

**“The Potter’s House”  
Jeremiah 18:1-11**

The first three Kings of Israel – Saul, David and Solomon – ruled over a relatively unified and prosperous kingdom. After the death of Solomon, civil war broke out and the kingdom split into two - Israel in the north and Judah in the south. Throughout the divided kingdom, God’s prophets addressed the people with a message that said in effect, “shape up and get with God’s program or you will be shipped out!” For various reasons, Israel was the weaker of the two and was conquered by the Assyrians about 721 B.C. Judah was conquered by Babylonia around 586 B.C.

Jeremiah preached during the last 40 years of Judah’s existence. His message is largely one of gloom and doom. He told the people that the constant threat from foreign powers was God’s judgment against them because of their sin. That word was such a bitter pill to swallow that his own family and closest friends turned on him and called him a traitor. Both nations continually thumbed their noses at all the prophets God sent. When the prophets said, “you shouldn’t do this but you should to that,” their typical response was, **“Why should we? What's the point? We'll live just the way we've always lived, doom or no doom.”**<sup>1</sup>

There are two dominant ideas as to how God might respond to such in-your-face-disobedience.

One is that God will soon take the disobedient to the woodshed where he’ll beat the living daylights out of them. I was in the shoe department of Macy’s on Friday evening where I noticed a couple with little guy who was a hellion on wheels. All of a sudden I hear the mother holler, “If you knock over those shoes, that man over there will get you!” That’s the concept of God that many people have. As a result, when some difficulty or disease or disaster comes upon them, they immediately assume they are being punished for something they did. Unfortunately, there are proof texts to support such an understanding. **“Only those who sin will be put to death,”** preached Ezekiel. **“Good people will be rewarded for what they do, and evil people will be punished for what they do.”**<sup>2</sup>

The other idea as to how God might respond to our disobedience is to ignore it because “God’s job is to protect God’s people no matter what they do,” especially if we are liturgically and doctrinally correct. Such a concept of God blinded the people of Judah. “Remember,” they would say, “God promised King David that his throne would go on forever. His dynasty will never end. We are heirs to that promise!”<sup>3</sup> As a result, the Temple became a sanctuary in which they thought they could find refuge from any judgment threatened by prophets such as Jeremiah. “Don’t let him bother you. This is the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord!”<sup>4</sup>

Are either of those concepts satisfying to you – “God will get you for that;” or “God doesn’t care what you do with your lives because God loves us just the way we are?”

We really don’t believe, do we, that God would personally direct a foreign power against us as

judgment for our sin? Remember the universal disgust everyone felt when some high-profile TV preachers announced that the attacks on September 11 were God's judgment against us because of the rampant immorality in our nation?

We really don't believe, do we, that because we consider ourselves to be God's people that there is a protective shield wrapped around us? A couple of weeks ago I went into a local store that I frequent where the clerk knows that I'm a pastor. She looked at me and said, "Oh, are you well? You look so thin." I told her I had some surgery recently and that I had lost some weight. She said, "It's a good thing you're a Christian." Yes, I believe it is a good thing to be a Christian. I would not want to be anything else. Since it wasn't the time and place to probe what she meant, I left with the feeling she meant some kind of protection that comes with being Christian and that maybe if the first line of defense failed, I must be on a fast track to certain and complete physical healing.

Neither of those concepts compute for me. Jeremiah is presented with a third option. I call it "**a still more excellent way.**"<sup>5</sup> **"Come, go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words. So [Jeremiah] went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel."**

Let us go to a potter's house and watch for a while. Try not to be anxious in the silence, but be still and listen for what God might be saying to you.

[At this point, the congregation watched a short video which showed a close-up view of a potter shaping a pot.]

I see gentle yet firm hands, loving hands intimately involved with the clay, hands that help each other, hands that know what the pot should look like and persevering hands that won't stop until the pot looks right. And hands that are willing to get dirty – very dirty. What I don't see is a potter who trashes the clay for whatever reason. Nor do I see a potter who doesn't care what the pot looks like. I do see hands that are in the recycling business.

This metaphor becomes a lens through which I read our faith story. At the very beginning of things, God reached down to the earth, took some clay, breathed into it and we began to live.<sup>6</sup> The pot didn't come out the way the Potter hoped. It wasn't because the Potter lacked skill. There must have been something in the clay because as soon as we started to live, we began to die – not just in a physical sense but in a spiritual sense. We begin to die because before God can wash his hands, we run away and hide from God. Ever since, God has been calling us – as individual persons, cultures, nations – and setting us back on the wheel, re-shaping us, re-forming us, smoothing away the rough edges of our arrogance, filling in the pot-marks, cracks and other injuries created by life's slings and arrows, and re-opening our hearts so we can be vessels of his grace.

I don't believe God is out to get us. I believe God is out to redeem us. I don't believe that God punishes as we deserve, nor rewards us as we think we may deserve. **"God makes the sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous."**<sup>7</sup> God does allow

us to experience the consequences of our own sinfulness. If he didn't, we'd never learn from our mistakes. God doesn't have to punish us. We do it to ourselves every time we choose to live in the darkness rather than the light; or choose disobedience over obedience; or choose death instead of life.

I don't believe everything that happens to us happens for some divinely appointed reason. Or that "God never gives us more than we can bear." First of all I don't believe that God is in the business of trying to trip us up. Secondly, many times people can't bear the burdens they have to carry. They crash under the weight.

I do believe that life's trials and tribulations can act as a refiner's fire that burns away the impurities. It's when you're hurting or suffering in some way that you are most likely to discover what is important in life and what is not important. After September 11, 2001, our nation began to make those discoveries. I remember preaching a sermon a couple of weeks later in which I said that everyone wants to get back to normal, but that we should redefine normal as being closer to the place God wants us to be. It didn't work that way. Instead of being purified, we returned to our frantic lives as we always lived them. If there have been any changes, maybe we have only become more rigid and bitter and angry and hateful. When we're up against it, whatever *it* is, better to remain pliable and malleable so that the Potter can redeem us. You know the old proverb: "The wind does not break a tree that bends."

I realize that the Jeremiah text before us sounds as if God "has the world on a string, sitting on a rainbow, with the string around his finger." There is much about it that makes me uncomfortable. It talks about God "**shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you.**" It asks, "Does not the Potter have the right to do as the Potter pleases?" Of course, or God would not be God. But we will also learn, if we stick with the story long enough, that God is love and love does not insist on its own way.<sup>8</sup>

I believe that God has a plan for our lives – not in the sense that everything that happens to us has been all worked out ahead of time in some fatalistic way making us nothing more than puppets on a string. I believe that God has a plan for our lives in the sense that God knows what our pots should look like.

I don't know who Bill Versteeg is, but this first-person monologue is attributed to him.

Before I, Jeremiah, close, I must tell you one more story about the potter. I saw it coming. It would happen after my time, some 700 years later. The Potter set to work to make a perfect, absolutely perfect pot, the beauty of which exceeded all others, the glory of which, it could only be said - when you saw the wonder of the pot - it so resembled the greatness of the Potter that to see the pot was to see the Potter himself.

The perfect pot was placed on display for all to see. We beheld its glory, the glory of the one and only. Only some saw its beauty, others hated its beauty, it was rejected, sold to be broken, destroyed, for 30 pieces of silver. When the seller saw what he had done, overwhelmed with irremovable guilt, he returned the 30 pieces of silver, and

those 30 pieces of silver were used to purchase the Potters field, the place where the potter's rejects were tossed, broken, marred beyond recognition.

But what they forgot is the Potter's privilege! The Potters privilege to take what is marred, broken, to rework it, and make something totally new - a new creation, formed under his tender care. One pot rejected, so that the others, formed like him in beauty under the potters careful touch, could be accepted. The Pot resurrected was the first of many that will portray the beauty of God - radiant, without spot or blemish, holy and blameless in His sight.

I Jeremiah, you Immanuel, we are but dust, the clay, being reworked under the careful, loving hand of God.

We all are clay being reworked under the careful and loving hand of God. Perhaps that's what the old Shaker Song has in mind:

*When true simplicity is gained,  
to bow and to bend we shan't be ashamed,  
To turn, turn will be our delight  
Till be turning, turning we come round right.*

1. Jeremiah 18:12 (*The Message*)
2. Ezekiel 18:20, *Contemporary English Version*
3. See 2 Samuel 7:1-17
4. Jeremiah 7:4
5. 1 Corinthians 12:31
6. Genesis 2:7
7. Matthew 5:45
8. 1 Corinthians 13:5