difficult and trying circumstances then, we can, with joy and comfort, rest on our God's wonderful promise "*to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness*" (Isa. 61:3). Our all-wise, loving Father desires that each of us display the glory and beauty of His beloved Son as did Paul (1Tim. 1:16). To this end He allows the perfect amount of *heat*—not too much and not too little—in order to *transform* us into the glorious image of His beloved Son. And the heat He sends is always sent in perfect love and perfect wisdom.

#### Gracious Comfort

May God encourage each one who has or presently is passing through deep waters with the thought that He is forming Christ in them, even as Paul told the Galatian believers: "*My little children, of whom I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you*" (Gal. 4:19).

In order that our *joy might be full* (Jn. 15:11) and our hearts resting in peace, let us hear the words of the apostle in Heb. 12:11, personally making them our own. "*Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby*".

It is true, dear reader, the kiln of God's *pottery workshop* may not always be pleasant to pass through, but Oh, what glorious and beautiful results are realized in the lives of each vessel that submits to the perfect ways of the Master Potter! And what joys are there for those who recline with the full assurance of faith in the blessed *Potter's hands*!

## In The Potter's Hands

### Epilogue

The oriental potter and his family described in this booklet, though fictitious, illustrate the main processes by which pottery has been created and fired throughout the ages—including Biblical times. The industrial revolution of 18th century Great Britain brought immense changes to Western culture including the mass production of goods that caused handmade objects such as pottery to become expensive and unappreciated. But though the craft of pottery suffered in the West, still in the 21st century a small “niche” market exists for crafts including hand-thrown pottery. In oriental society (as well as other cultures) handmade pottery is far more commonly used in everyday life, and in those places the potter still functions in a way similar to that described in this booklet.

Our imaginary account represents a *general summary*, without claiming total technical accuracy, of the kinds of materials and techniques that a potter in Biblical times would have used to create functional, handmade pottery.

Having both thrown and taught pottery, I have often been struck with the remarkable similarities between pottery making and the manner by which our blessed God works with each of us—the descendants of the man He first created in Eden from *the dust (clay) of the ground* (Gen. 2:7).

In thinking about the various steps described in each chapter, I have once again reveled in how descriptive they are of the way in which our loving Father—the *Master Potter*—unerringly brings each of His dear children into conformity with His beloved Son.

How painstakingly He forms each vessel, then intently watches with an untiring eye of love, as it endures the fires of testing and trials! How very much Our blessed God desires a family that fully reflects the glories, beauties, and perfections of His eternal, well beloved Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. “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*” (Rom. 8:29).

A day of eternal, unbroken glory is soon to dawn. A day when our blessed God will have gathered around Himself all the redeemed and then will be the perfect fulfillment of “*The*

*LORD thy God in the midst of thee is mighty; he will save, he will rejoice over thee with joy; he will rest in his love, he will joy over thee with singing” (Zeph. 3:17). Oh! how the Master Potter will joy and rest in His love—in perfect satisfaction with each vessel unto honour He has created (Rom. 9:21).*

#### Parable Of A Teacup

A couple used to go to England to shop in the beautiful stores for antiques—especially pottery teacups. One day in a gift shop they saw a lovely little teacup.

“May we see that? We've never seen one as beautiful.”

As the clerk handed it to them, the teacup spoke.

“You must understand,” it began, “I haven't always been a beautiful teacup. There was a time when I was just a lump of muddy clay. The master potter dug me up, then rolled and kneaded me over and over until I yelled, ‘Stop it! Let me alone.’

But he just smiled and said, ‘Not yet.’

He then placed me on a spinning wheel. I was spun around and around and around. ‘Stop it!’ I cried. ‘I'm getting dizzy!’ I screamed.

But the master only smiled again, nodded his head sympathetically and repeated, ‘Not yet.’

He then placed me in a large brick oven. I never felt such terrible heat. Why would the master do that to me—why would he burn me, I wondered. I yelled and knocked at the door. I could see him peering at me through a tiny opening and I could read his lips as he shook his head saying, ‘Not yet.’

Finally it became cool inside and the door opened. The master carefully put me on a shelf.

‘That's better’, I thought. But then He began to paint me all over with a brush. The paint smelled so strong I thought I couldn't breathe. Once again I yelled, ‘Stop it, stop it!’

The master just gave me another sympathetic smile and said, ‘Not yet.’

“Suddenly he picked me up and put me back into another oven—one which became much hotter than the first. Oh! how I begged and pleaded and screamed and cried. All the time I could see him peering through the tiny opening nodding his head with a smile, saying, ‘Not yet.’

In despair I thought that there was no longer any hope for me—I just couldn't make it through that terrible heat. I was ready to give up, feeling like I was about to melt into a shape-

less molten puddle. But just then I noticed that it began to get cooler in the oven. After a long time the door opened and the master gently took me out and placed me back on the shelf.

A bit later he handed me a mirror and with a smile said, 'look at yourself'. I did and couldn't believe what I saw.

"It's beautiful. I'm beautiful", I said over and over in wonder and amazement.

The master tenderly said to me, "Little teacup, remember, I knew it hurt you to be rolled and kneaded. But if I had left you alone, you would have dried up and become useless to me.

"I knew, too, how dizzy it made you when I spun you around on the wheel. But if I had stopped, you would have collapsed into a shapeless and useless blob of wet clay.

"I also knew it was very uncomfortable in the oven. But if I hadn't put you in there, you would have eventually cracked, and I would never have been able to use you for anything.

"I knew those fumes were bad when I brushed the decorations all over you. But if I hadn't done that, you would not be able to display my glory as your master potter.

"And if I hadn't put you back in that second oven where the heat was so terrible, you would never have gained the beauty that I wanted you to exhibit to others.

"Little teacup, because of all those uncomfortable times that you experienced, you are now just exactly what I wanted for you to become."

*"that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God" (Rom. 12:2).*

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*“But now, O LORD, thou art our father; we are the clay, and thou our potter; and we all are the work of thy hand” (Isa. 64:8).*

The Potter has the power,  
The knowledge and the skill,  
To fashion every vessel,  
According to His will.

The pattern and the purpose,  
Of every vessel planned,  
Its usefulness and beauty  
Are in the potter's hand.

The clay makes no decision,  
Has no will of its own,  
But yielded to the potter,  
His pattern is made known.

And thus the Master Potter,  
Our service has outlined;  
He asks us to be yielded  
Unto His Will and Mind.

His purpose to acknowledge,  
To listen to His voice,  
To let Him plan our pathway,  
According to His choice.

A vessel marred and broken,  
We may not understand,  
But all can be committed  
Unto the Potter's hand.

Our Father's way is perfect,  
His thought toward us is love;  
He's fashioning and molding,  
For life with Him above.

To trust the Heavenly Potter,  
And let Him mold the clay,  
Brings joy, and peace, and blessing,  
And happiness away.

*Anon*

