

"Another Vessel"

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"Then I went down to the potter's house, and, behold, he wrought his work on the wheels. And when the vessel that he made of the clay was marred in the hand of the potter, he made it again another vessel, as seemed good to the potter to make it" (Jeremiah 18:3,4).

We have reached the point in our meditations which is represented by that little clause "another vessel". When the clay of Israel refused to accept the Pattern of God as represented in Jesus Christ, it was broken on the wheel. And that is how Israel is today. It refused to accept God's Pattern and therefore, being marred, it was broken on the wheel, and God turned to make another vessel, of which He could say: 'In him I am well-pleased'... "a vessel, as seemed good to the potter to make it".

The vessel, then, that God is now making is according to Christ, and this time He is going to succeed. The end of the Bible shows us the vessel perfected and glorified.

Before we go further with this Pattern, there is a general word to be said. It is important for us to realize that God always had only one vessel in mind. He never did intend to have two vessels, one spoiled and the other good. The whole of the Old Testament contains the mystery of Christ. He is hidden everywhere in it and, in reality, God was working through all those centuries on the principle of Christ. The fact that the Old Testament closes in failure only means that the earthly representation failed. The heavenly intention never did fail, so that if God has to set aside one earthly expression, He is going on with His eternal thought. God's intention concerning His Son did not begin when Jesus came into this world. Christ had been in the mind of His Father from all eternity and was appointed to be the Pattern before ever this world was created.

You must remember that the only Bible the first Christians had was the Old Testament, and Christ said that everything in that Bible concerned Himself. He said: "The Scriptures... these are they which bear witness of me" (John 5:39). He took up all the writings of Moses and the prophets and "interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself" (Luke 24:27), and Peter says that it was "the Spirit of Christ which was in them (the prophets)" (1 Peter 1:10). So that if you had lived in the early days of the Church the only Bible you would have had would have been the Old Testament. But it would have been your Bible. If we ask for a Bible today we get the Old and the New Testaments together, but if Christians in the early days asked for a Bible, they were given just the Old Testament. Jesus used the Old Testament for Christians, and so did the Apostles, whose business was simply to show that the one Person in the Old Testament was Jesus Christ. All the outstanding features in it point in some way to Christ. It is God's book. He wrote it, and in His Mind there is only one object, and that is His Son.

So, in the outstanding persons of the Old Testament you have to see some feature of Christ. Was it Abraham? Well, we have been seeing how Abraham leads us to Christ. Was it Moses, or David, or the prophets? It was Christ about whom they were all speaking and whom they were representing in some way.

Let us take one simple illustration. Before the New Testament was written, during those wonderful movements in the early days, Philip was in Samaria, where God was doing a great work. The Spirit told Philip that he was to leave Samaria and go down to the desert. We might just say, by the way, that it seems a strange thing for the Lord to lead someone away from what was a very evident piece of His work to a desert. If Philip had not been a man utterly committed to the Holy Spirit, he would have had an argument with the Lord. He would have said: 'Lord, You sent me here to Samaria and You have proved that that was right. There is a great work of the Holy Spirit going on here, and now You tell me to go to a desert. How on earth can there be a revival in a desert?' The Lord does strange things, but the end of the story shows that He was right. Perhaps you would choose to stay in Samaria, where things are happening, and you might not like the idea of going down to a desert, but it might be that the Lord has something in that desert which is bigger than Samaria: Not only a town, but a whole new nation was touched in that desert. Well, that is just by the way.

You know what happened when Philip went down to that desert. He was looking round and wondering why he was there when he saw something coming from a distance. When it got nearer to him he saw that it was a chariot with some men in it. The Spirit said to Philip: "Go near, and join thyself to this chariot" (Acts 8:29). Again Philip was obedient to the Spirit, and as he got near to the chariot he heard the chief man in it reading. He looked at the man and saw that he was a dark-skinned Ethiopian, but as he listened, he said: 'I know what it is that that man is reading. He is reading out of my Bible.' So he said to the man: "Understandest thou what thou readest?" The man was reading from Isaiah 53, and he said: "How can I, except someone shall guide me? And he besought Philip to come up and sit with him... And Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this

Scripture, preached unto him Jesus" (Acts 8:31,35). I think this settles all arguments as to whether Isaiah 53 related to Jesus!

This is an example of how the Old Testament, as their Bible, was used to preach Jesus. There is something here which always amuses me. Philip preached Jesus out of Isaiah 53, and the very next thing the Ethiopian said was: "Behold, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized?" (Acts 8:36). Please turn to Isaiah 53 and tell me where it mentions baptism! You will read it a hundred times and, on the face of it, you will never discover the word 'baptism'. There is only one conclusion that we can draw. That chapter is about the death, the burial and the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and Philip must have said to this Ethiopian: 'To be united with Christ means being united with Him in His death, His burial and His resurrection.' The man believed and said "Here is water..." I always think the next phrase is significant: "And they both went down into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptized him" (Acts 8:38). Well, I leave that with you, but the fact is that that Ethiopian was baptized on Isaiah 53. That is just one instance of what we are saying. Whether it is the great persons in the Old Testament, or whether it is the central nation in it - Israel - or whether it is particular places, like Jerusalem and the Jordan, or whether it is special objects like the tabernacle and the temple, the fact is that in some way they all point to Jesus Christ.

So we come back to this: that He, God's Son, is the Pattern for the vessel, and we have commenced -and only commenced! - to study that Pattern.

Now just a further word about the beginning of the showing of the Pattern. The first thing about this Pattern is the mystery and the miracle of His birth from heaven. It is such a mystery that all the great brains of theology cannot accept it. I suppose the main point of controversy about the Lord Jesus is His virgin birth, but if you set that aside you reduce Him to the level of an ordinary man. In His very origin He would be no different from other men. I say again: many of the great brains of theology have decided against that birth. Nevertheless this has been, and still is, the great point of controversy, and this is an example of the fact that "the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God... and he cannot know them" (1 Corinthians 2:14).

The birth of Jesus Christ is a mystery and a miracle. At Christmas-time we see all sorts of things set up which are called 'the Nativity'. There are some animals in a stable, a man and a woman with a little baby, and we are told: 'That is the Nativity.' There was never anything more false. Bethlehem was never the birthplace of the Son of God. He was with the Father before this world was (John 17:5). Bethlehem was only the point at which He came out of eternity into time. His nativity was not in Bethlehem; it was in heaven. He repudiated His earthly father and mother and always spoke about "my Father which is in heaven" (Matthew 18:10).

Do you notice that when Luke wrote the genealogy of Jesus, he said of Him: "being the son of Joseph" (Luke 3:23), and then he protected that by putting into brackets "as was supposed". This was just what man supposed, but it was not true. He never was the son of Joseph.

What has this to do with us? This is the Pattern. The beginning of every Christian life is on the same principle as that of Jesus Christ. The Christian is not of time, but of eternity - thus the Apostle says: "He chose us in him before the foundation of the world" (Ephesians 1:4). Our coming into relation with the Lord Jesus is only our coming out of eternity into time, out of heaven into this world. Where is your true nativity? If you were asked that by people of the world, you would say: 'I was born in France.... in Switzerland... in England.' If you were to say: 'I was born in heaven', the world would look at you and say: 'You are a funny creature!' At best they would say: 'What do you mean? I don't understand.' Jesus said of Himself: "I am come down from heaven" (John 6:38) ... "I am not of this world" (John 8:23), and in that sense He is the Pattern. We do not belong here, and the consciousness of that ought to be growing stronger all the time. As we have said, there ought to be a mystery and a miracle in the life of every child of God.

I am not sure how your Bibles put this, but I am sorry that in the English Bible the words of the Lord Jesus to Nicodemus are put as they are, although in the Revised Version there is a correction in the margin. In the old Version it says: "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). That is quite good, as far as it goes, but what Jesus really said was: "Except a man be born from above". The real beginning of a Christian's life is from above, and not from beneath. Of course, dear friends, you and I have to learn the meaning of this all our life, but we just state the fact and leave it there for the moment.

The next thing that we must come to in the Pattern is what we may call 'the take-over of the Holy Spirit'. That which is born of God is taken over by the Holy Spirit. I do not want to make difficulties for anyone, especially for our young people, but for those who know their Bibles, you will remember that there is always associated with the resurrection of the Lord Jesus the idea of sonship. Now it was when the Lord Jesus came up out of the

waters of Jordan that He was attested the Son of God. Be careful! I am not saying that it was then that He became the Son of God - He was the Son of God. But on the resurrection side of the Jordan heaven attested Him the Son of God, and the Apostle Paul says: He "was declared to be the Son of God in power,... by the resurrection from the dead" (Romans 1:4-AV). There is a spiritual sense in which that was the new beginning.

Then do you notice what happens immediately after? The Holy Spirit from heaven takes over.

Now the Church went down into the Jordan when Christ was crucified. It certainly did go down into death. But when Christ was raised from the dead the Church began to live again, or, anyway, move toward life. It was like the dry and scattered bones of Ezekiel's vision beginning to move together. Something is happening in those forty days after the resurrection - there is a sound of movement amongst the dry bones. Then "they were all together in one place" (Acts 2:1) and the Holy Spirit came upon them. Although the Church was an eternal thing, it was born historically on the Day of Pentecost. The eternal had now come into time, and the mark of the birth of the Church was that the Holy Spirit took over. I am very careful when I use that phrase: 'He took over'. The Holy Spirit took everything out of the hands of men into His hands. That is why it is said: "A sound as of a rushing mighty wind" (Acts 2:2 - AV), and you know that when you get into the grip of a mighty, rushing wind, things are taken out of your hands and you just have to go where the wind is going. So Jesus said to Nicodemus: 'The wind blows where it likes, and you cannot tell the wind where it is to blow.' Some of us heard the wind coming down the mountains last night, and if you had been in the course of that wind it would have been silly for you to say: 'Now, wind, don't blow this way. Blow the other way.' You just have to go the way of the wind and accept that it is the master. "So is every one that is born of the Spirit" (John 3:8).

What did this mean in the case of the Lord Jesus as the Pattern? It meant that all His acts, His words and His ways were governed from heaven. There was a mystery about it. People could not understand why He did what He did and why He did things in the way in which He did them. They certainly could not understand His words. Apparently He was like other men, and that was their problem. As they looked at Him they did not see anything different from the other men around. He was Himself as a man, but He was also someone else, and something else.

Now, when we become mastered by the Holy Spirit we do not lose our personality. We remain ourselves and we can be distinguished amongst one another because we are all ourselves. And yet we are someone else. There is another who is different from what we are. In a sense, there are two personalities about us. There is what we are naturally, but there is someone else - what we are spiritually. So it was with Jesus: He was two beings, so to speak. Under the government of the Holy Spirit we are more than ourselves, and that is how it was with the Lord Jesus. When people met Him, they met more than Him, and if we are according to the Pattern that is how it must be with us. How I would like to spend a lot of time on that! May I remind you that Abraham was more than Abraham, Moses was more than Moses and Elijah was more than Elijah. When you met Abraham, Moses or Elijah you met all Israel.

You see, "none of us liveth to himself, and none dieth to himself" (Romans 14:7). As the Lord's people we represent something very much more than our individual life: we represent all the people of God. We are bound up with the whole life of the Church, and the vessel that God is making is the Church as a whole. It is the whole Church which constitutes the one vessel that God is seeking to form, so that our lives are intended to be a part of a much bigger whole. That truth, of course, involves us in a great responsibility.

Now, if you look into your Bible, you will see that that is exactly what it meant when the Holy Spirit took over. On the one hand, these people, Apostles and others, were just themselves. They were not changed into angels or into disembodied spirits. They were just themselves. Peter is still Peter - and yet they represent something very much more than themselves. They have become greater than themselves, and that is what the Holy Spirit will do for us.

These are just some features of the Pattern. There are very many more, but I must leave it with you to go and learn Christ.