

# VESSELS OF HONOR

by Norman Holmes

*“Now in a large house there are not only gold and silver vessels, but also vessels of wood and of earthenware, and some to honor and some to dishonor. Therefore, if a man cleanses himself from these things, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified, useful to the master, prepared for every good work.” –2 Timothy 2:20-21*

In these verses the Apostle Paul exhorted young Timothy how to become an honorable servant of God. It is true that the Lord can use any type of person to serve Him and further His purposes in the earth. However, not everyone will become a vessel of honor with a good testimony and with eternal rewards.

## Vessels of Wrath

Paul also mentioned that there are those like the Pharaoh of Egypt whom God has also raised up to accomplish His purposes. Pharaoh, however, was not called a vessel of honor, but was called one of the *“vessels of wrath prepared for destruction,”* in Romans 9:22. God used Pharaoh to display His power and glory when Moses countered his great evil by the greater power of God. Then after the Lord used Pharaoh as a *“vessel of wrath”* that evil ruler was destroyed, just as many vessels are discarded after they are used for a short time.

## Prepared for Destruction or Glory

There is a great difference in the preparation and usage of different types of vessels. Some, such as styrofoam drinking cups and plastic garbage bags, are quickly and inexpensively mass-produced. Other vessels, such as a silver bowl or crystal goblet, are carefully crafted with much skill and cost. The easily mass-produced vessels are usually used for a short season but then are discarded after they have served their purpose. On the other hand, the expensive well-crafted vessels will often be put on display in the house and may become a family treasure that is passed down through future generations.

The Apostle Paul spoke about the different destinies of these two kinds of vessels. In Romans 9:22-23 he wrote, *“What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction? And He did so in order that He might make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory.”* Here we see that a dishonorable vessel of wrath is being prepared for destruction, while an honorable vessel of mercy is prepared for the glory that God has foreordained for His faithful servants.

## God’s Sovereignty vs. Man’s Free Will

God in His sovereign will can choose to raise up any person, regardless of character, to accomplish His purposes in the earth. God raised up Pharaoh as well as Moses. God raised up Jezebel as well as Elijah. God also raised up Saul and Balaam to be used of God for a season although they were later rejected for their mixture.

While God chooses to promote whoever He wills to accomplish His purposes in the world, there is also the balancing side of man’s free will. God chooses to use a vessel, but what kind of vessel have we prepared ourselves to become? Have we allowed the Lord to mold us into godly character so that the Lord may make us to become like the silver bowl or crystal goblet? It is easy to make a plastic cup, but much expense and skill is needed to form a beautiful cup out of silver or gold.

As a young man, Karl Marx professed himself to be a dedicated Christian who loved the Lord. Yet due to hypocrisy in the church he became embittered against Christianity. History records that he became an enemy of God and went on to become the co-founder of communism. He was obviously a man created with great talents. However, he did not allow the Lord to mold his character into godliness through the trials of life. As a result he became a vessel of wrath instead of becoming an honorable servant of God who could have influenced the world for good.

To become a vessel of honor, 2 Timothy 2:21 states that we must cleanse ourselves. If we do our part we will become sanctified, useful, and prepared for every good work. For this type of vessel God has prepared an honorable and glorious eternal position in His house.

So God chooses whoever He will- the good, the wicked, and those who are full of mixture. Yet according to our own preparations we will become either honorable vessels for glory or else dishonorable vessels of wrath whose end is destruction. The Apostle Paul declared in 2 Timothy 2:19-21 that the choice is ours depending on whether we will cleanse ourselves from mixture.

We will now look in the Scriptures at the lives of three people who became vessels of honor. While they faced the same sins and problems that we all struggle with, they allowed God to cleanse them through the trials and blessings of life. From them we can also gain wisdom and encouragement to become vessels of honor in God's house.

## CLEANSSED VESSEL # 1- THE DESIRE FOR FIRE

When we look at the life of the Apostle John we find that he did not start out with the character that caused the church to entitle him the "Apostle of Love." On the contrary, Jesus first gave him the nickname, "Son of Thunder!" John's impetuous, rash, and judgmental character can be seen through several stories in the Gospels. The most moving of these stories is recorded in Luke 9:54-56 where we read, "*And when his disciples James and John saw this, they said, 'Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven, and consume them?' But He turned and rebuked them, and said, 'You do not know what kind of spirit you are of. For the Son of Man is not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them.'*"

The setting of this story was that Jesus and His disciples were traveling through Samaria. The Samaritans had already begun to turn to Christ as recorded in John chapter 4. But because Jesus would not stay with them on this occasion (as He was only traveling through to Jerusalem) they would not receive Him. They were accustomed to seeing the Jews travel through their territory on the way to Jerusalem, and having the religious Jews always ignore them. So the Samaritans were probably reacting to the self-righteousness of the Jews that when Jesus was simply passing through they ignored Him.

John's response was that of his natural character as a "Son of Thunder." In self-righteous indignation he asked Christ if they could call fire down from heaven to consume the Samaritans! John was zealous for the Lord and wanted the Samaritans to be judged by fire. However, the Lord Jesus rebuked him and said that the attitude of his heart was wrong. If he wanted to become like Christ then John would have to have the motives behind his zeal for God purified. John's self-righteous judgmental nature would have to be cleansed so that he could become a "vessel of mercy," like Jesus. If John wanted to call down fire on the Samaritans it would have to be for the purpose of showing God's mercy, not His wrath.

As John followed Christ for three and a half years the motives behind his zeal for God were purified. He became very close to the Lord. John, James, and Peter were invited up on the mountain to see Christ transfigured in glory. They were also the only disciples invited to see Jairus' daughter raised from the dead and to remain near Christ when He prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. Young John became a changed man as he spent these years close to Jesus. He wrote over 50 years later that "*we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as*

*He is,*” in 1 John 3:2. John had been transformed to become like Jesus as he saw the Lord- and John became the Apostle of Love as he saw that “*God is Love,*” 1 Jn.4:8.

When John had been a zealous young disciple he wanted to call down fire to judge the Samaritans. Yet after maturing in the Lord, John had the opportunity to see this fulfilled in a proper, godly way. In Acts 8:14-18 we read that Peter and John were called to come pray for the Samaritans during the revival that Philip was leading there. John did not call down fire to judge the Samaritans, instead he prayed with Peter and called down the fire of the Holy Spirit to bless the Samaritans!

Like John we can have character flaws and faulty desires that need to be cleansed. However, Christ can take those weaknesses and transform them into our becoming vessels of mercy. Spend time with Him and behold His great love. In the same way that Christ changed a “son of thunder” into an “apostle of love,” our Lord can equally change us!

## CLEANSSED VESSEL # 2- THE DESIRE OF THE LIAR

The next person we will study is the patriarch, Jacob. He was named Jacob by his parents because of the natural character that he displayed at his birth, Gen.25:24-26. However, his name means that he was a supplanter, or deceitful person! He continued to display this character as a young man when he stole his brother's birthright (Gen.25:29-34) and lied to his father to have him pray God's blessing upon him, Gen.27:1-36. Jacob had a good desire to obtain God's blessing upon his life. However, as a deceiver and liar he was not yet qualified to receive it! He first needed to be cleansed from his deceitful, manipulative ways to become a vessel of honor.

As Jacob matured and began to follow God, the Lord prepared him for His blessings through trials and sufferings. To cause Jacob to hate his sinful character the Lord brought him into the family of his uncle Laban, who was the arch-deceiver of them all!

The first big blow occurred on Jacob's wedding night. According to the local custom, at the end of the festivities the father brought his daughter to the darkened tent where she was united with her husband. But when Jacob woke up the next morning, he found that his father-in-law had deceived him by giving him his other daughter! Laban then craftily offered his other daughter (Jacob's true love) to also marry him if Jacob would work for him another seven years.

Jacob's anger could have burned for years against his father-in-law's deception. Laban took advantage of him in the dark tent when he deceitfully switched the sisters. Yet Jacob would have to admit to himself that he deserved that- after all, he had done the exact same thing! Years before Jacob had lied to his blind father when he said that he was his other brother, Esau, so that his deceived father would pray God's blessings upon him.

Genesis 31:41 tells us that Laban continued to deceive Jacob 10 times. Jacob reaped many sufferings as a result of his own sin. As Galatians 6:7 warns us, “*Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap.*” Suffering changed Jacob (see Is.48:10, Prov.27:17, and 1 Pet.5:10).

After many years the dealings of God made Jacob a desperate man. He desperately needed God's blessings and power when he returned to face his angry brother, Gen.32. Jacob knew that his brother could not be tricked again by his lies and manipulation. Unless God blessed him, he would be a dead man when he met Esau!

We can then read in Genesis 32:24-28 of how Jacob wrestled with God until he became a changed, broken man. When he no longer trusted in his own manipulative abilities, but fully clung to the Lord for His mercies, Jacob was changed. He was changed into becoming a vessel of honor and the Lord renamed him Israel, which means “Prince of God.” Jacob's character had been transformed, and as Israel he received God's blessing when the Lord told him, “*as a prince you have power with God and with men,*” Gen.32:28.

In a similar way there are times when we need to wrestle with God in prayer until we are changed and empowered. To become a vessel of honor we must cleanse ourselves from all deceit and manipulative ways. The abilities of the corrupt, natural man cannot cause us to inherit God's blessings. But if we learn to meet with God through the trials of life He can change us into becoming the vessels of honor and mercy that He has prepared to bestow His eternal kingdom and glory upon.

### CLEANSED VESSEL # 3- THE DESIRE TO ASPIRE

The last person that we will study is the Apostle Paul. With his strong motivation and his gifted abilities it seemed that he was predestined for greatness.

His pedigree was impressive. In Galatians 1:15 he declared that he was set apart for God from his mother's womb. He was born of pure Jewish blood as one of God's chosen people. He was descended from the faithful tribe of Benjamin. His parents named him Saul at his birth in the expectation that he would follow in the steps of the greatest Benjamite of all, King Saul.

Young Saul had the best of training. He grew up in Tarsus of Silicia, which at the time was one of the 3 great university cities in the Roman Empire along with Athens and Alexandria. He was a Pharisee, or a conservative Bible believer. As a teenager he studied at the feet of Gamaliel, who was the director of the most famous seminary in Jerusalem. Later in life a Roman governor exclaimed about his "*great learning*" in Acts 26:24.

Saul as a young man was chosen for leadership and given great authority by the leaders of his nation. In Acts 8:1-3 and 9:1-2 we can read how they first gave him great authority in Jerusalem and then made him an international ambassador. When Saul said in Acts 26:10 that he had given his vote against the Christians to put them to death, he was probably suggesting that he was a member of the Sanhedrin. They were the Supreme Council of the Jewish people. It consisted of 70 of the prominent leaders of Israel, such as priests, elders, scribes, and lawyers who were skilled in the Jewish law.

God had undoubtedly formed Saul to become a mighty vessel in the earth. Yet in his blind pride and self-righteousness young Saul was doing everything wrong. Instead of becoming a great vessel of honor, Saul was actually becoming a great vessel of wrath! Instead of becoming the man of God that he aspired to be, Saul had actually become the greatest persecutor of God's people! He was certainly following in the steps of King Saul who had grown in his pride and rebellion until he killed the priests of God and tried to stop the new move of God personified in David.

As the Master Potter, God in His sovereign grace shattered the vessel of wrath the young Saul was forming himself into. On the road to Damascus Saul saw the light of God and also had his own blindness revealed. God continued to reshape Saul's character for many years. Saul still desired to do something great for God with his life, but he first needed to learn the proper way to aspire to greatness. As our Lord Jesus had taught, if you want to become great you must become the servant of all. If we humble ourselves then the Lord will lift us up. It is the meek, not the mighty, who shall inherit the earth.

Saul learned his lessons and allowed God to reform his character until he finally became a great vessel of honor. Saul, whose name meant "destroyer," was renamed Paul, which means "little." Instead of remaining a great destroyer of the people of God Paul humbled himself to become a "little" one who called himself "less than the least" of all the believers, Eph.3:8. Because the Apostle Paul allowed the Lord to reform his life he became a great vessel of honor who has qualified for a glorious position in the eternal kingdom of God.

We have a Choice of Destiny

As we study these things we can become gripped afresh by the knowledge of God's ways. God in His sovereign will creates each of us to be a vessel to further His purposes in the earth. Yet while every type of vessel can be used in a house, only certain ones will remain and be given honorable positions. It is according to our own choices in life as to whether or not we will allow God to shape us into becoming vessels of honor or dishonor. And according to our response to God's preparations we will also qualify to either be given an eternal inheritance in glory or else be rejected and removed.

As Paul had exhorted young Timothy, the choice depends on whether we will cleanse ourselves. The Prophet Isaiah repeated this when he declared, "purify yourselves, you who carry the vessels of the Lord," in Isaiah 52:11. The choices we make through the trials of life will determine our destiny for either glory or destruction. If we determine by His grace to fully follow the Lord then we will find a higher purpose in life than to just be temporarily *used* of God- we will also be *approved* of God for all eternity as glorious vessels in His house.

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