



Light

...on a New World

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The Wisdom of Solomon

THE knowledge of man has increased at a phenomenal rate over the past century or so. Advances in medicine, agriculture, exploration, the sciences, psychiatry, sociology, technology and in many other fields, are hailed as providing the answers to all the problems that beset the world. Democracy, human rights, self expression, self assertion, equality, non discrimination and being all inclusive, are promoted as being essential for human growth and achievement.

In short, in the relatively short time since the industrial revolution, the knowledge and skills of mankind have increased considerably. For example this article is being written on a computer, that even 30 years ago, would have been considered to be in the realms of science fiction.

THE WISDOM OF THIS WORLD

Yet what does an objective viewpoint yield? Man can split the atom, fly faster than sound, send robots to Mars, heal many diseases and yet he is totally incapable of changing his physical and moral nature. Crime and violence in society are at an unprecedented level and new diseases arise that modern antibiotics fail to cure. Technology has given us the power to destroy the earth several times over; society is breaking down and terrorism in its many forms is a scourge that affects much of the world in one way or another. Surely the truth of the inspired words of Paul, come ringing down through the ages:

‘...the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, ‘He catches the wise in their own craftiness’, and again, ‘The LORD knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile.’

[1 Corinthians 3. 19, 20]

A FALSE SENSE OF SECURITY

Jesus described in a parable the truth about our situation if we fail to seek God. He spoke of a man who had much wealth and decided to build bigger barns in order to accommodate his goods. He thought:

‘...I’ll say to myself, you have plenty of good things laid up for many years; take life easy; eat, drink, and be merry’. *[Luke 12.19 NIV]*

But he failed to recognise one vital truth:

‘...God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?’

[Luke 12. 20 NIV]

For those of us who live in the western world, our comfortable homes, careers, pensions, and an abundance of the things associated with modern life, can lull us into a false sense of security and an avoidance of anything that challenges our ‘comfort zone’, thus weakening or stifling faith in God. For those living in less affluent societies, where life is less secure and where there is little stability, there will be many other faith testing challenges to face.

But whatever the circumstances, a deeper appreciation of what is truly valuable in life is essential. No matter what our personal circumstances are, everybody needs to learn true knowledge and wisdom. As Jesus taught in that parable, we do not know the day or the hour in which our life will end!

THE PATH OF TRUE WISDOM

True wisdom is something that the majority of mankind can neither conceive of nor really understand. Even the wisdom books in the Bible are sadly neglected by those who claim to be Christian. Yet if we are to find the right path to salvation, then we must learn the path of wisdom.

The Bible teaches us that life did not come about by blind chance and equally so life was not given without reason. Creation was intended to give God pleasure, to be a reflection of His glory and Jesus taught us that eternal life is dependent on knowing God [John 17.3]. To know God, to seek His ways, to reflect His glory is the whole reason for our very existence. Our lives are not our own to do with as we please; as Solomon wrote at the end of the book of Ecclesiastes:

‘Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter:
Fear God and keep his commandments, **for this is
the whole duty of man**’ [Ecclesiastes 12.13].

To fear God and keep His commandments is our whole duty, what more can be said! Indeed, ‘*Happy is the man who finds wisdom, and the man who gains understanding*’ [Proverbs 3.13]. Blessed indeed - for that man will find the true meaning of life! Yet is this still possible in this present world of unbelief? So many problems beset mankind that to quote the proverb, they would take the ‘**wisdom of Solomon**’ to resolve. This phrase is often used but without any appreciation of who Solomon was. However, one can learn many lessons from the life of this great king of Israel.



The Wisdom of Solomon – Painting by James Tissot (see 1 Kings 3.16-28)

SOLOMON'S WISE CHOICE

Solomon was chosen to succeed his father David as king of Israel, but when God asked him what gift he wanted, Solomon did not ask for long life, riches or the power to subdue his enemies. This was his reply:

“Now, O LORD my God, you have made your servant king instead of my father David, but I am a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in. ‘And your servant is in the midst of your people whom you have chosen, a great people, too numerous to be numbered or counted. ‘Therefore give to your servant an understanding heart to judge your people, that I may discern between good and evil. For who is able to judge this great people of yours?’ [1Kings 3.7, 9]

Solomon's request was granted and God told him:

‘Behold, I have done according to your words; see, I have given you a wise and understanding heart, so that there has not been anyone like you before you, nor shall any like you arise after you’ [1Kings 3.12].

This is the attitude that God desires to see in those called to be His children, not greed for material things, but rather a humble seeking after knowledge and understanding of His Word – in short true wisdom. This series of articles intends to do just that, to learn from the Divinely inspired writings of Solomon which are mainly found in the books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon.

THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES

Ecclesiastes was probably written *around* 970-930 B.C. The English title is taken from the name ‘*Ecclesiastes*’ used in the Latin

Vulgate, meaning '*speaker before an assembly*'. The Septuagint title was the Greek word *Ekklesiastes*, which is derived from the word *ekklesia* meaning assembly or congregation. The Hebrew title, Qoheleth is found only in the book of Ecclesiastes and means '*preacher*'. It comes from a root word *qahal* meaning to gather or assemble together (for the purpose of seeking wisdom). Thus the meaning conveyed is one who speaks before an assembly, as a preacher and teacher.

The Book of Ecclesiastes opens with these words: '*The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.*' So we have an immediate link to Solomon the son of David, judging or teaching the people the right path to godliness. Solomon's wisdom is recorded for our learning in the books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and The Song of Solomon.

The book of Ecclesiastes gives the reader an insight into the mediations and experiences of this wise King Solomon, whose wisdom has become legendary. Solomon was the recipient of a communication from God through the Holy Spirit and was granted the gift of unlimited wisdom. Yet, despite his learning, knowledge, experiences and riches, in the end Solomon failed to please God. During his life time Solomon married many wives and as he grew older they led him to worship idols and he sinned by turned away from following God wholeheartedly.

SOLOMON'S FOLLY

One point of interest to note is that Solomon reigned for forty years and Rehoboam who succeeded him was forty one when he ascended to the throne. The mother of Rehoboam was an Ammonitess. Solomon had married a woman who was not of the nation of Israel against the commandments of God, who had clearly stated that the Israelites were not to intermarry with the surrounding nations [*Deuteronomy 7.1-4*]. Rehoboam was born one year before the death of David and perhaps David had an inkling of what the future held and warned Solomon his son about the dangers that lay ahead. Certainly, the book of Kings records:

‘For it was so, when Solomon was old, that his wives turned his heart after other gods; and his heart was not loyal to the LORD his God, as was the heart of his father David. For Solomon went after Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, and after Milcom the abomination of the Ammonites. Solomon did evil in the sight of the LORD, and did not fully follow the LORD, as did his father David.’

[1Kings 11.4-6]

How sad it is that this account of such a wise king becomes sullied by his final folly, indeed as Ecclesiastes says: *‘Dead flies putrefy the perfumer’s ointment, and cause it to give off a foul odour; So does a little folly to one respected for wisdom and honour’* [Ecclesiastes 10.1].

Thus Solomon has this to say, possibly in reference to himself: *‘Better a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who will be admonished no more.’* [Ecclesiastes 4.13]

Solomon, rich and powerful as he was, lived a full life with all its pleasures, but in the end he came to the conclusion that life is vanity. All his great wealth and power were worthless without God. Solomon was right in his conclusion that the whole duty indeed the purpose of our existence is to love and fear God and to obey his commandments.

THE TEACHING OF ECCLESIASTES

In future articles we shall look at some of Solomon’s wise sayings in more detail. In summary, the book of Ecclesiastes can be divided into two main themes:

- ❖ The vanity and futility of earthly things.
- ❖ The excellence of divine wisdom.

Without God life is devoid of purpose and meaning. We are born and eventually we die. What occurs between these two events changes neither of these facts. Furthermore, life is often unjust; suffering and sorrow afflict all and rich or poor all go to the same place - the grave. In contrast the 'preacher' shows that the meaning of life cannot be found in the things of this world, nor by gaining knowledge about any created thing. True meaning to life lies only in serving the Creator, knowing Him and His purpose. Solomon and his experiences are recorded to teach these two fundamental themes, for example:

- * The preacher identifies himself as the son of David and King in Jerusalem, thus being of noble birth and lineage.
- * He writes about his wisdom and understanding of both secular and spiritual matters.
- * He writes about the many construction projects he undertook including buildings, gardens, parks and vineyards.
- * He speaks of the vast wealth that had been amassed by him and of his renown in the ancient world.

Yet for all this, even if Solomon had lived a long and healthy life that had been extended beyond the normal human life span, as in the time prior to the flood, it would have all been futile. Solomon concludes that it would all end in his death noting:

'...there is no more remembrance of the wise than of the fool for ever, since all that now is will be forgotten in the days to come. And how does a wise man die? As the fool!' [*Ecclesiastes 2.16*]

Solomon continues with a commentary on his own achievements:

'...I hated all my labour in which I had toiled under

the sun, because I must leave it to the man who will come after me. And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will rule over all my labour in which I toiled and in which I have shown myself wise under the sun.' [Ecclesiastes 2.18, 19]

This book of Ecclesiastes teaches us that man can find pleasure in the various aspects of his work, in interests, in study, in family life and in the companionship of others. Life will have its share of sorrow, loss and pleasure, however, the lesson must be learned that all aspects of life are fleeting as a vapour. Life will cease and will have been without meaning apart from God who created all things. Yet God is not remote but rather gives meaning to life. He has shown His mercy and love by providing the means of reconciliation and salvation. The duty of man is to search this out.

THE TEACHING OF PROVERBS

How can we find and learn divine wisdom?

The book of Proverbs speaks of the path to finding true wisdom; it begins: *'The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel'* and it continues:

- * *'To know wisdom and instruction, to perceive the words of understanding,*
- * *To receive the instruction of wisdom, justice judgement and equity,*
- * *To give prudence to the simple, to the young man knowledge and discretion.'* [Proverbs 1.1-4]

Discipline, prudence, discretion, ensuring what we do is right, just and fair, are not attributes that come naturally; they are contrary to the man made wisdom of human rights and self assertion. Such

characteristics are developed only by one thing: '*The fear of the LORD*' which is '*the beginning of knowledge*' [Proverbs 1.7]. Solomon adds to this the following words:

‘The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom,
and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding’
[Proverbs 9.10]

A PERSONAL APPEAL

So we urge you to take time out and consider some of the wisdom inspired by God and taught by Solomon. Think about how you can apply its message in your life. The wisdom of God is of far greater value than anything this life can offer, no treasure can compare with it:

‘Wisdom, like an inheritance, is a good thing and
benefits those who see the sun. Wisdom is a shelter
as money is a shelter, but the advantage of
knowledge is this: that wisdom preserves the life of
its possessor.’ [Ecclesiastes 7.11,12 NIV]

Solomon by his example teaches that we have to make a diligent effort to learn from the Word of God and to gain understanding [Proverbs 4.7; Ecclesiastes 7.25]. The Lord God who created all things by His wisdom has provided the means of salvation through His Son the Lord Jesus Christ.

Of Jesus we read:

‘The Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon Him, The
Spirit of wisdom and understanding, The Spirit of
counsel and might, The Spirit of knowledge and of
the fear of the LORD.’ [Isaiah 11.2]

Only by humbly fearing the Lord our God (fearing in this context means respect and reverence for God in every aspect of our lives) by

learning the wisdom that God has revealed in His Word can we find the true meaning and value of life!

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FREE BIBLE COURSE

The Bible Correspondence Course is in two parts. The first part gives a basic outline of what the Bible contains and its message. The second part is a more detailed study of the important Bible teaching concerning God's plan of salvation and the Christian way of life. The course is free of charge and the first lesson can be obtained by writing to:

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Bible Characters

Elijah

WITHOUT doubt the life of Elijah is one of the most exciting and dramatic of Bible stories. It tells of the battle between good and evil, of an individual standing out against the majority.

It describes a roller coaster of emotions, as Elijah moves from great triumph to utter despair. The stern prophet from the wild hills of Gilead is pitched against the scheming wiles of the wicked queen Jezebel. But when we read the account in the later chapters of The First Book of the Kings, we must try and look beyond the drama and the intrigue, because this narrative has many lessons that we can learn.

BACKGROUND TO ELIJAH'S MISSION

The background is the religious decline of the northern kingdom of Israel. They had deserted the true God, and had set up their own gods, worshipping the golden calves. When Ahab became king, he adopted the gods of his Sidonian wife Jezebel; with that new 'religion' came sexual license and a complete disregard for the standards set out in God's law. The law of God contained clear warnings about the consequences if Israel served idols:

'Take heed to yourselves, lest your heart be deceived, and you turn aside and serve other gods and worship them, lest the LORD'S anger be aroused against you, and he shut up the heavens so that there be no rain, and the land yield no produce, and you perish quickly from the good land which the LORD is giving you' [Deuteronomy 11.16,17].

It was Elijah's mission to pronounce that judgement would indeed come on Ahab and his kingdom. He appears before the king, and makes this terrible pronouncement: *'...As the LORD God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall not be dew nor rain these years, except at my word'* [1 Kings 17.1].

From this we see that the extent and duration of the drought was to be under the control of Elijah. The drought would only end at the prophet's command. As a result Elijah would be a wanted man, and so at God's command he went to hide himself in the hills on the east side of the Jordan by the brook Cherith.

GOD'S CARE FOR ELIJAH

Here is the first lesson - an example of something that is repeated time and again in the record. God instructs Elijah, and the prophet obeys without question or hesitation. God promised to protect Elijah from the worsening effects of the drought, by assuring him that he could drink from the waters of the brook and that ravens would bring him food. Jesus probably had this incident in mind when he said: *'Consider the ravens, for they neither sow nor reap, which have neither storehouse nor barn; and God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds?'* [Luke 12.24]. And so the life of Elijah is testimony to the reality of that assurance.

But as well as providing for Elijah, God was also educating His prophet. The raven was an unclean bird under the Law of Moses and yet God was using this scavenger to provide food for Elijah. It was the same lesson that the Apostle Peter later had to learn: *'What God has cleansed you must not call common'* [Acts 11.9].

THE WIDOW OF ZAREPHATH

The next stage of Elijah's exile from Israel would reinforce that lesson. Elijah was told to travel north to Sidon, the homeland of the idolatrous Queen Jezebel. This move was again at the express command of God, for God had told Elijah that a widow there would

sustain him. This was probably difficult for Elijah; first unclean birds had fed him, now he was to be cared for by a Gentile widow, who the Jews would have regarded as spiritually unclean. But God had a purpose with this Gentile woman and Elijah's experience with the ravens was leading him to understand this.

The initial meeting between the widow and Elijah demonstrates her remarkable character. In this time of drought she would have barely had sufficient food for herself and her son. She had never met Elijah before; yet his first words on meeting her were to request that she sacrifice what little food she did have to feed the prophet - and she did so!

Because of her generosity and her kindness, Elijah, the widow and her son were sustained by a continuing miracle. As fast as they consumed the flour and the oil to make the cakes they needed to eat, so the flour and the oil were replenished. While the wicked in Israel were experiencing the privations of the severe drought, Elijah, the widow and her child were sustained by God's power.

A GREAT MIRACLE

But disaster was just over the horizon. The boy became sick and died; yet the outcome is a wonderful illustration of the power of God and the power of prayer. Elijah prayed for a miracle; he said: *'O LORD my God, I pray, let this child's soul come back to him'* [1Kings 17.21].

We should never underestimate the greatness of Elijah's faith in making this request. Despite the many



Elijah raises the widow's son

miracles recorded in the Bible, no-one had yet been raised from the dead. Elijah asked for such an impossibility to happen; not for himself, nor for his nation, but for a foreigner.

The miracle happened as a testament to Elijah's faith and trust in God. But we should not underestimate the faith of the widow in this. In the letter to the Hebrews, the writer gives a list of the heroes of faith and among these is this remarkable comment: '*Women received their dead raised to life again*' [Hebrews 11.35], almost certainly a reference to the widow of Zarephath.

'HOW LONG WILL YOU FALTER BETWEEN TWO OPINIONS'

After this miracle, God again instructs Elijah to go and present himself to Ahab [1 Kings 18.1]. Elijah went to see him fully confident in God's care for him. He would need that care, for the record explains how Ahab had been searching high and low for Elijah, since he regarded him as the cause of the calamity on his people [1 Kings 18.17].

But rather than cowering in fear before the vengeful Ahab, Elijah takes command and instructs Ahab to assemble all his false prophets to appear at Mount Carmel, where the power of the God of Israel and indeed of the whole universe would be revealed. Elijah then issued a challenge to all the assembled people: '*How long will you falter between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal then follow him*' [1 Kings 18.21].

The challenge was simple; two altars would be prepared and an animal sacrifice laid on each altar. Ahab and the prophets of Baal would entreat their god to call down fire to consume their sacrifice. Elijah would call on his God to do the same. The god that responded by fire would be vindicated as the true God. Elijah invites the prophets of Baal to call on their god first. They pray to Baal but get no response. They beseech Baal to answer by fire but nothing happens. They start to mutilate themselves by cutting themselves with knives so as to make Baal understand the sincerity of their devotion.

ELIJAH'S PRAYER ANSWERED

Elijah mocks their vain efforts – perhaps their god is asleep, or he is away on a journey [1 Kings 18.27]. All day long they plead and implore but absolutely nothing happens. Then it is Elijah's turn and before he calls on his God, he tells the people to pour water (given the drought, this was probably sea-water from the nearby Mediterranean Sea) over his sacrifice, over the wood and over the altar. When everything is thoroughly drenched and with all the people watching, Elijah calls on God to answer his prayer by fire. Immediately *'the fire of the LORD fell and consumed the burnt sacrifice, and the wood and the stones and the dust, and it licked up the water that was in the trench'* [1 Kings 18.38].

This was a mighty miracle to convince the nation of the reality and greatness of their God. It is the same God that we are invited to approach and worship today, a God who will listen to the prayers of those who serve Him in obedience and faith. The people of Israel were apparently convinced and they responded by slaying all the false prophets and proclaimed the name of God.

With this transformation in the religious life of the nation, Elijah prays for the drought to end. Again his faithful prayer is answered and rain is sent on the land and Elijah proceeds in triumph ahead of Ahab's chariot as they return to the king's palace at Jezreel.

Elijah had discredited and destroyed the prophets of Baal but he had not reckoned with Jezebel. She was made of sterner stuff than most and would not take this defeat of her prophets lying down. *'Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, 'So let the gods do to me, and more*



Elijah runs ahead of Ahab

'So let the gods do to me, and more

also, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by tomorrow about this time' [1 Kings 19.2].

A MOMENT OF WEAKNESS

We have seen the great faith and courage of Elijah and we have noted his consistent obedience to God's command. Now we see a moment of weakness. In his moment of triumph, Elijah receives a threat that he hadn't expected. He had challenged the king and with the power of God he had achieved a mighty victory over the forces of evil. Surely that same power could protect him from the jealous rage of Jezebel, but on this occasion his faith and trust crumble and Elijah flees in fear of his life.

It is the only time in the whole narrative where Elijah's movements are not dictated by the Word of the Lord. There is comfort for us in this moment of weakness; even the great men of the Bible have their moments of doubt and despair. It is no different in this age when belief and trust in God is challenged on every side. But the important lesson from Elijah is that in his despair, God sought him out. When he fled from the wrath of Jezebel, Elijah's consuming thought was that he wanted to die. He thought his mission was a failure because Israel had not been truly reformed by his work. But God sent an angel to comfort and strengthen Elijah and to encourage him to travel to Horeb the mountain of God, where God appeared to him [1 Kings 19.5-10].

THE POWER OF GOD DEMONSTRATED

At Horeb, Elijah was taught an important lesson, one that we all need to learn as well. Elijah was feeling a little sorry for himself. He thought he was the only true servant of God left in the earth, and his life was under threat. Perhaps he thought that if his God was so powerful as to consume the sacrifice, the altar and the water by fire, why was he in such fear of his life. Surely that power could destroy Jezebel and all her kind in a moment?

So Elijah is told to stand at the entrance to the cave and witness the glory of God pass by. There was a mighty wind, so strong as to break

the rocks. Then there was an earthquake that shook the mountains. Finally there was a terrible fire that consumed all before it. But the record says that God was not found in any of these things. Finally, after the fire came a still small voice. It seems quite likely that the voice spoke the same words as were spoken to Moses many years before, when he stood on the same mountain, and saw a similar revelation of God's power.

These were the words spoken to Moses *'And the LORD passed before him and proclaimed, 'The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means clearing the guilty...' [Exodus 34.6,7].*

LESSONS FOR TODAY

What was the lesson that God was trying to convey to Elijah? Elijah was reminded of God's awesome power and majesty, but the lesson is surely that God does not want to frighten men into submission and obedience. The power of God today is to be experienced through the still, small voice. It is the voice that speaks to us through God's law, through the Psalms and the Prophets.

It is the same voice that speaks through the words of Jesus and the writings of the apostles. It is the voice that tells us of the mercy and grace of God, of His abounding goodness and truth. It is a voice that speaks to us – instructing us to serve God out of love for His ways and respect for His commands, not out of fear of His judgements.

Israel had seen the power revealed through Moses but the majority perished in the wilderness. They had seen Elijah call down fire from heaven but most of them were the more persuaded by Jezebel. Surely that is why Moses and Elijah appeared with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. Jesus' generation had seen his miracles and attributed them to the power of Beelzebub, the prince of demons. Man will never be convinced of something he does not want to believe, no matter how great the evidence.

Conviction in the things of God must come from within, by listening to that quiet voice of truth and righteousness. Today, we can hear that voice speaking to us from God's Word the Bible. Listen to it carefully, and you will find that it has more power than a tornado; it can move you more than a major earthquake, and it can purify more effectively than a raging furnace.

God told Elijah that he was not his only servant; there were 7,000 in Israel who had never bowed the knee to Baal. Even though there were many more than Elijah was aware of, they were still a small minority. So it is today; those who serve God in faith and truth are in the minority.

Our aim in this publication is to pass on the message of that small voice to others who will hear. Try listening, and we hope and pray that you will find the power and encouragement that enabled Elijah to pick up the pieces and go back to his work of proclaiming God's message. He was to establish the school of the prophets and also trained Elisha, so that he could take up the mantle after his own ministry was ended. So there has been a continuing witness in the earth to the power of God's Word.

But you may have noticed the closing phrase of those words we have already quoted, that God spoke to Moses and probably to Elijah – *'by no means clearing the guilty'*. This reminds us that there will come a time of judgement, when God's righteous anger is poured out on the wickedness of men. Ahab and Jezebel were to experience Divine retribution. Those who reject God and scorn His ways will have to give account when Jesus comes again to establish God's kingdom. Then the wind, the earthquake and the fire will be seen again in the earth and the opportunity to listen to the still small voice will have passed.

Steve Irving
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Bible Trades

The Potter

IN Biblical times the potter was a familiar sight at work in almost every town and village and the making of domestic pots is one of those trades that has changed very little over the centuries. The potter was an essential part of daily life, providing for household and other needs and as a result has presented the archaeologist with a veritable feast of finds, as the museums of the world confirm. Because of the interest in pottery as a leisure activity, we can get very close to this trade just as it was practised so many centuries ago. Even today, we can go to a pottery and see vessels being made, just as they were in Bible times. Commercial pottery has of course, developed the craft and uses modern sources of power to enable large quantities to be produced but the principle remains largely unchanged.

INTRODUCTION TO THE WORK OF THE POTTER

In the Bible there are at least sixteen occasions when the work of the potter is referred to. In the Old Testament, the word translated into the English language comes from the Hebrew word *yatsar* and means to mould into a form through squeezing into shape. In the New Testament, the Greek word is *kerameus*, from which the more familiar word ‘ceramics’ is derived. In the vast majority of cases, the work of the potter is used by God to make a very powerful lesson and we will look at some of these lessons in this article. Interestingly, the IVF Bible Dictionary suggests that fired pottery was discovered when a clay lined straw basket was burnt. Be that as it may, we *do* know that pottery goes back a long way to Neolithic times.

ONE OF THE OLDEST TRADES

Until the invention of the potter's wheel in the 4th millennium BC, by means of which clay is 'thrown' and shaped on the rotating wheel, clay vessels were hand made and this method is still used today, especially for large vessels. Because it is very common, if fragile, large quantities of pottery shards are to be found strewn on every ancient 'tell' or mound.



The potter at his wheel

There is an oblique but telling reference to this in the book of Job, reckoned to be one of the oldest books of the Bible, where we read: *'And he took for himself a potsherd with which to scrape himself while he sat in the midst the ashes'* [Job 2.8]. Yes Job took to himself a broken shard of pottery to ease the pain and irritation caused by the *'painful boils'*. Many similar pieces of pottery have been dug up by the archaeologists as they investigate these ancient city sites.

Careful observation of the layers of fragments found on one site, allows interesting comparisons with other sites being investigated. Records of pottery so found at several Palestinian sites, have enabled a series of pottery shapes to be built up which can also be dated. Caution has to be exercised however, in attempting to date with any greater accuracy than 50 years either way. By plotting the location of the pottery shards, it is possible to build up a picture of trade routes and cultural boundaries.

USES OF POTTERY

As the centuries passed, so the design of pots and vessels and the glazing that became possible changed as other materials were introduced and mixed with the clay. Bowls, jugs, plates and oil lamps have been found in great abundance. Pottery storage jars were used at centres of learning to contain old parchments and a notable example of this is 'The Dead Sea Scrolls'. These vital documents, testifying to the veracity of the Bible, had survived many centuries stored in clay vessels. Grain was also stored and moved in jars, some of which were quite large. The 'Tell el Armana tablets' are remarkable baked clay tablets on which diplomatic and other records have been permanently imprinted.

There was one characteristic which applied to all such pots – they were relatively fragile and porous. They were easily broken and it is this characteristic which God makes use of in His Word the Bible, to bring home important lessons.

CHARACTERISTICS OF CLAY

There is a reference to clay, which although not directly associated with the work of the potter, is referred to in more recent English versions of the Bible as 'ceramic clay'. The feet of the great image seen by Nebuchadnezzar in his 'dream of empires' in Daniel chapter 2, are described as part iron and part ceramic clay, which suggests a degree of glazing was involved. The significance of the image, which represents the nations from Daniel's days down to our own times, is that the entire edifice of man's rule stands on feet of clay and is therefore unstable. Iron and clay do not bond well together and that is a very accurate description of the nations we see today. This is not the place to discuss the dreams of Nebuchadnezzar as they are dealt with in other writings available from Light Bible Publications. (See the special issue entitled *Light on Bible Prophecy*).

THE DIVINE POTTER

This leads us to consider the two characteristics of clay that make it an ideal symbol or type. Clay that is suitable for moulding and squeezing into the shape and form of a pot or vessel, is soft and malleable. Once it is fired in the oven, it becomes hard and brittle and quite impossible to change. The potter also has a role to play in Biblical teaching, for God Himself is shown to be the Divine Potter! Let's have a look at some examples of this from the Bible.

‘But now, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you our potter; and all we are the work of your hand. Do not be furious, O LORD, nor remember iniquity for ever; indeed please look - we all are your people.’ [*Isaiah 64.8, 9*]

What is the background to this reference? The Prophet Isaiah was lamenting the fact that his people Israel, to whom he was sent to minister, had been disobedient to God and were suffering the consequences. He was acknowledging the supremacy of God and His right to do what He wants with His creation. He was, as it were, speaking on behalf of the nation and asking God to be merciful in the punishments he was meting out to Israel. The prophet recognises that God has every right to do as He pleases. God, the Father is the Divine Potter, moulding His people who are the clay. The clay also possesses certain characteristics. If it is soft and malleable, then anything is possible. If we are prepared to allow ourselves to be moulded to the pattern of righteousness that God is seeking, then we too can be made into a vessel that is suitable for God's purpose.

A POWERFUL LESSON

In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul makes use of this analogy or type of the potter and the clay in discussing the overall purpose of God, in which He sees and knows the end from the beginning and the role that we can play in that purpose. He takes the example of

Pharaoh, who having his own freewill, hardened his heart and refused to help Israel in their affliction in Egypt. Eventually, God hardened Pharaoh's heart to the point where there was no turning back. Paul asks if this is reasonable in his letter to the believers at Rome:

‘For he says to Moses, *“I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.”* So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, *“Even for this same purpose I have raised you up, that I may show my power in you, and that my name may be declared in all the earth.”* Therefore he has mercy on whom he wills, and whom he wills he hardens. You will say to me then, “Why does he still find fault? For who has resisted his will?” But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, “Why have you made me like this?” **Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor?** What if God, wanting to show his wrath and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, and that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had prepared beforehand for glory, even us whom he called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles?’ [Romans 9.15-24]

There is a very powerful lesson in Paul's words. God is the great Creator and the Bible tells us that He has created all things for His pleasure. He has a plan for the world and that plan is being worked out to a successful conclusion. We can be part of that plan, for God has said that He is not willing that any should perish, but that all men

and women should come to repentance. The lesson is, that we can be part of the plan and purpose of God, if we as the clay in the hands of our Maker, permit ourselves to be moulded to become ‘vessels of mercy’ through which God’s glory will be manifested in the age to come.

There is possibly a link with this process in the words of Paul as he brings the letter to the Romans to an end: *‘I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God’* [Romans 12.1,2]. In the J.B. Philips version of this letter the phrase ‘do not be conformed to this world’ is rendered ‘don’t let the world squeeze you into its mould’! Does the Apostle have the work of the potter still in mind here?

THE POTTER’S HOUSE



Jeremiah at the Potter's house

This principle concerning the work of the Divine Potter can be better understood when we consider the way a potter works on the wheel. It helps us to understand how God works and of His willingness to show mercy and forgiveness to those who are truly repentant.

In Jeremiah chapter 18 we read how God sent the prophet to the potter’s house. While he was there he watched the potter moulding a pot on the wheel and he saw something that can happen at any time:

‘Then I went down to the potter’s house, and there he was, making something at the wheel. And the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hand of the potter; so he made it again into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to make.’

[*Jeremiah 18.3, 4*]



Broken pottery

What caused the work to be spoilt, we are not told but given that the Divine Potter does not make mistakes, it must be the clay that caused the fault. But the potter perseveres and makes the vessel or pot that he wants. Jeremiah was sent along to the potter to hear ‘*the word of the LORD*’ and God said to him:

‘O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter? says the LORD. Look, as the clay is in the potter’s hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel’ [*Jeremiah 18.6*].

God goes on to make the point that He controls the affairs of the nations as part of His purpose with the earth and man. Evil nations are punished and there are many examples of this in the Bible, but if a wicked nation repents, then God shows mercy. The city-state of Nineveh is a classic example of this as a study of the prophecy of Jonah makes very clear. But, God is primarily concerned with Israel and He says to Jeremiah:

‘Now therefore, speak to the men of Judah and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, saying, Thus says the LORD: Behold, I am fashioning a disaster and devising a plan against you. Return now every one from his evil way, and make your ways and your doings good’ [*Jeremiah 18.11*].

The prophecy of Jeremiah and all the major prophets whose writings are part of the Scriptures predicted the time yet in the future when God, having moulded, punished and re-moulded His people the nation of Israel, they will become the cornerstone of the Kingdom of God. The work of the Divine Potter will have been achieved. No doubt, Jeremiah went away to record the Scriptures with the scene at the potter's house very firmly in his mind. We have to ask ourselves, what sort of clay are we? Are we letting this present world and age squeeze us into its mould or are we allowing God to influence our lives in obedient service to Him?

Israel were not obedient and in the shorter term, they have merited the punishments of God, even to this present time. The description of Israel in dispersion makes use of clay after it has been fired. As we have remarked, the biblical sites of the world are littered with broken shards of pottery and this is how Israel is described by Jeremiah: *'The precious sons of Zion, valuable as fine gold, how they are regarded as clay pots, the work of the hands of the potter'* [Lamentations 4.2].

AN ACTED PARABLE

Jeremiah was also told by God to take a *'potter's earthen flask'* and go to the local rubbish dump at Jerusalem called the valley of the son of Hinnom in Bible times [Jeremiah 19.1, 2]. It was an uncompromising message that he was to give the leaders of Israel:

'Hear the word of the LORD, O kings of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem. Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: "Behold, I will bring such a catastrophe on this place, that whoever hears of it, his ears will tingle"' [Jeremiah 19.3].

The message was very straight and to the point. Israel the nation had persistently sinned against God. They had not allowed themselves to be moulded into *'vessels of mercy'*, as Paul puts it in writing to the

Romans. Under Jewish law, any home polluted by disease or death had to be purged and cleansed because of the association between sin and death, of which disease is but a symptom. Wooden utensils can be scrubbed clean, but earthen pots had to be smashed – there was no other remedy. Israel were so polluted by idolatry that they too must be smashed to pieces as God told Jeremiah:

‘Then you shall break the flask in the sight of the men who go with you, and say to them, “Thus says the LORD of hosts; Even so I will break this people and this city, **as one breaks a potter’s vessel**, which cannot be made whole again; and they shall bury them in Tophet till there is no place to bury.”’

[Jeremiah 19.10, 11]

THE FUTURE WORK OF CHRIST

The work of the potter has been graphically used by God to press home lessons that apply to His people in every age. Very soon, God’s Kingdom will be established on the earth and it will replace all other kingdoms, the kingdoms of men which stand upon the clay feet seen in the vision of Nebuchadnezzar. Again, the destruction of the kingdoms of men is graphically described for us in Psalm 2:

‘You shall break them with a rod of iron; you shall dash them in pieces **like a potter’s vessel**. Now therefore, be wise, O kings; be instructed, you judges of the earth. Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling’ *[Psalm 2. 9-11]*.

To share with Christ in ruler-ship of the nations is the prospect held out today to the servants of God. In his last message recorded for us in the book of Revelation, Jesus offers this wonderful prospect to those who are faithful:

‘And he who overcomes, and keeps my works until the end, to him I will give power over the nations - He shall rule them with a rod of iron; **as the potter’s vessels shall be broken to pieces - as I also have received from my Father.**’ [Revelation 2.26, 27]

A LOT TO THINK ABOUT

So the humble everyday work of the potter provides us with a lot to think about. In almost every village and town across Bible lands, it would be possible to watch the potter at work making the very necessary every day things for domestic use. Do we see ourselves as clay? We are made of ‘*the dust of the ground*’ [Genesis 2.7] and because of sin, we return again to dust when we die. But for all of us, there is the prospect of resurrection. Just as the nation of Israel is to be raised again from the dust, so we too can anticipate a glorious future. God has declared His purpose:

‘...that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had prepared beforehand to glory, even us whom he called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles’

[Romans 9.23, 24]

The work of the Divine Potter has continued to these last days of Gentile times and soon it will be completed. The question we have to ask ourselves is this. Will we be among those vessels of mercy who have been shaped, moulded and made fit for the Divine purpose?

David Evans
Kent, UK

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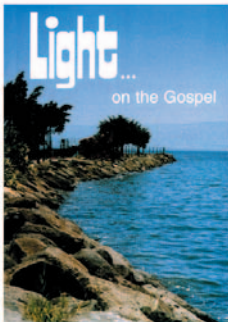
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