

# THE POTTER AND THE CLAY

by Ray C. Stedman

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We turn again to the prophet Jeremiah today. It is always easy to find the book of Jeremiah -- those are the clean pages in your Old Testament!

In Psalm 9 the psalmist says, "The wicked shall be turned into hell, and all the nations that forget God," {Psa 9:17 KJV}. Judah, in the days of Jeremiah, was a nation which had forgotten God. All through the scope of this prophecy, across the forty years or more that Jeremiah ministered to this nation, we are watching a nation being turned into hell -- chaos spreading throughout the land, corruption widespread in government, morality constantly declining, evil infecting the people, the life of the nation gradually becoming more and more hellish -- exactly in accordance with the prediction of the psalmist.

In our own day, as you know, America is a nation which is rapidly forgetting God. And so, in our own time, we too are watching the phenomenon of a nation which has forgotten God being turned into hell -- with corruption spreading in the land, the moral fiber of our people losing its consistency, the government increasingly unable to govern properly, the institutions of American life being shaken by frequent panics and torn with dissension -- all this exactly in line with the prediction of the Scriptures.

The message of Jeremiah, as we have seen in this book, is that of a growing revelation of the heart of the God who turns a nation into hell. We hear the judgments of God in this book, but what the prophet is being taught as he goes along is to know the heart of the God of judgment. And what a different picture that is! I think the great message of this book to us is to see what lies behind that which appears to be the ruthlessness of God in dealing with a people, and learning, from chapter to chapter, what kind of God is behind the judgment.

In our last study, in Chapter 17, we saw that Jeremiah was taught two great truths: "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately corrupt," {Job 17:9a RSV}. That is, "There is no hope in man." No nation, ever, has reversed the trend of deterioration simply by trying to gather up its own resources and gird up its moral strength and, through human wisdom, work out a remedy for the degenerative faculty in that nation. It has never happened. There is no hope in man. The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately corrupt.

But Jeremiah was also shown "a glorious throne set on high from the beginning" {Job 17:12a RSV}, which, he tells us, is the place of our sanctuary. That is, "There is hope in God -- the present availability of God to an individual or a nation." And when that person, or that people, turns to that God, healing begins to come back into that life. This is in line with the well-known promise of Second Chronicles 7:14: "...if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land."

In Chapter 18 we have an additional lesson taught to the prophet. This section, Chapters 18 and 19, falls into the same period of time in Jeremiah's ministry as the previous two chapters, which we studied last time. The chapter opens,

**The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: "Arise, and go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words." So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel. And the vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to do. {Jer 18:1-4 RSV}**

We have commented in previous messages about the many things God uses to teach his people, these remarkable visual aids which appear from time to time in this book whereby God imparts lessons to this prophet. Here is another. Jeremiah was sent down to the potter's house, and there he saw three simple things. But they conveyed to him a fantastic lesson. Through the courtesy of Mike Johnson of Discovery Art Guild,

we too have been at the potter's house this morning, watching the potter making a vessel of clay. We have observed the same things that Jeremiah did, for the art of making a pot has not changed through the centuries. The wheel is now turned by an electric motor, but that is about the only difference. Even this is still controlled by the foot of the potter. The clay is the same as it has always been. The potter is the same, with his capable hands, guided by his intelligence, working to mold and shape the clay into the vessel he has in mind.

When I was in Israel a few years ago, visiting the tomb of Abraham in the village of Hebron, I noticed right across the street a potter's house, and I went "down to the potter's house". There was the potter making his vessel in the ancient way, unchanged from the days of Jeremiah. There were the same ingredients -- the potter, the clay, and the wheel. The potter had a little treadle at his foot which he used to make the wheel turn and to control its speed. Today those same ingredients are still part of the making of a pot.

What did Jeremiah see in this lesson? First there was the clay. And Jeremiah knew, as he watched the potter shaping and molding the clay, that he was looking at a picture of himself, and of every man, and of every nation. We are the clay. Both Isaiah and Zechariah, in the Old Testament, join with Jeremiah in presenting this picture of the potter and the clay. And in the New Testament we have the voice of Paul in that great passage in Romans 9, reminding us that God is the Potter and we are the clay. So Jeremiah saw the clay being shaped and molded into a vessel. Then some imperfection in the clay spoiled it in the potter's hand, and the potter crumbled it up, and began anew the process of shaping it into a vessel that pleased him.

Jeremiah saw the wheel turning constantly, bringing the clay against the potter's hand. That wheel stands for the turning circumstances of our life, under the control of the Potter, for it is the potter's foot that guides the wheel. The lesson is clear. As our life is being shaped and molded by the Great Potter, it is the circumstances of our life, the wheels of circumstance, what Browning called "this dance of plastic circumstance", which bring us again and again under the potter's hand, under the pressure of the molding fingers of the Potter, so that he shapes the vessel according to his will.

Then, Jeremiah saw the potter. God, he knew, was the Great Potter, with absolute right over the clay to make it what he wanted it to be. Paul argues this with keen and clear logic in Romans 9: "Will what is molded say to its molder, 'Why have you made me thus?' Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for beauty and another for menial use?" Of course he has. The vessel is shaped according to the image in the potter's mind.

So Jeremiah, watching, learned that an individual or a nation is clay in the Great Potter's hands. He has a sovereign right to make it what he wants it to be. He has the skill and design to work with the clay and to bring it to pass. And if there be some imperfection in the clay, something which mars the design, spoils the work, the potter simply crushes the clay down to a lump and begins again to make it yet a vessel according to his own mind. In the verses which follow, this lesson is applied to the nation:

**Then the word of the Lord came to me: "O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter has done? says the Lord. Behold, like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will repent of the evil that I intended to do to it. And if at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, and if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will repent of the good which I had intended to do to it." {Jer 18:10 RSV}**

In other, more direct terms, this is the same lesson Jeremiah learned at the potter's house, applied to the nation. When the pressure the potter applies is successful in turning the clay in the right direction, the potter seems to repent, the pressure is relieved, and the clay is allowed then to remain in the form it has taken. But when something in the clay resists, the potter then seems to repent of making a vessel at all, and he crushes it into a lump, and begins again to make it yet into the vessel he desires.

And this is true of our individual lives. If some hard circumstance comes into your life -- and it may be there right now, or it may be just around the corner, or you may just have passed through it -- that circumstance is

the wheel of God, to bring you against the pressure of the Potter's hand. If you do not resist, if your will does not spoil the work by murmuring, grumbling, or complaining, or feeling resentful and bitter, but you accept the working of the Potter, then the pressure is relieved, and the vessel takes shape. But if there is resistance, if the human will, like some imperfection in the clay, chooses something other than the Potter has in mind, then the Potter can do nothing else but crush it down to a lump once again and, beginning with the same lump, make it over into a vessel which suits his heart and mind. The great lesson Jeremiah learned at the potter's house was that of the sovereign control of God. He is the potter, and we are the clay.

There is a beautiful lesson here in the word "repent" as it is used in reference to God. When you and I talk about repenting, we speak in terms of changing our mind. We started out to do something. Circumstances occurred which caused us to change our mind. So we then did something else. But that is not the way the word is used concerning God. Many Scriptures tell us that God never changes his mind. And though we employ the term "repent" because it looks as if he has changed his mind, it does not express the thought adequately. The Hebrew used here is very interesting. It is really the word "sigh," "heave a sigh." It can be used either as a sigh of sorrow, or a sigh of relief. The word is used both ways here in this passage. God says, "If I say to a nation, 'I'm going to destroy you,' or to an individual, 'I'm going to uproot you, crush you,' and I bring pressure upon you to that end, if you yield to it, if you conform to what the pressure is driving you to, then I will heave a sigh of relief."

Do you remember the days of the Cuban missile crisis, when we learned that the Soviet government was installing missiles in Cuba aimed at the hearts of American cities. President Kennedy immediately reacted by ordering the Navy to quarantine any missile-carrying ships, threatening to search the ships if they continued on their courses, which would have been an outright act of war. The nation trembled in uncertainty, wondering if we would be engulfed in a nuclear war with Russia. How tense those days were! And remember how, from every home in this country, there came a collective sigh of relief when it was announced that the Soviets had capitulated. We stood eyeball to eyeball, and they blinked first, as President Kennedy put it, and they removed the missiles from Cuba.

That is the kind of sigh God sighs. That is the way he repents. He has one thing in mind -- to make a vessel according to his design -- and nothing will stop him. But he does not like to judge. He does not like harshness and severity and chastisement. In fact, in the book of Lamentations, Jeremiah says that God does not willingly afflict the sons of men. He takes no delight in it at all. Isaiah calls it God's "strange" work. Judgment is not according to the desire of his heart. What he is doing is bringing pressure, molding and shaping the clay, forcing it up and out and into the shape of the vessel he wants it to be, hoping the clay will conform. And when it yields to his touch, he breathes a sigh of relief: "This is enough pressure, I don't have to bring any more."

But there is also the sigh of sorrow, the sigh which says, "Oh, it has to be done, there's no other way out." That is what you see occurring here in Judah. Verse 11:

**"Now, therefore, say to the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: 'Thus says the Lord, Behold, I am shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you. [There are the molding fingers of the potter at work.] Return, every one from his evil way, and amend your ways and your doings.'" {Jer 18:11 RSV}**

There is the heart of the potter, hoping that the pressure he is exerting will be enough so that he can sigh with relief as the clay yields to his hands. But as verse 12 makes clear, in Judah's case it did not happen:

**"But they say, 'That is in vain! [i.e. "Forget it, God!]" We will follow our own plans, and will every one act according to the stubbornness of his evil heart. '" {Jer 18:12 RSV}**

And so God sighed with sorrow. He expressed it in the verses which follow:

**"Therefore thus says the Lord:  
Ask among the nations,  
who has heard the like of this?"**

**The virgin Israel  
has done a very horrible thing.  
Does the snow of Lebanon leave the crags of Sirion?  
Do the mountain waters run dry, the cold flowing streams?" {Jer 18:13-14 RSV}**

That is, "Does this ever happen in nature? Does snow melt away from the tops of the high mountains? Do the waters of these streams ever run dry when the snow is continually melting? No, it is absolutely contrary to nature."

**"But my people have forgotten me,  
they burn incense to false gods;  
they have stumbled in their ways,  
in the ancient roads,  
and have gone into bypaths,  
not the highway,  
making their land a horror,  
a thing to be hissed at for ever. [Literally, a thing to be "whistled" at, in amazed  
dismay.]**

**Every one who passes by it is horrified  
and shakes his head.  
Like the east wind I will scatter them  
before the enemy.  
I will show them my back, not my face,  
in the day of their calamity." {Jer 18:15-17 RSV}**

That is the Potter, smashing the clay down into a lump again, that he might begin anew and make it yet a vessel according to his own design. In Verse 18 a very personal note is suddenly interjected. Evidently the king and the government of Judah are upset at the message of Jeremiah. They do not like this proclamation of sudden and certain doom, so they decide to take action against him. Verse 18:

**Then they said, "Come, let us make plots against Jeremiah, for the law shall not perish  
from the priest, nor counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophet. Come, let us  
smite him with the tongue, and let us not heed any of his words." {Jer 18:18 RSV}**

In other words, the government conspired, from the king on down, and began to plot against Jeremiah. They said to themselves, "We want to make one thing perfectly clear: This man is not going to change anything in this country. There is going to be no change. The law shall not perish from the priest, nor counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophet. In all three branches of government -- legislative, executive, and judicial -- there will be no change. Nothing is going to happen because of this man. No recession no problem will come into the land."

Then they launched a campaign of defilement and defamation against Jeremiah. They conspired together to undermine his authority and to speak against him as a person. Perhaps they even bugged his house, that they might find words to defame him. This drives Jeremiah back to the Lord in prayer. He runs to God with prayer -- the right place to go -- but consider this prayer:

**Give heed to me, O Lord,  
and hearken to my plea.  
Is evil a recompense for good?  
Yet they have dug a pit for my life.  
Remember how I stood before thee  
to speak good for them,  
to turn away thy wrath from them. {Jer 18:19-20 RSV}**

He reminds God how faithful he had been to intercede for these people, this very nation, how he had pled with God to turn his wrath away from them and spare them. And now what he gets for his pains is a campaign of defilement and defamation against him, and a plot against his life. Look how Jeremiah takes it:

**Therefore deliver up their children to famine;  
give them over to the power of the sword,  
let their wives become childless and widowed.  
May their men meet death by pestilence,  
their youths be slain by the sword in battle.  
May a cry be heard from their houses,  
when thou bringest the marauder suddenly upon them!  
For they have dug a pit to take me,  
and laid snares for my feet.  
Yet, thou, O Lord, knowest  
all their plotting to slay me.  
Forgive not their iniquity,  
nor blot out their sin from thy sight.  
Let them be overthrown before thee;  
deal with them in the time of thine anger. {Jer 18:21-25 RSV}**

"Get 'em, Lord!" Isn't that amazing? He could weep before God and pray for these people, intercede for them, as long as he was not personally involved. But when he got into the plot, and they were aiming at his life, then it was a different story. See what a "good evangelical" Jeremiah was?! "I love humanity; it's people I can't stand!"

Now, does this surprise us? No. This is but confirmation of that word Jeremiah learned about himself in Chapter 17: "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately corrupt," {Jer 17:9a RSV}. Even a prophet's heart can give way to the temptations of the flesh. Rather than following his Lord, and praying, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" {Luke 23:34}, Jeremiah's cry is, "Wipe them out, Lord. They're after me, now. Lord, pay 'em back in full measure, in kind!" Well, that is the way we pray, sometimes, and this man is of like passions with us. One of the most instructive things in this book is to see how this mighty prophet, who fulfilled a faithful ministry to this nation, had his times of weakness and trembling, of fear and of reaction in the flesh, as this prayer makes clear.

We will move rather quickly through Chapter 19. God sent Jeremiah back again to the potter's house:

**Thus said the Lord, "Go, buy a potter's earthen flask, and take some of the elders of the people and some of the senior priests, and go out to the valley of the son of Hinnom at the entry of the Potsherd Gate, and proclaim there the words that I tell you." {Jer 19:1-2 RSV}**

Back to the potter's house he went, this time not to watch the formation of a vessel in the hands of the potter, but to buy a potter's flask, a vessel already fired in the kiln, hardened, brittle. He was to take it outside the gates of the southern part of Jerusalem to the valley of Hinnom, which is called, in the New Testament, the valley of Gehenna. This was the garbage dump of Jerusalem, the place they threw all the refuse from the streets of the city. All the bodies of dogs and cats and other animals that died in the streets were left there to rot. It was the place where bodies of criminals were thrown after execution, to rot in the sun and be food for vultures -- an evil, stinking place. There Jeremiah was to take the elders of the people and some of the senior priests and say these words to them:

**"You shall say, 'Hear the word of the Lord, O kings of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem. Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Behold, I am bringing such evil upon this place that the ears of every one who hears of it will tingle. Because the people have forsaken me, and have profaned this place by burning incense in it to other gods whom neither they nor their fathers nor the kings of Judah have known; and because they have filled this place with the blood of innocents [This was a place where altars were erected to the god Molech, a fearsome, grinning god inside of which was built a great fire, and then through whose mouth the people passed their living children to be burned alive.], and have built the high places of Baal to burn their sons in the fire as burnt offerings to Baal, which I did not command or decree, nor did it come into my mind; therefore, behold, days are coming, says the Lord, when this place shall no longer be called Topheth, or the valley of the son of Hinnom, but the valley of Slaughter. And in this**

**place I will make void the plans of Judah and Jerusalem..." {Jer 19:3-7a RSV}**

There is the sovereignty of the Potter over the clay. Men make plans. God makes other plans. Napoleon had to learn that lesson. He once said, "God is on the side of the army with the heaviest artillery." There came a time in his life when, exiled on the island of St. Helena, he said, "Man proposes; but God disposes."

**"And in this place I will make void the plans of Judah and Jerusalem, and will cause their people to fall by the sword before their enemies, and by the hand of those who seek their life. I will give their dead bodies for food to the birds of the air and to the beasts of the earth. And I will make this city a horror, a thing to be hissed [whistled] at; every one who passes by it will be horrified and will hiss [whistle] because of all its disasters. And I will make them eat the flesh of their sons and their daughters, and every one shall eat the flesh of his neighbor in the siege and in the distress, with which their enemies and those who seek their life afflict them." {Jer 19:7-9 RSV}**

These words came literally true. In but a few years the armies of Nebuchadnezzar surrounded this city, laid siege to it, and the resulting famine grew so severe, as we will see in this very prophecy, that the people resorted to cannibalism and killed and ate their own children, and one another, in order to live. Then the armies broke down the walls of the city and leveled them to the ground, so that later those passing by would whistle in amazement at the destruction which came upon this city.

Now Jeremiah was told to do something with the flask he had purchased at the potter's house, beginning with Verse 10,

**"Then you shall break the flask in the sight of the men who go with you, and shall say to them, 'Thus says the Lord of hosts: So will I break this people and this city, as one breaks a potter's vessel, so that it can never be mended. Men shall bury in Topheth because there will be no place else to bury. Thus will I do to this place, says the Lord, and to its inhabitants, making this city like Topheth. The houses of Jerusalem and the houses of the kings of Judah -- all the houses upon whose roofs incense has been burned to all the host of heaven, and drink offerings have been poured out to other gods -- shall be defiled like the place of Topheth.'" {Jer 19:10-13 RSV}**

The chapter really ends here. Chapter 20 should begin at Verse 14 of Chapter 19. We will reserve that till next Sunday. But Jeremiah was told, in the striking figure God employed for the benefit of these people, to take the potter's vessel he had bought and dash it to pieces on a rock. And as they watched it fly into smithereens, so that it was impossible to bring it back together, these people were taught that they were dealing with a God whose love is so intense that he will never alter his purpose -- even if he has to destroy and crush and break them down again.

You see, that is the way the world sees God right now. They see the hell which is coming into our nation, the hellish things which are taking place. And soon it will be worse, according to the prophetic Scriptures. There will be worse signs taking place, worse affairs among men, in which "men's hearts will fail them for fear of seeing the things which are coming to pass on the face of the earth." They will cry out against God as being harsh and ruthless and vindictive, filled with vengeance and anger and hatred. That is all the world sees.

But the people of God are taught further truth. Jeremiah had been to the potter's house. He had seen the potter making a vessel, and he knew that it was love behind the Potter's pressures, and that when the vessel was marred, the Potter was capable of crushing it down again, bringing it to nothing but a lump, and then molding it, shaping it once again, perhaps doing this again and again, until at last it fulfilled what God wanted. That is the great lesson Jeremiah learned at the potter's house, and that we can learn at the potter's house, as well. In Paul's second letter to Timothy he says,

**"In a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver but also of wood and earthenware, and some for noble use, some for ignoble. If any one purifies himself from what is ignoble [those practices which appear just before this in the context -- wrongful attitudes, contentiousness, ungodliness, doctrinal aberrations, iniquity] then he will be a**

**vessel for noble use, consecrated and useful to the master of the house, ready for any good work." {2 Tim 2:20-21 RSV}**

One of the great lessons we can learn from the New Testament's use of the figure of the potter is in the book of Acts -- the incident when Judas brought back the thirty pieces of silver and flung them down at the feet of the priests, after having betrayed his Lord. The priests gathered up the money and took counsel together, and bought with the money a potter's field. And it was known thereafter as "the field of blood," {cf, Matt 27:6-10}. This once again is God's wonderful reminder of the heart of the Potter. For if you watch this Potter very carefully, at work in your life, you will find that his hands and his feet bear nail prints, and that it is through blood, the blood of the Potter himself, that the vessel is being shaped into what he wants it to be.

When we are in the Potter's hands, feeling his pressures, feeling the molding of his fingers, we can relax and trust him, for we know that this Potter has suffered with us and knows how we feel, but is determined to make us into a vessel "meet for the master's use" {2 Tim 2:21 KJV}. What a tremendous lesson, what a beautiful lesson Jeremiah learned at the potter's house -- one which I hope will guide us and guard us under the pressures which are coming into our lives these days. Remember that the Potter has a purpose in mind, and the skill and ability to fulfill it, no matter how many times he may have to make the vessel over again.

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