

The Potter and His Vessels

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[0 : 00] I'd like us to look this morning in the first of what I trust will be two parts. This morning, the first part, I want to look at the reality of the potter and what he is doing here with the clay as seen and witnessed by Jeremiah here.

One of the most famous incidents in the prophecy of Jeremiah when he's sent down to the potter's house, these few short verses, seeing the potter at work on the wheel and then the vessel gets marred and spoiled and he remakes a new one here.

But we read the whole chapter for a reason. We could just have read these few short verses about the potter itself and that would have been a nice re-illustration and story. But the context of this, of course, is the reality.

The reality of Israel or Judah's going away from the Lord. The reality is that both the message is one of solemnity, one of warning, as it were, and the messenger himself is very far from perfect. Jeremiah has a lot to contend with. And, you know, he is one of the most, we might say, unhappy prophets, the weeping prophet he's sometimes described as. Because whilst the other prophets have, you know, good times and bad times and a certain amount of recognition maybe from the courts or the king in their day, Jeremiah appears to have it all against him, all bad.

[1 : 26] And I think it's in that context that we have to recognize when he cries to the Lord, particularly at the end of the chapter, he uses language that we think is a wee bit sort of inappropriate or maybe unforgiving.

You know, deliver up their children to the famine. Verse 21. Pour out their blood by the force of the sword. And let their wives be bereaved of their children and be widows.

Let their men be put to death. Let their young men be slain by the sword in battle. Let a cry be heard from their houses when thou shalt bring a troop suddenly upon them. For they have digged a pit to take me and hid snares from my feet.

Yet, Lord, thou knowest all their counsel against me to slay me. Forgive not their iniquity. Neither blot out their sin from thy sight. But let them be overthrown before they deal thus with them in the time of thine anger.

And I think, well, that's not very Christian. That's not very appropriate for a messenger of the Lord. And yet, on the one hand, we have to recognize that Jeremiah has no one else to turn to except the Lord.

[2 : 31] And what we are before the Lord is what we are in reality. And many of us, I suspect, have had thoughts or perhaps urges or feelings which are vengeful or which are violent or inappropriate or aggressive.

Which we would never want the world to see. And we would never want people to think that we were that aggressive or uncontrolled in our temper or vengeful or whatever.

But we might pour it out before the Lord. And we might take it to Him and say, Lord, this is what I'm feeling. And maybe it's wrong and maybe it's sinful. But I can't help what I'm feeling. And this is what I really, really want to do to these people.

He takes it to the Lord. Which is the right and appropriate place to take it, of course. And what each of us is before the Lord is what we are in reality.

And so what the Lord has called and inspired Jeremiah not only to feel but to write down is not to say, oh, are these feelings good? Aren't these appropriate?

[3 : 35] These are right, nice and good things for a prophet of the Lord to think and to feel. But rather, they are recorded, I would suggest to you, for posterity. So that the succeeding generations right down to our own can see not only the dire straits in which Jeremiah is.

He is crying out for this, for this vengeance, we might say, on his enemies. He's crying out to the Lord because there's no one else he can go to. Everybody else is against him. And this is how he feels in reality. But this is recorded also for us to see that the Lord's servants in that day, in this day, and in every day and age are imperfect vessels. They are saints in the sense of being redeemed by the Lord, by his precious blood and so on. But they are themselves very imperfect. They are every one of them marred vessels. But the God who is speaking through Jeremiah is a God of reality. He's a God of the world how it really is.

[4 : 45] His prophets are fallen men as they really are. They have these vengeful feelings. They have these desires for God to pour out his wrath on their enemies.

Now, on the one hand, let's just put in parenthesis here, that what Jeremiah is actually asking for is not so much personal vendetta, although he mentions the bad things they have done to him. But when he is asking for this evil to be recompensed against us, he's not really saying, and I've thought of all these nasty things I really want you to do against the Lord. But rather, all these things are the prophesied consequence of turning away from the Lord.

The Babylonians are coming. Everybody knew what the Babylonians were like. They were pagans. They were ruthless. And when they took a city and sacked it, they behaved in the same way as every marauding army in every generation ever behaves when they sack a city.

Blood would literally run in the streets. Everyone would be slaughtered. Women would be defiled. Children would be smashed to bits and destroyed. The place would almost certainly be burned to the ground.

[5 : 57] It was not a pretty thought or sight. This is what Jerusalem could certainly expect if the Babylonians came and overthrew them.

The only way they could be defended was if the Lord took their side. And the only way the Lord is going to take their side is if they themselves turned back to him.

So what Jeremiah is asking for here is not so much, oh, all these things I've thought of, Lord. Now, these are good ideas. Really, visit these nasty ideas on them and make them really sorry they were bad to me.

It's rather a case of almost washing his hands of it and saying, Lord, this is going to be the outcome if they don't turn to you. Well, they're not turning to you. They're rejecting everything. I'm telling them so.

Let it unfold as has been prophesied. Let the vengeance come. Let the Babylonians come. Let the wrath fall on them in exactly the terms that have been prophesied.

[6 : 55] Let it come. Let it happen. So it's not that he's thinking these things up and thinking, aren't these nice satisfying vengeance upon my enemies. But rather, these are the realities that everybody knows would happen when a marauding and vengeful army takes a city that has resisted it.

It will be a slaughter. It will be absolutely bloodthirsty from start to finish. There will be no escape. And there will be no mercy in it.

And so what Jeremiah is saying effectively is, okay, Lord, if they don't want to turn to you, just let it unfold. Let the prophecy happen. Let it come. Because everything I tried to tell them, everything I tried for their good, shall evil be recompensed for good?

They have digged a pit for my soul. Remember that I stood before thee to speak good for them and to turn away thy wrath from them. Therefore, give up their children for the famine and so on.

This is what Jeremiah is saying. Bring it on, Lord. Just bring it on because they're not listening. They even want to kill me. So do your will, Lord, is what he is really saying. But the terms in which he expresses it are less than merciful, as we can see.

[8 : 12] And it may shock us with our 21st century ideas of political correctness. That we think that, you know, the one who's getting bullied should always be the one to turn the other cheek.

And if they hit back, oh, well, then that's very bad. They should be up to the headmaster's office where the original bully should just be left in peace. We don't like the way that people are encouraged to hit back here.

We don't like with our ideas of modern political correctness. Jeremiah shouldn't be thinking these things. And I think, imagine, no matter what he's been through, and of course we haven't been through anything like what he's been through.

None of us knows what we would do in different circumstances. You know, we read in the famine accounts in Jerusalem or Syria of people actually eating their own children. And we think, oh, that's disgusting. We would never do that. None of us knows what we are capable of. None of us knows whether if your own child was threatened, you might kill with your bare hands the person that was actually threatening them.

[9 : 13] And yet if somebody said, you're a killer, you would kill somebody. You'd say, no, no, I would never do that. But none of us knows what we would do if we were driven to the circumstances and the extremity that others put up with.

Now here's Jeremiah in his situation. And none of us has been through what he has been through. And this is what he's coming out with. Of course, there is a contrast, a marked contrast, that even what Jeremiah is asking for here.

And what Jesus on the cross, for example, prayed, Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do. But rather he is saying, forgive not their iniquity, neither blot out their sin from thy sight, but let them be overthrown.

So, Jeremiah is not Jesus. Jeremiah is not God the Son. He is a flawed, fallen servant of the Lord. He is an example of the reality of how fallen man is. Even those who are the Lord's are fallen men and women.

[10 : 18] And this is the reality that the Lord has come to address. The reality of the message, which addresses the reality of the situation.

And of the messenger himself, who is likewise, like those to whom he gives the message, he is himself fallen and flawed. He himself stands to suffer if the city goes down to the Babylonians, just like everybody else stands to suffer.

He himself would know fear, just as everybody else would know the fear of the approaching enemy. He himself would suffer all the things that they endured and more.

But this is the reality. And God is a God of reality. Contrary to what some cynics would tell you. Oh, that's just old fairy stories.

Oh, that's not really real. It is the most real thing in heaven and earth. Unreality is what people say. Oh, it's only what you can actually analyze under the microscope.

[11 : 21] It's only what you can see and touch and feel and so on. Well, you know, that doesn't even stand up to scientific analysis. You know, how can you see gravity?

How can you see and feel love? How can you see electricity? No, you don't see any of these things. But you see the effects of them. You see the reality of what happens when they come into play. When they are in action. And so it is with the Lord. We see his work unfolding. We see the actions and the activity of the Lord.

We see the reality which is inexplicable. In a context of unbelief and downright denial of the facts. God is a God of reality.

He is the only ultimate reality. And the message that he is giving is a message of reality to real people. In a real situation of real trouble.

[12 : 23] Jerusalem is in trouble. Jeremiah is in trouble. Israel is in trouble. Mankind is in trouble. Friends, you and I are in trouble by nature.

As is our country. As is our society. As is our generation. We need this God of reality to address us here and where and how we are.

Because we are not perfect. And we are not sort of plaster saints who only ever wish good things against our enemies. And only ever think nice thoughts. No, we don't. We are full of all the flaws. And all the imperfections. And all the vengefulness. And all the bitterness. And all the aggression. And all the lack of forgiveness. That we really shouldn't have all these things.

We ought to be more like Jesus. But we are not him. Only Christ is the one who is able to redeem and to deal with all these things. We are the fallen reality.

[13 : 26] And it is that reality that the Lord himself, illustrated here by the potter, has come to address. So there is the reality. Secondly then, we come to the potter himself.

The potter himself is what the Lord uses as the illustration to describe his own situation. He says, go down to the potter's house. Then I went down to the potter's house.

And behold, he wrought a work on the wheels. And the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hand of the potter. So he made it again. Another vessel. And it seemed good to the potter to make it.

Then the word of the Lord came to me, saying, O house of Israel, cannot I do with you as this potter? Sait the Lord. Behold, as the clay is in the potter's hand, so are ye in mine hand, O house of Israel.

I will do what I see as sovereign right. And if people turn to me, whatever instant I speak concerning a nation, a kingdom, to pluck it out, down, to pull down, to destroy it.

[14 : 27] If the nation against whom I pronounce, turn from their evil, I will repent of the evil that I thought to do unto them. And in what instant I shall speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to build and to plant it.

If it do evil in my sight, that it obey not my voice, I will repent of the good. Wherewith I say, I will benefit them. The Lord has the power to pull down and to pluck up.

The power to build, the power to plant, and the power to destroy. He is absolutely sovereign, as the potter with the clay. But let's look at this potter for a wee second here, as we move into the passage.

The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah, saying, Arise, go down to the potter's house. Now, down. Most likely, Jeremiah is doing most of his prophesying in the temple precincts in Jerusalem.

Now, the temple is built on the height, what was Mount Moriah there. It is the highest point there of that part of Jerusalem, certainly of ancient Jerusalem. And he would be speaking there, not simply because it was the house of God, but because it was the place everybody gathered.

[15 : 34] And with the concourse, all the people going through it and about it, whether gathering to worship or to do sacrifices, or sometimes, no doubt, buying and selling, as even in Jesus' day, if you wanted to meet the crowd, if you wanted to have business with the crowd, that was where you gathered.

So, if Jeremiah has a message to give, then standing in the gate of the house of the Lord is the place where you're going to encounter most people. People are going to hear, and even those that don't stop, they'll hear a wee bit as they listen, and then they'll go on down into the street and say, you hear what that guy was sitting up in the gates?

He said this, this, and this. And others will come back. And I'll say, oh yes, I heard him say that myself. And some might stop to listen. This is how you get the message out. You go where the people are.

And so he would be there in the temple precincts. And yet the Lord says to him, go down now to the potter's house. And he said he's sent into almost certainly the Hinnom Valley.

Now the Hinnom Valley runs along the southern and western side of Jerusalem there. It's the image that was used initially for a description of hell, where people threw all the rubbish and burned it.

[16 : 42] And there was endless burning going on. And this was an illustration of hell. But also in the Hinnom Valley, where there would be little streams running and burns running, and there would be clay in the ground.

That's where the potters almost certainly would work. And anyway, anywhere in Jerusalem where you would send Jeremiah, it would be down from the temple. He'd always be coming down.

Now, of course, if the potter is an illustration of the Lord himself, we have to remember that the Lord himself came down amongst us. Whenever he was going to work in this earth, it was going to be a descent.

It was going to be a coming down from where he was at the first. The glory that he inhabited in heaven's realm and in paradise for all eternity.

And when he came down amongst us, not only to live and work and act in the days of Jesus, but as he comes down to move by his spirit amongst his prophets, to give them of his word, to give them of his spirit, as he moves amongst fallen men, he is lowering himself.

[17 : 49] He is coming down. Most perfectly, of course, in the example of Jesus himself, of God's own son coming down amongst us. He gets down in the dirt.

He gets down in the clay. That very clay that the potter uses is dug out of the very ground. It is out of the soil. Now, of course, what the Lord made himself with the original creation of mankind, we know he made from the dust of the earth.

Genesis 1, verse 26. God said, let us make man in our image after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the fowl of the air, over the cattle, over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.

So God created man in his own image. In the image of God created he him. Male and female created he them. The Lord took from the very dust of the ground.

He created man. This is what he did. And this is God's creation in himself. Verse 7 of chapter 2 in Genesis. The Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life.

[18:59] And man became a living soul of the very ground itself. Like the potter with the clay. He gouges the clay out of the ground. And he wets it.

He moistens it. And he gives it everything he needs. And then he works on it. And he moulds it. He works it on the wheels. And he makes a vessel, a jar, a box, whatever it may be.

He's making it as he sees fit. And he makes all of us different and unique in our own ways. Some with black skins. Some with white skins. Some with brown or yellowish.

Speaking different languages. Different shapes. Some are tall and thin. Some are wider and fatter. Some are heavier. Some are lighter. We're all unique. Because God has made us that way.

The potter, albeit using a lump of clay, makes every vessel different. Every one unique in those handmade days.

[19:56] I mentioned how the one I showed the children was almost certainly mass produced. Yes, okay, that's nowadays. But in the original illustration, the potter is making everything unique from the ground.

He comes down into the valley where he can work with the clay. If Jeremiah is going to witness the potter, he too must come down to where the potter is.

Because the potter must come down to where the clay is. God comes down amongst us in order to be involved with us. In order to take part in our lives.

In order to make us and mold us as he desires us to be. God came down, as it were, into the dirt. And from the very clay of the ground, he made man.

He made each individual one that he has made. He breathed into their nostrils the breath of life. And man became a living soul. And the vessel that he makes is intended to glorify him.

[21:01] Just as the potter makes something which he is going to be, if not proud of in the simple sense, which he will be satisfied as testifying to his workmanship.

No tradesman, no workman of any kind, wants people to look at his work and think, Who on earth did that? Oh, so and so did it.

You know, from around the corner, next door. My goodness, what a mess. I'm not going to get him to work on my house, on my yard, on my work. No, what you want is you want somebody to say, That's fantastic workmanship.

Who did that for you? I'll get a note of his name and address and say, I'll get a note of his number. I want him to work on my house. I want him to work on my office or my building. I want him to work on my particular property.

When I see what he does, when I see the pots that he makes, when I see the paintings that he creates, when I see the workmanship of what he does, it's going to make you think, I want that guy to work on mine.

[22:02] I want that. I want some of his product because it's so good. That's what every workman will want because his work will advertise his skill and ability and what he does.

And he knows if he does a shoddy job, if he does bad workmanship, it's going to stand there and witness against him. And everybody's going to ask, Who did that? Oh, it's awful.

Who made that pop? James, I don't want another one of those. But rather what God makes is intended to glorify them. And he has made of men and women that which is good in its original construction.

We read about how in Genesis he creates men and women in his image, male and female. And he makes it good. You know, Ecclesiastes tells us, chapter 7, verse 29, Lo, this only have I found that God hath made man upright, but they have sought out many inventions.

The things man decides to do, his own ideas, he can improve on what God has done. God said, Don't eat the fruit. And man said, Oh, yeah, but the fruit's good. It's good. It's tasty.

[23:17] It'll make you wise. Oh, yeah, just exactly as the serpent says. I can improve on what God has said. I can improve on what God has decided. If I do it my way, I can make him even better.

And that's man's thought, isn't it? It's his thought from the garden, right through through civilization and creation and the laws that God gives all the way through to the way that he is to be worshipped.

We can improve on what God has said in the Bible. We can make it even better. We just do this. We do it our way.

And we enhance it. We make it more beautiful. We make it more cheerful. We make it more pleasing. We make it more acceptable. We can improve on what God has done.

In other words, we are better than God. We know better than God. Ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.

[24 : 20] That's the original temptation. And we are suckers for it. In every aspect of life, in his man's original sin coming through, we can do a better job than God.

Thank goodness we now know better than God. We can improve on his laws. We can improve on his worship. We can improve on his ideas.

We can improve on his laws for relationships. We can improve on his ideas for family life. And when it's right to kill or not to kill. When it's right to break apart. When it's right to unite things.

In fact, almost every single thing that God has said in his laws and his word, man in his godless rebellion has told him, God says, no, no, God says keep that together.

We're going to break it apart. God says keep those two apart. We're going to bring them together. If God says keep alive, we're going to kill. If God says kill, we're going to keep alive. We're going to do the exact opposite of everything God said.

[25 : 23] And if you think of almost any instance in life, whether it involves human relationships, or medical care, or life at either end of the spectrum, beginning or at the end, euthanasia, or abortion, or medical care, or relationships in marriage, and so on, anything that God has specified how it should be done, man comes along and says, no, no, I think it'd be better if we do the opposite.

And this is our fallen conviction. The vessel is marred. The vessel has been made by God, and it has been made good.

But the vessel is marred in his hands, because it goes wrong. We go wrong. Romans 5, verse 12, we read, Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin, and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned.

Likewise, we read chapter 3, verse 23, All have sinned and come short of the glory of God. We are made good by God, but the vessel is marred.

It's marred not because God has done something wrong, but rather because we ourselves had the idea that we could do better than God.

[26 : 51] It is as though the clay itself is saying, I can do better than this potter here. What does he know? He's not even clay himself. Isaiah 45, we read at verse 9, Woe unto him that striveth with his maker.

Let the potsherd strive with the potsherds of the earth. Shall the clay say to him that fashioneth it, What makest thou? Or thy work? He hath no hands.

We really going to say to God, We can do better than you. But that's what we do all the time. And as a result, we do it wrong. We do it badly. And we try to mend it by our own means.

You see, it doesn't matter what area of life you think about it. Whatever job, whatever profession, whatever activity it is. If we come in as a complete novice to that, we cannot automatically do better than the expert.

You think of somebody's wandering into an operating theatre and saying, Well, I look around the hospital now, and I can see all the instruments there. There's this person, they've been knocked out by an anesthesiologist now.

[28 : 01] And I see you've got an operation to do. Well, that's fine. You just stand aside, I'll put on the white coat, I'll put on the mask, and I'll just make whatever we cut some either. And then take a bit out and stitch it all up afterwards.

No bother. I've watched this tons of times on TV. I can do it. You guys know, here's at university. Here's at, I can do this. Anybody can do this. Just you watch me and see how much better I can do it.

That will also be the case for even what might seem more simple tasks. Whatever jobs or whatever work it may be, if somebody's emptying bins, there's a way to do it.

There's a way to dry the dust cut. There's a way to make sure everything is safe and all the safety rules are followed. There's a way of operating all these things that the professionals make it look easy.

And when we come to somebody, say, oh, I can do it better than men, we make a mess of it. Because we literally don't know what we're doing. But they do. And if that is so with men, how much more is it the case with God?

[29 : 07] The vessel is marred in the hands of the potter. And that is our condition. That is our condition. Whether we ignore it and pretend it's not happening, we think, no, no, it's okay, we're doing fine.

We don't look only the weak need God as a crutch to lean apart. Well, if you're already lame and you don't lean on a crutch, then you're going to fall over and we end up crawling in the ditch. Not that I would accept that the Lord is a crutch for anyone to lean on.

The Lord is health and strength to the marrow and bones. He's the only one that makes healthy. He's not a crutch because we're lame. We're lame without him.

We're weak without him. We're helpless without him. We're blind without him. We're stumbling along in the dark trying to do operations with our eyes. Shut. And all the results that will follow from that because the vessel is marred.

And even for the Lord's people, we are imperfect. We are flawed. We come up with the wrong thoughts, the wrong ideas. We are not as Christ would have us be.

[30 : 16] We are not as he is. That is true with us. It is true with Jeremiah himself as we see towards the end of this chapter. And of course, this is where we came in.

This is the reality. And the reality is our need of God's intervention in our lives. The potter is at work. The clay is there in his hands. And he is ready to create a thing of beauty. He is ready to create a vessel fit for holy use.

But we, the clay, are always quite happy swidging around on the ground there. And we want to do it the wrong ways. And I think the reality is our lostness. The reality is even in the case of Jeremiah, even in the case of the saints of the Lord, they have seemed to be imperfect.

They have seemed to be flawed. And the Bible, which demonstrates its truthfulness, does not hide this reality.

[31 : 25] It does not pretend, oh, no, Jeremiah only about good thoughts. And Paul and Bartimaeus, they never argued. And all the saints of the Lord and all the apostles, they never had a wrong thought.

They never made a mistake. Peter never denied the Lord. He was always loyal. He was always good. The disciples stuck by him in Gethsemane. Of course they did.

They never put a foot wrong. This is what you should all try and be, boys and girls. The Bible does not attempt to pull the wool over anyone's eyes. It is truth from beginning to end.

It is reality. Through and through. Because it is the word of a living God who deals in the reality of how we are and what we need.

This is where we came in. Our needy, lost reality. And the Lord is the only one who is able to provide the remedy.

[32 : 26] And he's already there, ready to do it. When Jeremiah goes down to the potter's house and watches him at work, the potter's already there.

He's already way ahead of him. Before God puts it in the heart of his servant, even to make the move, the illustration and the reality of God is already at work, already there.

And this, friends, is our hope. This is our reason not to be despondent, not to be downcast, not to think, oh well, there is no hope. Nor will he.

We will look next Lord's day at the other half of his work, what the Lord does make. And the reality of the vessels he is prepared to create. But first and foremost, we see the reality of where we really are.

of what the Lord the potter does, of how he is at work, and of the vessel that he makes, and how the vessel is marred, and we are.

[33 : 29] That is precisely why we need a Savior. Thank you.