

The Potter and His Clay

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Preacher: Shawn Woo

[0 : 00] In a poem entitled Invictus, the English poet William Ernest Henley captures the resilience and defiant independence of the human spirit.

And the last stanza reads this way, he says, It matters not how straight the gate, how charged with punishments the scroll. I am the master of my fate. I am the captain of my soul.

Isn't that an accurate description of humanity, right? We like to bow to no one. We like to get our way. We don't want people to interfere with our lives and what we want to do.

And so the mantra goes, let me be and I will let you be. That's the prevailing attitude of our world. In the chaotic world, we strive and struggle to maintain some semblance of control over our lives.

But this passage teaches us that we are not in control of our lives and our fates. That we are not independent beings accountable only to ourselves. And really the main point of these three chapters is that in spite of appearances to the contrary, God is the sovereign Lord over creation to whom we are accountable.

[1 : 11] That's really the main point of this passage. And first we're going to see God's sovereignty over the nations. And then lastly we're going to see God's sovereignty over Jeremiah and people around him. The word of the Lord comes again in verse 2 and says to Jeremiah, Arise and go down to the potter's house and there I will let you hear my words.

So when Jeremiah visits the potter's house and sees the potter working at his wheel, he notices a clay vessel in his hand that was spoiled, ruined vessel.

This was misshapen or ruined in some kind of way so that he could not be turned into the vessel that the potter wanted it to be. And because of that, he takes the ruined clay in his hand and reworks it into another vessel.

And as it seemed good to him to do. So as Jeremiah is watching this scene unfold, the word of the Lord comes to him again in verse 6. O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter has done, declares the Lord.

Behold, like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. So the verb do that is used here, can I not do this to you as my clay?

[2 : 20] The word do that's used here is the same word that's repeated throughout verses 3 and 4 to refer to the potter making the clay. In fact, that's the same word that's used over and over again in Genesis 1 to refer to God making and fashioning his creation, the whole world.

And so that word that's being used here is declaring God's absolute sovereignty over all of creation. Israel is mere clay in God's hands and God can fashion them into whatever he wants as the potter does with his clay.

Look at verse 4 again. According to what does the potter rework the spoiled vessel into another vessel? He says, as it seemed good to the potter to do. He makes the clay to be what he wants to be according to his own will.

He doesn't have any obligation to the clay itself. They're merely his creatures. He is sovereign over them. God's sovereign Lord over his creation. And this illustration, the meaning of it is spelled out further in verses 7 to 10.

Follow along with me. Verses 7 to 10 of chapter 18. If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, and if that nation concerning which I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it.

[3 : 35] And if at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, and if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will relent of the good that I had intended to do to it.

So yes, even though God had made a covenant with Israel, there were covenant obligations. And if they fulfilled those covenant obligations, they would enjoy the covenant blessings. But if they violated those covenant obligations, they would experience the covenant curses.

And conversely, when God decrees disaster on an evil nation, but they repent and turn from their ways, God would relent. And so this shows that God's not confined or limited in what He can do to His people and to the nations.

As a potter of His clay, God has every right to act in a manner that seems fit to Him. So that's God's sovereignty. But that doesn't mean that God is arbitrary or somehow capricious, does whatever He wants to do.

Because God is in fact constant and faithful. So the word reworked, right, in verse 4, and the word turns from in verse 8, and the word return in verse 11 are all different translations of the same Hebrew word.

[4 : 48] So what God's saying is people have turned away from His purposes, and because they have turned away from Him, God is turning them away to other purposes. And so God's turning them away, it has to do with them turning away from Him.

And so the only way they can avoid this judgment is for them to now turn back to Him. So it shows that kind of consistency of God's action, right, that God's treatment of His people, indeed His treatment of all the nations on earth, is not arbitrary or impulsive, but it's based on how the nations are responding to Him.

So He's not being fickle, He's not changing His mind, rather He's being faithful to who He is and keeping His covenant promises. So it's not God who has changed and turned on His people, it's they who have turned on Him and changed on Him.

And so God's face is turned away from them. Why? Because they have turned their back on Him. And so verse 12 tells us how the people responded to this call to repentance by Jeremiah.

But they say, that is in vain. We will follow our own plans and will everyone act according to the stubbornness of His evil heart. God promised that He would relent of the disaster, or literally the evil that He has designed for them because of their evil.

[6 : 07] Yet each and every one of His people clings to the stubbornness of their evil heart. And this kind of rebellion is so unheard of that God speaks about how unheard of this is.

He says, who has heard of the likes of this? He says in verses 13 to 16. And He describes it this way, But my people have forgotten me. They make offerings to false gods. They made them stumble in their ways in the ancient roads and to walk into the side roads, not the highway, making their land a horror, a thing to be hissed at forever.

So the highway is a reference to the paved roads. And they had paved roads in the ancient world, and they were quite expensive to make. And I was just hiking a couple weeks ago in Seattle.

And as you're on the trail, sometimes you notice these, not the official pathway, but these byways that go to the sides. And they're created either by one or two ways. Either one way is that people get lazy.

They don't want to stay on the path, on the winding path, so they caught a shortcut through the grass, and they create this byway, right? And another way they create a byway is they venture into the woods.

[7 : 18] They get a little bit too adventurous, and they go into the woods and try to forge their own path. And on one of those byways, there was a sign saying, Stay on trail, because it was dangerous to go into those byways, those paths that they created for themselves.

In fact, a few years back, in that same trail, because people went into those byways, there was a man who got lost and died because he couldn't find his way out. And so that's kind of the image that Jeremiah is painting here.

God has paved a highway for them to walk on that has stood the test of time, the ancient road that many have walked before them, yet these people have strayed into the side roads, into the obscure and secluded roads of sin that lead to death, ultimately.

And so as Jeremiah is continuing to denounce their sins, the people, as you can imagine, are fed up with him. And they say in verse 18, Come, let us make plots against Jeremiah, for the law shall not perish from the priest, nor counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophet.

Come, let us strike him with the tongue, and let us not pay attention to any of his words. Striking with the tongue means to bring a charge against that person. Bringing a legal charge against Jeremiah.

[8 : 33] So these people are not heeding any of Jeremiah's words. They should be listening to him, but instead they are speaking to him. Instead of heeding his words and learning from him, they want to teach him. And they're complacent because they can't imagine a day when God would abandon them because they have these institutions.

They have the temple. They have the priests. They have the prophets. They have these sages. When they have these leaders in their context, how can it be that all of these leaders are wrong and that Jeremiah is right?

So they are complacent. They are not listening to Jeremiah. And as long as these people, these leaders who pay lip service to God are in place, they feel that surely God cannot abandon us. And so they reject the true teaching and true warnings of prophet Jeremiah. And as these people responded this way, Jeremiah himself has had enough of them, these stubborn people.

And so he cries out to God in verses 19 to 23. Hear me, O Lord, and listen to the voice of my adversaries. Should good be repaid with evil? Yet they have dug a pit for my life.

[9 : 41] Remember how I stood before you to speak good for them, to turn away your wrath from them. Therefore deliver up their children to famine. Give them over to the power of the sword. Let their wives become childless and widowed.

May their men meet their death by pestilence. Their youths be struck down by the sword in battle. May a cry be heard from their houses when you bring the plunderers suddenly upon them. For they have dug a pit to take me and laid snares for my feet.

Yet you, O Lord, know all their plotting to kill me. Forgive not their iniquity, nor blot out their sin from your sight. Let them be overthrown before you. Deal with them in the time of your anger.

It's pretty intense, right? If you were to say that to somebody out on the street, you very well might risk getting called on for abuse or abusive language or for threatening.

And so Jeremiah, this sounds initially very severe and vindictive, but you have to remember that Jeremiah is a prophet of the Lord. And in Matthew 10, 40 to 41, Jesus says, Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me.

[10 : 55] And the one who receives a prophet, because he is a prophet, will receive a prophet's reward. And the one who receives a righteous person, because he is a righteous person, will receive a righteous person's reward.

A prophet of God represents God himself. And to reject a prophet who was speaking authoritatively, the inspired words of God, was tantamount to rejecting God himself.

And the curses that Jeremiah utters here, they're not just personal, vindictive, kind of vengeful curses. They're actually exactly the curses that were stipulated in Deuteronomy 28 in response to people who break God's covenant.

So he's really calling down the same curses that God had already given to people as they first entered covenant with him. And so Jeremiah, who then once stood before God to turn away God's wrath from his people, now seeing their stubbornness, their evil, that they're incapable of repentance, he stands now before God to call God's wrath down on them.

And then in chapter 19, this picture of God as the potter and his people as the clay is continued in a different episode. And he says, Thus says the Lord, Go buy a potter's earthenware flask and take some of the elders of the people and some of the elders of the priests and go out to the valley of the son of Hinnom at the entry of the potsherd gate and proclaim there the words that I tell you.

[12 : 19] So this time Jeremiah is to buy a potter's flask and assemble the leaders of Judah at the valley of the son of Hinnom at the entry of the potsherd gate. The potsherd gate is mentioned only here in the entire Bible, but the name suggests that it's the gate beyond which potters dumped all their broken pottery, all their ruined pottery that was no good for anything.

And the Jewish commentary on the Old Testament called the Jerusalem Targum, it identifies the potsherd gate with the dung gate. So a dung gate, as the name suggests, is where they burned or they dumped all the people's garbage and refuse, right?

So they think that it's the same thing, same place where they dumped all this. And this is significant not only for the image of the broken pottery being dumped there, but also because years back in 2 Chronicles 28 and 33, it's recorded that two of the most wicked kings of Judah, Ahaz, and his grandson Manasseh, they burned their own sons as sacrifice to an idol named Baal at this very place, at the valley of the son of Hinnom.

And so this is a symbolically very important place. And there Jeremiah's next prophetic assignment takes place. And his announcement is that he brings the charge that they worshiped idols, that they made child sacrifices to Baal.

And the word he uses is this, he says, they profane this place by making offerings in it to other gods whom neither they nor their fathers nor the kings of Judah have known.

[13:56] The word profane literally means to make strange or foreign. Because they have forsaken the God of Israel and worshipped foreign gods, Israel has become like a foreign nation to God.

And all the plans of Judah and Jerusalem, God says he will nullify and make void. So it's not the plans of Judah, even though they rebel against him, that will ultimately prevail. But it is the Lord's plan that will prevail because he is the sovereign Lord over creation to whom we are all accountable.

And at the climax of this announcement, God commands Jeremiah in verse 10 to break the flask in the sight of the people in a dramatic symbolic act. And then he says in verse 11, thus says the Lord of hosts, so will I break this people and this city as one breaks a potter's vessel so they can never be mended.

Men shall bury in Topheth because there will be no place else to bury. So there's a sense of finality here in chapter 19 that wasn't there in chapter 18. In chapter 18, they were spoiled pottery that can be reworked into another purpose.

But here, it's not just the misshapen pottery, it's a broken pottery that can no longer be mended.

And so after concluding that forceful prophecy, Jeremiah leaves Topheth and goes to court of the temple in verses 14 to 15.

[15:14] So in front of more people, a bigger audience in front of the temple and makes a similar pronouncement. And so even though the people of Judah were living their lives as usual without heeding the warnings of Jeremiah, and even though they were defying God with seeming impunity, the day of reckoning will come.

And that's what Jeremiah is announcing. And this is helpful for us to apply because today, as there were in the days of Jeremiah, the most prominent people in the world, the leading voices of our society, they may not recognize the true God.

But it would be a grave mistake for us to follow their lead and ignore the God who created us because we are all clay in the vessels, in the hands of the potter. We were created for His purposes.

So then are we examining our lives then, our priorities, our purposes, to see if they are aligned with that of our Creator? Or are we as creatures trying to forge our own path and live for ourselves?

And so in chapters 18 to 19, we saw God's sovereignty over the nations, and in chapter 20, we see God's sovereignty over Jeremiah. Read verses 1 to 2 with me. Chapter 20, 1 to 2.

[16:23] Now Pasher, the priest, the son of Emer, who was chief officer in the house of the Lord, heard Jeremiah prophesying these things. Then Pasher beat Jeremiah the prophet and put him in the stocks that were in the upper Benjamin gate of the house of the Lord.

And so, this is really ironic because in chapter 1, verse 10, when God first called Jeremiah, He promised them He has set him over the nations.

And the word set him over means to make overseer or to make an officer. It's the same word that's used here to describe the title that's given to pasture. He's the chief officer in the house of the Lord. So, the officer of the house of the Lord is now beating and binding the messenger of the Lord, the officer of the Lord. So, obviously, something is amiss here.

And so, in response, Jeremiah, however, doesn't just tower. But next day when he's released, he defiantly says to him in verses 3 to 6, the Lord does not call your name pasture, but terror on every side.

[17:30] For thus says the Lord, behold, I will make you a terror to yourself and to all your friends. And then he talks about how pasture will be exiled and that's fulfilled later in Jeremiah.

So, even though Jeremiah gets the final word, this episode throws kind of Jeremiah into a bout of depression and turmoil. And so, he pours out his heart to God in this raw, unfiltered way in verses 7 through 18.

He says in verses 7 to 8, O Lord, you have deceived me and I was deceived. You are stronger than I and you have prevailed.

I become a laughingstock all the day. Everyone mocks me for whenever I speak, I cry out, I shout, violence and destruction for the word of the Lord has become for me a reproach and derision all day long.

In 1 Kings 22, when Micaiah, who is a true prophet of the Lord, goes to warn the king of Israel against going into battle against Syria, there are 400 false prophets who are prophesying, yes, you should go into battle, you should go into battle, God will give you a victory.

[18 : 44] And in that scene, Micaiah prophesies that God will send a lying spirit to these false prophets to deceive the king. And it's that same word that's used here that Jeremiah is using to speak to God.

He's saying, I've become a laughingstock all the day and everyone's mocking me because everywhere I go, you tell me to preach violence and destruction, but as of yet, there is no violence or destruction to be seen in Jerusalem.

These people are doing fine. And so I'm a mockery and so maybe if this is the case, all of these leaders, these false prophets, they're saying that everything's going to be fine.

Maybe they're the ones that have the truth. Maybe I'm the one that's been duped by you, God.

That's basically what Jeremiah is telling him. But even though he says this, he doesn't stop saying what he's been called to say.

In fact, he says he can't stop speaking because he says in verse 9, if I say, I will not mention him or speak any more in his name, there is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones and I am weary with holding it in and I cannot.

[19 : 54] That's such an intimate look at Jeremiah's relationship with God. Notice that even when the judgment that he is announcing on God's behalf is not happening, Jeremiah does not once doubt that God has spoken to him.

Rather, he says, God, you've lied to me. And then he says, there is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones. Jeremiah has so completely aligned himself with his desires, with that of God's desires.

He has given himself so completely to the mission of God. He can't help but to speak. Even though we have been called not to preach that message of judgment but the message of God's salvation through Christ, I pray that all of us would have that kind of intimate relationship with God because we can't help but to speak and to be witnesses of God because our purposes are so aligned with His and our passions are so aligned with God's.

And so because Jeremiah can't help but to speak the message, he has to go on being mocked by his peers. And so he says in verse 10, For I hear many whispering, terror is on every side.

Denounce him, let us denounce him, say all my close friends, watching for my fall. Perhaps he will be deceived and we can overcome him and take our revenge on him. Remember that Jeremiah renamed Pasher, the chief officer who beat him and bound him.

[21 : 19] He named him terror on every side, right? And now, Jeremiah is being mocked because so often wherever he preaches, he says terror on every side. They call him, people have started to call Jeremiah, oh, there comes terror on every side.

Let's denounce him, let's denounce him, make fun of him. And it's his friends, he says. All of my close friends, they're watching for him to fall and for him, for them so that they can take their vengeance on him.

So Jeremiah is really hitting rock bottom here. He's feeling lonely and forsaken. He feels weak and vulnerable. But at this rock bottom, he turns to his faith in God who is the rock of ages.

He says, though he's not feeling well, he turns to what he believes here. Because even though he has no comfort, he has his conviction and that's written here in verses 11 to 13.

But the Lord is with me as a dread warrior, therefore my persecutors will stumble, they will not overcome me, they will be greatly shamed, for they will not succeed, their eternal dishonor will never be forgotten.

[22 : 26] O Lord of hosts, who tests the righteous, who sees the heart and the mind, let me see your vengeance upon them, for to you have I committed my cause. Sing to the Lord, praise the Lord, for he has delivered the life of the needy from the hand of evildoers.

The ruthlessness of his enemies cannot stand against the steely resolve of the God, the dread warrior, to defend his servant. So even though they try to overcome him, they will not overcome him.

And instead of making Jeremiah fall, they themselves will stumble. And instead of them taking their revenge on Jeremiah, God will take his vengeance upon them. So even though it seems and feels like God's enemies are prevailing, God will prevail in the end.

So in your life, to whom have you committed your cause? Do you look to people, your fellow creatures, for your validation? Do you look to them to vindicate you, to put a stamp of approval on your life and what you do?

Or do you look to your creator? Because in spite of appearances to the contrary, God is the sovereign Lord over creation to whom we are accountable. But in spite of his faith that God will deliver him from his enemies and detractors, Jeremiah has not yet been delivered and so he remains in great anguish.

[23 : 53] And he continues his lament in verses 14 to 18. Cursed be the day on which I was born, the day when my mother bore me.

Let it not be blessed. Cursed be the man who brought the news to my father. A son is born to you, making him very glad. Let that man be like the cities that the Lord overthrew without pity.

Let him hear a cry in the morning and an alarm at noon because he did not kill me in the womb so my mother would have been my grave and her womb forever great. Why did I come out from the womb to see toil and sorrow and spend my days in shame?

Among the Jews, it was a capital offense to curse God or to curse one's parents. And so Jeremiah carefully avoids both.

But out of the depth of his suffering and sorrow, he does curse the day of his birth which is about the most serious thing he can curse. And it's a common literary way in which the ancient world expressed these sentiments that they would not rather have been born.

[25 : 03] And it's a heart-wrenching sentiment, right, to say that I wished my mother's womb were my grave, right? Because the womb is supposed to be a place of nurturing and security but it's shocking and it's jarring to hear Jeremiah say that I wished my mother's womb had been my grave.

And this is insightful and helpful for us because Jeremiah's stirring lamentations and mourning on the one hand is set right next to his soaring praise of God and his expression of faith.

And that teaches us something very important about Christian hope because Christian hope is not the wishful positive thinking that many gurus and life coaches in the world in our society today teach.

We don't have to put on a mask and draw a smile on our face when we are feeling horrible. We don't have to deny our sufferings and shortcomings and struggles and say everything and pretend like everything is okay.

We can acknowledge our sufferings. We can admit our shortcomings and struggles and even then as Christians we can have hope because we believe that in spite of appearance to the contrary that God really is the sovereign Lord of our creation and that he is making all things new and he will make the world a right in the future.

[26 : 18] So Christian hope is not this flimsy wishful thinking of an optimist it's the enduring and substantive hope of a person who trusts in God. And these few chapters have shown that in spite of appearance to the contrary that God is the sovereign Lord over creation that he is sovereign over the nations and the kingdoms and over the lives of individuals like Jeremiah and Pasher.

He establishes kingdoms overthrows others. He raises one person and humbles another. But these chapters also point to a greater eternal reality because the image of the potter and the clay that Jeremiah uses here in these chapters to speak of God's sovereignty how he determines the fates and fortunes of peoples and nations in this life that's used later in Romans 9 in the New Testament by Paul and he picks up that image of the potter and the clay to show that God is not only sovereign over our lives in this life but also in the life to come that he sovereignly determines the eternal fate and fortunes of people.

And similarly in Jeremiah the ruined and broken pottery were discarded in the Valley of Hinnom and the Hebrew name for Valley of Hinnom when it's used in the New Testament it gets transliterated into the Greek word for hell.

Hell is Valley of Hinnom. Those who refuse to acknowledge and follow God will not only be discarded like pottery in this life but in eternal perdition in hell.

And that's the fate of all people because we have all at some point ignorantly and pridefully refused to acknowledge God. We, even though we are mere clay pottery designed for the potter we have lived instead for his purposes we have lived for our purposes we have presumed to be masters of

our own fate and captains of our own souls.

[28 : 15] And if we are to be saved from the Valley of Hinnom we have to yield to the will of the Master and submit to his purposes for our lives. But the truth is we are all like the Israelites because they said in chapter 18 verse 12 that is in vain we will follow our own plans and will everyone act according to the stubbornness of his evil heart.

Our evil hearts are stubborn and resistant to God's will and just and the people of Judah had Jeremiah to tell them about how they can be spared from God's judgment but Jeremiah ultimately failed to save them he was unable to save them because they rejected Jeremiah's message. Jeremiah could mourn and he did he could mourn people's sins but he could not atone for their sins. Jeremiah could warn them about God's coming judgment but Jeremiah could not deliver them from God's judgment.

But about 600 years after Jeremiah God sent his own son Jesus Christ the son of God to atone for people's sins and to save them and deliver them from God's judgment.

Jeremiah was only threatened to be killed but he was spared because God protected him. But Jesus Christ was actually killed and crucified by his own people but on that cross as he died Jesus was unfolding and advancing and fulfilling God's ultimate plan by absorbing the judgment and penalty for sin and paying for all the sins that we deserve to be punished for for those who trust in him.

[29 : 56] And this love that God poured out if we trust in Jesus who died for our sins so that we can live with God and so that we could be saved and spared from the judgment and that if we know that love that Christ displayed on the cross that love is what melts the hardest hearts it's what makes the misshapen hardened pottery that we are moldable again so that we can be used for the wonderful purposes that God has for us.

People like to say right God has a wonderful plan for your life how many times have you heard that from people? God does have a wonderful plan for your life but it might not be the plan that you have for yourself.

You might want to get married raise a family get a dog become a manager or principal or president or professor and retire comfortably when you're 60.

these are not bad things in and of themselves and you can certainly pray for and ask God for them but these are not the primary plan that God has for you.

Our creator's primary plan is for us to be saved by him for eternity and for us to be shaped into his glory that's God's primary plan.

[31 : 11] His plan is that we grow in our love for him more and more so that we can cherish him above all things so that we can be sanctified so that we can become more and more like the Holy Son Jesus Christ.

That's his primary purpose. So let me invite you all of us at Clay no matter what you do for a living make loving God and glorifying God the primary pursuit of your life.

Banish all your selfish ambitions foolish fancies and vain hopes subdue all your sinful habits and thoughts and submit entirely to the sovereign lordship of Christ and let him mold and shape you as he sees fit.

It's when we do that then and only then that we will truly discover the wonderful plan that God has for us. Let's pray together. God this is a hard message Lord for us to hear a difficult pill to swallow because we like to have our way all of us we have turned to our own way but we thank you for sending Christ to save us to bring us back the sheep that have gone astray back to the fold of the Father.

Help us now to give ourselves entirely to you entrust our lives entirely to you mold and shape us as you will so we might see your purposes fulfilled in our lives Lord.

[32 : 50] In Jesus name we pray Amen.