

Jeremiah 18:1-11

This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: ²“Get up, and go down to the potter’s house, and there I will reveal my words to you.”

³So I went down to the potter’s house, and he was making something on the wheel. ⁴But the pot he was forming out of the clay was ruined as he shaped it with his hands, so the potter formed it into a different pot, whatever he saw fit to make.

⁵Then the word of the LORD came to me.

⁶House of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter does? declares the LORD. See, like clay in the potter’s hands, that is what you are in my hands, house of Israel. ⁷One time I may say that a nation or a kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down, and destroyed, ⁸but if that nation I spoke about repents of its evil, then I will relent and not bring the disaster I had planned to bring against it. ⁹Another time I may say that a nation or a kingdom is to be built and planted, ¹⁰but if they do what is evil in my sight by not listening to my voice, then I will not bring about the good I said I would do for them.

¹¹Now therefore say this to the men of Judah and to those who live in Jerusalem. This is what the LORD says. Look! I am forming a disaster against you. I am devising a plan against you. Turn from your evil ways, each of you, and reform your ways and your actions.

Reform

I.

Splat! A lump of clay is smashed down in the center of a circle. 6,000 years ago in Mesopotamia the potter’s wheel was invented. Not much has changed about the basic structure since then, other than motors to turn the wheel instead of the potter’s feet.

One of the things archeologists are always searching for in their digs are shards of pottery. Those little broken pieces help them to date the civilization. Throughout human history there has been a need for vessels that will hold water for cooking and cleaning; people have needed plates and bowls and cups for eating and drinking; lamps have been needed to burn oil to light up their homes. Archeologists can determine which little broken bits were likely from things used in everyday life, and which were decorative.

Today most of the earthenware we use comes from some far-off factory made by machines rather than individual artisans. Most of those who use a wheel and their hands are just hobbyists; the rest are artists creating pieces that, even if used from time to time, are mostly intended for display.

“Get up, and go down to the potter’s house, and there I will reveal my words to you” (Jeremiah 18:2, EHV). Did you think that it is only modern culture that likes visual aids? In our church we enjoy sermon slides that display the passages being used at any given time. Sometimes there are even pictures or videos that help to illustrate a point. It certainly works in a culture that reaches for a phone to pull up a YouTube video any time someone wants to see how something is made or learn a new skill. Long before YouTube and screens in a church or school setting, God used visual aids to punctuate his message to Jeremiah.

“So I went down to the potter’s house, and he was making something on the wheel” (Jeremiah 18:3, EHV). I wonder what Jeremiah thought about as he watched the potter work. Maybe he thought a little bit about the material—basically just dirt. Perhaps that made him think about creation. “The LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being” (Genesis 2.7, EHV). God can take lumps of dirt and make living, breathing masterpieces. As he stood there watching, did Jeremiah think about all the ways God continues to mold and shape his masterpieces—teaching us from the various things that happen to us in our lives, and preparing us for things *he* knows are still to come?

“So I went down to the potter’s house, and he was making something on the wheel. ⁴But the pot he was forming out of the clay was ruined as he shaped it with his hands, so the potter formed it into a different pot, whatever he saw fit to make” (Jeremiah 18:3-4, EHV). The process is called “throwing.” That lump of clay is slapped into place on the wheel. No matter how skilled or unskilled the potter, the first step looks much the same for all.

It’s the hands that make the difference. Steady and skillful hands begin to work their magic on the spinning clay and piece seems to grow or shrink at the potter’s will. A thumb gouged into the center begins to define a vessel of some kind. The thickness and the shape of the walls are maintained by one hand on the outside and one on the inside. Get the walls too thin as the piece spins and the whole thing collapses on itself. Stopping the wheel, the potter unceremoniously scrunches the mess into a new lump and begins the process all over.

What was it, exactly, that the Lord wanted him to see?

“House of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter does? declares the LORD. See, like clay in the potter’s hands, that is what you are in my hands, house of Israel” (Jeremiah 18:6, EHV). Jeremiah was not there to learn a new skill or to witness a master craftsman at work, but for an object lesson. God compared himself to the potter and Israel to the lump of clay. God could do whatever he wanted with the nation of Israel and no one could argue with him, just as a ball of clay could never argue with the potter about what would be done with the lump.

All too often Israel disobeyed God, even though he had shown his goodness to his people over many generations. They needed to hear and understand that *God* was still in control. *God* was still the potter and they were still the clay. He still would mold them and shape them according to his good and gracious plans.

II.

Sometimes you probably feel like a lump of clay—bruised and battered, smashed flat and scrunched up into a squishy ball. More than once the Bible used the illustration of clay and a potter. Paul said to the Romans: “Who are you, a mere human being, to talk back to God? Shall the thing that is formed say to the one who formed it, ‘Why did you make me like this?’ No. ²¹ Doesn’t the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay one pot for special use and another for ordinary use?” (Romans 9:20-21, EHV).

God is *still* in control. Though the world appears to us to be *out* of control, God still shapes and molds the events of history for his people—for believers. He still uses what is happening in the world to draw his own closer to him, and to prepare them for the things that are yet to come in our lives.

When Jesus sent out the Twelve, he knew they would face adversity as they proclaimed the gospel. To give them confidence he reassured them: “Are not two sparrows sold for a small coin? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground without the knowledge and consent of your Father. ³⁰ And even the hairs of your head are all numbered. ³¹ So do not be afraid. You are worth more than many sparrows” (Matthew 10:29-31, EHV).

God is in control, not only in the events of history and controlling the nations, but molding and shaping the course of our lives individually. Believers are precious to him. The Everlasting Potter knows the adversity you face—and the adversity you *will* face in the future. He knows exactly what you need to be prepared, come what may. The events of today he uses to shape you to deal with the events of tomorrow.

“Now therefore say this to the men of Judah and to those who live in Jerusalem. This is what the LORD says. Look! I am forming a disaster against you. I am devising a plan against you. Turn from your evil ways, each of you, and reform your ways and your actions” (Jeremiah 18:11, EHV). Sometimes bad things happen in the lives of Christians. Sometimes we bring them on ourselves by our own sinful actions. Sometimes we need a warning from God. When those sins come back to haunt us, God is calling us to repent and reform, just as he called out to Israel through Jeremiah.

III.

It is important to remember that God wouldn't call you to repent and reform if he were not concerned about you and your eternal future. He wouldn't call you to reform if he hadn't already taken care of the sin problem for the world. He *does* call you to repent because he *does* care—and because he already *has* done something about it.

Throughout history God has molded nations and kingdoms and people to do his bidding. Heathen nations and their kings were used for God's purposes to bring his people to the place of his choosing, or to set in motion the wheels of history that would bring about his purposes.

No matter how mashed down and flattened Israel might appear at certain points in history, God still had his plan and purpose in mind. Sometimes his people needed to be disciplined for their wickedness and sin. It might seem as though God had abandoned them, but it was not so. God was still in control, like a potter with a lump of clay. God would shape and mold Israel, even using the heathen nations around them for his own purposes, to preserve the line of the Messiah alive. God would bring about his salvation at his own time and in his own way.

He did. "When the set time had fully come, God sent his Son to be born of a woman, so that he would be born under the law, ⁵ in order to redeem those under the law, so that we would be adopted as sons" (Galatians 4:4-6, EHV). When *God* determined every piece of the puzzle of history was in the correct position, he sent Jesus into the world. Though he was completely and truly God, Jesus was born completely and truly human. He was born this way so that he would be subject to God's moral law to serve as our substitute. All this he did so that he could live perfectly in our place and die innocently in our place.

The most wonderful and glorious molding and shaping of all was done, not at a potter's wheel, but by the Lord Jesus, under the plan and direction of the Heavenly Father. We were molded and shaped by Jesus' sacrifice to be declared righteous and innocent in God's eyes. We are made sons and daughters of God who are legitimate heirs to sit alongside Jesus on his heavenly throne.

IV.

From time to time in history, this message of salvation has been obscured, or misunderstood. Old Testament history is filled with the accounts of good and evil kings in Israel. The people wandered away from God and his promises. God sent prophets to reform and restore his Word, and the people repented and returned to God.

Throughout history after the New Testament people have turned away from God and to gods of their own making and choosing. There have been times when the gospel was obscured under rules taught by men and under plain disuse. God still was and is in control. He continues to guide and shape and mold.

On this celebration of the Reformation brought about by God's servant Martin Luther we give thanks that God gave us back the true, unhindered, unobscured gospel under Luther's leadership. We pray that God would continue to lead us to continually reform our attempts to once again put our own spin on things rather than let the Word tell us what God wants us to hear and know and believe.

"Get up, and go down to the potter's house, and there I will reveal my words to you" (Jeremiah 18:2, EHV). And God *has*. The Word is here—preserved for us all these centuries and translated so that we can understand it in our own language. Restored and reformed so that it wouldn't be obscured any longer.

"Turn from your evil ways, each of you, and reform your ways and your actions" (Jeremiah 18:11, EHV). God grant that each of us individually would guard ourselves from evil and continually reform ourselves to live more and more as children of our Heavenly Father. God grant that corporately—as a congregation and as a church body—we may continue to guard our doctrine and our practice so that we continue to be the light of the world. God bless us all as he continues to mold and shape us for the future he knows is coming. Amen.