

The Potter and the Clay (Jeremiah 18:1-19:15)



This is one of the well-known passages in Jeremiah, often used to illustrate the question of free will and predestination. The picture is 'clay in the hand of a potter'. 'O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter? Look, as the clay is in the potter's hand, so are you in My hand, O house of Israel!' (18:6)

God is the potter and we are the clay. Does this mean we have no free will? We have no choice in what we become in the end? (c.f. 18:5-10)

Jeremiah explores this important question. Jeremiah 18 is about soft wet clay in the shaping process before it is baked. Jeremiah 19 is about hardened clay after it is baked, after which there is no further possibility of moulding or shaping it. While the clay is still soft the potter can shape it and work on it, but once it is baked hard, there is no possibility of reshaping it. We only have two choices: Use it as is or break it.

A. Wet Clay (18:1-23)

1. **Variety of Clay** - Clay is very much part of our lives from the ancient days to this day – bricks, tiles, cups, pots, plates, vases, washbasins, toilet bowls, etc. Most of us live in a house made with clay - brick and mortar. There is an infinite variety of clay: soft clay, hard clay, acidic clay, alkaline clay, grainy clay, uniform clay, wet clay, dry clay, etc. The potter must carefully weigh what kind of vessel he can make out of the clay at his disposal. The kind of vessel a potter can make is limited by the type of clay he has. A low-grade grainy clay is ok to make a thick mug. But to make a fine china vase, he needs a particular grade of clay. The potter is limited by the type of clay he has as to how much he can do with it.
2. **Jeremiah in the Potter's House (18:1-4)** - God told Jeremiah to go down to the potter's house, where the potter was turning the bottom wheel with his feet while he shaped the clay on the top wheel with his hands. The potter wanted to make a beautiful vessel, but the clay wouldn't run in his hands. It was either too grainy or too runny, so it would not hold the shape. So, potter put the clay into a lump again and made a crude vessel out of it instead.
3. **Lesson from the Potter's House (18:5-10)**
 - a) Then the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah 'O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter? Look, as the clay is in the potter's hand, so are you in My hand, O house of Israel!' (18:6) What is the lesson? It is not fatalism, but the very opposite (v7-10). 'Even though I have pronounced destruction, if you turn from evil and turn to Me, I will relent (change my mind) from the disaster I was going to bring upon you. However, if you do evil and turn away from Me, even though I may have pronounced blessing, I will not bring the good I promise I will bring on you but destruction.' That is the point.
 - b) The Potter wanted to create something beautiful, but it was the clay that decided its final use. Fine china or crude pot. Vessel of God's mercy or a vessel of His wrath. All of us will be fashioned into something God will use. We will either demonstrate God's mercy or His judgment.
 - c) Paul exactly says this also, 'But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay, some for honour and some for dishonour. Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from the latter, he will be a vessel for honour, sanctified and useful for the Master, prepared for every good work.' (2 Tim:20-21).

So, God is saying to Israel, 'O Israel, are you not in my hand? I tried to mould you into a beautiful vessel of glory to demonstrate My mercy, but you just wouldn't respond in My hand (stiff-necked people), so I will now make you into another vessel to demonstrate My judgment.'
 - d) There is nothing fatalistic about God's plan for us. God wants to shape us and use us in beautiful ways. However, to the extent we do not cooperate in God's hand, God's plan for our lives cannot be fulfilled. Can God redeem the time we have wasted? Yes, He can. (Rom 8:28-29) It is God's mercy. Although God cannot give back to us the wasted years, He can still make something useful out of our lives. However, if anyone tragically resists God to the end, then God has to break that vessel as it is no longer useful to demonstrate God's mercy, only His wrath.

4. Israel's Response to God (v12) and Jeremiah (v18) – Israel's response was a sad one.

- a) *'That is hopeless! We will walk according to our own plans.'* (v12) They said, 'We don't want to be the clay in Your hand, God. I have my own plan. I want to shape my own destiny and become something I want to be.' But, *clay cannot mould itself into anything.* All that clay can do is 'settle down'. Nobody can mould himself something beautiful without inviting the Potters' hand to shape him.

God tells Israel how senseless they are, *'You have forsaken the cool fresh water from the snow-capped Mt Hermon, rich in healthy minerals flowing into the Jordan river. Instead you have chosen the strange, unclean and muddy water.'* (v14) God says, *'When Israel insisted in their own ways, they quickly got off the good ancient path of blessing (6:16), and they went astray into the dead-end that leads to death.'* (c.f. Highway of holiness c.f. Is. 35:8-9). God says, *'This pathway they have chosen (which is not a pathway at all) will not lead to My face, but My back (Num 6:26).'* God's face means God's presence, grace and favour.

- b) But Israel's plan didn't end there. They turned against Jeremiah and attacked him, *'We already have our spiritual leaders, and we are perfectly happy with them (priests, wise men, prophets.'* (v18) They wanted Jeremiah, God's messenger, silenced. Jeremiah's ordeal is recorded in Ch20.
- c) At this point Jeremiah knew that they have made up their mind and they will not turn. Jeremiah has been pleading with God for Israel for years. Now his prayer changes from a cry for mercy to a cry for justice. It is a shocking prayer. The nation has gone too far, and cannot be made into a beautiful vessel. Now, all that is left is for them is to be made into a vessel that will demonstrate God's justice.
- d) In Romans 9:14-24, Paul is not saying God has predetermined who is to be saved and who is not to be saved, but that all have rebelled and were the vessels of God's wrath. But God in His mercy and great patience chose some to become the vessels of His mercy.

Remember, Pharaoh hardened his heart first - seven times. (Ex. 7:13, 14, 22; 8:15, 19, 32; 9:7) This 'clay' became hard. Then the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart once (Ex. 9:12). After that Pharaoh hardened his heart twice more (Ex. 9:34, 35). Finally, the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart six more times (Ex. 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 14:4, 8). God dealt with Pharaoh in great patience, but Pharaoh repeatedly rejected God. So, God made him into a vessel of judgment to demonstrate His wrath.

B. Baked Clay (19:1-15)

1. Clay has limited time to be shaped and moulded. Our life spans 70-80 years. The moment we die our body stiffens and we are no longer mouldable. This is true for the soul. The Lord told Jeremiah to take an 'earthen jar' (*'buqbuq'*, Heb) and go to the Valley of Hinnom with some elders. *'Buqbuq'* is an onomatopoeic word, a crude water container with a long narrow neck - a large water jug. Perhaps this was the same vessel from Ch17. Jeremiah broke the earthen jar in front of their eyes in a prophetic act and prophesied God's judgment (19:1-3).
2. Valley of Tophet Prophecy (19:4-13) – The Hinnom valley was named so because the son of Hinnom bought the land.
 - a) The gate leaning over this valley is called *'Potsherd Gate.'* The bottom of the valley was full of broken pottery pieces. Once the pottery is chipped or cracked or leaked, it is impossible to reshape it. They cannot be recycled once they are baked. They can only be broken. *'There is nothing as malleable in the making, and nothing as unalterable after the baking, as pottery.'* In this valley, useless potteries were dashed to pieces.
 - b) Josiah destroyed the altar to Baal and Asherah in that valley. However, the people of Jerusalem still came out at night to sacrifice their babies to Molech at night in the fire! Tophet means 'fireplace'. Archaeologists have discovered the cuneiform text instructions for offering sacrifices to astral gods on flat rooftops. God would turn this valley into a *'valley of slaughter.'* Years later, after Jerusalem was totally destroyed, this prophecy was fulfilled. When the Jews returned, the gate became known as the *'Dung Gate'* (c.f. Neh. 2:13; 3:13-14). Dung and rubbish from the city were continually thrown into this valley, where perpetual fire smouldered and worms crawled around in the rubbish heap.

- c) In Jesus' days, 'Hinnom' became 'Henna' and Jesus used this valley 'Gehenna' to illustrate hell. Jesus said, *'It is better to lose your hand or eye than to finish up in Gehenna where worms do not die, and the fire is not quenched.'* Hell is the place where the 'human rubbish' is tossed into, that can no longer be recycled and salvaged.
- d) When Jesus died on the hill opposite the Hinnom Valley in Jerusalem, on the same day Judas Iscariot died at the bottom of this valley. Judas hung himself over the valley and the rope broke and his body fell headlong into the valley. When his body hit a rock, it broke open and his intestines gushed just like smashed pottery. The priests bought the field and called it the 'field of blood.' The Bible says of Judas, *'He went to his own place.'* That was Judas Iscariot's epitaph.
3. God then commanded Jeremiah to go to the temple court and prophesy the same word that he spoke over the Hinnom Valley. The nation refused to listen to the word of God and turn to Him, so God had no choice but to dash them to pieces like the useless pottery. 600 years later Jesus cleansed this very same place, driving out the money changers with a whip! Like Jeremiah Jesus wept over Jerusalem and prophesied its destruction.

God is the potter. We are the clay in His hands. May we yield and respond to God's hands fully.