

# Jeremiah 18

## The Potter's Wheel

### Setting the Stage

Have you ever watched a potter at work? Some of you may remember the film *Ghost*, with its famous pottery scene. Others may have worked with clay themselves, perhaps beginning with Play-Doh when we were children. There is something fascinating about watching a lump of material become a useful vessel in the hands of someone who knows what he is doing. The potter has a design in mind, but the clay does not always cooperate. Sometimes the vessel becomes misshapen or spoiled, and the potter begins again.

Jeremiah 18 takes us into that workshop. God sends Jeremiah down to the potter's house, not simply to observe a craft but to receive another prophetic lesson. We have encountered enacted messages before in Jeremiah. Remember the linen waistband in chapter 13? Jeremiah was told to wear it, bury it and later retrieve it, only to discover that it had become ruined and useless. Now another ordinary object becomes the means by which God speaks about Judah.

But this chapter contains more than a pottery lesson. The first seventeen verses reveal God's freedom to respond to the choices of nations and individuals. The final six verses reveal Jeremiah's increasingly troubled heart. The prophet who has pleaded for his people finally reaches the point of praying against those who are plotting to destroy him.

We need to hear both messages. The potter's wheel tells us something about God's sovereignty and our response. Jeremiah's prayer tells us something about the pain of serving God when the very people we are trying to help turn against us.

### Big Idea

God is sovereign, but His sovereignty does not make our responses meaningless. He calls His people to turn from evil and allows Himself the freedom to respond to their repentance or rebellion. The clay should not resist the potter. Yet Jeremiah himself struggles to live with that truth when opposition becomes personal. The chapter invites us to yield to God's shaping hands and to bring our anger to Him without allowing it to become the final word.

### Down to the Potter's House (Jeremiah 18:1-4)

God tells Jeremiah to go down to the potter's house, where He will announce His words to him. I find the Hebrew language interesting here. The verb associated with hearing, *shema*, reminds us that Jeremiah is not merely attending a demonstration. He must listen. The potter's activity is the visible lesson, but the word of God is what will explain it.

That is an important reminder whenever I open the Bible to teach others. I am not merely preparing something for you to hear. I must be listening myself. Jeremiah must receive the message before he can deliver it.

The potter is working at his wheel, probably a simple arrangement of stone wheels connected by a shaft. His feet provide the motion while his hands shape the clay. The vessel begins to take form, but something goes wrong. Jeremiah says the vessel was spoiled in the potter's hand, and the potter makes it again into another vessel, whatever seems right to him.

The Hebrew word for spoiled is *shachat*. We encountered the same word in Jeremiah 13, where the linen waistband became ruined. The repetition is significant. In both chapters, God uses an ordinary object to demonstrate the corruption of Judah. The garment could no longer serve its original purpose. Now the vessel is spoiled while still being shaped.

Yet there is an important difference. The potter does not simply discard the clay. He works it again. What was spoiled is refashioned into another vessel.

That is the hopeful part of this otherwise disturbing lesson. God has not lost His ability to make something useful from what has gone wrong.

## **The Potter's Pleasure**

Verse 4 tells us that the potter remade the vessel as it seemed good to him. The Hebrew expression is worth considering. The word *yashar* carries the sense of what is right, straight or pleasing. The potter is not simply entertaining himself. He is producing something that meets his 'straight' purpose.

And that leads me to a passage that has meant a great deal to me over the years. Psalm 17:15 says, "As for me, I shall behold Your face in righteousness; I will be satisfied with Your likeness when I awake." I have often pondered that verse. When will I finally be satisfied? Not merely content with my circumstances, but satisfied in the deepest sense? When I awake in His likeness.

John takes us toward the same expectation in 1 John 3. We are already children of God, but what we shall be has not yet appeared. When Yeshua appears, we shall be like Him because we shall see Him as He is.

I know that is a little excursion from the potter's workshop, but I think it belongs here. God is shaping a people for His purposes, and His work is not finished. I am not yet what I shall be. Neither are you. There is a day coming when His work will be complete, and I will be satisfied when I awake in His likeness. For now, back to the wheel.

## **Can God Change His Mind? (Jeremiah 18:5-10)**

God explains the object lesson beginning in verse 5. He asks whether He cannot deal with the house of Israel as the potter deals with the clay. Israel is in His hand.

That sounds straightforward until we read the next verses. God says that if He announces judgment against a nation and that nation turns from its evil, He may relent concerning the calamity He intended. Conversely, if He announces blessing and that nation does evil, refusing to obey Him, He may reconsider the good He had promised.

That is fascinating.

Some people imagine sovereignty to mean that God has determined every outcome in such a way that human choices make no difference. But Jeremiah's explanation does not allow us to dismiss human responsibility. God is sovereign, and part of His sovereignty is His freedom to respond to what people do.

Warren Wiersbe makes the distinction that God's character does not change, but His actions toward people may change according to their response. Christopher Wright describes this as “responsive sovereignty.” I think that expression is especially helpful.

Wright also warns against assuming that every biblical reference to the potter and clay makes precisely the same point. Isaiah uses the pottery image to challenge the absurdity of clay questioning its maker, especially in relation to God's surprising use of Cyrus (Isaiah 45:9–13). Jeremiah's emphasis is different. Here the clay's response matters, and God declares His freedom to act accordingly.

That is not a weakness in God. It is part of His sovereign rule.

### **Paul, Pharaoh and the Potter (Romans 9:14–24)**

Rabbi Saul, the Apostle Paul, returns to the potter-and-clay imagery in Romans 9. There he discusses God's freedom to show mercy and to harden, using Pharaoh as a significant example. He asks whether the thing molded can question the One who molded it.

Paul's discussion is larger than Jeremiah 18, and we should not pretend that the two passages are identical. Nevertheless, they belong to the same biblical conversation about God's authority, human resistance and divine mercy.

Romans 9 also tells us that God endured with great patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction in order to make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy. Paul goes on to speak about those God has called, not only from among Jewish people but also from among the Gentiles.

There is the glory of God. He is not merely demonstrating that He has the power to destroy. He is making known His mercy. People who deserved judgment can become recipients of grace. That is why I resist reading the potter's wheel as though its only message were, “God can do whatever He likes, and you have no say in the matter.” Of course, God is sovereign. But Jeremiah explicitly tells us that He calls people to turn and that their response matters.

### **Shuvu Na — Turn Back, Please (Jeremiah 18:11–12)**

The national message becomes personal in verse 11. God announces that He is devising a plan against Judah and then calls the people to turn from their evil ways and reform their ways and deeds.

The Hebrew is especially striking: *Shuvu na, ish midarko hara'ah*—turn back, each person from his evil way. I love the urgency of *shuvu na*. The command *shuvu* means return or turn back, and *na* adds the force of an appeal. It's close to a 'please.' God is not merely delivering information about a future disaster. He is calling His people to respond.

And notice *ish*. Each person. Every individual. The cantillation tradition even helps us hear the emphasis. The *ta'amim*, the marks used in chanting the Hebrew text, draw attention to the individual appeal. It is as though God is saying, "You! Yes, you. Don't miss this."

The nation is going into exile. Jeremiah has already made that clear. But what about individuals in our days? What about your Mrs. Goldberg? What about that fellow, Shimon bar Yosef? What about any individual Jewish person listening to Jeremiah? What about you?

National judgment does not cancel individual responsibility. God calls each person to turn from the bad way and make good his ways. But how does that happen? Is the answer merely improved behavior? More religious activity? More fasting? More prayer? Better performance?

I don't think so. Those things do have their place, but they are not the foundation. The answer is found in the potter's workshop. Stop resisting the Potter.

## **The Clay That Allows**

Think about resistance for a moment. To resist is to stand against something. Satan is the great adversary, the one who opposes God's purposes. Judah has been resisting God for generations, and the result is a spoiled vessel.

The clay that succeeds is the clay that allows the potter to work. I am not suggesting that human beings are literally inert lumps of material without minds or wills. Jeremiah has just emphasized our individual responsibility to respond. That is precisely why the illustration matters. God calls us to yield rather than resist.

Faith is not primarily an achievement we present to God. It is trusting Him enough to allow Him to shape us. We give ourselves to Him, and He makes of us what serves His purposes. This is where Wright's "responsive sovereignty" becomes so useful. God is sovereign, and we are responsible. He is free to shape and reshape, and He calls us to respond in trust.

Give yourself to the LORD. Allow Him to shape and reshape you. And remember that His purpose is not merely to make you comfortable but to make you useful, to reflect His character before the world. One day, when I awake in His likeness, I will be satisfied. What a day of rejoicing that will be.

## **Thinking, Planning and Resisting**

There is another Hebrew thread running through these chapters. The language of thinking, devising and planning appears repeatedly. The word *machashavah* means a thought or plan, and Jeremiah uses related forms of this word here to describe both God's intentions and the people's schemes.

God is devising a plan concerning Judah, but the people are also making plans. The question is whose thinking will govern their lives. Proverbs reminds us of the significance of what takes place within us. James Allen famously developed the theme in his book *As a Man Thinketh*. I am not suggesting that positive thinking somehow replaces faith, but I do think Jeremiah is confronting Judah's deeply established patterns of thought.

I hear Jeremiah saying something like this: Come on, folks. Think rightly. Believe rightly. Work with God rather than against Him. Unfortunately, that is not the answer Jeremiah receives.

### **A Plot Against the Prophet (Jeremiah 18:18)**

Verse 18 begins the second movement of the chapter. The people say, “Come, let us devise plans against Jeremiah.” There is that planning language again. They reason that the priest will still have Torah, the wise man will still have counsel, and the prophet will still have a word. In other words, they believe the established religious authorities will continue functioning without Jeremiah. They do not need this troublesome prophet challenging their confidence.

It is an extraordinary response to God's invitation to repent. Instead of reconsidering and turning from their wrong ways, they decide to silence the messenger. I see here a triple plot against Jeremiah. There is first the whispering campaign, an attempt to discredit his message. Then comes opposition to his words, which I understand to be carrying the possibility of formal accusation. Finally, the hostility reaches the level of a threat against his life.

We should distinguish what the text states explicitly from what we infer about the developing conspiracy. But the direction of the opposition is unmistakable. Jeremiah is no longer merely unpopular. His enemies are organizing against him.

And notice where they place their confidence: priests, wise men and prophets. Religious authority, intellectual authority and public influence appear to be on their side. Jeremiah has been warning Judah to trust the LORD. The people answer by trusting the very institutions that have failed to bring them back to Him.

### **The Weeping Prophet Has Had Enough (Jeremiah 18:19-23)**

Then Jeremiah prays, and the prayer is not comfortable reading. He reminds God that he stood before Him to speak good on behalf of these people, to turn away God's wrath from them. He has pleaded for their welfare, and now they are digging a pit for his life.

His response is fierce. He calls for judgment upon his enemies and their families. He asks God not to forgive their iniquity or blot out their sin. What happened to the weeping prophet?

Nothing happened that suddenly transformed him into a different person. Jeremiah is still Jeremiah. He has spent years pleading, warning and suffering because he loves his people. But that love has brought him pain, and now the people he sought to save are plotting against him. He has reached the end of his patience.

The Psalms give us similar prayers. In fact, I would aver that any and every emotion known to humanity finds expression somewhere or in many places in the Psalter. For instance, Psalms 35, 58 and 109 contain cries for justice that can sound shocking to modern readers. They are commonly called imprecatory prayers. They ask God to act against those who are doing evil.

We may find them difficult, especially as followers of Yeshua, but Scripture does not conceal them. They reveal the anguish of people who have experienced serious injustice and who bring that anguish before God.

There is a difference between pretending we are not angry and honestly telling God what is happening inside us.

Paul tells us in Ephesians 4, drawing upon Psalm 4, to be angry and yet not sin. Anger itself is not necessarily the problem. What we do with it matters enormously. Jeremiah's prayer gives us a window into a wounded servant's heart, but it does not automatically provide the model for how every believer should respond to personal enemies.

Jeremiah is at the end of his tether. Longsuffering is not eternal suffering. It has limits. His prayer is real. His pain is real. His frustration is real. But it is not the end of the story.

## **A Better Response Than Revenge**

Here I want to bring us to Yeshua. Jeremiah pleaded for his people, and they turned against him. On the other hand, centuries later, Yeshua came to His own, and many rejected Him. He faced accusations, ridicule, betrayal, legal proceedings and ultimately execution. He could have called upon heavenly armies to defend Himself. Instead He went to the cross.

And there, while suffering at the hands of His enemies, He prayed, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." What a contrast with Jeremiah 18. I don't say that to diminish Jeremiah. He was a faithful prophet carrying an extraordinarily painful assignment. But Yeshua gives us a fuller picture of the love and mercy of God. He did not merely ask that judgment be delayed. He bore our sins Himself. Abel certainly could have cried out for justice, and if I read the book of Hebrews correctly, he well did so. But in contrast to that, the "blood of Yeshua speaks better than the blood of Abel." (Hebrews 12:24, Genesis 4:10) Mercy triumphs over judgment. (James 2:13)

During Passover we remember redemption through the blood of the lamb. As a Jewish believer in Yeshua, I see the greater redemption accomplished through Messiah's death and resurrection. He endured the hostility of sinners, died, was buried and rose again. His disciples, who had scattered in fear, became witnesses to the risen Messiah. Paul later reminds the Corinthians that hundreds of people witnessed His resurrection.

The grave was not the end. Jeremiah's enemies wanted him silenced. Yeshua's enemies believed the cross would end His presence if not only His influence. But God's purposes were not defeated by either human hostility or death.

That is why our final model is not the exhausted prophet crying for vengeance. It is the Messiah who forgives, saves and restores.

## What Will You Allow God to Make?

So we return to the potter's house. The clay is spoiled. The potter is still at work. God calls Judah to turn towards Him, and the people refuse. They would rather silence Jeremiah than listen to him. We have the same choice before us. We can resist God's work, justify ourselves and continue along the familiar road. Or we can yield to Him.

The potter's wheel is not merely a lesson about God's power. It is an invitation to trust His hands.

And when the shaping becomes uncomfortable, when opposition comes or when our own hearts become angry and exhausted, we can bring that pain to Him as Jeremiah did. But we need not remain where Jeremiah ended this chapter. We can look to Yeshua, who endured hostility without surrendering His mission of mercy.

Allow the Potter to work. Allow Him to reshape what has become spoiled. Trust His purposes even when you cannot yet see the finished vessel.

One day, when I awake in His likeness, I will be satisfied.

## Takeaways

- God is sovereign, and my response to Him matters.
- The call to repent is personal: each of us must turn from our own evil way.
- Faith means yielding to the Potter rather than resisting His work, taking His mission on board and learning to think His thoughts.
- Anger can be brought honestly to God. He made us with emotions.
- Yeshua shows us a response to enemies that goes beyond Jeremiah's cry for judgment.

## Memory Verse

Jeremiah 18:6

“Behold, like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in My hand, O house of Israel.”

## WATCH

Watch the original live teaching on YouTube of Jeremiah 18:

<https://youtu.be/fUzEpJKghmM>

## What's Next?

### Jeremiah 19 — When the Clay Can No Longer Be Reshaped

Last chapter, Jeremiah visited the potter's workshop and watched a spoiled vessel being reshaped while the clay was still workable. In chapter 19, he returns to the potter, but this time he buys a finished earthenware jar. God instructs him to take some elders and senior priests to the Valley of Ben Hinnom, a place associated with idolatry and terrible practices, including child sacrifice. There he must deliver another message of judgment and then smash the jar before his witnesses.

The contrast is unmistakable. Wet clay can be reshaped. A fired jar, once shattered, cannot simply be put back on the wheel and remade. Judah has repeatedly refused God's invitations to repent, and now the consequences are becoming unavoidable. Jeremiah even uses Hebrew wordplay involving the jar and the pouring out of Judah's plans. What began as a lesson about God's freedom to reshape becomes a warning about the consequences of persistent resistance.

But there is another important question. Why does God devote so much attention to judgment? Why not hurry on to restoration and hope? Chapter 19 forces us to confront the seriousness of sin before rushing to the comfort of forgiveness. And in the closing verse, we discover two failures that explain Judah's predicament: the people have stiffened their necks and refused to listen to God's words.

The challenge is personal. Will we remain pliable in God's hands, and will we listen when He speaks?

### Bibliography

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