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Israel Teaching Letter

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“YOU ARE THE POTTER - I AM THE CLAY”

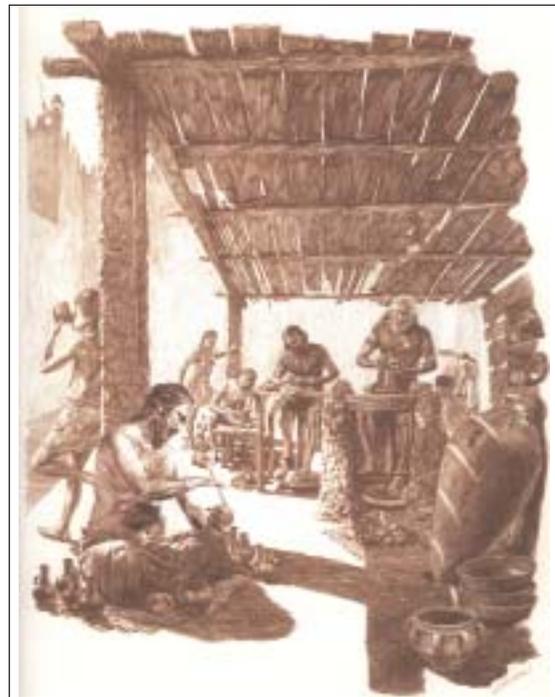
Early in the morning, a prophet made his way out of the Potsherd Gate of the city of Jerusalem heading to the house of Yonadav the potter. With quick pace he took the trail churned to fine dust by the hoofs of thousands of sheep and goats to where the Valley of Ben Hinnom and the Valley Kidron intersect. The two valleys cradle Jerusalem in their arms on the east and west, meet, and then head southeast carrying runoff water to the Dead Sea.

Jeremiah, the prophet, had heard the Word of the Lord in the quiet of the night instructing him to pay a visit to the house of the potter where God would have a message for him.

Jeremiah entered through the arched gateway in the potter's perimeter wall and then into the potter's studio. It was the beginning of his busy day and Jeremiah arrived just in time to see him make a serious mistake in the pot he was forming. The pot began to wobble in the potter's hands as it spun on the wheel, then suddenly it caved in on one side and flopped comically on the wheel between his hands.

Jeremiah was not sure from the frustrated glance of the potter if he had caused the problem by his unannounced entry. He began to offer an apology when the potter's face softened and he simply said, “Air bubble!” The potter then removed the clay of the marred pot from the wheel, stepped to a flat white table and kneaded the clay like bread dough. Soon, he sliced the lump of clay with a fine strand of wire and inspected its insides. Nodding approval to himself, Yonadav stepped back to the wheel, slapped the lump down, began the wheel spinning and firmly pushed the clay to center it on the wheel.

As soon as the lump stopped wobbling between his hands, his thumbs dug into the center and went down creating a doughnut shaped lump. Slowly Yonadav took his hands from the form, placed them both together on one side of the clay and gently put pressure on both the inside and outside of the clay, then he pulled up a perfect cylinder. He looked up smiling at Jeremiah and said, “No bubbles!” Jeremiah watched as he slowly



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formed the lump of clay by repeatedly pushing the sides of the cylinder out from the inside. He recognized it to be a water vessel but with a very attractive shape.

"I wanted a large vase," remarked the potter, "but the quality of this clay will make a better water pot."

God's message to Jeremiah was that as the potter was master over his clay, so was God master over the people of Judah.

The above story describes a quick trip to the potter's house, but embedded in this story are many more lessons full of important spiritual applications. As an art major in college, I fell in love with pottery and everything about it. I filled as many electives in my schedule with pottery as I legally could and still keep my major course of study on track. There is something about the art of pot making; the hands-on, tactile sensation of clay yielding to one's hands that brings the potter back to the wheel time and time again.

The potter's trade has not changed with technological advancement as much as other trades. Some things have been motorized and improved, like electric wheels that the potter does not have to kick by foot to make it spin. The firing ovens are bigger and hotter and able to make better quality pottery, but generally, the potter's studio is very similar to Jeremiah's day.

WHAT DID JEREMIAH SEE IN THE POTTER'S WORKSHOP?

Along one wall of the potter's workshop stood large clay storage jars that held hydrated clay ready for the potter to scoop out and begin his creative process.

Close to the jars a hip-high bench, with plaster slabs embedded in the wood, served as a work bench for kneading the clay in a process known as wedging. The plaster slabs absorbed excess water in the clay, allowing the potter to stop the wedging process the minute he knew the clay was the right consistency for wheel work.

A row of potter's wheels sat close to the wedging bench, where the potter would spin the clay to create jugs, jars, bowls and vases. Off in a corner a small sealed room known as the greenware room allowed pots just taken off the wheel to dry slowly. Any moisture in a new clay vessel prohibits it from being put in the firing kiln. A slow drying process is needed to keep the pot from warping or cracking should moisture evaporate too quickly.



In an area away from all other equipment stands the firing kiln. Size varied from closet-size to the size of a small room depending upon the potter's resources and demand for his work. Smaller kilns could fire 15 to 20 medium to small sized pots. Other kilns found during archaeological excavations in the Middle East were industrial size. Some larger kilns were used to make terra cotta tiles for the roofs of more expensive homes and public buildings and were therefore quite large.

After the first firing, a pot is called bisque ware. A special room in the potter's work area is set aside for bisque ware. It is waiting the final step of decoration with colored glazes by the hands of an artist, whether it be the potter himself or someone else more gifted with design.

Since we are likened to clay in the potter's hand in many places in Scripture, understanding the stages of pottery making is revealing of our character and some of the stages we go through before we are considered useful vessels from God's point of view.

Walk through the potter's house with me for a description of the tools, processes and their uses.

THE WEDGING BENCH

The wedging bench is actually a kneading area for clay preparation, just as bread dough is kneaded before baking. Benches range from elaborate to as simple as plaster of paris poured into a simple wood frame. The purpose of using a plaster kneading area is that plaster absorbs excess moisture from the clay. During the wedging process, the clay's consistency will change slowly. The experienced potter knows exactly when the clay is right for the job he has set before himself. A firmer consistency is useful for wheel creations while a slightly softer



consistency is permissible for hand built vessels. A handy addition to the wedging bench is a stretched wire within arm's length of the wedging area. Several times during wedging the potter will take the lump of clay in both hands and pass the wire through the lump, in effect slicing it down the middle like a melon. Separating the two halves, he can see if there are any air bubbles in the clay. Air bubbles must be wedged out completely. If the bubble does not cause the pot to collapse on the wheel, it is even more damaging in the kiln where the heat becomes so intense that the bubble itself becomes a small explosive device, destroying the pot and often several pots around it.

In comparing ourselves to clay in the hands of God, the Great Potter, there are some applicable Scriptures. The sensation of being kneaded and sliced apart may have purposes that you were not previously aware of. It purges out air bubbles and flaws, purifies and makes us malleable "clay" suitable for the potter's purpose.

Biblical Lesson: *"In a large house there are articles not only of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay; some are for noble purposes and some for ignoble. If a man purges himself from the latter, he will be an instrument for noble purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work"* (II Tim. 2:20,21).

CENTERING

When the potter approves the consistency of the clay, he turns to the nearby wheels. With a brisk move he slams the lump of clay onto the surface of one of the wheels as close to the center as he can aim. The slamming of the clay causes it to adhere to the wheel securely, making sure it does not slide off during the forming process. Sitting at the wheel, the potter takes a special position for centering the lump on the wheel. Centering is one of the most important stages of a vessel's development. A poorly centered lump of clay will result in major trouble in later stages of the process, sometimes even to the point of ruining the vessel before it can be brought to completion. You cannot make a symmetrical, well-formed vessel when the lump being worked is off-centered. With knees spread apart, the potter begins the wheel spinning.

Once thrown and spinning, the potter rests his right elbow on the inside of his right knee for stability, and he begins applying pressure on the lump of clay. With his left hand, he presses down on the top of the lump of clay. If the potter's hands are anchored and steady and the lump centered, the lump will respond by spinning smoothly without any noticeable wobbles. To finalize the centering process, the potter will take both hands and squeeze the clay creating a tall cone, then resume his centering position. Once again he will press the clay down with the left hand, in effect packing the molecular structure of the clay into a very compact but elastic mass.

When he knows the clay is centered he takes a new stance. The elbow is not needed in its extra stable position any more. He places his head now over the center of the clay and with both thumbs, digs into the center of the centered lump. Pressing down to within a quarter of an inch of the bottom of the clay, he then takes his hands away slowly and gently in order not to adversely affect the centering of the clay. He now has a thick ring of clay on the wheel. Moving both hands to the same side of the clay, one on the outside of the vessel and one on the inside, he begins to slowly and repeatedly pull up the walls of the clay into a cylinder. All wheel thrown pots are started with a basic cylinder. It is during this slow formation of a cylinder that an air bubble will cause the pot to collapse inwardly upon itself.

With the cylinder finished, slow, smooth hand motions from the bottom to the top, pressing outward from inside the pot, begin the forming process that will make the cylinder into a vase, water jug, or whatever else the potter desires.

Biblical Lesson: *"Yet, O Lord, You are our Father. We are the clay, You are the potter; we are all the work of Your hand"* (Isa. 64:8)





GREENWARE

The carefully formed pot is now cut off the potter's wheel by passing a thin wire under the bottom of the pot. A small spot of water placed on the wheel near the pot base allows the pot to slide smoothly across the wheel into the potter's waiting hands. Gingerly the pot is carried to the greenware room and set on a shelf. Too much haste in drying will cause the pot to warp at best and crack at worst. The time in the greenware room is subject to the size of the pot and the thickness of its thickest part. The humidity of the greenware room is like an incubator to a newborn baby. It is the best atmosphere for the greenware to become what is known as

"leather-hard" and workable for attaching handles, spouts if it is a tea pot, or accessories of clay for purely decorative purposes before the first firing.

Biblical Lesson: At times, what seems to be "time-out" for us when we are chafing to minister for the Lord, is time in the greenware room. It is a time of getting grounded, established and settled in the Lord. Paul too had his "drying out" time. According to Galatians, he took that time-out in stride, understanding that God had things to teach him. ". . . *I did not consult any man, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went immediately into Arabia and later returned to Damascus. Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Peter and stayed with him fifteen days. I saw none of the other apostles-only James, the Lord's brother*" (Gal. 1:16-19).

THE BISQUE FIRING

In the allegory of the potter's house, we now come to the danger point. We are facing the first fire! Many times, I watched the loading of the huge oven, known as the kiln, in my college classes. Each item is chosen with care as the cost of running a ceramic kiln is high. Bowls are chosen in graduated sizes so they can be nested one inside another utilizing the maximum amount of space. Items are stacked within millimeters of each other, since all the excess moisture is forced out by the extreme heat, causing the greenware to shrink about 10% in the firing.

It is at this stage that a poorly made pot is in danger of destruction. While an air bubble on the wheel causes the pot to collapse, an air bubble here becomes a bomb that will blow apart the vessel. The completion of each kiln firing in college was like a holiday. All the students gathered eagerly around the kiln to retrieve their treasures for the next stage. However, to open the kiln and find that a less skilled potter's work had caused an explosion and destroyed several pots around it was greatly discouraging.

The firing in and of itself is a wonder. After the kiln is loaded and the heavy door securely shut, a small heat sensitive cone is placed in a small hole in the door in easy view. The kiln is ignited and the heat builds over a long period of time. The cone can be observed from across the room through the hole. The heat is so intense that you cannot even stand close to the kiln. At times you must stand across the room from the heat. When the cone melts, it is an indicator that the proper temperature has been reached and the heat in the kiln can be turned down - not off, just reduced to begin the cooling of the items. Cooling too quickly can cause the pottery to break as well. The total cooling process takes from 24 to 36 hours depending upon the size of the kiln. When the temperature gets low enough, the heavy door is opened just a crack to let the final cooling take place more quickly.

Finally, the bisque firing is finished and unglazed ceramic items come from the kiln strong and ready for the next phase - the glaze firing. The firing process is essential to creating a vessel that is durable and lasting. Without it, the pot is useless.

Biblical Lesson: "*Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you: But rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings; that, when His glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy*" (I Peter 4:12,13).

THE GLAZE FIRING

Just when you thought the fire was over, it is time for glazing the bisque ware. In this process, a pot you may have thought to be ignoble becomes a thing of beauty. The touch of an artist's hand can make a simple pot a classic treasure.

The pots are painted and the loading of the kiln takes place all over again. This time even more precaution is taken as two pots touching can mar the surface, ruining the pot. Danger of explosion is past, but pots cannot now be stacked inside each other for fear of marring the glaze which liquefies in the heat before hardening.

Combinations of chemicals and minerals suspended in water form the make-up of glazes. Silica, the same material from which glass is made, is a major ingredient. When painted on the surface of bisque ware and refired at an extremely high temperature, glazes melt into a thin coating of beautifully colored glass on the surface of the bisque pot. The chemical combinations are endless and the results are as varied as the artist. However, the glazes look dull and unappealing in their raw form, and the true color cannot be seen until they are fired.

The opening of the kiln after the glaze firing always holds surprises for pottery students. Since very few glazes are predictable, the potter wonders if the finish will be what he intended, will the colors be strong and clear, will the design be as attractive as he thought.

During this firing the small peep-hole holds three heat sensitive cones to measure the temperature that has been reached. The firing takes longer and the cooling time is extended as well. But the excitement at the opening of this firing is more intense than at the bisque firing. Artists' expectations and hopes are high that they have mixed a great glaze and applied it well to create a "poem" on clay. Pleasing to the eye, pleasing to the touch, and useful according to the potter's design, are the criteria.

Biblical Lesson: In Paul's letter to the Ephesians, he says that we are God's workmanship. The Greek word for workmanship is "poema," the word from which we get poem. Some men create with words, and some men create with their hands - I can think of no better analogy for the potter's craft than this verse: *"For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them"* (Eph. 2:10).

USEFULNESS - THE VESSEL IS COMPLETE

Our potter's house story is an allegory and certainly not as cut and dried as the potter's craft. God is sovereign and can recreate and rework the original, useable material through the process from any given point. We are unlike a pot that is fired already - it is brittle and unyielding after firing - in that our material in God's hands is miraculously workable anytime we yield to him. But, on the other hand, God did not send Jeremiah to the potter's house for no reason. There is much to be learned there and much for us to consider for our benefit.

Biblical Lesson: II Timothy 2:21 states, *"If a man cleanses himself from the latter, he will be an instrument for noble purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work."* Unlike clay, we have the ability to aid in the craftsman's process by purging ourselves, and looking to become a vessel of beauty in the household of the Lord. I believe Peter sums up this self cleansing process in his second letter: *"For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But if anyone does not have them, he is nearsighted and blind, and has forgotten that he has been cleansed from his past sins. Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure. For if you do these things, YOU WILL NEVER*



FALL, and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (I Pet. 1:5-11). (emphasis added).

THE POTTERY SHOP IS STILL OPEN

At times we do not understand pressures that overtake us in our attempt to walk with God. I believe God's visual aids (Jeremiah's trip to the potter) are given to help us understand the purpose of what we are going through in our journey of faith.

Unlike the allegory, we are useful in whatever stage we happen to be in. God is always able to use a yielded vessel. We are part of a larger plan - a historical drama being played out daily.

From the time of Jeremiah, there have been successive whirlwinds of tumultuous history scattering God's workmanship (the Jewish nation) all over the world, but, the ancient people from this story are now back in their land. The potter's shop is once again open and in business. The dusty trails are still there and waiting to be explored. God is once again creating His amazing vessels in the Middle East. Wherever we may be, we can be used to realize God's lesson to Jeremiah. Actually the story has come full circle. The physical potter's house was right here in Jerusalem and God's attention has now returned to the original place of His message to Jeremiah.



However, during the scattering time, God's grace has been extended to us - those far off and not of the house of Israel. We therefore, owe something according to Paul's letter to the Romans: “. . . *For if the gentiles have shared in the Jews' spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings.*” (Rom. 15:27).

By our willingness to become pliable clay in God's hands, we have been formed into “*an instrument for noble purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work*” (II Tim. 2:21). We have been created and designed as vessels filled with and pouring forth God's grace, love, compassion, assistance, strength and comfort. These characteristics of a noble vessel listed above can now be used to participate in the end of a cyclical drama whose final stage is Israel generally and Jerusalem specifically.

Many pastors, Bible teachers and even lay people have written and asked if they can use these notes for preaching and teaching. The answer is a resounding, YES! That is why I am sending out this *Israel Teaching Letter*. It is my hope that the information contained herein will be disseminated over and over again, whether through the spoken word or by photocopying and redistributing these teachings. “*For out of Zion shall go forth the law, the Word of the Lord from Jerusalem*” (Isa. 2:3).