

Jeremiah 19

When the Clay Can No Longer Be Reshaped

Setting the Stage

Last week we accompanied Jeremiah to the potter's house. We watched the potter work at his wheel, shaping a vessel from a lump of clay. When the vessel became spoiled, the potter worked the clay again, making another vessel as seemed good to him. There was hope in that workshop. The clay was still pliable, the potter was still working, and the possibility of something new remained. Now Jeremiah returns to the subject of pottery, but something significant has changed. This time God tells him to buy an earthenware jar. That's it. One item on the shopping list for the prophet! He isn't going to take it home and put it on the mantelpiece. He has another assignment, another object lesson, and this one is considerably more disturbing.

I think chapters 18 and 19 belong together. They are two movements of the same prophetic message. The first demonstrates God's freedom to reshape a misguided people who turn back toward Him. The second demonstrates what happens when those people repeatedly refuse to listen. Once the clay has been fired and the jar is shattered, it cannot simply be returned to the wheel. What could a broken jar, an ancient valley outside Jerusalem, and a prophecy delivered more than 2,500 years ago possibly tell us about our lives today? Quite a lot, I think, especially about truth, consequences, and our willingness to listen.

Big Idea

God's warnings are not empty threats. Persistent refusal to hear Him has consequences, and the opportunity for reshaping must not be taken for granted. Yet even in this severe chapter, God identifies the heart of Judah's failure: the people have stiffened their necks and refused to heed His words. The invitation for us is to remain humble, teachable, and responsive to the God who wants us to know Him.

The Witnesses and the Valley (Jeremiah 19:1–3)

God instructs Jeremiah to buy an earthenware jar and take with him some of the elders of the people and some of the senior priests. They are to accompany him to the Valley of Ben Hinnom, just south of Jerusalem, near the Potsherd Gate. The location is not incidental, and neither is the company. Why bring the elders? Why not simply send Jeremiah to preach to the crowds? Because these men have responsibility for the people. They are supposed to know God's instructions and help the nation live accordingly. Instead, they have tolerated practices that should have horrified them. Their presence at this ceremony is not merely ceremonial. They are witnesses to the charges against Judah, but they are also among those who must hear the indictment.

James reminds us that teachers will incur a stricter judgment (James 3:1). That concerns me as a teacher, and I hope it concerns everyone who has accepted responsibility for instructing others

in God's ways. If I know better, I ought to live better. If I am responsible for teaching others, I must take that responsibility seriously. There is a lesson here for every believer who calls someone else to repentance. People sometimes complain that religious folk are forever telling others what is wrong with them, and perhaps they don't realize that we ourselves have already had to hear the same charge. Before I tell someone else to change, I ought to be able to say, "God has been dealing with me about this very thing. Perhaps what I've learned will help you too." Repentance should begin with those who teach it, and then those leaders should call others to respond as well.

The Valley of Ben Hinnom was associated with some of Judah's most dreadful religious practices. Jeremiah 7 has already introduced us to this place, where the people built high places and sacrificed their children. The worship of foreign gods, including Baal, had become entangled with the life of Judah. Josiah had defiled Topheth as part of his reforms (2 Kings 23:10), yet the spiritual condition of the nation had deteriorated again. Religious reform under one king had not produced lasting obedience in the hearts of the people. The valley was notorious for its associations with defilement and judgment, and its later connection in the time of Yeshua with Gehenna only adds another layer to its terrible reputation for us. Jeremiah brings his witnesses to a location where the landscape itself seems to testify against the nation.

The Charges Against Judah (Jeremiah 19:4–5)

Then God begins listing the charges. Notice how the accusations accumulate in verses 4 and 5. The people have forsaken Him, made the place foreign to His purposes, offered sacrifices to other gods, filled it with innocent blood, and built high places where children were burned as offerings. And this. And this. And this. It almost sounds like someone insisting that every offense be entered into the record. These are not minor mistakes or breaches of religious etiquette. They are scandalous violations of the covenant, and the repeated accusations leave no room for excuses. The language reminds me of the charges in an ancient treaty, where the obligations have been made clear and the violations are now being read aloud.

God declares that such practices were never commanded by Him. They did not even enter His mind. I find that extraordinary, because it raises the question of how people who had received God's revelation could have moved so far from His character. Some interpreters have suggested that these sacrifices may have been defended through a confused mixture of the worship of the LORD and the worship of other gods. Whether or not that was the intention of every participant, the text is emphatic: God utterly disowns the practice. Judah was not supposed to imitate the surrounding nations. Israel was called to influence the world through its relationship with the LORD, not to allow the world to redefine its understanding of Him. Yet here they are, practicing things so foreign to God's character that He declares He never commanded, spoke of, or even contemplated them.

That raises a larger question about religion itself. Ask someone about their religion and you may receive a list of activities. "I attend synagogue on Saturday." "I go to church on Sunday." "I don't smoke, I don't drink, I don't chew, and I don't go with the girls that do." Is that what faith

amounts to? A collection of things we do and things we avoid? Jeremiah has already given us a better answer. In chapter 9, God tells the wise person not to boast in wisdom, the strong person not to boast in strength, and the rich person not to boast in riches. Rather, the one who boasts should boast in understanding and knowing Him (Jeremiah 9:23–24). That's the heart of Jeremiah's message. Know God. Love the LORD your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. Be in relationship with Him, learn His character, and live accordingly.

Judah had developed practices so foreign to God's character that they could only be described as religion of their own invention. They were not influencing the surrounding world toward God; they were allowing the surrounding world to reshape their understanding of Him. That danger has not disappeared. We can construct religious systems, defend them vigorously, and still fail to know the God we claim to worship. We can become experts in religious language and activity while losing sight of the relationship for which those things were intended. The question is not simply whether we are religious. The question is whether we know Him.

The Jar and the Judgment (Jeremiah 19:6–11)

Jeremiah's Hebrew is particularly interesting here. The earthenware jar is called a *baqbuq*, a word that sounds rather like the gurgling of liquid from a vessel. In verse 7, God uses a related-sounding verb, *baqaq*, to describe how He will empty or frustrate Judah's plans. There is a deliberate sound play. The vessel and the emptying belong together, and the effect would have been especially memorable to those hearing the prophecy in Hebrew. Think about the location. Jeremiah has taken this jar to a place associated with discarded pottery and defilement. God declares that He will empty the counsel of Judah and Jerusalem there. Their clever plans, their confidence, and their imagined security will come to nothing. What a shanda. What a disgrace. They have exchanged the wisdom of God for schemes that will ultimately be poured out like discarded pottery leftovers.

Then the language becomes more severe. God warns of death by the sword and bodies left unburied, exposed to birds and animals. In Israel's culture, burial was an important expression of dignity toward the dead. To be denied burial was a terrible dishonor, an additional humiliation beyond the death itself. The land was meant to reflect Israel's covenant relationship with God. Its Sabbaths, its fruitfulness, its treatment of the living and the dead, and its responsibilities toward those who dwelt within it all belonged within that relationship. Now the very land would become a witness to the nation's failure. Josiah had once sought to cleanse the nation of its defilement, but the people had returned to the practices that brought judgment upon them (2 Kings 23:10; Jeremiah 7:30–34). The result would be a catastrophe that no amount of political maneuvering could prevent.

In verse 10 Jeremiah must smash the jar in front of the elders. There is no ambiguity in the action. A fired earthenware jar cannot be returned to the potter's wheel and reshaped like wet clay. Its broken pieces testify to a judgment that cannot be undone. Chapter 18 asked whether Judah would allow the Potter to reshape her. Chapter 19 shows the consequence of repeatedly refusing. The contrast is deliberate and sobering. God had not lost His ability to work with His

people, but the people had persisted in rejecting His warnings until the announced destruction could no longer be avoided. The shattered jar is not an invitation to admire a clever prophetic illustration. It is a warning about the seriousness of refusing God.

Don't Hurry Past the Horror (Jeremiah 19:7–9)

I find verse 9 almost unbearable. God describes the conditions of siege becoming so desperate that people will eat the flesh of their own children and one another. We know that famine and warfare can reduce human beings to unimaginable behavior, but knowing that such things have happened does not make this passage any easier to read. The language repulses me. Jeremiah uses expressions of horror and astonishment to communicate the magnitude of what is coming. The consequences are not presented as an unfortunate inconvenience or a temporary setback. The coming destruction is terrifying, and the prophet wants his hearers to understand just how terrible it will be. The language of judgment is severe because the sins being judged are severe.

When I read this, I want to move quickly to a more hopeful passage. Perhaps you do too. We want to say, "Well, that was then. We have Yeshua. We have the Holy Spirit. We have new life." Yes, and thank God for all of that. But don't be in such a hurry. Why does God devote so much space in Scripture to judgment? Why are we required to hear these terrible descriptions? Why not hurry on to the good news or at least some better news? The answer might be that we have become far too comfortable with the assumption that we deserve good things. We expect kindness, consideration, recognition, and favorable treatment. We imagine that life owes us something, and we are surprised when our expectations are disappointed. Jeremiah challenges that confidence and requires us to examine what we think we deserve.

I remember teaching this chapter on our weekly Zoom Bible class while at the same time I was visiting Warsaw, not long after the Russian invasion of Ukraine began in 2022. Refugees were pouring into Poland and other European countries. People were under pressure, and the atmosphere felt tense. I was surprised by what I experienced as rudeness in everyday encounters. Perhaps I had recently spent too much time in Kansas and Missouri, where people seemed friendlier. Perhaps I was comparing Warsaw with Sydney or other places in Australia. Perhaps the people around me were simply exhausted by the extraordinary demands of those weeks. I didn't want to malign them, because I couldn't know what burdens they were carrying. But the experience made me think about my own expectations. Why did I assume people should make room for me, yield to me, or treat me in a particular way? Why was I surprised when they didn't?

Because somewhere inside me was the thought, "I deserve it." I am entitled. But am I? The book of Jeremiah repeatedly confronts that assumption of entitlement. Judah had received extraordinary privileges from God, yet those privileges had become grounds for presumption rather than gratitude and obedience. When we read chapter 19, we ought not merely to shake our heads at the sins of ancient Jerusalem. We should examine ourselves. We should be willing to say, "I don't deserve. I am unworthy. I am a sinner. I am sorry." That's not a comfortable place to stand, but it may be exactly where we need to stand before we can appreciate mercy. Don't

rush away from it. If we hurry past the seriousness of sin, we may never understand the wonder of grace and forgiveness.

Two Clues in the Final Verse (Jeremiah 19:14–15)

Thankfully, Jeremiah's prophecy does not end with chapter 19. There is more to come. But even here, in the closing verse, I find two clues that point us toward the proper response. Jeremiah returns from Topheth and stands in the court of the LORD's house. He announces that God is bringing the calamity He has declared because the people have stiffened their necks so as not to heed His words. Did you hear those two reasons? They stiffened their necks, and they would not listen. Sometimes the clearest way to understand what God wants is to notice what He condemns. If stiff-necked resistance has brought judgment, then the opposite is humility and willingness to yield. If refusing to heed His words has brought disaster, then the opposite is listening and trusting what He says. Those two responses are as relevant today as they were in Jeremiah's Jerusalem.

I love the expression "stiff-necked." You can almost see the posture. The shoulders are set, the neck is rigid, and the person refuses to move. Think of a rugby front rower bracing himself against the opposition. "I will not!" That is not the posture God wants from His people. He calls us to humility. Be pliable. Be moldable. Allow Him to shape your life while the clay is still workable. Submission to God doesn't mean becoming a robot. It means trusting Him enough to stop fighting His purposes. It means allowing Him to make us into people who reflect His character, rather than people who insist that He accommodate our preferences.

I remember the story of a little boy at home busily drawing with crayons. His mother asked, "What are you drawing?"

"I'm drawing a picture of God," he replied.

"That's lovely, dear, but nobody knows what God looks like."

"In a minute they will," he replied.

I love that child's confidence. There is something wonderful about the idea that our lives might give others a clearer picture of God. We are not making up His character or inventing a new religion. We are allowing Him to form His character in us. If people look at our lives, what picture of God will they see? Will they see stubbornness, entitlement, and resistance, or will they see humility, compassion, and a willingness to obey?

The second clue is equally important. The people refused to heed God's words. This has been a recurring theme throughout Jeremiah. Again and again God speaks. Equally often the people refuse to listen. Their problem is not a lack of information. They have prophets, Torah, priests, religious institutions, and a long history of God's dealings with Israel. What they lack is a willingness to receive what God says as truth for themselves. They have heard His instructions, but they have not allowed those instructions to shape their conduct. Hearing is not the same as heeding, and familiarity with religious language is not the same as obedience.

And here we come to something Yeshua said to His Jewish listeners in John 5:39–40. They searched the Scriptures because they believed that in them they had eternal life. Yet those very Scriptures testified about Him, and they were unwilling to come to Him for life. Imagine that. Loving the words of God while missing the One to whom those words point. We can study the Bible, mark it, analyze its vocabulary, examine its historical setting, and discuss its theology. Those are good things, and I spend a great deal of my life doing that. But the purpose of Scripture is not simply to produce people who know more about Scripture. It is to bring us into a living relationship with the God who speaks through it. We are not meant merely to live in the Bible. We are meant to live in relationship with the God revealed in the Bible.

That relationship changes how we treat our neighbors. It changes our expectations, our decisions, and our willingness to repent. It brings us to the Messiah, Yeshua, in whom we discover the mercy we could never claim as an entitlement. Judah's tragedy was not that God had failed to speak, but that the people had refused to listen. They possessed the words, but they resisted the God who gave them. And that remains a danger for anyone who handles Scripture regularly. We can become so familiar with the text that we forget its purpose is to lead us to Him.

What Will You Allow God to Make?

So what do we do with Jeremiah 19? We have watched the prophet buy a jar, gather witnesses, walk into a notorious valley, announce judgment, and smash the vessel. We have heard the terrible consequences of Judah's refusal to listen. We have been reminded that leadership brings responsibility, that religious activity is no substitute for knowing God, and that judgment is not something to dismiss lightly. Now we face the question ourselves. Will I stiffen my neck, or will I allow God to shape me? Will I ignore His words, or will I listen? Will I insist upon my own entitlement, or will I acknowledge my need for mercy?

The chapter's judgment is severe, but its warning is not pointless. God wants us to hear Him. He wants us to know Him. He wants us to have life. The potter's wheel in chapter 18 invited Judah to respond while reshaping was possible. The shattered jar in chapter 19 warns against presuming that the invitation can be ignored forever. Don't miss the warning, and don't miss the God who gives it. Let Him shape your life. Listen to His words. Have real hope. And above all, come to know Him.

Takeaways

- Leadership brings responsibility before God, not immunity from judgment.
- Religious activity is no substitute for knowing the LORD.
- God's warnings are serious; don't hurry past them.
- A humble heart remains moldable in the Potter's hands.
- Heed God's words and come to know the One they reveal.

Memory Verse

Jeremiah 19:15

“Because they have stiffened their necks so as not to heed My words.”

WATCH

Original Jeremiah 19 teaching — <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XTb5ihVirsk&t=85s>

What's Next?

Jeremiah 20 — Who's Really in Charge?

Jeremiah has smashed the earthenware jar and announced judgment upon Judah. But his message does not go unanswered. In chapter 20, Pashhur, a prominent priest and Temple official, has Jeremiah beaten and placed in the stocks. The prophet who called the nation's leaders to repentance now suffers at the hands of one of those very leaders. And that raises a question: who's really in charge? Pashhur has authority in the Temple, but Jeremiah has been commissioned by the LORD. The conflict is about much more than two men disagreeing. It concerns the authority of God and the willingness of religious leaders to recognize His voice.

Then the chapter becomes intensely personal. Jeremiah complains that God has persuaded him into a calling that has brought him ridicule and suffering. He wants to stop preaching, but God's word burns within him like a fire he cannot contain. He moves from anguish to praise, inviting others to sing to the LORD, only to plunge back into despair and curse the day of his birth. Why does Scripture preserve such an uncomfortable prayer? What does it teach us about lament, honest conversation with God, and the cost of obedience? And when we ourselves are caught between confidence and despair, who will we allow to rule our lives? Jeremiah 20 brings us face-to-face with the wounded prophet—and with the God who remains sovereign even when His servant is struggling.

Bibliography

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- Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Decisive: Taking a Stand for the Truth—Jeremiah*