

Spiritual Formation:

Lumps of clay and the anatomy of obedience

Dr. Douglas A. Blanc, Sr.

The Potter's House

We tend to regard Jeremiah's account of "The Potter's House" as merely containing the notion of God molding and shaping our ends as we surrender to His purposes (Jeremiah 18:1-17). While this is generally the sense of the text, it ultimately misses the mark at determining what is at stake in the process. For example, what is the relationship between Jeremiah's potter (and the clay he is manipulating) and God's dealing with Israel during the time of the prophet? Answer: Israel (specifically, Judah) had grown obstinate toward God (see 2:13).¹ They had removed themselves from God ("their Glory") in order to serve the idols of the nations surrounding them (see 2:11).

What Jeremiah observes is a potter working with clay that did not yield to his intention, so he reshaped it into something else. In other words, the potter did not give up on the clay (18:4). Jeremiah is given a message that involves an invitation to God's wayward people (18:6, 11) and also an indictment upon His people for failing to return to the Lord (18:12). God explains His willingness to deal favorably with the wayward if repentance is made, but at the same time He will withhold the good from those doing evil (characterized by disobedience), 18:7-10. The consequences for the unrepentant wayward people of God are dreadful (18:13-17). Jeremiah 18:17 contains shades of Matthew 7:23.

Satan's Intentions

It is worthwhile noting Satan's intentions at this point. When determining the course of a faithful disciple, Satan opposes to tempt us from the path of obedience. Therefore, when sensing resistance to the clearly revealed will of God (recorded in the Word and witnessed by the Spirit), we can be assured that Satan is at the root of the temptation. Satan desires worship. This will be embodied in the form of "the man of lawlessness-sin" (2 Thessalonians 2:4). Satan despises the worship of God and seeks the destruction of the people of God (John 10:10). Temptation is a sign that Satan intends to lure us away from our settled devotion to God (James 1:13-15; Matthew 4:1-11; see especially v. 9; 26:41). In 1 Corinthians 10:13 it is difficult to know if the "temptation" mentioned is a "testing from God" or a "tempting from Satan."² If the former, we can be assured of God's

¹ God is regarded as a "fountain of living waters." That is, He is likened in His dealings toward His people as a "self-sustaining spring, or deep well" (see John 4:13-14; 7:37-39). By forsaking God, the nation chose gods who are likened in their abilities to "broken cisterns," useless in substance and only having the appearance of providing for the needs of the people. Cisterns were sub-stratum pits, designed to contain fresh water and plastered with masonry to prevent leaks. The god-cisterns were broken. In such case the water in them would be putrid. In was in such a broken cistern that Jeremiah was thrown and would have drowned in the mire had not Ebed Melech (Ethiopian eunuch/official) intervened (Jeremiah 38:5-13). Imagine being cast into such a place, sinking helplessly in the mire with only a small opening at the top. Note: it's interesting that we see another eunuch of Ethiopia in the NT, this one coming to Christ through the witness of Phillip (Acts 8:26-40).

² The Greek word (noun) is πειρασμός. "...to try to learn the nature or character of someone or something by submitting such to thorough and extensive testing - `to test, to examine, to put to the test, examination, testing. ...put yourselves to the test as to whether you are in the faith (or not)' 2Cor 13:5; `the Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to test him they asked if he would

corresponding grace to endure (2 Corinthians 12:7-10). If the latter, we can also be assured that Satan cannot prevail in his attacks if we employ the means provided by God to resist (Ephesians 6:16; James 4:7 and 1 Peter 5:9). Indeed, whether “testing” or “temptation,” God has left an escape route *through* the stress and strain of the flight, “a way out so that you can endure it” (1 Corinthians 10:13). Someone has well said, “The devil can wall us in, but he can’t roof us over.” So, look up tested and tempted pilgrim (see Luke 21:28).

Lesson from Ancient Israel

A lesson from ancient Israel is worth noting as well. In the book of Judges we see the intention of God for His people to possess the land of Canaan and dispossess the native tribes in the process (1:1-36). The standard is complete annihilation, a “ban”³ on the current inhabitants. Of all the Israelite tribes, only Caleb succeeded in the task (Judges 1:20; see also Numbers 14:24). In fairness, God did not intend for His people to immediately dispossess the entirety of Canaan, but left a remnant of the nations to “test” His people (Judges 2:23; 3:4). The danger was syncretism.⁴ Israel failed the test, the test of obedience (Judges 2:2, 17). The nations became a snare to them (Judges 2:3) and the people of God forsook the Lord for “broken cisterns” (Judges 2:10-11). The once powerful nation, equipped with the blessing of God’s strong hand upon them, became powerless before their enemies. God withdrew His mighty hand and left them without the means to do what He had once commissioned them to perform. We wonder at this, but is this not the price of grieving the Spirit of God (Isaiah 63:10; Ephesians 4:30)?

show them a sign from heaven' Mt 16:1. `don't be surprised at the painful testing you are experiencing' 1 Pet 4:12; `when you undergo all kinds of testing' Jas 1:2. `you shall not put the Lord your God to the test' Lk 4:12; `an expert in the Law stood up to test him' Lk 10:25. It is also possible to understand *πειραζω* and *εκπειραζω* in Mt 16:1 and Lk 10:25 as meaning `to try to trap.' *Louw and Nida, Greek-English Lexicon of the NT Based on Semantic Domains.*

³ In order to prevent this specific occurrence, God commanded the Israelites to utterly destroy the peoples of the land: "Completely destroy them -- the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites -- as the LORD your God has commanded you. Otherwise, they will teach you to follow all the detestable things they do in worshiping their gods, and you will sin against the LORD your God" (Deuteronomy. 20:17-18). See also Genesis 15:16; 2 Kings 21:11; Ezra 9:1; 1 Kings 11:5-7; 1 Kings 14:24; 2 Kings 16:3; 2 Kings 23:13; 2 Chronicles 36:14; Ezra 9:11; Judges 10:6. The Hebrew word is *charam* *חָרַם*; a primitive root; to seclude; specifically (by a ban) to devote to religious uses (especially destruction); physical and reflexive, to be blunt as to the nose: - make accursed, consecrate, (utterly) destroy, devote, forfeit, have a flat nose, utterly (slay, make away). (*Key Dictionary of Biblical Hebrew and Aramaic.*) "...The *herem*, the anathema [is] carried out on the vanquished enemy and his goods. The meaning of the root and the usage of the cognate verb show that the word *herem* denotes the fact of 'separating' something, of taking it out of profane use and reserving it for a sacred use; alternatively, it may stand for the thing which is 'separated' in this way, forbidden to man and consecrated to God." (Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, Vol. 1, Part III, ch. 5, p. 260) The word is closely related to our word "harem" (from Arabic *harim*) which refers to a secluded area of a house allotted to women. In Arabic the word literally means "sanctuary," a "forbidden" area, since the women in a harem are exclusively the property of the husband and off-limits to all others. The Hebrew word *herem* used in our passage refers to "the exclusion an object from the use or abuse of man and its irrevocable surrender to God" (Leon J. Wood in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* 1:324).

⁴ **Syncretism** is the attempt to reconcile disparate or contrary beliefs, often while melding practices of various schools of thought. This may involve attempts to merge and analogize several originally discrete traditions, especially in the theology and mythology of religion, and thus assert an underlying unity allowing for an inclusive approach to other faiths.

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Warning Passages

It is interesting to also note the parallel to Hebrews 3-4. The “warning passages” in Hebrews (2:1-4; 4:12-13; 6:4-8; 10:26-31; 12:25-29) are intended to check the hearts of God’s people at the point of faltering in their faith as the ancient Israelites (see at Hebrews 3:12, 19). The root of Israel’s disobedience was “unbelief.” (See the case of Saul in 1 Samuel 15:1-35.) For the sake of unbelief a generation did not enter in Canaan, but wandered in the Wilderness. The writer characterizes this as failing to enter into God’s “rest” due to disobedience (Hebrews 4:11). The “rest” of God was not the land of Canaan. The land served as a proving ground for what they were to ultimately experience in an everlasting communion with God (Hebrews 11:16). The believers in Hebrews were being warned against adopting a spirit of unbelief, a spirit of disobedience. It was not that their salvation was insecure, but that in the midst of “temptation” they should realize the severity of taking their eyes off of God. The goal of “rest” is not a “*this worldly place*”, but an “*other worldly experience*” for which this world offers no substitute (see Hebrews 11:25). The answer? Fixing our eyes on Jesus (Hebrews 12:1-3; see 2:17-18; 4:14-16).

Application Points

1. Determine to obey the Word of the Lord.
2. Offer yourself completely to God (see Romans 12:1).

The basis for this is our being “set apart ones” to God (see ἁγίοις or “holy ones” at 2 Corinthians 1:1). We belong to God as ones “devoted to His exclusive use. This is the concept of *charam* חָרָם in a positive sense. The OT priests were “Holy” קָדוֹשׁ (*kadosh*) to the Lord in the sense that they were reserved (as the temple articles) for the Lord’s exclusive use (see Leviticus 21:6-7).

3. Resist temptation to deviate from the path of obedience.