

Well, it's a joy to be preaching and learning with you again as we learn more about God through Jeremiah. Call me strange, but this weeping prophet is one of my most treasured books in the Bible, and contrary to popular belief, it's not all about doom and gloom.

As we've seen through our first two weeks, Jeremiah was a reluctant young man when God called him to share some of the most confronting warnings with his people, Israel, who had broken both God's trust and their covenant relationship repeatedly. But before we get too carried away in thinking it's all judgement and wrath for Israel, Jeremiah 18 gives us a beautiful insight into the 'why' of Jeremiah's prophecies – why is Jeremiah being sent out to share these warnings?

The simple answer is that God wants to transform the Israelites from something that is broken and marred to something that is beautiful and pleasing to Him. Jeremiah's ministry spanned over 40 years, but he was not always actively prophesying. Under the King Josiah, Israel was reforming its covenant relationship with God. But after Josiah's death, Jehoiakim abandoned these reforms. And thus, we have our passage today, when Jeremiah renews the warnings to Israel against neglecting their covenant with God. They are heading closer towards what becomes exile in Babylon, but it's not all certain – through Jeremiah, God gives them a glimpse of his loving kindness.

As we dive into this beautiful and challenging passage, we'll see three key themes: God is in charge – not us; God is constant – and also merciful; and that God has good plans for us – we are a work in progress. So let's dive in and see where God leads Jeremiah – and us.

GOD IS IN CHARGE – NOT US

Look with me at vv.1-4:

¹The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: ²"Come, go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words." ³So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel. ⁴The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him. ⁵Then the word of the LORD came to me: ⁶Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done? says the LORD. Just like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel.

(Jeremiah 18:1-6)

Now I'm as thankful for good art as the next person but does anyone just actually think "I might go watch a potter at his wheel today?". It's the strangeness of this situation which immediately highlights for us a key part of this passage – that God is in charge of what is happening here. I'm trying not to get too Hebrew nerd excited, but the opening phrase "the word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD" sets the scene for us perfectly. "The word of the LORD" was a common phrase in the OT from the prophets, precisely designed to show us that this is not just benign social observation, but what Jeremiah sees and speaks here has deep, transformative meaning. And transformation is exactly what Jeremiah sees – a master artisan sits at his wheel, working his skill, his mastery, his wisdom to make something good, meaningful and pleasing in his sight. Not only is God in charge of what Jeremiah is seeing, but he is also in charge of what is happening at the potter's wheel – because he is the potter.

How do we know that God is the potter? Not only does God tell Jeremiah this in this passage, but this kind of imagery also draws parallels throughout Scripture. God, the potter, takes something inanimate, broken, marred, and makes it into something that is beautiful. Genesis 2 – God takes the dust and forms it into Adam. Ezekiel 37 – God takes the dry bones and breathes new life into them. Jeremiah 18 – God takes the lump of clay, which is broken, which has deformities, and forms it into something "which is pleasing to him". In the Hebrew texts, the word for 'potter' in Jeremiah 18 is from the same base as the verb 'to form', seen in Genesis 2 as God forms humankind. This is not a simple 'make some craft', but the formation of humanity in its most beautiful form – as God intended us to be (Also Isaiah 64:8). So often in my conversations with people, I hear the phrase "what do I need God for? I'm quite OK now". And the reality is that without God in charge, or with false gods in his place, we neglect to realise that without God at the wheel, we wouldn't be formed as we are. We would be dust, dry bones, clay.

That said, it would be naïve to conclude that we are all passive lumps of inanimate clay, completely emotionless. The other risk is that we assume forming the vessel at the potter's wheel is an easy process for a happy go lucky God figure. One of the sermons I listened to on this said that a slight, diminutive looking potter challenged a church to an arm wrestle. No one took her on. Beneath her slight frame was a strength that was formidable. It is a strength that wrestles with clay that is tempestuous, difficult to mould. It can go off course and try to do its own thing. Sound familiar, much? God knows

that Israel is not passive, and nor are we. It is God who has given us agency to move either with or against him. But none of this agency exists without God – because it is God who is at the wheel, and it is He who is forming us.

GOD IS CONSTANT – AND MERCIFUL

It's this agency from the potter, from God, that we see expressed in vv.7-10.

Look with me:

⁷At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, ⁸but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it. ⁹And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, ¹⁰but if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will change my mind about the good that I had intended to do to it.

(Jeremiah 18:7-10)

Too often, we may see passages like this one used to argue that God is vindictive, unreliable and harsh. Sadly, it is another example of how meaning can quite literally get lost in translation. Again, not to go full Hebrew grammar nerd, but it is the structure of the passage which shows us that God is not vindictive or spiteful, but in fact he is constant and merciful towards us. Vv.7-8 and vv.9-10 work like your classic 'if-then' scenario – if you do A, I will do A, but if you do B, I will do B.

What critics often miss here is the fact that God is always present – through the good and the bad. He is not a god who only hangs around when times are good. He is constant. He knows when Israel, and we, are walking with him in covenant, and when we are walking away from covenant. If Jeremiah were a book of 'doom and gloom', it would suggest that God is wrathful, and only wrathful. But it is a book of hope, and expresses here, as throughout Jeremiah and across Scripture, that God is inherently merciful. He is merciful, and he wants to show us this mercy.

Let's be honest, if I were the lord of Israel and this is how they'd broken the covenant, I'd be long gone. And God has every right to have had enough. We see in vv.9-10 he reminds Israel that he is not a doormat to be walked over without consequence. But even after years of faithlessness, still God is here, still reminding them, and us, that there is an offer of hope for renewal.

Jeremiah brings home for Israel, and for us, the seriousness of his covenant with us – God has formed us, knows us, and loves us, so much so that he will measure out the consequences of our sin unless we choose to turn to him, when we can be assured of his mercies.

GOD HAS GOOD PLANS FOR US – WORK IN PROGRESS

Our final verse is pretty confronting, and we need to ask: is God threatening to reshape us, lest he destroy us?

Let's look at v.11:

¹¹Now, therefore, say to the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: Thus says the LORD: Look, I am a potter shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you. Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings.

(Jeremiah 18:11)

We need to remember that God took Jeremiah to the potter's house to warn Israel. They needed to be confronted with their sin and reminded that it doesn't work to live without God. And so do we. But this confrontation only comes from a God who is so loving and merciful that he also comforts us. This warning is not a **fait accompli**.

Jeremiah's prophecies spanned across forty years, because Israel's covenant and renewal were a work in progress. It takes a patient potter time to make a vessel that is beautiful as well as useful. Not once did the potter walk away from his work because it was marred, but instead he took the flaws and reworked them into something that is new. The kingdom of Israel was broken and marred, just as Jeremiah prophesied, but then God remade them, through Jesus, into a kingdom pleasing in his sight.

And friends, the comforting news is that we are also a work in progress. We come into this world like so many clay pots. Our lives are pitted with blemishes and impurities. As clay goes, we are not all that easy to work with, and sometimes we need to be created all over again. Which is what the Holy Spirit does in the life of those who trust in Christ. We are being slowly, surely, formed into something that is pleasing to God. It is not quick, and it's not

always fun, but when we know Christ, then we are a testament to God's love and mercy.

Friends, we may sometimes look upon our lives and think, what on earth is God doing? Is this some kind of new abstract pottery act? We have disappointments in our relationships. There are diseases in our bodies. We have discouragements and disagreements with friends, and family.

But we are not the potter. God often makes something out of us that we do not have in mind. We are the clay. And what should the clay do? Trust the potter and surrender to the potter's skillful hands. Swiss Reformer Ulrich Zwingli once wrote to a friend: "I beseech Christ for this one thing only, that he will enable me to endure all things courageously, and that he breaks me as a potter's vessel or make me strong as it pleases him"

So as Jesus trusted in obedience to God, even to death on the cross, let's ask ourselves – are we willing to accept that God is in charge? Are we willing to recognize that we have failed to live as God intended? And are we willing to trust God to work with us, to shape us and form us as is pleasing to him?

May the Holy Spirit dwell with us and gives us the courage and humility to be shaped more and more like Jesus, every day. Amen.