

Putty in the Potter's Hands

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

6th in a nine-part series

August 14, 2011

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Jeremiah 18:1-11NRSV

This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: ² "Go down to the potter's house, and there I will give you my message." ³ So I went down to the potter's house, and I saw him working at the wheel. ⁴ But the pot he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands; so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him.

⁵ Then the word of the LORD came to me: ⁶ "O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter does?" declares the LORD. "Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. ⁷ If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, ⁸ and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned.

⁹ And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, ¹⁰ and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it. ¹¹ "Now therefore say to the people of Judah and those living in Jerusalem,

Jeremiah 19:1,2, and 10-13NRSV

¹ 'This is what the LORD says: Look! I am preparing a disaster for you and devising a plan against you. So turn from your evil ways, each one of you, and reform your ways and your actions.'

This is what the LORD says: "Go and buy a clay jar from a potter. Take along some of the elders of the people and of the priests ² and go out to the Valley of Ben Hinnom, near the entrance of the Potsherd Gate. There proclaim the words I tell you,

¹⁰ "Then break the jar while those who go with you are watching, ¹¹ and say to them, 'This is what the LORD Almighty says: I will smash this nation and this city just as this potter's jar is smashed and cannot be repaired. They will bury the dead in Topheth until there is no more room.

¹² This is what I will do to this place and to those who live here, declares the LORD. I will make this city like Topheth. ¹³ The houses in Jerusalem and those of the kings of Judah will be defiled like this place, Topheth-- all the houses where they burned incense on the roofs to all the starry hosts and poured out drink offerings to other gods."

Is there comfort being putty in the Potter's hands?

So far, Jeremiah is a dour book; mostly comprised of accusations of apostasy and warnings of impending judgment and doom. The people of God have driven themselves off of a cliff and we get to watch the play by play. We get to see God's thoughts as his people continue to rebel and choose that which is not good for them.

Throughout Jeremiah, the anger of God is clear and unmistakable. In this passage, God declares that he can destroy them like a potter can destroy a piece of clay that has not yet been hardened by the fire. With the merest flick of his wrist, God could bring destruction down to each and every one of us.

This is what it means to be putty in the potter's hands. It means that God is in control.

Love or Sovereignty?

What is God's primary attribute
– Love or sovereignty?

Protestant thought is divided
along this question.

John Calvin and his followers
argued that in order for God to
be God, then he must be in
control; God's authority and
power lay at the heart of the
nature of God. Otherwise, how
could God be God?

This thought is a requirement
for the doctrine of
predestination. If God is in
control and there is a heaven
and a hell, then God – as the
one in control – is the arbiter of
who does or does not make it to
heaven and hell.

Others in the Protestant
tradition accepted God's
authority, but argued that God's
primary characteristic was not
his power, but rather his love.

John Wesley, the founder of
Methodism did not believe that
a God who came down to die
for all of humanity and whose
primary characteristic is love
would allow some to be
predestined to hell.

In Jeremiah, God begs and
pleads with his people to turn
from their evil ways. They do
not do so. Judgment and
consequences will follow them
because of their actions, but is
it proof of God's sovereignty?

While Methodists believe in
God's power, we hold that it is
proof of God's love. Even
through exile, God finds another
way for his people to find his
way back into the warm
embrace of God's love.

*"God is love, and those who
abide in love abide in God,
and God abides in them."
1 John 4:16*

An Angry God?

The notion of God in control can lead to a
simple logic puzzle:

*If God is in control, and bad things happen, then
God must cause bad things.*

We assume that since God is in control AND
bad things happen that God must be a very
angry God.

It reminds me of a sermon I was forced to read
in high school by Jonathon Edwards, entitled,
Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.

Here is a short segment from this famous
sermon:

*"The God that holds you over the pit of
hell, much as one holds a spider, or some
loathsome insect over the fire, abhors
you, and is dreadfully provoked: his wrath
towards you burns like fire; he looks upon
you as worthy of nothing else, but to be
cast into the fire" Given July 8, 1741.*

Could Jeremiah be saying the same thing about
Israel? Is it possible that God is playing a game
with Israel, dangling them over the greedy
mouths of the barbaric Babylonians because he
abhors them?

Is God so angry that he no longer loves them?

In John Edwards' sermon, he uses the word love
four times, and the word wrath fifty-one times.

Is this what is happening in Jeremiah – is God's
wrath more powerful than his love by a factor of
ten?

The Point of Pottery

Let us take another look at the text in Jeremiah
and use the metaphor of the Potter to see God's
intent.

*But the pot he was shaping from the clay
was marred in his hands; so the potter
formed it into another pot, shaping it as
seemed best to him.*

The point of pottery is to make something
beautiful and useful. When clay is going round
and round and the potter is trying to create

something beautiful, sometimes the piece needs to be redone. It needs some more
work. And so the same clay is crushed again so that the potter can refashion it the way
that it was intended to be fashioned in the first place.

God is furious throughout Jeremiah. God is angry that they are not formed into the image that he had hoped that his people would be formed!

But the point of destruction is not to cause harm to his people, but rather refashion them into the shape that he had called them to be in the first place.

A Long-Term Pottery Plan

After the first demonstration with the pottery in chapter 18, God tells Jeremiah to go up and buy a piece of pottery and then crash it on the ground in front of the leaders and elders of Israel. As he does so, Jeremiah is instructed by God to declare that God will destroy Israel "so that it cannot be restored."

It is difficult to see the hope of this story.

As a pastor, I have numerous times been called to the bedside of dying persons. At least three times, I have been summoned to the bedside of dying infants. The most painful moments of my life are the moments where I am asked to proclaim hope in such tragic moments. I do so because we believe in a God who provides hope precisely at those moments where it looks as if nothing could ever be restored.

In the 37th chapter of Ezekiel, God comes to another prophet and takes him out to a valley of dry bones. The scripture says that the bones are very dry – the equivalent of shattered pottery. And God raises up out of those dry bones living bodies:

Ezekiel 37:7-14 ⁷ So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. ⁸ I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. ⁹ Then he said to me, "Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." ¹⁰ I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. ¹¹ Then he said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.'" ¹² Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. ¹³ And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. ¹⁴ I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act, says the LORD."

In spite of the dire proclamations in Jeremiah and the hopelessness that came from the destruction of Jerusalem, God has a habit of providing hope in places where there is no hope.

In fact, we believe in a God who rose from the dead three days after he had been brutally murdered. When you are putty in the hands of the master potter, there is no flaw that he cannot fix and there is no anguish that he cannot calm.

It often takes longer than we want for God to act. It took five decades for the Israelites to be returned home. It took six hundred years for the messiah to be born in a manger in Bethlehem. Good works slowly, but he is a master potter always looking for ways to transform us into the works that he knows we can be.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Here is the idea: Love is the primary nature of who God is. We find that in the person of Jesus, in the writings of 1 John, and we see it in the way that God continually forgives and seeks redemption for his people – the Israelites. Why do we continually reject God’s offer for love and redemption? Why do we continually ignore warnings about our own failings and weaknesses and refuse to rely on God?

God is not interested in punishing us, but there are consequences to our actions. What are ways that you have experienced consequences to your actions? And how has God used your own periods of exile to help restore you?

As we who have been forgiven in Christ work with others who have gone the wrong path, how do we act more like God and continually offer people grace and forgiveness? The Israelite people had ignored him and chosen other gods over him and yet he allowed them to be restored. Who in your life needs restoration and the offer of forgiveness? Do you need restoration and the offer of forgiveness? God is always offering his love and redemption. Will you respond?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Monday, Jeremiah 19 Broken Pots.	Tuesday, Jeremiah 20:12-18 The Anguish of Pain
Wednesday, Jeremiah 22 – The Continued Call for Holiness	Thursday, Jeremiah 24 God’s Watchful Eye in Exile
Friday, Jeremiah 26:1-7 – A Chance to Repent	Weekly Joys and Concerns

Scott’s Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We meet at 11:45 in room 127 on Tuesdays.

We will not meet on Aug 16

We will begin a new study of the gospel of John on August 23.

Join us whenever you can. Bring a study Bible.