

# The Cup and the Fire - Part 4

by T. Austin-Sparks

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*God is a God of purpose, who can take our brokenness and make it into something new and beautiful, and who desires to redeem and restore us to Himself.*

**Duration:** 52:30

**Scripture:** Jeremiah 18:1

**Topics:** "Christian Life"

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## Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the concept of God's creation and the impact of sin on the world. The sermon begins by describing the chaotic state of the world before God began to shape and mold it. Despite the brokenness and imperfections caused by sin, the speaker emphasizes that God does not give up on his creation. The sermon concludes by highlighting the message that God's love and wisdom triumph over all difficulties and that there is hope for redemption and restoration. The speaker also references biblical passages such as Genesis and the consequences of Adam and Eve's sin.

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## Transcript

For the present, we have finished with the particular theme of this conference, and we are being led this evening to something which is a message in itself, and it takes its rise from a very familiar part of the scripture in the prophecies of Jeremiah, the 18th chapter, the word which came to Jeremiah from the Lord, saying, Arise and go to the potter's house, and there I will cause thee to hear my word. Then I went down to the potter's house, and behold, he was making a buck 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. And I want to put alongside of that these words from the New Testament, the letter to the Ephesians chapter 2 and verse 10, For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God afore prepared, that we should walk in them.

Returning to this so well-known illustration of God's workmanship in the house of the potter, to which the prophet was told to go, as we read it, or perhaps as we have read it in times past, there are three effects that this can have upon us. It depends entirely upon which word we underline, where we stop, where we put the emphasis. There are three words which sum up this whole paragraph, and which of those words we choose and resolve into the message, will decide a very, very great thing where we are concerned.

It may affect our whole life. There's the word marred. The vessel which he made was marred in the hand of the potter.

If we make that the word, then something of a spirit of hopelessness will come over us, and we shall begin to find inwardly a thinking, and we shall begin to say, yes, I've made a mess of things. I've spoiled it all. There's not much hope for me.

Marred. Spoiled. That will have one effect upon your whole life, if you take that word and make it the message.

Thank God that is not the message. But it may be, even in a small gathering like this, there's somebody who's got there. Looking back on your life, you do so with very little gratification, pleasure, rather with regret, perhaps remorse.

Perhaps you fall into this mood. You think of yourself as the clay. You have perhaps made a mess of things.

Perhaps you have not fulfilled all the promises, all the possibilities. You feel there's been a breakdown, and that sense of failure, of lost opportunity, and much more in that direction, creates this shadow over life, and makes you feel, well, that's it. Now it's just to try and get through in some way and finish up as decently as we can.

That is a despairing outlook on life, and that will most surely be the result of putting your circle around this word. Various translated here in the version from which I have read. Marred.

In another version, spoiled. Spoiled. Go on.

There's another word here. He made it another. Another vessel.

And if we put our line under that word, and make it the message, that will open the door to some gloomy thoughts and considerations, which will at once begin to say, well, God has not been able to fulfill his original intentions. Well, I am concerned. I have to be content with being his second best.

Something other. Something different. Something that he really did not mean me to be.

That is, making the most and the best of a bad job. He's just working with me on an alternative line. And, well, that reduces me to being something of a mystic.

Not what I was intended to be. You see the possibilities of putting your circle around that word, another vessel. But then there's another phrase here.

As seemed good to the past. To make it. As seemed good to the past.

That introduces an altogether new prospect and possibility and outlook. If, after all, it is possible for him to say, it's good. My work is good.

And to find his own pleasure and his own satisfaction, that will certainly be far better and higher and greater than my greatest satisfaction could possibly be, if God is satisfied. His standard is so much higher than my best. If he can say, it's good.

Well, I say, James, that opens up a new prospect, doesn't it? That introduces the triumph of his greed. In spite of everything. In spite of what we are.

And of all our failure. And of all his difficulty with us. His great triumph.

His wisdom. His triumph over all the problems in us. His love overcomes all the difficulty that he has with us.

Yes, over all the setbacks that he may have encountered in us. If the end is, it's good in his sight. As seemed good.

I say that brings an altogether new situation into view. These are the three possibilities that arise out of these words. We choose the third.

That is the message. That is the message that I want to bring to you. Now, our method this evening will be to take the principle that lies right at the heart of this, lifted out of its immediate context and setting, just for a moment, and see it in its larger relationship and application.

The Bible opens with a father's house. It's a very big father's house. Very much bigger than Jeremiah's.

When we open our Bible, we find a shapeless, distorted, chaotic man. To view it, it might present the aspect of utter hopelessness, impossibility. What can you do with that? It is simply said, the earth was without form, void, darkness was over the face of the sea.

It's chaos. But the next thing, the very next thing is the great father getting to work upon that shapeless, distorted man of clay. He made it a game.

He made it a game. And, friends, he stood back from the wheel of creation, the making a game, it says. He looked on all things.

And it was very good. It was God's verdict. It is very good.

Principle is our very large application, isn't it? But then it is not long before we come to another breakdown in the whole thing. And once more, the vessel is marked. We know the story of Adam's sin, by which he drew the whole creation into judgment, again under a curse.

He himself came there, marked, spoiled. The creation came there. The man, he said, because you've done this, the earth is cast to your feet.

Thorns and dry shall it bring forth by the sweat of thy brow, shall eat thy brain. Now, we know a good bit about that. But the woman, he said other things like that.

Going to be suffering associated with her life and her function. The clay is marked in the hands of the father, spoiled. But does he throw it aside? Does he give it up? Does he say, it's hopeless, it's impossible, I can do nothing with this.

And so discard the whole thing. That is not the God of the Bible. He's got the poor stuff, it is true, the poor clay is proved to be very poor stuff.

But he sets to work again with that stuff. He sets to work again and he makes it again another. And out of that poor stuff we see a man named Abel emerging.

A man who stands in the Bible with much honor, whose name has come right down through the ages. Something which has found the approval of God. The New Testament put the distinct approval of God upon Abel.

No greater approval could be given than that God should call him righteous. Righteous Abel. And Abraham, and Abraham.

I'm always so glad you know that in these great men God never, never hides what poor stuff they were in themselves. He lets us see their flaws. The flaws in the clay.

He lets us see their weaknesses. He lets us see them break down. He lets us see that but for that mighty hand of his they would make shipwrecks like all the rest.

They in themselves are no better stuff than others. But they're in his hands. These are men in his hands.

And there emerges out of that clay, that same clay, the same clay as we are. There emerges this man Abraham. And what a lot in the Bible there is which is of this character is very good.

It's very good. As seen good unto the potter. And what do we say about Jacob? No one needs to be told that Jacob was poor clay.

We know, we know Jacob. Really that word is the synonym for human frailty, weakness, and worse. Yes he belongs to that clay.

But he is in the hands of the potter. And when the potter has done his work he forever afterwards is proud to say I am the God of Jacob. God of Jacob.

So we might go through whole of the Old Testament. Figuring out this one and then. Lift out Elijah and then hear what the Apostle James says.

Elijah was a man of like passions with us. Yes the same clay, the same stuff. And we know that even in his life there was breakdown.

He shows his weakness under the strain, under the tension. But he stands in great honor with God. He made it again.

Out of that breakdown in Adam. Out of that poor stuff. The broken down Adam and Adam represents.

Taken this and made it as it seemed good to the potter to make it. Principle you see is at work everywhere. We might go on to look at the men who failed and who were, to use one translation which I rather like, quite a fresh one, who were reworked.

In that version it says he reworked it. He reworked it. We are his workmanship was the work.

It would be difficult to know where to start, where to finish. With a man who broke down and he reworked. We might just take one I think the Old Testament who is quite an outstanding illustration and example.

No other than David himself. We've read his psalm tonight. Wondered if you noticed.

Psalms are psalms David. Cry of a heart overwhelms the consciousness of it's Savior. It's breakdown.

It's him. The great sobs rising out of that psalm. And if you look to see the history that lay behind it.

You see the good cause. Good cause for David. Two weeks before God.

Confessing his sins. Crying, creating me a clean heart. Oh God, renew a right spirit within me.

And anybody who has the very slightest knowledge of the story of knows the tragedy of David's life. The breakdown. Oh indeed, indeed.

This was Mark in the hands of Paul. He failed. He broke down.

He became a tragedy from one standpoint. But God didn't give him up. I'm not stopping to give you the details.

There are some of them too terrible. Too terrible. You're, you're amazed.

The man was capable of doing that until, until you know your own heart. There you are. This man grievously and terribly broke down.

Lay with Mark. Boy, but look again. Did God discard? Did God cast away? He made it again.

So that the David that comes down to us today is not that David but another one. The David of honor. The sweet singer of Israel.

The David of our beloved song. Oh what should we do without the songs of David? The greatest of Israel's kings. And this, I have found David.

A man after my own heart. Is it possible to say anything more than that? Greater than that? Something's happened. Something's happened.

He reworked. He made it again. Or if we pass out of the Old Testament into the new.

At once there leap onto the stage. Men who embody this, this great principle. What about Peter? Did Peter break down? Was Peter poor stuff? Andres, I will follow thee even unto death.

The next breath. I tell you, I know not the man. Denying as it said with oath.

Denying his law. You don't like talking about men in this way and bringing up their faults. But you have to see that dark side in order to see the marvel of divine grace.

And there's Peter. Did that clay disclose law? A seeming unworkableness? Resistance? Cure him to his law. To his master.

This shall never come to thee. This shall never. Not so, no.

Something there in the clay you see. But oh, what a Peter we've got today. Haven't we? That's not the Peter we have.

Remember that? The old story? The clay which broke down? Peter we have now. It's a very different Peter. We love to read his letters.

Wonderful help and inspiration come from his two letters in the New Testament. And we love to see him on the day of Pentecost standing up. We love to see him later dragged before the rulers standing on both his feet and challenging them with all courage and boldness.

What a changed picture from that fireside denial in the lower hall when his Lord was standing his trial for his life. What a change. Ah, he reworked it.

He made it again as it is good. And we all have to say, and it was good, and it is good, it is good. Or to take one other example and illustration from the New Testament, and these are not the only ones, a young man by the name of John Mark.

John Mark. A young man who lived in Jerusalem, who lived evidently in a godly home, who lived in a place where the Lord himself and his disciples were both to gather to assemble, have their fellowship. Wonderful times, no doubt, in that room when John Mark lived there.

The day came when Barnabas and Paul took that young man with them on their great missionary journey. From town to town and city to city, John Mark saw the wonderful things that God was doing. Behold the wonderful works of the Lord.

But it was strenuous going, it was costly, and when he reached a certain point on the journey, he said, I'm not going anymore. I can stand no more of it. I'm going home.

The narrative tells us that he left them and went back to Jerusalem. Clay had given up, stamina, he found wanting. He had broken down, that is not all.

As he reflected upon it, I wonder what his reflections were. I'm quite sure that they were very gloomy reflections. Oh, I've made a mess of it, don't think.

I'm going to think. But I have been the cause of the separation of these two great men, Barnabas and Paul. I have been the occasion of their parting, thunder, and the end of their united missionary activities.

That's what happened. Over him, this thing happened. Well, those are things, dear friends, which might well lead to some gloomy reflections and hopeless outcomes.

I think Clay, he seems to have been barred and spoiled. But that's not the end of the story. Most of you know your Bibles and have left ahead.

You know how the story finishes. That even Paul says, bring John Mark, for he is profitable unto me. There are some lovely things said about this young man, this young man in the end.

Recovered, restored, recommissioned, full time. And it is he who has given us this beautiful book which goes by the name, The Gospel by Mark. And all scholars today are one in the conclusion that Matthew built his gospel upon Mark and Luke very largely did the same.

But Mark was the source of the other. So, there's a story. He made it again.

These are men who broke down in the process. Great trials. Potter did not discard the poor Clay.

Oh, so much depends, does it not, upon how we interpret this Potter. Let us look at him. Who is he? This Potter is not a man.

How differently men would deal with these people. This is God. He has the Clay.

Yes, the poor stuff. And he is seeking to work it. And he comes suddenly upon something in it that does not yield.

And what is this? For a moment, he pauses to know what's this, what's this, this. What does he do? Not this Potter to say, we can go no further. We must give it up.

All our intentions are impossible of realization. We just throw it aside and look for something better. Not this Potter.

That's not the God of the Bible. Watch him. He may be sorry that he has missed that something, whatever it might be.

He might for a moment have to pause and think. But then you see light come into his face. You see the triumph of the smile of his grace and of his wisdom when he said, we'll not be defeated.

We'll have something for our pleasure and satisfaction, whatever we find. That's the God of the Bible. All this that I'm saying to you has one thought towards which I want to lean.

And I want to come to that as quickly as I can. God is a God of purpose. God is a God of purpose.

God is a God of purpose. And God does not undertake anything that he knows he can never achieve. And when he does so, he can perfect that thing.

He has the resource. He has the wisdom. He has the patience.

He has the grace. He has the love. He has the power.

He can do it. That is the God of hope. Glad our brother in his prayer used that phrase tonight.

A little complimentary to me over the message. The God of hope. The God of hope.

That means a God who never does something for our comfort. But you know, we must always, we must always be perfectly honest and perfectly faithful. While all this is true in the Bible, along the line that we have first used, there's another line in the Bible of those who were spoiled and never remade.

The dark side, I'd hardly like to look at it, but we must. In order to get a popularity, there were some spoiled and never reworked. You can call them to mind at once.

There's Abel's brother, Cain. There's Jacob's brother, Esau. There's Saul, the first king of Israel.

In the New Testament, there's Judah. Yes, these are people who have gone out into the dark. There's nothing about them that is to God's pleasure.

But one mentions that for a purpose. You see, to see the why, the why that was so, is to do two things. Firstly, it is to explain their opposite.

That is, to tell us why these others did come out to the glory and praise of God. To see why the others did not. And the other thing is this.

To see the explanation will bring us to the door of hope and to promise. Let's look at these men quite quickly. Cain.

Why was he unretrieved? Why was he not worked, reworked, made again? In him, there was nothing. It seems completely lacking the sense of sin. The sense of sin.

I cannot tell you the whole story of these men. I have to trust that you know enough. And if you don't, you will believe what I'm saying as a summary of their life.

Cain was a self-righteous man. Cain was a self-sufficient man. Yet withal, a man that had some religion.

He built an altar. He brought an offering to God. He had some religion.

If he lived today, he would have gone to church. But his religion was either just mere superstition or patronage. Religion that acknowledges God, you know, for fear that if you don't, it will go bad with you.

It will go ill with you. Thought of a safeguard is religion. Superstition or patronage.

Recognizing God, of course. He recognized God. He acknowledged that God is.

God, minus the sense of sin, can build religion without having that essential consciousness of sin and needing a substitute, your savior. That's Cain. Cain was a man who did not know his own heart.

If you had said to Cain earlier on, Cain, it will not be very long before you commit the foulest murder. You will take the life of your own brother. By your act, your own brother will lie dead at your feet.

His blood will be trickling into the spot where Cain has placed his head. Oh, he would never have believed that. But that was what was in him.

He had no sense of sin. He did not know his own heart. And you know God can't do anything with that.

You notice that all the men on the other side of whom I've spoken, the men who had this deep consciousness of sin, men who believed in the Lamb of sacrifice, men like David. I acknowledge my sin. I acknowledge my sin.

I gave to thee only if I had done that which is evil in thy sight. They were men with a consciousness of sin, of the need of a savior, every one of them. But Cain was not like that.

And that puts the man out of the hands of God. He can do nothing with that. He can't rework that.

That brings us to this, the way, the way of the purpose, the way of the glory, the way of the divine satisfaction, the way of the realization, the way of the consciousness of sin. And if you have that, it's a thing of promise, a thing of hope that brings us to the door of hope. The most hopeless person before God is the one who does not realize in their heart, perhaps, that they need what he has provided in his son, a savior.

Fast to Esau. Esau, Jacob's brother, you know about him. Here again was a fatal lack.

He lacked the sense of the supreme importance of things spiritual. The birthright, the birthright which brought him, or would have brought him, into that place of standing for God. You see, the firstborn was supposed to stand for God, to be God's representative.

He was the priest in the family. He had to do with holy things. He was the one that led the family into the presence of God.

That was the birthright. Much more was bound up with the firstborn and his birthright. But Esau, the Bible says, and this is the final condemnation of that man, he despised his birthright.

That is, he lacked this essential consciousness of the supreme importance of things spiritual. And whatever you have to say about Jacob, that was not true of Jacob. He may be sold the birthright, but he

did at least recognize the superlative value of spiritual.

And what a lot there is hidden in the veins of Esau. Long, long history, as we pointed out in this conference, the history of Eden. Oh, how that breaks out in the Bible story again and again.

You remember, Doink, the Edomites, whose vile treachery resulted in the slaying of all the priests of this Eden. Ah, the Edomites are the descendants of Esau. And wherever you find them in the Bible, you find the same thing, the utter lack of the essence of the supreme importance of spiritual things.

Holding spiritual things lightly and cheaply, thinking that a mess of pottage could gratify some passing whim and appetite. Light and pleasure is more important than the things of God. God can do nothing with that.

He never works that again. But so, here again is another fatal lack. He lacks that spirit of meekness which trusts and obeys the Lord.

That's how it came out at the end. The final downfall, I suppose, came about because, first of all, he didn't trust the Lord. He was put to the death.

He was given a magnificent opportunity at showing that he implicitly trusted the Lord. And he showed that he did not. His trust in the Lord would have led him to do a certain thing that Samuel the prophet told him to do in the name of the Lord.

And he disobeyed because he did not trust. And that faith, God can't tell you. The kingdom was rent from Saul.

He went out. Armaged and never remade better. God is going to do this thing.

He must have in us that simple faith which trusts him and obeys him. It's the very least that he asks of us. And Judas, finally Judas.

Lots of things can be said about Judas. But to sum it up, what does Judas mean? Well, Judas fatally lacks an adequate sense of the greatness of his opportunity. I think that what would you give to be called by Jesus Christ into the circle of immediate discipleship, to be with him wherever he went, to share his ministry, to be his companion, to be his helper.

Jesus Christ, the son of God, here in the flesh. And a man called into fellowship with him in his life and in the great purpose of God for which he came into the world. And throwing away for thirty pieces of silver.

Yes, utterly lacking in a sense of the greatness of his opportunity. Here we are. We here, every one of us are called into the fellowship of God's son.

We are all called into the most honorable company and circle that this universe has. Living fellowship with God's son. In life, in service, in companionship, in suffering for him.

All that accepts the call. For every one of us. Oh, what an opportunity.

What an honor. What a privilege. What an unspeakable blessing.

Called into the fellowship of his son, Paul put it. Called into the fellowship. If God is going to realize all his great designs, fulfill all his purpose, make out of this poor clay something that is pleasing to him, as is

good in his sight, dear friends, you and I have got to have this.

A sense of the great, great honor that is conferred upon us to be called into the fellowship of his son. To sum it all up, there must be, as differing from all these men, Cain and Esau and Saul and Judas, there must be in us an over-mastering sense of the transcendent importance of eternal things. That eternal things outweigh all other considerations in this life.

Use a phrase of the Lord Jesus, seek ye first the kingdom of God. The things of the kingdom of God shall be to us of such paramount importance that nothing, nothing is to be compared with them or to come in their way. All else is worthless.

However great the kingdoms of this world, what shall it profit a man? He shall gain the whole world, lose his own soul, which means lose the purpose for which Christ redeemed you. No over-mastering sense of the transcendent importance of things eternal. If that is in accordance with us, we may be poor stuff.

We may be very poor stuff. But he'll make it a gain, a vessel. That is good to the potter, good.

Oh, to think that it's possible that at long last, or short last, at last, at last, he might look upon his work in you and in me and say, so great, it is very good. That is the possibility, that is the prospect. The Lord find in us the things that will make it not only a possibility but an actuality.

Shall we sing from the Ketik hymnal? On the Ketik hymnal number 225, through the noise of our 10,000 voices, songs of joy and din of bismarck, comes a sound to which thy near hearken is the saviour knocking at thy heart.

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