

Potters and Persecutors

Jeremiah 18

Jeremiah 18:1-4 – “The word which came to Jeremiah from the Lord, saying: ² “Arise and go down to the potter’s house, and there I will cause you to hear My words.” ³ Then I went down to the potter’s house, and there he was, making something at the wheel. ⁴ And the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hand of the potter; so he made it again into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to make.”

Background Notes

In our studies of Jeremiah, we’ve already seen that God asked Jeremiah to give a number of object lessons to the people of Judah. To communicate God’s message of coming judgment, Jeremiah gave the object lessons of the ruined linen sash and the smashed wine bottles in chapter 13; the signs of the droughts and famine in chapter 14; and the lessons from the restrictions God placed on Jeremiah’s life and lifestyle in chapter 16. There is yet another object lesson in chapter 18: the sign of the potter and his clay vessel.

In this case, the Lord gave the object lesson to Jeremiah himself - not to the people. But then Jeremiah was to take the meaning of the object lesson and communicate it to the people in a message or sermon.

Jeremiah was to go to the house and workshop of a potter and watch a potter making clay vessels on his wheel. How many of you have seen the process of someone making a clay pot on an old-time potter’s wheel? Have you ever tried it? It’s a lot harder than it looks!

When the clay vessel that the potter was making was marred in some way, the potter gathered up the clay into a new lump and made a different vessel. It’s important to note that the flaw was in the **clay** - not in the skill of the potter.

The meaning of this object lesson has to do with the sovereignty of God.

Doctrinal Points

1. The doctrine of God’s sovereignty is not the same as fatalism.

Jeremiah 18:5-11 - “Then the word of the Lord came to me, saying: ⁶ “O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter?” says the Lord. “Look, as the clay is in the potter’s hand, so are you in My hand, O house of Israel! ⁷ The instant I

...speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, to pull down, and to destroy it, ⁸ if that nation against whom I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I thought to bring upon it. ⁹ And the instant I speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to build and to plant it, ¹⁰ if it does evil in My sight so that it does not obey My voice, then I will relent concerning the good with which I said I would benefit it.

¹¹ "Now therefore, speak to the men of Judah and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, saying, 'Thus says the Lord: "Behold, I am fashioning a disaster and devising a plan against you. Return now every one from his evil way, and make your ways and your doings good."'"

The doctrine of God's sovereignty is not the same as fatalism. Some people, including some Christians, confuse these two terms, but they are not the same. Fatalism is the idea that everything has been predetermined by an impersonal cause called "fate," and nothing can change the outcome.

The Bible does NOT teach fatalism. ***The Bible DOES teach that God is sovereign.*** God is in control of everything. Nothing happens by chance. Ephesians 1:11 says, *"God works all things after the counsel of His will."* One of my favorite sayings is, "There are no maverick molecules in the universe!"

But within the sphere of God's sovereignty, there also is the truth of human choice. People are not robots. They do make choices, and their choices do affect results and outcome. God does answer prayer, and He does withhold His planned judgment - if and when people repent (as we see in this chapter).

The point of the object lesson of the potter and the clay was that God is sovereign over the nations, including Israel. If God planned to destroy a nation because of its evil, but then that nation repented of its evil ways, then God would relent concerning His judgment (v7-8). That is not fatalism. But at the same time, it does not take away from God's sovereignty.

If, on the other hand, God planned to build up a nation, but then that nation did evil in the sight of the Lord, then God would withhold His promised blessing (v9-10). Again, this is not fatalism, but at the same time it does not mean that God is not fully sovereign.

On this basis of the choice to do right or wrong, God was dealing with the nation of Judah: *"Return now every one from his evil way, and make your ways and your doings good" (v11).*

In Romans 9:21, Paul was probably thinking of this object lesson God gave to Jeremiah when he wrote, *"Does not the potter have power over the clay from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor?"* Notice that Paul applied this illustration of the potter's sovereignty over the clay to individuals, and not just nations.

How does all this fit together? God's sovereignty, human responsibility, God's omniscience, God's election, human choice, and so on – it's simply beyond our finite comprehension. But there's no doubt that the Bible teaches that God is sovereign! And the doctrine of God's sovereignty is not the same as fatalism.

2. The response to God's message is hate for the messenger.

Jeremiah 18:12-18 - *"And they said, 'That is hopeless! So we will walk according to our own plans, and we will every one obey the dictates of his evil heart.'"*

¹³ Therefore thus says the Lord: 'Ask now among the Gentiles, who has heard such things? The virgin of Israel has done a very horrible thing. ¹⁴ Will a man leave the snow water of Lebanon, which comes from the rock of the field? Will the cold flowing waters be forsaken for strange waters? ¹⁵ 'Because My people have forgotten Me, they have burned incense to worthless idols. And they have caused themselves to stumble in their ways, from the ancient paths, to walk in pathways and not on a highway, ¹⁶ to make their land desolate and a perpetual hissing. Everyone who passes by it will be astonished and shake his head. ¹⁷ I will scatter them as with an east wind before the enemy. I will show them the back and not the face in the day of their calamity.'

¹⁸ Then they said, 'Come and let us devise plans against Jeremiah; for the law shall not perish from the priest, nor counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophet. Come and let us attack him with the tongue, and let us not give heed to any of his words.'

Not only did the people of Judah willfully reject God's message and His call to repentance, but they planned to silence Jeremiah as well. Look at their initial response in verse 12: *"And they said, 'That is hopeless! So we will walk according to our own plans, and we will every one obey the dictates of his evil heart.'"*

Talk about *willful disobedience!* And the same is true today. When you try to share the good news with unbelievers, how often they will say, "You're wasting my time and yours - get lost! Forget about it!"

In verses 13-15 the Lord drew a contrast between the pure snowy mountain streams of Lebanon, that always follow the laws of nature, and the people of Judah, who had unnaturally turned away from the Lord to "strange waters." As a result, the Land would become desolate and the people would be scattered before the "east wind" of the enemy Babylonian forces (v16-17). They would know the back of the Lord, and not His face of blessing.

What was the further response of the people to Jeremiah's word from the Lord? They hated Jeremiah even more and tried to silence him, even threatening his life (v18).

The reaction is the same today. Try preaching out against sin in our nation, and your message will not only be rejected, but you will experience the hatred of this world - maybe even threats on your life. In John 15:18, the Lord Jesus said that *"the world will hate you as it hated Me."* And in 1 John 3:13 He warned that we should not be surprised if the world hates us. The response to God's message is hatred for the messenger.

Practical Application

Pray as Jeremiah prayed.

Jeremiah 18:19-23 – “Give heed to me, O Lord, and listen to the voice of those who contend with me! ²⁰ Shall evil be repaid for good? For they have dug a pit for my life.

Remember that I stood before You to speak good for them, to turn away Your wrath from them. ²¹ Therefore deliver up their children to the famine, and pour out their blood by the force of the sword. Let their wives become widows and bereaved of their children. Let their men be put to death, their young men be slain by the sword in battle.

²² Let a cry be heard from their houses, when You bring a troop suddenly upon them, for they have dug a pit to take me, and hidden snares for my feet.

²³ Yet, Lord, You know all their counsel that is against me, to slay me. Provide no atonement for their iniquity, nor blot out their sin from Your sight; but let them be overthrown before You. Deal thus with them in the time of Your anger.

Pray as Jeremiah prayed. “But wait a minute,” you say. “Are we really to pray for judgment, as Jeremiah prayed?” Yes - as long as we remember what Jeremiah was praying for. He didn’t pray for the Lord to zap the people because he wanted personal revenge for how they had treated him. No. He was praying that the Lord would keep His word and fulfill His promise of threatened judgment, because the people would not repent of their sin.

All of the conditions Jeremiah called for in his prayer were judgments that the Lord had already pronounced if the people would not repent. For example, look back at Jeremiah 9:20-21, and Jeremiah 11:22, and Jeremiah 15:8. Jeremiah was essentially praying for God’s word to be fulfilled. And notice how Jeremiah prayed in verse 23: “*But let them be overthrown before You.*” Not before **me** - “*before you.*”

Would it be right for us to pray today for God to get rid of hell, and remove His judgment from unbelievers if they refused to believe? No, of course not. We pray for their salvation, but if they refuse to believe, we don’t pray that God will change His righteous standards and His revealed eternal program. No, we pray in line with God’s Word.

We pray as Jeremiah prayed.