

The Potter's House

Jeremiah

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Bible Text: Jeremiah 18:1-12

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Well, let's turn again to Jeremiah 18. And we will read again verse 6. Jeremiah 18:6.

6 O house of Israel, cannot I do with you as this potter? saith the LORD.
Behold, as the clay is in the potter's hand, so are ye in mine hand, O house
of Israel.

Jeremiah has often been given a message from the Lord that directly the Lord speaks to him and says, "Jeremiah, say this to the people." Here he is told to go to the potter's house in verse 2. And it remind us of what Hebrews 1 tells us that God spoke at different times and in different ways to the fathers by the prophets. And here is one of these different ways. He is told to go to the potter's house. And really then in verses 1 through 4, the Lord is giving to Jeremiah the picture, and he will give him the point in verses 5 through 12.

But this picture of the potter and the clay, it's certainly a picture that Jeremiah would have been very familiar with. This was an everyday event. Pottery was one of the major crafts in the ancient world. And he goes down then to the potter's house. Probably somewhere down by sea level or perhaps by the pool of Siloam down in the valley of Gehennim where the potters likely were. And he gets this picture then. And really it's not a picture that is all that different to what you can see today when you see a potter making clay, making a clay pot. He would have seen this potter working away with this clay. He would see this clay spinning upon this top wheel and the potter using his feet to spin another wheel underneath which spun the top wheel, and you would see the clay then on top of this wheel.

And if you think of what Jeremiah saw then, the picture that he saw, he would have seen a man who had great skill. A man who knew what he was doing. It would have been no doubt fascinating like it is today. Boys and girls, if you would look at a potter making a clay pot, it's a most fascinating thing to see and to see the skill that the potter has. Maybe it's something, no doubt, you could watch for a long time with great interest.

But not only does Jeremiah see skill. He also sees sovereignty, or he sees power. The potter has power over the clay. The clay doesn't talk back to the potter. The clay doesn't

say, "Why are you making me like this?" No, the potter with a very small touch can change the whole shape of the vessel that is being made.

So, you see skill. You see power or sovereignty. You also see standards. You might look at this potter like you do today and you might think, "Well, that looks very good. That's, as it were, the finished article." But you notice that the potter is not happy. And he presses it down and basically starts over. Something was wrong. And the reason is, he has standards. You notice at the end of verse 4, only when it is finished, it says it seemed good to the potter. It has to seem good to the potter. The potter has the standard. The potter has the picture, the design, and the standard of that design in his mind.

And so you see skill. You see sovereignty. And you see standards. This is the picture that the Lord is giving Jeremiah as the material, if you will, for his sermon. But if that's the picture, then verse 6 most definitely gives us the point. "O house of Israel, cannot I do with you as this potter? saith the Lord. Behold, as the clay is in the potter's hand, so are ye in mine hand, O house of Israel." Most certainly this passage is teaching the total, the complete, sovereignty that God has over all things. He is the divine potter, as it were. He is the creator, and we are the clay. We are the creature. Just like Isaiah says in chapter 64:8. "But now, O Lord, we are the clay, and thou our potter; and we all are the work of thy hand." And just like the potter with the clay, the potter is able to do with the clay whatever he wants to do.

Well, this is a truth that we need to be continually reminded of. In our world today so often people have no thought at all of God. People think of their own lives as something that they shape, as something that they craft. That they are, as it were, the potters over their own life. That they are the lords over their own life. That they with their own skill will set their own standards and they will be sovereign over their own lives. Our lips are our own. Who is Lord? Who is the potter over us? But the truth of this passage is that God is the Lord. God is the divine potter. Nothing happens by chance. Everything is happening according to his purpose. He does whatever he pleases. And whatever he pleases is always good. And nobody can say to him, "What are you doing?"

So, here we have a picture of what God is doing especially with his people. And you see, and this is what we want to look at here, you see very simply the potter making. You see the potter marring. And you see the potter remaking. The potter is making, marring and then remaking. And certainly in Hebrew it comes out as something that happens over and again. It's a constant pattern. You could paraphrase verse 4 this way. When the vessel which he was making was marred, he would make it again. So, there is this potter and this is what Jeremiah sees in the house. He sees a potter working with the clay, and then it's marred, and he breaks it down. He presses it down. And he remakes it again. And then it's still not right, and he pushes it down again and remakes it again until it is what he desires it to be.

So, here then we see the potter making the clay. Now, just by the way, the word potter is in Hebrew is really the word for the one who forms. The one who forms or who crafts. And interestingly, it is the same word that is used of God's work at creation. Genesis 2:7.

“And the Lord God formed man.” Same root word. The Lord God formed. He was the potter of man you could almost say. The Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life.

Well, we confess, don't we, I believe in God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth. And you think of the world, the heavens and the earth that he did make, the universe, the stars, the sky, the galaxies. Jeremiah says in chapter 10:12, “He hath made the earth by his power, he hath established the world by his wisdom, and hath stretched out the heavens by his discretion.” He is the great potter who made and formed all of these things and stretched the heavens out, as it were a potter with clay. Effortlessly. With tremendous skill, and power, and sovereignty. Not with preexisting clay, but out of nothing. He simply spoke the worlds into being. And in all of that you see the goodness, the wisdom, the power, the skill, and you say with the Psalmist, “Oh Lord our Lord, how excellent in all the earth thy name. Thy glory thou hast spread afar in all the starry frame.”

But what's true of the heavens and the earth is also true of the nations. And that's particularly the case in the context here. You see that in 7 through 10. He's speaking to the nation of Judah. And he speaks to other nations too. But especially to the nation of Judah the Lord is coming, and he is saying, “I as the potter, all the good that you have is from my hand. The way in which you were shaped, the things that were done for you, it has all come from my hand. You have the Word of God. You have the adoption, as Romans 9 says. “You have the glory. You have the covenants. You have the worship. You have the promises.” And so Psalm 147:20 says that God never dealt to any other nation like he did to Judah. His statutes and his judgments he makes his people know. To them as to no others his grace he loves to show. That's speaking about the nation of Judah. To them as to no others. But why? Why were they so blessed? Well, he is saying, “It's because I was the potter. It's not because there was anything special about you as this clay. It was all in my goodness, and in my bounty to you.”

But you can think of this personally too. Not just in terms of the created world. Not just in terms of the nation of Judah, but personally. Jeremiah knew this. If you would go to chapter 1 of Jeremiah. Jeremiah is resisting the call. He is saying, “Lord, I can't speak. I am too young. I am not good with words.” And the Lord comes to him in verse 5 of chapter 1, and he says, “Jeremiah, I am the potter. Before I formed thee,” same word again. “Before I formed thee, before I was the potter of you, I knew you. I loved you. I sanctified you in the womb. I had this picture in my mind. I am the potter. I formed you.”

“I am the clay,” the people of God come to learn. “I am the clay. God is my maker.” That's what we were singing. “God my maker, think on me.” And you look at the power, you see the power of God, the skill of God, the sovereignty of God, the design of God, the thoughts of God, as we will sing again in Psalm 139, the thoughts of God in your own life personally, you, me, everything about you. “All that I am,” we are going to sing, “I owe to thee. Thy wisdom, Lord, has fashioned me. I give my maker thankful praise whose wondrous works my soul amaze.” And everything about us is praise to our Lord our maker. The way you look. The way I look. Our health, our temperament, when we

were born, where we were born, who we were born to, every detail of our lives! Our family, our friends, when we live, where we live, all the way to our death, even to the second, even to the heartbeats of our life. It's God our maker. We are in his hand. Right now, you are in God's hand, and so am I. Every heartbeat you have had in this service is from God. Every breath is from God. We live, and we move, and we have our being from God.

Doesn't that teach us humility? Our times are in his hands. What is our relationship to the one in whose hands we are? All men are in his hands, whether they recognize it or not. Spurgeon has a sermon the sovereignty of God, very similar to this text, and I think he hits, as we would say, the nail on the head when he writes this, or he says this. He says: Men will allow God to be everywhere except on his throne. Now, isn't that a thought. Men will allow God to be everywhere except on his throne. They will allow him to be in his workshop to fashion worlds and to make stars. They will allow him to be in his almonry to dispense his alms and be bestow his bounties. They will allow him to sustain the earth and bear up the pillars thereof, or light the lamps of heaven, or rule the waves of the ever moving ocean, but when God ascends his throne, his creatures then gnash their teeth. And when we proclaim an enthroned God and his right to do as he wills with his own, to dispose of his creatures as he thinks well, without consulting them, then it is that we are hissed and execrated, and then it is that men turn a deaf ear to us, for God on his throne is not the God they love. They love him anywhere better than they do when he sits with his scepter in his hand with his crown on his head. But it is God upon the throne that we love to preach. It is God upon his throne whom we trust. "God's sovereignty," Jeremiah says here, "is over everything." What he is really saying is, "God is on the throne. The potter is the king."

Let us notice here the marring of the clay. Verse 4. "And the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hand of the potter." Something happened to the clay that the potter was not pleased with. It doesn't tell us what, but it may be that some part that's just not smoothing out, or some air bubble, or something in the clay. There is something that is not right, and it's marred. It's spoiled. It's not right. The potter doesn't become frustrated. With effortless ease the potter just applies some pressure, and down goes the whole clay again and returns to the way it was.

Well, there is a clear lesson here. The potter is able to unmake what he made. He is able to unmake what he made. Perhaps you're sitting there watching the potter for a long time. There is a lot of time, and effort, and focus, and investment that the potter puts into it. And then all of a sudden, he pushes, applies pressure, and he unmakes the thing that he had made. Well, God can, and one day will do that with the created world. The world that he stretched out. "The heavens will pass away," Peter says, "with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat, and the earth also, and the works that are therein shall be burned up." You can think of nations, verses 7 through 10. Through it really, the Lord is saying, at least in our language, "I am able to change my mind." Now, of course, we know that in the absolute sense, God never changes his mind. His purpose will stand, and he will do all his pleasure. But the way he speaks here to accommodate our understanding is this, it's the Lord saying, he's really saying, "I'm not bound to do with

you what you think I should do with you.” So he says in verses 7 and 8, “When I say to a nation, ‘I am going to pluck you up. I am going to pull you down. I am going to destroy you.’” Words that go back to Jeremiah’s call in chapter 1:10. “When I say this to a nation,” he says in verse 8, “if they repent, I will repent of this evil that I thought to do to them.” But then on the other hand, in verse 9, “if I tell a nation, ‘I’ll build you up. I’ll plant you. I’ll shower blessings upon you.’ But if you do evil in my sight, if you don’t listen, and you don’t obey my voice, then I will repent of the good that I said that I would do.”

God is not forced to bless. That was the mistake that the people of Judah had got into. They were saying, “We are the people of God. We are the temple. We have the worship. We have David’s throne with us. There is no way that we will be taken away into captivity.” And they are really saying, “God couldn’t do that! He wouldn’t, and he couldn’t.” And the teachers, the false prophets, had been coming, and they were saying, “It’s going to be okay. Babylon will not come. There won’t be this captivity.” And then when it did come, they were saying, “Well, you’re going to be back in two years.” It was all this message of peace.

And God says, “Yes, I placed you on this wheel of blessing, as it were. I formed and fashioned you in such a way that you would be the receivers of great blessing, but just because I put you on the wheel this way doesn’t mean you will always be on the wheel this way. If you do not repent, I can as quickly unmake you, and mar you, as I made you in the first place.” And that is true of our own lives too. We’ve all been blessed with the gospel. We’ve all been blessed, to some extent at least, with godly examples in our lives. But God says, “If you refuse to listen to my words, I can take it all away, the gospel blessings, and even life itself.” And the God who formed us from the clay of the earth can as quickly cause us to return to the earth from which we came. We are in his hands. And of course, there is the great marring that we have made because of sin.

But here there is a message of great grace and great hope too. Thirdly, here, the potter remaking the clay. He made it. It was marred. And now, the potter remakes it. The Lord is really saying, “I can start again. I can start again. I can remake. You’re still on my wheel. You’re not in the oven where the shape is fixed forever. You’re still on the wheel. As long as you have breath, as long as you’re on the ground of mercy, as long as you’re breathing, as long as the sound of the gospel is still in your ears, you’re still on the potter’s wheel. And you come to realize that there is no better place for you than to be on the potter’s wheel, and to be in the hand of the potter. The hand that we are afraid of that would crush us because of our sins, we come to realize that hand is our hope. Oh Lord, my maker, think on me. Think on me for good. And here is the hope. The potter is the one who made you and is able to remake in Christ Jesus. “If any man,” Paul says, “be in Christ, he is a new creation,” literally. “All things are passed away. Behold, all things have become new.”

And so, Jeremiah here in this potter’s house, and you and me with him, we see a picture of what it means to be a Christian. It was marred in the potter’s hand. The hand that so lovingly fashioned and made us in his image, in Adam we have marred. We have sinned.

We have spoiled, and yet, in the same hand, the end of verse 4, we read. Do you read this? “So he made it again.” What words of hope, and grace, and blessing are embedded there. “So he made it again.” He is able to take the most marred, spoiled, useless sinner, and wash him or her in the blood of the Lamb and break down the unbelief, and the ruins of the old life of sin, and death, and self-righteousness, and make alive in Christ Jesus.

And the end of verse 4 gives us the standard, the design. “As seemed good to the potter to make it.” He can make you and me not only useful, but beautiful by grace. He with his salvation, Psalm 149 says, the meek will beautify. He can make this beautiful. Yes, even the marred life that is ours because of sin.

And you can have this description written over your whole life: a vessel of mercy. That’s what Paul calls it in Romans 9 referring to this chapter no doubt. A vessel of mercy. A vessel that when you look at it, and you see its shape, what you see is mercy. What you see is grace. What you see is the workmanship of God created anew in Christ Jesus. Does that describe you, my dear friend, this evening? How do you describe your life? And would you say, “A vessel of mercy from a God of mercy unto me?” And really this is what God does continually in the life of the believer. There is this ongoing breaking down, and pressing down, and reshaping, as it were. He’s taking the impurities that he finds in his people, and he is purifying the sons of Levi. He’s taking the besetting sins that come up in the life of the believer, and he is pressing it down and killing it, as it were but all in order to make it alive. The person who cannot be patient, the person who cannot forgive the other person, the person who refuses to forgive, God will press upon you if you are a vessel of mercy, and he will break that down, so that you will be tenderhearted and that you will forgive one another as Christ has forgiven you.

You can be like Peter. Peter said, almost as though he was saying, “I am the finished vessel. I am the finished article. I will never deny. I have come to the place where I will never deny the Lord.” And the Lord but touched him. Let him go as it were but for a moment and into the sieve of Satan he denied him thrice, but no. The hand of God was upon Peter. The hand of Christ was upon Peter. “And when thou art converted, when thou art remade again, go and strengthen your brethren.”

So, God breaks you down, Christian believer, but he does it not because he is finished with you, but because you are not yet in the full image of the Son. God has a way of breaking his people down on the wheels of hard providences, but he does so for this reason, so he made it again another vessel as seemed good to the potter to make it. And that’s what the Christian life is. It’s learning again and again. It’s not what I think. It’s not what I want. It’s not my standard. It’s not my design. In the hand of the potter. The potter, the standard the potter has, the divine potter has, is the image of his own Son, and it’s not until he sees that image at last in everlasting glory that he will say, “It is very good.” There is nothing attractive of clay in itself. But when the hands of the potter are upon it, and the thought of the potter, as one man says, the thought of the potter is brought to bear upon it, and the plan of the potter is worked out in it and through it, then there is a real transformation.

But there is a word of warning here too, because there is a vessel of mercy, but there is also a vessel that, as Paul writes, is fitted for destruction, a vessel of wrath. And you have that here in verse 12, people who say, "There is no hope." And look at what they say, "We will walk after our own devices, and we will everyone do the imagination of his evil heart." "Woe unto him that striveth with his maker," Isaiah says. But the question, the answer, the test is really this: have we fled to Christ for mercy? Because if we have, then we are a vessel of mercy which he is fitting more and more for the Master's use. If we have fled to Christ for refuge, we have ceased trying to shape our own self-righteousness upon our own wheel of independence, we fled from that into the hand of the divine potter here, fled to Christ for refuge, then in his hand, our times are in his hand, and all will be well. Amen.

Let us pray.