

God the Skillful Potter

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[0 : 00] Now we are continuing our studies in Jeremiah, and I'd invite you to turn, please, to page 646. We're going to be reading chapter 18 of Jeremiah, page 646.

The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord, Arise and go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words. So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was, working at his wheel.

The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as it seemed good for the potter to do. Then the word of the Lord came to me, 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. 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.

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 intended to do to it.

[1 : 34] Now therefore, say to the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, Thus says the Lord, Behold, I am shaping, I am forming disaster against you, and devising a plan against you, Return everyone from his evil deed, and amend your ways and your deeds.

They say that is in vain. We will follow our own plans, and will everyone act according to the stubbornness of his evil heart. Therefore, thus says the Lord, Ask among the nations, Who has heard the like of this?

The virgin Israel has done a very horrible thing. Does the snow of Lebanon leave the crags of Syrian? Do the mountain waters run dry in the cold flowing streams?

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 side roads, not the highway, making their land a horror, a thing to be hissed at forever.

Everyone who passes by it is horrified and shakes his head. Like the east wind, I will scatter them before the enemy. I will show them my back, not my face, in the day of their calamity.

[2 : 51] Then they said, 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. When Jeremiah himself speaks, 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. 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 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 plunderer suddenly upon them, for they have dug a pit to take me, and laid snares for my feet.

[3 : 55] 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. This is the word of the Lord. May he bless it to our hearts and minds. Now, if we could have our Bibles open, please, at Jeremiah 18, and we'll have a moment of prayer before we begin.

Lord God, how we praise you for your word, the word that you have spoken through your prophets, the word that so fully and faithfully points to the Lord Christ himself, and the word that your spirit can take and use in our hearts to form Christ in us.

This is our prayer this evening, Lord. Cause our hearts to burn. Cause our eyes to be opened. And lead us to Christ Jesus, who is the great subject of this word.

And in his name we pray. Amen. Some weeks ago, Thelma and I visited a very impressive glass-making place.

[5 : 27] It has to be said, the exhibits had prices, which were also extremely impressive. But it was a very beautiful place, and a very wonderful experience. But the thing we enjoyed most was when the master craftsman said, would you like to see me making a horse?

We wonder, well, are we going to be here for the whole afternoon? And to our amazement, he took the instrument he had with a shapeless blob in it, put it in the furnace, drew it out, and then with a few deft strokes, with some other kind of instrument, a horse formed in front of our very eyes.

It looked like magic. Like everything else that's done well, that's done brilliantly, it looked easy. But of course, many, many, many hours, many, many hours of preparation, many hours of careful working with the substances went behind it.

And I couldn't help this week, as I was preparing this passage on the potter, to think of that. But God, the skillful potter, is what I want to speak about this evening.

And the intricate care that that man took with the glass, which he made into a horse, and many, many other things, which were around the shop and so on, this is a picture of the intricate care of the creator with his whole creation, and with the human beings in that creation.

[7 : 00] That was the point, surely, in Psalm 139, which we sang at the beginning, which I refer to, and will again. Careful, skillful, loving, creating, the righteous and holy purposes of God.

Now, Jeremiah had already heard God's voice in ordinary objects and circumstances. Back in chapter 1, he had seen, he had heard God's word in an almond branch and in a boiling pot.

And now here, he is sent to the potter's house. Verse 2, Arise and go down to the potter's house, and there, I will let you hear my words.

Now, you'll notice the significance of the ordinary and the everyday. But Jeremiah is not going to be left to speculate. It's not that Jeremiah is being sent to the potter's house.

The Lord is saying, then go and write an essay about it. Go and preach a sermon using your imagination. God says, go down to the potter's house and I will let you hear my words.

[8 : 05] Now, as God says, look at this, look at this amazing craftsmanship. Look at its intricacy. Look at the care that's gone into it. And I'm going to tell you what this means. God, the skillful potter, God's sovereignty, God's providence at work.

Now, providence is a word that's not in the Bible, but it does refer to God's continuing care in creation. God did not create the world and then leave it to run on its own, occasionally interfering if there was a, something went wrong or if some adjustment had to be made.

God is totally involved in his whole creation from the very beginning until he ushers in the new creation. So let's look at this chapter then and see what we can learn from the potter.

God has spoken by his prophets. Let's learn from what he says to this prophet about the potter's house. And first of all, in verses 1 to 12, God's providence is a call to repentance.

In other words, God's providence is not an abstract idea. Because God is working, because God is creating, because God is shaping, then that's a call for repentance.

[9 : 18] Now, there are two parallel truths that we must always hold in tension. One is that God is sovereign. Nothing and no one can prevent his purposes being fulfilled.

That's one side of the truth. The other is that humans are responsible. We are responsible about how we respond to him. Now, there is no easy, slick form of words that can help us to understand these truths.

Both are true. Both are absolutely true. And we need to hold them in tension. And we mustn't use God's providence as an excuse for doing nothing and for saying, oh, well, I don't know if I'm one of the chosen.

So what's the point of my repenting and believing? Many years ago, I think it was in a sermon on Romans 9, which, of course, where Paul takes up this image of the potter in Romans 9 to 11, Willie's dad made a very helpful remark.

He said, the question that each of us must ask is not, am I one of the chosen, but will I believe? I found that a most helpful thing over the years.

[10:34] Not, am I one of the chosen, but will I believe? And so it is here. Now, you'll notice as well that in verse 6, O house of Israel, like the clay in the potter's hand, Israel isn't exactly in every respect like the clay.

That is the point. Israel can respond in a way that the clay cannot. And remember, we mustn't take pictures, even biblical pictures, and press them further than they can go.

So what's happening here then? God's providence, first of all, is dynamic. Look at the verse, verse 3, he was working.

Verse 4, he was making. Verse, then verse 4, he reworks it into another vessel. So what I said earlier on, God is not simply, as it were, giving the whole package at once.

He's continually working in our hearts, in our lives, day by day, hour by hour, indeed, moment by moment. And we're going to see this later on in the summer when we return to this.

[11:49] In chapter 19, the metaphor carries on, and this time, it's going to be a vessel for destruction. Remember, Paul talks about that in Romans 9 to 11, vessels for destruction.

In other words, vessels that don't fulfill the purpose for which God make them. You see, the point about God's sovereignty is he works continually in all our lives, and indeed in the lives of every human being.

As E.S. Lewis once said, we will all eventually do God's will, but it will make all the difference to us if we respond to him the way that John did, or the way that Judas did.

And I find that very helpful. What's going to happen to us is not just simply some rigid decree about which we can do nothing. It is, will I believe?

And when we are Christians, will I keep on believing? Will I allow the skillful potter to shape my life? Will I become what Paul calls in 2 Timothy 2, a vessel for honorable use?

[12:57] Paul uses that metaphor again, in a great house there are vessels for dishonorable and for honorable use. So, God's providence is dynamic. It's not a case of saying, oh, that happened, nothing can be done about it.

God is at work. And the Lord Jesus Christ says in John, my Father works continually and I work. I think the second thing to notice is that God's care and attention to detail.

And the word potter itself. Now, this word potter is the noun from the verb in Genesis 2, verse 7.

The Lord God formed, the Lord God shaped the man out of the dust off the ground.

This is where the metaphor actually comes from. In other words, this is the creator doing what he did at the very beginning, taking lifeless dust, lifeless clay and breathing it into it, the breath of life.

And when he created humanity, he created them for a purpose. And that purpose was to enjoy him, to glorify him, to be with him forever, to be a bride for his son.

[14:09] Right away back at the very beginning and twice in Jeremiah, Jeremiah 10, Jeremiah 51, Jeremiah speaks about the Lord as the one who formed, who shaped all things.

That's the thought of Psalm 139 again. We are fearfully and wonderfully made. Think of the intricate organs in our bodies of which we are never aware of.

Only aware of, perhaps, of an operation or something and perhaps organs in our body who weren't even aware that we had. And yet God shapes these perfectly, lovingly, carefully.

No effort spared. No care too much. Great artistry, if you like. And the Lord lavishes this on the people that he made.

Just as Adam was created to love and serve the Lord, Israel was formed and shaped to love and serve the Lord as are his people today.

[15:11] So, the Lord says to Jeremiah, Jeremiah, look at that potter. He doesn't just throw the pot and that's it. He works carefully, lovingly.

Very often, very often it's not obvious what he's doing. And certainly in that glass blowing place it was not at all obvious to an uninformed eye like mine what was happening.

The point is the master craftsman knew what he was doing. And just as with us so often it's not obvious what the skillful potter is doing. But he is the one who works everything out.

He is the creator who is still creating. He who began a good work in you will continue and complete it the day of Jesus Christ.

But there's another thing here as well in verse 7. If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom I'll pluck up and break down and destroy it or else verse 9 build and plant it.

[16:16] The Lord saying Jeremiah do you remember what I said to you when I called you? I said your message would pluck up and break down. It would build and plant.

And this is surely a reassurance to Jeremiah. When Jeremiah looked around him he didn't see much evidence of the potter at work. It was more like going into that so suppose for example you've gone to that glass making place and something has swept through it and everything of the glass was lying broken and shards everywhere.

That's what Israel looks like what Judah looked like to Jeremiah. The Lord is reminding Jeremiah Jeremiah that's the message I gave you. It looks as if it's not working.

It looks as if no one is responding keep on going Jeremiah keep on keep on preaching this message and verse 11 now therefore say to the men of Judah and the inhabitants thus says the Lord behold I am shaping disaster remember the Bible is never afraid to say that the Lord shapes disaster Isaiah says in chapter 45 I Yahweh create good and evil because the Bible will never allow dualism now by dualism I mean the idea that there are two gods of roughly equal power one of whom is responsible for evil one of whom is responsible for good and when you think of it that's the natural way that we would think if we didn't have scripture because that's really what paganism is about maybe not just two gods but in all the pagan religions there are good gods and evil gods there are gods of love gods of plenty god of warmth god of sunshine there's also the gods of war the gods of famine and disease and death the Bible will not allow the Lord's prerogative to be usurped not of course that God does evil for the sake of evil of course not the Lord works the evil of others into his purpose wasn't that what

Willie was showing to us this morning in Genesis 50 you meant it for evil but God meant it for good not that God was partly evil and you were partly evil but that you were wholly evil and God is wholly good and God is working out his purpose and so it is here so you see it's not fatalism it's a call to repentance I am shaping disaster against you that's a call to repentance remember Jonah 40 days and Nineveh will be destroyed and Nineveh believed God and therefore it was not destroyed not destroyed then it was to be destroyed later because they returned to their old bad ways you see the point surely of verse 8 and 9 if evil people repent I will not destroy them but if my own people turn away from me I don't think they'll escape the judgment God's providence is not fatalism God's providence is a call to repentance the potter shaping the clay wants passionately the clay to be the beautiful vessel that he made it and he wants passionately for his people to be the kind of people he made them to be and that idea that theme continues in a different way in verses 13 to 17 which I'm going to call

[20:00] God's covenant is a challenge to his people let me explain what I mean this is the therefore in verse 13 which presumably means that Jeremiah is still listening to what the Lord is saying about the visit to the potter still at the potter's house and the therefore is clearly linked to the passage about the potter and the fact that the potter is the creator helps us to understand this I think let's say two things first of all covenant is built into creation itself look at verse 14 does the snow of Lebanon leave the crags of Syria do the mountain waters run dry the cold flowing streams that's not an absolute statement because obviously sometimes the cold flowing streams do run dry but the point that's being made is that the created order on the whole obeys the creator the planets do not crash out of their orbits the laws of gravity if you like normally apply what he's saying is the potter makes everything including the snow of Lebanon and the crags of

Syria they do what the potter wants them to do as he shapes them they keep within their boundaries because creation itself is a covenant God in love commits himself to his creation and even after the fall that's reaffirmed after the fall God says the same things to Noah as he had said to Adam go be fruitful multiply fill the earth and subdue it even though you're fallen the mandate still remains and the promise as in chapter 8 of Genesis as long as the earth remains summer and winter seed time and harvest day and night will never cease what the Lord is saying to Jeremiah is Jeremiah creation behaves the way that I programmed it to behave if you like now it's not total obedience because as we know creation itself has fallen because of human sin

Isaiah says the same kind of thing the ox knows his owner he asks his master's crib but Israel do not know me look at the so often these the created order is linked with the covenant look at the stars Abraham this is what my promise is going to be like because creation fallen broken as it is still bears the stamp of its creator and that's what Paul says in Romans 8 isn't it creation stands on the tiptoe of expectation that's the metaphor there longing for the revealing of the children of God but what Paul is saying is once the children of God are truly shaped by the potter once they are truly

like Christ then the ancient mandate of ruling the earth can be taken off and we've got to think as we think of these passages about reigning with Christ we've got to see it in terms of the creation mandate not that we be sitting around on marble thrones for all eternity dressed in curtains and wearing gold crowns but we be resuming the ancient mandate and the new earth

Israel behaves however faithlessly and irrationally the virgin Israel has done a very horrible thing and the second thing is Israel has gone Israel basically has lost its way verse 15 my people have forgotten me they make offerings to false gods made them in the ancient roads now don't let's misunderstand this phrase the ancient roads this is an echo of chapter 6 verse 16 where Jeremiah says seek the old paths the ancient paths where the good way is now the word used for ancient there is the same word the Hebrew word which means eternal seek the paths of eternity not appeal for traditionalism it's not saying go back to the good old days it's saying what in the ways that the creator planned from all eternity you should walk in now

Ephesians 2 I think it is puts it good works which were already prepared for us to walk in that's what's happening here the whole emphasis of the book of proverbs living according according according to the patterns the rhythms that the creator has built into creation and verse 17 like the east wind I will scatter them this I think is a deliberate parallel and contrast to Exodus where the east wind of course swept back the seas and allowed the Israelites to travel in safety I will show them my back that universal sign of rejection turning your back on someone in the day of their calamity but you'll see like the first part it is still a call to repentance it's a challenge to his people look at the covenant writ large throughout creation the heavens declare the glory of God and the sky shows his handiwork look at creation look at the way it behaves and the third thing verses 18 to 23

[25 : 55] God's prophet cares deeply for God's honour now it's still related to what's being said because in chapter 19 he's going to go on with the pottery image but the way it's related is this I think if God has so comprehensively rejected his people if his purpose seems to have come to nothing where does that leave Jeremiah who has himself been comprehensively rejected this important verse 18 then they they of course is left unspecified his enemies if anyone had cause to feel you're not paranoid they actually are out to get you then surely Jeremiah had more cause than most to feel that now Jeremiah is saying something here he said often before the leadership have totally and utterly failed every part of it come that for the law shall not perish from the priest who are you

Jeremiah the Torah the law the words of Moses is the priests who are supposed to teach that we don't want to listen to any amateur like you Jeremiah there are people who are officially appointed to do it because remember that was one of the tasks of the priests to teach the Torah to teach the law of Moses at the very end of the Old Testament period Malachi is to lambast the priests for failing in their two tasks one liturgical task if you like offering proper sacrifices the other teaching task they're doing nothing properly but because they are official because the establishment have appointed them because their blessing or we're going to listen to them once again this is religion for you isn't it we're going to listen to the religious experts Jeremiah very interesting the word prophet occurs over 200 times in Jeremiah nearly all these cases refers to false prophets and that's so often the case in scripture remember

Amos famously said I am not a prophet nor the son of a prophet we don't actually know whether Amos said I wasn't a prophet now and I'm one now because there's no there but more likely what he said I'm not one of those charlatans who call themselves prophets I've actually got a message from the Lord nor counsel from the wise the wise teachers the people who people of course like the great king Solomon himself and others at his court who taught the kind are the words from the prophet and so you see we've got the whole establishment priest prophet wise man wise teacher come let us strike him with the tongue and let us not pay any attention to these words now you'll notice this is a two way process the people are being led astray by bad leaders but they actually want those bad leaders and it's always a two way process people ultimately get the end of verse 18 again come let us strike him that's

Jeremiah with the tongue let us not pay any attention to his words so in every age the voice of the true prophet people want to silence it what do you imagine these priests and wise men and prophets were saying well it's not difficult to imagine they were they were teaching an easy gospel cheap grace the lord loves you he'll never punish you don't listen to Jeremiah he's a he's a misery guts after all he's not a good word to say about anything or anybody don't listen to him and of

course people responded to that and this is followed in verses 19 to 23 by another of the laments or confessions of Jeremiah the one of those psalm like passages we notice this already and all the way through the book we have these psalm like passages hear me oh lord verse 19 and listen to the voice of my adversaries should good be repaid with evil notice the basic realities once again of creation and fall once again linking with the idea of the skillful potter as the creator should good be repaid for evil

I ask them to repent I ask you to turn your wrath away back to like Moses remember Moses does this after the golden cap he says Lord block me out of your book as long as the Israelites can be saved Paul uses similar words I would be wish myself a curse for my people who are Israelite he is absolutely broken hearted the ingratitude verse 20 remember how I stood before you to speak good for them to turn away your wrath from them I've often said Jeremiah is a very clear pointer to the Lord Jesus Christ the one who stood in between the people and God's anger of course neither Jeremiah nor Moses nor Paul great servants as they were could do that there was only one who could do that only one who could take the anger of God away from us but there is a dire warning verses 21 and following the consequences of the way they are following verses 21 to 23 now sounds very harsh and someone commentator says this is this is

[32 : 04] Jeremiah letting himself down and quotes father forgive them for they know not what they do now remember one very important thing Jeremiah's opponents knew exactly what they were doing the Roman soldiers who crucified the Lord genuinely didn't know what they were doing they thought this was just another criminal but these men these were totally and utterly determined to break Jeremiah and to reject the word of God and the language he uses is really language from Moses from Deuteronomy 28 and from Leviticus 26 the covenant curses the Lord has been rejected Jeremiah doesn't have the authority to say to these people oh I know the Lord is angry I know what Moses said but I'm actually a kind hearted guy so I'm going to tell you something different Jeremiah was kind hearted Jeremiah was sensitive but he's spelling out here the covenant curses do you think that's only in the

Old Testament and what Paul says in 2 Timothy 4 Alexander the coppersmith did me much evil the Lord will reward him according to his deeds now I think that's important we don't be sentimental about this this is not a case of the prophet being vindictive this is a case of the prophet being faithful and the passage leaves us with a sense of great sorrow that this prophet this humble sensitive prophet must so reject us where are we going to find any hope in this at all I think we find it in verse 23 yet you oh Lord know you oh Lord know not just you know about this not just you're looking down as an indifferent spectator but once again back to

Psalms 139 verse 1 you Lord have searched and known me biblical word know is not just knowing about the biblical word know is the covenant word you Lord know me you are the covenant Lord you will keep your promise and judge those people who have broken the covenant the implication of that is you are going to vindicate those who keep that covenant remember back once again in Exodus showing judgment but showing covenant love and mercy to a thousand generations of those that fear him there lies Jeremiah's security not in the broken glass and broken pottery all around him but the fact that the skillful potter who is working his purpose out will vindicate him and will vindicate his purposes as a medieval writer says all will be well and all manner of things will be well

God knows God cares one day God will show that he meant it for good amen let's pray Lord God these are disturbing words in the lonely agonies of Jeremiah we glimpse something of the cost of being a faithful witness and a faithful servant and in the scornful attitude of the leaders and of the people we also hear an echo of our own rebellious selves Lord help us to trust in you help us to believe that you know us you have searched and known us and you will lead us in the way everlasting and receive us to glory we pray these words in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ Amen