

## The Potter's Hands

*A sermon preached by Dr M J Hyde at Galeed Chapel, Brighton, on Lord's Day morning, 11<sup>th</sup> August 2019*

'Behold, as the clay is in the potter's hand, so are ye in mine hand, O house of Israel.'  
(Jeremiah 18:6)

The potter was a parable told by Jeremiah to the children of Judah. It sets forth how the sovereign God controls all, and holds all people in his hands – but especially his people, his church. 'So are ye in mine hand, O house of Israel.' The Apostle Paul, perhaps quoting these words or alluding to the same illustration, says, 'Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why has thou made me thus? Hath not the potter power over the clay?', 'O man, who art thou that replest against God?' (Romans 9:20-21) In this text we come face to face with the sovereignty of God. Our God is a God who reigns over all, and rules it to this end – that all should be for his honour and his glory.

We read that Jeremiah went down to the potter's house and saw the potter making a pot on the wheel. However, the vessel that he made was marred by his hands. Certainly there could be no marring under the hand of the heavenly potter – the heavenly potter never makes any mistakes. When the heavenly potter puts his hand to the work of grace in a soul, there is never any mistake. The Septuagint (that is, the original Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible) says, 'the pot fell and was broken.' Perhaps the reference is to that which marred all of mankind – sin which marred all God's creation. In the account in Jeremiah, once the pot had been defaced, the potter made another vessel. He picked up the clay and formed it again, as it seemed good to him.

The message that Jeremiah was to take to the God's people was this: as the clay is in the hands of the potter, so the house of Israel were in the hands of God. Like clay, they were absolutely helpless. They were under the sovereign hand of the potter, who would do what he willed, whether to destroy the pot that he had made, or re-form it, to make something better.

You see, the house of Israel – the kingdom of Judah especially – had backslidden against God. They presumed on his grace and on his promise. They presumed that, because they were the Lord’s people, they could do what they liked, and the Lord would still have mercy. But God gives them a solemn warning – it is only by the sovereignty of his grace that his people are preserved. It is only by the sovereignty of his grace that he will keep his people, and that he will perform his promise to them. Therefore this solemn warning is given to them that they should turn from their evil ways, lest the Lord should turn in his sovereign anger against them and take away the promise from them.

And we know that despite his love and his mercy to his people, his natural people today (the Jews) are in darkness because they still will not hear the words of the Lord by the prophets of the Old Testament. They have never received the one who was prophesied, the one who has come into this world – the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. – ‘He came unto his own, and his own received him not.’ (John 1:11)

But we should hear the warning too. He has appeared in his glory to us and we have seen him and beheld his light as in a dark place, but the Apostle gives us, in Romans 11, the same warning message: we should not be high-minded; we should not be hardened; we should not presume on grace – because as the Lord had cut out the natural branch and grafted in the wild branch – as he had given the gospel to the Gentiles – so the solemn warning is given that he may turn away from us. These are solemn things! May we have the ear given to us to hear the warning.

So our text is solemn and yet precious to the Lord’s people. ‘Behold, as the clay is in the potter’s hand, so are ye in mine hand, O house of Israel.’

Now the important question is, whose hand is it that we are in this morning? Can we feel that we are in this text – that we are in this verse: ‘Behold, as the clay is in the potter’s hand, so are ye in mine hand, O house of Israel.’? Of course, the truth of the matter is that everyone is in God’s hand. The hymn writer sums it up when he says:

No thought can fly, nor thing can move,  
Unknown to him that sits above.

(B. Beddome, *Gadsby's* 6)

God controls everything. You cannot do anything without God's permission – without the divine will. God is over all, and over every circumstance in our lives. He controls everything that concerns us in this life, in providence and in grace – and we cannot escape that fact.

But it is one thing to be in the hands of God and another thing to know the comfort and the preciousness of being in the hands of God.

On one hand it is a solemn thing to know that our soul is in the hand of God. Jonathan Edwards, the American theologian, famously preached about sinners in the hands of an angry God. We are born into this world as sinners, and under the curse. We are children of disobedience, the children of wrath, even as others. We come forth from our mother's womb speaking lies, guilty of original sin, and adding sin to sin. As such, to think of ourselves in the hands of God must mean that we are in the hands of an angry God – a God whose righteous justice goes out against sin, and who cannot look on sin with any degree of lenience. What a solemn place that is to be!

But as we are born into this world we have no knowledge of this. Our minds and our understanding are darkened. The carnal mind is enmity against God. We do not see God's hand. We do not understand that we are in God's hand. We have no knowledge of God. And what is worse is that we actively try to continue in that ignorance. Paul tells us quite clearly in the opening chapters of Romans that even the heathen, though their minds are darkened by sin, yet they have some understanding of good and evil and some instinctive understanding of God's goodness. But as we are born into this world, that knowledge is something we try to blot out. It never brings us to realise the solemnity of what it is to be sinners in the hands of an angry God.

Have you ever come to feel what it is to be a sinner in the hands of God, and to realise the solemnity of it? You – a sinner – and God – holy? You – bound by the things of this world; – and God – the great eternal Infinite who is above

everything? You – a creature of time with a time appointed to die, a time when your life on this earth must come to an end; – and God – the great Eternal, the Unchangeable? Have we ever come to this place where we realise whose hands we are in – the hands of a sovereign, righteous, holy God?

That is not a comfortable experience, but the blessing is this. When the Lord teaches us that we are in his hands, he doesn't just leave us with that first painful revelation that we are sinners in the hands of a holy God, but he teaches us more and more of the graciousness of the hands in which we are found. That is the knowledge which is given to us, and must be given to us, by the working of the Holy Spirit. When the Holy Spirit begins to work in a soul to convince of sin, and to bring us face to face with a holy God, then he will perfectly perform that work, and bring it to completion. The work which begins with the conviction of sin – the knowledge that we are unclean, undone, and without God and without hope in the world – that revelation must end in this: seeing that we are in the hands of a gracious God – a God who saves sinners, and a God who has purposed all things for his honour and for his glory, and for the good of his people.

That is what I would like to try and come to this morning – to notice something concerning the solemnity, and yet also the preciousness, of being in the hand of God. 'Behold, as the clay is in the potter's hand, so are ye in mine hand, O house of Israel.'

**I want to notice, as the Lord will help me this morning, a few aspects of these hands.**

### **I. Firstly, they are sovereign hands.**

The clay in the potter's hand has no power. The clay is absolutely lifeless. When it is dug out of the ground, it will remain exactly as it is. It is up to the potter to take it up in *his* hands to shape it and form it into a pot.

And while it is being formed, the clay has no power over itself. If you have ever done pottery, you will know that not everything will always go as you expect. As the clay begins to warm up, and perhaps as the potter adds water to soften

it, sometimes the pot can begin to droop. It seems to begin to disform itself and take some shape on itself without the potter shaping it. But that is not a movement of the clay itself, it is not a conscious or self-initiated movement. And under the control of the potter the pot will be put to one side to cool down again, to stiffen up, so that the potter will again be able to work the pot. Everything from beginning to end is under the control of the potter, and the potter knows exactly what he is doing.

So it is with God, as he works in this world, and in the lives of his people. In the midst of his church he is sovereign Lord over all. He is performing everything according to his eternal purpose – and his eternal purpose is his honour and his glory.

That is the end towards which the potter works. Why does the potter make a pot? Because when the pot is finished, he wants that pot for his use, and to display his honour and glory. You can go round a pottery workshop and see pots made for various uses. The pottery that we use on the table was made to be useful – the purpose for which it was designed is for the use of the master of the house. The pots which are placed in a museum or gallery are for the glory of the potter himself.

So it is with God as he works in the lives of men and women in this world. He is forming them for his use. The sovereignty of God can be seen in how he shapes us for his use here in this world. He sets apart some apostles, some teachers, some evangelists. He sets apart some men for the work of the ministry. He sets apart men and women in the church to be prayerful and committed to the cause of God. He sets apart some in the church to walk humbly and set a good example, to be like lights to shine in a dark place. He gives to some the pen of a ready writer, and he gives to others the tongue of the learned, that they may speak a word in season. He forms us for the purpose that he wants us to have for his work on this earth. The Lord's people, as they look back over their life, can see how everything has worked together for the place where they now are.

Friends, can you look back and see how the Lord has worked in the things of grace? Can you look back over your life and see how the Lord has shaped your pot? How he has shaped your life to bring you under the sound of truth in various places? How he has sent one of his servants to preach the Word to you on a certain occasion? No other word would have done. But the potter knows exactly what he is doing. Maybe there have been marked occasions when a word comes forth, a word of encouragement, a word of rebuke, and has a powerful effect on you. It comes sharper than any two-edged sword, and knocks a corner off the pot, and shapes the pot in some new way. These occasions cannot be forgotten, they are precious occasions. God is sovereignly working in the lives of his people to bring us to the place in his grace where we are now worshipping him. When you are seeking the Lord in Galeed Chapel this morning, and desiring to worship him here, he has been sovereign in that work. You have had no control over it. He has been in control over everything.

The Lord also works sovereignly in providence. He has prepared you for your place in life – as a mother, a father, a mother in Israel, a minister of the gospel. You may wonder today what he is doing, the work may still seem to be unclear to you. But we can rest in the sovereignty of God. He is not doing anything by chance.

You see, the potter doesn't make accidents on his wheel. When the potter sets out to make a pot, he has a plan. He has an image in his mind of what the final pot will be, because it has a specific purpose. What would be the point of putting a spout and handles on a plate? Or what good would a teapot be without a spout?

God never works without a purpose. That is one of the blessings of God's sovereignty.

My life's minutest circumstance  
Is subject to his eye.

(C. Wesley, *Gadsby's* 70)

Every detail is according to his ordering – nothing is happening by chance - everything is according to his purpose. The pot he makes will be perfect for the

use he has in mind. Now, friends, what is the use that he is purposing us for? What work does he have for us to accomplish on this earth according to his eternal purposes? He must fit us – perfect us for that work.

But there is also much more. He is also preparing us to praise him in heaven to come. That is the goal of the work. The pot will not be complete until we are brought to glory. Then the work of sanctification will be complete. When we are raised again, and this mortal made immortal, and this corrupt made incorrupt, and when we shall be like him, then the work will be complete. Then we will be perfected for his praise in glory to come, for the use that he has prepared for us, to sing his praise in eternal ages, world without end. Whatever work he has for us to do here, there is a greater work we are being prepared for in glory to come – the work of eternal praise and worship of our sovereign God.

You see, there are pots that the potter makes solely for his honour and his glory – the pot that people go and gaze on and marvel at. You can see the great works of Wedgwood, if you go to the Wedgwood Museum in Stoke-on-Trent. Displayed there are some of the great pots he made, for the sole purpose of showing the potter’s amazing skill and wonderful artistry, for the honour and the glory of the potter.

You know, God works for the same end – the honour and the glory of himself. What a mystery it is that he is honoured and glorified in this way! – that when he takes a lump of lifeless clay – worthless clay – he can make it into a vessel that displays his honour and his glory. Then we shall be for the honour and the glory of his majesty in showing forth the work of grace in eternity to come.

Compare the clay that comes out of the ground with the beautiful Wedgwood vases – the colours, the amazing carvings that have gone into them, the intricate and the innovative glazes. The two seem totally incomparable. So it is as we consider ourselves, poor sinners on this earth – we can hardly comprehend that when the potter has done his work we will shine in his glory. Although we feel as if we are lying among the pots, yet, as the Psalmist says in Psalm 68:13, “yet shall ye be as the wings of a dove covered with silver, and

her feathers with yellow gold.” That is the difference between the clay at the beginning of the work, and the beautiful finished pot at the end of the work. That is the difference between the soul as we are born into this world, as sinners guilty of original sin, and the end of the work – sinners saved by grace in glory.

As God works that work, he is sovereign. He is sovereign in the way he works that work in the soul of a sinner. And he is sovereign in the choosing which lumps of clay will be unto salvation. He takes some to make a vessel of honour, and others to make a vessel of dishonour. The sovereign grace of God makes a separation in the world. Not all are chosen. “Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated.” (Romans 9:13) The hand of this potter is sovereign. We need to tremble at the thought of it this morning. Do you tremble? Can you come in with the words of the Countess of Huntingdon:

But can I bear the piercing thought:  
What if my name should be left out,  
When thou for them shalt call?

*(Gadsby's 938)*

If this makes you tremble this morning, you have got a sense of the sovereignty of the hand of this potter in his dispensing electing grace.

Salvation is not our choice. We would never choose. Instead, “we love him, because he first loved us.” (1 John 4:19) The sovereignty of the hand of the potter is seen in our salvation from beginning to end. It is all of grace. From beginning to end, salvation is all his work. Therefore we cannot say unto him, What doest thou? “Who will say unto him, What doest thou?” (Job 9:12) “Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God?” (Romans 9:20) What can you argue back against the hand of the gracious potter?

Now, in context here, there is a solemn message concerning the sovereignty of God. God is telling his people that if they repent, and do what he wants them to do, then he will continue to make them a vessel of honour. But, if they continue to go against him, then he will cut them off. He will make them a vessel of dishonour and cast them away.

We might wonder, “Doesn’t that contradict God’s sovereignty?” No, it *is* God’s sovereignty. God does at times appear to repent in his dealings with man, but as in his eternal mind he has one purpose which never changes. “He is in one mind, and who can turn him?” (Job 23:13) “God is not a man, that he should lie” (Numbers 23:19) There is no changing of his eternal decree. But in his dealings with his people, sometimes he hides his grace, so that he will bring us to tremble, and so that he will cause us to turn again to him.

The message from the apostle is similar. The sovereignty of God is not ground to sit down to rest comfortably on. Rather it is a reason to stir us up to serve the Lord with reverence and godly fear. We are to work out our salvation here with fear and trembling. We are to live before him as a sovereign God. Friends, in your life, in your conduct, in your witness, at home, in the family, in the church of God – are you setting forth that you are in the hands of a sovereign potter? If you are sitting back careless, saying, “Well, I can sin so that grace may abound,” or if you are saying, “Well, it doesn’t matter about that slip and about that fall, it doesn’t matter about whether I’m in the Spirit or not at the moment, God is gracious and sovereign, and he will work everything out in the end” – then you are defying God, abusing his sovereignty, and contradicting his grace. What a solemn place to be! We are in the hands of the sovereign potter, who says, “O house of Israel, cannot I do with you as this potter?” In a moment, the marred vessel can be turned away to destruction. You see, friends, what it is to know that we are in the hands of a sovereign potter. It is to live in the fear of God.

It is the privilege of a saint to live in the fear of God. To serve him with fear and trembling. To desire to show forth his honour and glory. To desire that the Lord will be working sovereignly in our lives. To come to the place where we can say, “Not my will, Lord, but thy will be done.” To come to the place where we have to confess that we are nothing, we are fools, but we have the desire that he would be working sovereignly in our lives, –so that we would be at last a vessel fit for the Master’s use, for his honour and glory.

The sovereignty of God is no ground for the soul to sit down on and rest complacently. It should stir us up and make us exercised to see and to know

the work of the sovereign potter in our lives. It should humble us, and bring us to him to plead, “Lord, have mercy upon us. O work mightily in us.” As our opening hymn said, “Leave not the work thou hast begun.” We should pray that he would not leave it unfinished, unfulfilled in us, though we are sinful worms. There is so much that strives against that work. We have to come and plead the grace and sovereignty of God. “Lord, not because of anything in us, but all on the grounds of thy sovereign grace.” ‘Behold, as the clay is in the potter’s hand, so are ye in mine hand, O house of Israel.’

## **II. Secondly, they are strong hands.**

Now I want to come to another aspect of these hands. They are sovereign hands, and they are also strong hands. We may think that clay is a weak substance, it doesn’t need a strong hand. But clay does need a strong hand. If you have ever taken clay directly from the ground and worked it to prepare it for the wheel, you will know just what strong hands you need. The clay comes out cold, and hard. It needs strong hands to work on it, strong hands to pummel it, strong hands to turn it over and bang it to get the air out of it, strong hands to break the lumps of rock and impurities that are in it, because if those things are left in when the pot is put in the kiln, the pot will smash. Perhaps some of you did clay work at school, and you can perhaps still remember just how hard work it was. It is hard work to make a pot, it needs a strong hand.

Friends, when we come to consider ourselves, as clay taken from the ground, we can begin to see what strong hands we need. Do you feel you need strong hands? You have an old nature which fights against grace. You have an old nature which still says, “We will not have this man to reign over us.” You have an old nature which, just like the children of Judah, is rebellious.

But hear the words of the potter.

Rebellious thou hast been,  
And art rebellious still;  
But since in love I took thee in,  
My promise I’ll fulfil.

Those are the words of a strong-handed potter. Nothing too hard for the Lord! The work of grace is a mystery. It is a mystery when we consider what we are by nature. Clay like this, being formed into a beautiful pot. That is a strong work, it requires a strong hand. Now the hands of this God are strong hands to perform the mighty work of grace that is required.

We read here that the pot was marred: "And the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hand of the potter: so he made it again another vessel." Just on the reading of the words, it would appear it was the same clay, reworked by the heavenly potter. When the Lord works in grace in the souls of his people he makes a real change in them. It is a change that can only be made by grace, and it is an almighty change, it is a strong change, it is an irresistible change. The work of grace that is performed by the hand of the holy potter is invincible, it cannot be resisted. The clay yields to the hand of the strong potter. It cannot resist his forming purposes. What a blessing that is!

The doctrines of grace are blessed doctrines, and especially this invincible, irresistible grace. If grace could be resisted, if grace was not invincible, where would you be? You would still be a sinner far off from God, wouldn't you? You have an old nature which needs grace to make the change – grace to make the difference. You need God to work – and when God has worked, what a strong, mighty work it is! Nothing can stand in its way: not your old heart, not your old nature, not all your wisdom, not all your strength – it all had to fall.

People who are physically strong tend to think they have abundant strength and they will never be weak. Then it is an unpleasant surprise when they are brought down into physical weakness. It is just the same in grace. One day we think everything is well with us. We think we are doing well in this world; everything is going well. We may even think that heaven is ours because we have done good deeds and we have been good to people, we have been kind to our neighbour, so good will triumph in the end – we have a hope. But then the heavenly potter puts forth his strong hand, and touches us. Then we are humbled under the mighty hand of God, and brought to realise that all our

righteousness is as filthy rags, and we have absolutely nothing, and sin is destined only for eternal punishment. What a mighty work this potter performs!

But that is only the beginning of the work. He keeps alive grace in the souls of his people as he teaches us, and as he leads us on in grace. We are like pupils who will not listen, pupils who are slow to learn. Weak teachers would give up, they would turn away from them. But our gracious God is stronger than that. He graciously teaches us the same thing time and time again. A potter perhaps works on an intricate handle, or some final flourish on the pottery. He makes it, but it appears then to droop. So he has to put it aside for a little and then take it out again and work it again, and again, and again – until it is perfect. So sometimes it must seem with the work of grace in us. Our potter has a strong hand – he never tires of his work. What a blessing that is! God will never tire of his work in his people. He is not tired of the work in your soul this morning, although you may feel you are tiring him. The Lord's people, at times, push things to the extreme. When the Lord appeared to Moses at the burning bush and told him to go to his people, Moses kept asking the Lord for another sign, for another sign, another sign – until we read that God turned away from him. But God didn't leave Moses. That is because he is a strong God, and he will not leave his people. He will not tire of them. His hand is strong.

His strong hands hold the pot up. The pot cannot hold itself up, but it has to be held carefully in those strong hands, and carried about by the potter. Those pots are heavy, but the strong potter does not drop them. The potter takes care of his pot – and so the Lord takes care of his people. They will never be dropped, they will never be smashed. "Underneath are the everlasting arms."

The strong hands of his grace – what precious hands these are! Sovereign hands, strong hands. He is able to perform the work of grace. Nothing is too hard for the Lord. Maybe you feel this morning that your soul has come to the end of the work of grace – you wonder if the Lord can do anything more with you – or you find yourself so barren, so lifeless, so sinful – you wonder whether the work of grace has ever been begun. But he is able. He says, "I will work, and who shall let it?" (Isaiah 43:13) The poor puny clay, the clay which is

absolutely unable to shape itself, under the strong hand of the potter, will – and must – be shaped. Nothing too hard for this potter!

### **III. Thirdly, they are skilled hands.**

They are skilled in the sense that there is nothing too hard for him. If you take a picture of a pot to the master potter, nothing will be too hard for him to make. He will know exactly how to shape it. So it is with God – because this potter’s wisdom is immense. He knows everything. He created us. He created us for his honour and his glory. He knows the end from the beginning. When you begin to make a pot, you must begin at the end. What is the final product going to be? When you begin to make anything, whether it is made out of wood, or whatever it is – what is its purpose? What space does it need to fill? What shape does it need to take in order to fulfil its design? The potter knows exactly. God knows exactly the place in his kingdom where he is going to place each individual pot, and he knows the purpose which he has made it for – his honour and glory. He works with skill to a wise master plan.

Nothing is too hard for him. Nothing is too hard for him to work. The beautiful intricate glazes you see on a pot, the beautiful designs – you wonder how they were ever conceived, let alone how they are worked out! That is the skill of the potter. It is just the same in the lives of God’s people – he is skilful.

He knows just how to get the finish he wants. He knows how to put sand on the pot in order to give it texture. He knows how to shape it with different tools – where he must use his hand, where he must use some other tool. He knows exactly how to fire the pot. There is a great deal of skill in firing a pot, because that part of the work is irreversible. Once the pot is fired, the clay is changed – it can never be changed again, it can never be turned back. Once you have hardened the clay it can never be made soft again. It has changed in substance.

So it is in the work of grace. When the potter first take the clay and moulds it into shape, and then puts the clay into the kiln – when he first changes and then continues to work on that clay by grace – when he makes us a sinner saved by grace – we can never go back to being what we were before.

It is not just once that the potter puts the pot into the fire, but many times. And the potter will steam the pot in order to prepare it for the fire. If you just put the pot straight into the fire then the pot can break, because the heat can be too much.

This is just the way the Lord works in the lives of his people – he knows just what pressure to apply. He knows just when they need the furnace to shape them, to harden them, to bring them to the point where he can work the next stage.

Then the potter's skill is seen in each step of the glazing process as the different colours are applied, and they are put into the fire in between each colour in order to fix the colour.

It is the same when the potter works in grace, in the lives of his people. Maybe the potter has put you in the fire – the furnace of affliction. Maybe he is bringing you to realise that you cannot keep alive your own soul. Maybe he is weaning you from all your props, all your self-righteousness, all the religion you thought you had, in order to bring you to rest more upon grace. In all of this, his is a skilled hand.

We cannot always see the end. Our middle hymn (J. Hart, *Gadsby's* 315) was headed, "What I do thou knowest not now; but thou shalt know hereafter." (John 13:7) You see, friends, if we are able to believe that the hand that holds us is a skilled hand, then we will not worry that we cannot see what is coming to pass, because we know that he will not make a mistake.

He was too wise to err, and O,  
Too good to be unkind.

(S. Medley, *Gadsby's* 7)

This is the blessing of knowing that we are in the hands of the potter – we can walk by faith then, and not by sight. The Lord works everything in the lives and experience of his people to teach them his grace, and to teach them to depend on him. He is skilled in that work. He makes no mistakes. If you are here this morning thinking the Lord is making a mistake in your life, may the Lord give

you this Word this morning: ‘Behold, as the clay is in the potter’s hand, so are ye in mine hand, O house of Israel.’ He never makes a mistake.

If we are able to see these wise hands in which we are held, then we will find a quiet resting place – a peaceable habitation, where we will be able to say with the Psalmist, “The lines are fallen unto me in pleasant places; yea, I have a goodly heritage.” (Psalm 16:6) It is a pleasant place to be – in the hands of an all-wise potter, who knows exactly what he is doing.

#### **IV. Fourthly, they are sure hands**

Then, friends, I wanted to come to this – that these hands are sure hands. The work of grace is a certain work. The hand of the potter makes no slips and no mistakes. The pot cannot be left unfinished. He never gives up – he never gives up on his work.

It is a poor potter that begins a work, and gives up on it. Why has he given up? Perhaps because he has lost interest in the pot, or because the pot is not as beautiful as he wanted it to be. But if the pot is not as beautiful as he wanted it to be, that is because of an error on his part. If he has taken on making something which is beyond his skill, then that is also an error on his part.

But here we have a potter who nothing can defeat. He knows exactly what he is doing. His skill is boundless. His wisdom is boundless. His strength is limitless. Nothing is too hard for him. Therefore his hands are sure hands. He *will* complete the work. It may take a long time. Pots are not made overnight, particularly not the most beautiful pots – they take weeks, or months, of patient work and patient firing.

Perhaps there is a word here for somebody this morning, who feels at the moment to be like a pot on the shelf. If you go into a potter’s workshop you will find there are generally many pots in various states of finishing on the shelves around the walls. Some have been fired, and they are now waiting for the glaze – they may wait for many months on the shelf. You may think the potter has forgotten them, but he hasn’t. The image of the final pot is still in

his mind, and the day will come when he will take the pot down, and he will do the next thing with it.

The Lord waits that he might be gracious. He waits because he has a purpose. Sometimes he may want to gather together a group of pots that need the same colour on them at the same time. The Lord works in that way in his church sometimes. Some of his people have to go through a time of waiting until others are brought in, so that they will all be taught and led together.

The way this potter works, no pot will ever be left on the shelf. If you are feeling this morning that the Lord has forgotten you, that he seems to have turned aside from his work of grace, that he hasn't visited you for many days, then may there be some comfort in the fact that the hands of the potter hold you, and they are sure hands. He *will* finish his work. He will visit again. He will complete his work. He will not leave you an unfinished pot, because these hands are sure hands.

If there is one thing we should take away from the whole sweep of Old Testament history, it is the certainness of the work of God. As Joshua reminded the people, "Ye know in all your hearts and in all your souls, that not one thing hath failed of all the good things which the Lord your God spake concerning you; all are come to pass unto you, and not one thing hath failed thereof." (Joshua 23:14) He performed his work. It is a sure work, it is a certain work, it cannot come to nothing.

Just for a moment, let us consider. If the work of grace *could* come to nothing – if the pot could defeat the potter and he could give up on it – what kind of potter would he be? He would not be worthy to be called a potter, would he? Friends, I speak solemnly, but reverently. If God could ever give up on a work of grace, he would cease to be God. It would subvert his very nature. Our salvation rests on the nature of God. We are in the hands of the potter. You see, friends, the main thing is not what we feel within ourselves. It is not the fact that we feel forsaken and alone, left on the shelf, so unfinished and with so much yet to be done. Our salvation rests in the hands of the potter, who is working infallibly, surely, and will complete his work.

It is a sure work also in the sense that it is a perfect work. If something is done surely, it is done certainly and done to completion. Once it is done, no one can point the finger at the final product. That is what the Lord does when he works grace in the souls of his people. When he says, "Behold, as the clay is in the potter's hand, so are ye in mine hand, O house of Israel," then we can say with the Psalmist, "The Lord will perfect that which concerneth me," (Psalm 138:8) and with Job, "He performeth the thing that is appointed for me: and many such things are with him." (Job 23:14). O to be enabled to see that he will complete the work of grace!

The Apostle takes up the same thing in writing to the Thessalonians. "And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly ... Faithful is he that calleth you, who also will do it." (1 Thessalonians 5:23-24) That is the finished work of the pot.

Consider that the pot is never finished until it comes out of the fire for the final time. Until then it is not the finished product. The problem with the Lord's people too often is that we want to be a finished pot today. As we look within ourselves, we feel there is so much yet to be worked in the work of grace, and we become impatient and fretful. But that is because we have forgotten that the work of grace is not yet complete.

If any of you have ever worked with glazes you will know that when you put on the glazes before the pot goes in the fire, they are very strange colours, very drab. The colour only comes out as it goes into the fire, and the colours are generally not seen in all their glory until the final firing. It was a total marvel to me when I saw this happen. When the pot went into the kiln with its final glazes on, the colours were so drab, I could see no beauty in it. But when I saw the pot after it had come out of the kiln, I could scarcely believe it was the same pot. The colours now shone in their glory. The glass in the glaze had been melted and the pot now sparkled.

It will be the same when the Lord finishes his work. While we are this side of glory, all we will see is the drab colours, and the base elements. We only see what appears to be a mess on the pot. But when we pass finally into glory, when he brings us for the last time out of the fire, then we will shine in his

glory! We shall be like him! For we shall see him. Until we come to that place, the work of the potter is not complete, but the blessing is, “Behold, as the clay is in the potter’s hand, so are ye in mine hand.” We are in the hands of a sure potter, who is performing the sure work of sanctification in us. He will perform the final work and bring us to glory. This is what the Lord’s people have to rest on – that we are in the hands of a sure potter, who *will* complete his work.

That is what it means to walk by faith and not by sight. We cannot see the finished work, but by faith we know that the hands we are in are sure hands. They will complete the work. They will perform it. The work will be finished.

Friends, do not despise the day of small things in the life of grace. A few weeks ago here we considered Zechariah’s words, “Who hath despised the day of small things?” (Zechariah 4:10) There are days when you feel you sit on the shelf, and days when all the glaze seems to be drab and colourless, but do not despise the day of small things, because the Lord has begun the work, and he *will* complete it. He will complete it certainly. “I will work, and who shall let it?” “The Lord will perfect that which concerneth me.” (Psalm 138:8) “And they shall be mine, saith the Lord of hosts, in that day when I make up my jewels.” (Malachi 3:17)

The glory of the hand of the potter is seen when the potter takes the pot out of the kiln for the last time, and holds it up to see its beauty. Then he sees his own reflection in the glaze, and he shows to everyone around the beautiful thing that he has made with his own hands.

Our God is working to the end of his own glory. To change the figure slightly, Isaiah tells us that the day is coming when we will be a diadem, a beautiful crown, in the hand of our God. We will be for his beauty, for his glory. This is a great mystery.

It is a great mystery that clay should ever have brought fame to Josiah Wedgwood. Base earth made a man famous and rich. And it is a great mystery that sinners of this earth – the fallen sons of Adam – should ever be jewels in the crown of our God for his honour and his glory. But we are in the hands of the potter and, eventually we will be in his hands in glory, when he holds us as

a finished pot, for all the glorious heavenly host in heaven to behold, and we shall shine in the beauty of his glory.

And do not lose sight of the fact that we are as certainly in his hands throughout the process of bringing us to heaven. We are under the control of his hand when we are in the kiln. We are under the forming strength of his hand as he forms us on the wheel. We are under the skill of his hand as he applies the glaze and forms us in his image, and shapes us according to his will. And, friends, we are as firmly in his gracious hands when he holds us in glory for ever and ever to come. “Behold, as the clay is in the potter’s hand, so are ye in mine hand, O house of Israel.”

#### **V. Finally, they are gracious hands**

I must just add that these are hands that work kindly and tenderly with the clay. If you work clay too hard, if you overwork it, it becomes too soft, it loses all its shape and it all falls to nothing. When this potter works with skill and with wisdom, he works also with grace and mercy. He works towards the clay being glorified. It is a blessed thing when we can see that:

He is too wise to err, and O,  
Too good to be unkind.

He graciously works everything in our lives and in our experience so that we will at last be vessels fit for the Master’s use. We are tried at times, and we cannot see this, and we cannot feel this, and there are times when we may wonder whether the work of grace has ever been begun in us. But then let us see by faith, “Behold, as the clay is in the potter’s hand, so are ye in mine hand, O house of Israel.”

I came to this text by reading an article in a magazine from a local church in Hove. It opened with the minister asking somebody in his congregation recently, how were they? And the reply they gave was, “I’m still in the hands of my Heavenly Potter.” You know, friends, it came with such sweetness – I am still in the hands of my Heavenly Potter.

Can you say that this morning, friends? You see, if we know that we are in the hands of the heavenly potter, it does not matter what is going on in providence, and it does not matter what is going on in grace. Of course, in one sense it does matter – the Lord’s people will be exercised concerning the day when the pot will be finished. They cannot settle down, as Judah did, unconcerned about these things. But what I mean is that we have to leave the finishing of the work in his hands. We must leave this sanctifying work in his perfect hands. We have to believe that he is performing all things according to his good pleasure, and that at last he will bring us to glory. When we have the sense that we are in *his* hands, and that we have not fallen out of his hands, and that we are not lost – what precious comfort there is! These are sovereign hands; they are strong hands; they are wise and skilled hands; they are sure hands. They will finish the work, and they are hands that will finally glorify us, and hold us up in his glory. What precious hands they are! What a precious place to be – to feel that we are in the hands of God!

We spoke of the beginning of the experience – what a solemn thing it is to be brought to realise that we are sinners in the hands of an angry God – but as the work goes on, our eyes are opened by grace and we see the love and the mercy of God alongside his righteousness and his holy justice. We come to echo the experience of Psalm 130, both, “If thou, Lord, shouldest mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand?” and, “But there is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared.”

What gracious hands they are, performing that work! Well might we then say, “I wait for the Lord, my soul doth wait, and in his word do I hope.” We can hope in the word that he has spoken to us, upon which he has caused us to hope, that he will perform and complete the work. “Let Israel hope in the Lord: for with the Lord there is mercy, and with him is plenteous redemption. And he shall redeem Israel from all his iniquities.” The clay in the hand of the heavenly potter will be redeemed from *all* their iniquities.

I ask you this morning, is our text a word of comfort to you? Can you leave everything this morning in the Lord’s hands – because you can see *his* hands encircling you? Do you know what it is to feel what the Word of God tells us:

“Underneath are the everlasting arms.” (Deuteronomy 33:27) “His left hand is under my head, and his right hand doth embrace me.” (Song of Solomon 2:6) “He shall cover thee with his feathers, and under his wings shalt thou trust.” (Psalm 91:4) “In the time of trouble he shall hide me in his pavilion.”? (Psalm 27:5)

These are illustrations of these hands – gracious hands in which the Lord’s people are held. It is a comfort to the Lord’s people to be enabled to believe, to be enabled to see, that we are held in the hands of God. These are the hands of God. This is the illustration: “Behold, as the clay is in the potter’s hand, so are ye in mine hand” – what blessed hands they are!

Just this comment in closing. Each of us individually is in the Lord’s hand, but here it is put collectively, “So are ye in mine hand, *O house of Israel.*” What a blessed thing it is when we can see that the church of God is in the hands of the heavenly potter! To realise that he is working his work on this earth, in the church, among the nations of the earth. He is gathering to himself out of every nation, kindred, tribe and tongue a people who he is forming for his praise. And the work is ongoing – it is not complete. The work is ongoing – but it is certain. “But now we see not yet all things put under him. But we see Jesus.” (Hebrews 2:8-9) We see those precious hands, working all things according to his good pleasure – and at last all the glory will be got unto him in the highest heavens to come.

Therefore, let us seek to walk by faith and not by sight – to pray that the Lord would show us his gracious hands, so that we would know, “Underneath are the everlasting arms,” and so that we would feel his working hands on us, and so that we would be enabled to trust at last that his hands will complete the work, and bring us to glory.

May the Lord bless his Word unto us.

Amen.