

WORDS FROM BIGTOP

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A Weekly Devotional from Curt "BigTop" Marek

BROKENNESS

The Potter and the Clay

Jeremiah 18:1–6

“The word which came to Jeremiah from the LORD, saying, Arise, and go down to the potter’s house, and there I will cause thee to hear my words. Then I went down to the potter’s house, and, behold, he wrought a work on the wheels. And the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hand of the potter: so he made it again another vessel, as seemed good to the potter to make it. Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying, O house of Israel, cannot I do with you as this potter? saith the LORD. Behold, as the clay is in the potter’s hand, so are ye in mine hand, O house of Israel.”

— Jeremiah 18:1–6 (KJV)

I've been sitting with one word this week: broken. Not the kind of broken you throw away — the kind God puts back on the wheel.

Here's what happened to Jeremiah. God tells him to go down to the potter's house. No sermon yet, no explanation — just “go watch.” So Jeremiah goes, and he watches a man working clay on a wheel. And somewhere in that spinning, the vessel gets marred in the potter's hands. Ruined. Not what it was supposed to be.

Here's the part I love. The potter doesn't scrap the clay. He doesn't throw it out and start with a fresh lump. Verse 4 says he “made it again another vessel, as seemed good to the potter to make it.” Same clay. Same hands. New shape.

Then God turns to Israel and says the same thing is true of them — of us. “As the clay is in the potter's hand, so are ye in mine hand.”

That's the whole devotional right there, if you want to stop reading. But let's sit in it a little longer.

Brokenness isn't the end of the story — it's the middle of it.

We treat broken like a final word. Broken marriage, broken plans, broken health, broken trust in ourselves. We start acting like once something's marred, it's finished. But that's not what happens at the wheel. The marring happens while the potter's hands are still on it. He doesn't step back and

say “well, that's ruined, guess we're done here.” He presses back in. He reshapes. The brokenness doesn't end the process — it's part of it.

You don't get reshaped off the wheel.

Notice Jeremiah doesn't say the potter set the clay aside to fix it somewhere else. It gets reworked right there, in his hands, still spinning. If you're in a season where things feel like they're falling apart, that might not be a sign God's letting go — it might be the exact moment His hands are on you the tightest.

The second vessel isn't a lesser version of the first.

Scripture doesn't say the potter made a worse pot the second time. It just says he made “another vessel, as seemed good to the potter.” Maybe the shape God's forming you into now isn't a downgrade from what you had planned for yourself — it's just not the plan you were expecting. That's a hard thing to trust when you're the clay and you can't see what's being formed. But the whole passage hinges on one fact: the potter knows what he's making, even when the clay can't see it yet.

| *The LORD is nigh unto them that are of a broken heart; and saveth such as be of a contrite spirit.*

— Psalm 34:18 (KJV)

| *He healeth the broken in heart, and bindeth up their wounds.*

— Psalm 147:3 (KJV)

| *We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; Persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed.*

— 2 Corinthians 4:8–9 (KJV)

A world more educated, more connected, and more broken.

Here's what stops me. We are living in the most educated society in human history. We are more connected than any generation that's ever walked the earth — a phone in every pocket, the whole world one tap away. And brokenness is still climbing.

The U.S. suicide rate today is 32% higher than it was in the year 2000. Nearly 3 in 10 American adults now say they've been diagnosed with depression at some point in their life — up almost ten points in less than a decade. Among adults under 30, depression rates have more than doubled in the last several years.

And the generation that has grown up the most digitally connected — Gen Z — is also the loneliest generation on record. Research following thousands of people over nine years found that the more time people spent on social media, active or passive, the lonelier they became. Not the other way around. We built the most connected society ever, and it is producing some of the loneliest people who have ever lived.

Clay doesn't heal itself just because it's surrounded by other clay. Connection isn't the same thing as being held.

Even the church can wound.

You'd think the church would be the one place this doesn't happen — the one place brokenness gets met with more hope, not more hurt. But sometimes people get wounded in church worse than they do anywhere else.

Francis Chan tells a story about a young man from a gang who walked into his church, got saved, and got baptized. For a season he was on fire — people surrounded him, called him, poured into him daily, walked him to the cross. Then, without anyone deciding it out loud, it faded. The calls stopped. The invitations stopped. He could walk in on a Sunday and nobody would so much as greet him at the door.

He still lived on the same streets, around the same old friends. They noticed him. They sought him out. They showed up. A year later, Chan found him and asked where he'd been. The young man told him the truth: he felt more loved by his gang than he ever did by the church.

Chan has said that story broke something open in him — the realization that a gang was giving people a better picture of family and belonging than the body of Christ was. That should stop every one of us. Not to shame the church, but to ask what we're actually building: a wheel where broken people get reshaped in the potter's hands, or a room where they get admired for a season and then quietly set back down.

Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted. Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ.

— Galatians 6:1–2 (KJV)

And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.

— Hebrews 10:24–25 (KJV)

The loneliest pew is behind the pulpit.

I've been a pastor for over 30 years, and I can tell you — there is no lonelier place than ministry, especially in a small church. I remember being a worship pastor and spending countless hours, week after week, retooling sound equipment and media just trying to make things a little better for the next service. Nobody sees those hours. They just see Sunday.

Small church ministry means little funding, thin resources, low membership, and big expectations anyway. Everyone in the building is a critic and a backseat driver. Most churches don't fail for lack of money — they fail for lack of vision and leadership, and that weight lands on one set of shoulders every single week.

The numbers back up what pastors already feel. Around 91% of pastors say they've experienced burnout in ministry. Over half report real loneliness and isolation, and about 38% say they've dealt with depression tied directly to their ministry. Nearly half of evangelical pastors are bivocational — working a second full-time job just to keep doing the ministry they're called to. And 40% of American churches have fewer than 50 members, which is to say most pastors in this country are doing this without the staff or resources anyone assumes they have.

A pastor is a counselor, a therapist, and a mentor to people who will never call to check on him back. He's on call 24/7, expected to bring hope into a broken world while carrying board meetings, budgets, staffing, and a hundred quiet opinions about worship style before anyone even gets to substance. He becomes the target for everyone's frustration about the direction of the church — often precisely because he's the one still standing there when everyone else has room to walk away.

Here's the hard truth in it: the potter's hands get tired too. Pastors spend their lives being poured out for other people's reshaping and can go years without anyone stopping to ask what shape they're in. If you're in ministry and reading this — you are allowed to be clay. You don't have to be the potter for everyone else and never let anyone near your own wheel.

And if you're not in ministry — go find your pastor this week. Not with a complaint. Just ask him how he's really doing, and mean it.

But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a juniper tree: and he requested for himself that he might die; and said, It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life... And as he lay and slept under a juniper tree, behold, then an angel touched him, and said unto him, Arise and eat... And the angel of the LORD came again the second time, and touched him, and said, Arise and eat; because the journey is too great for thee.

— 1 Kings 19:4–7 (KJV)

Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; Who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God.

— 2 Corinthians 1:3–4 (KJV)

My own turn on the wheel.

I want to get personal for a minute, because this isn't theory to me. I've spent right at 30 years working in public schools alongside pastoring. I started as a bus driver, just to help the district out and stay close to my own kids while I youth pastored at a small church. One summer I got asked to help lead teams of custodians and student workers refreshing campuses for the next school year. Somewhere in the middle of working my way up through school administration while pastoring multiple ministries, God built me all the way up to Director of Operations — giving me more opportunities to witness grace in action than I ever would have had inside four church walls. I raised up more leaders over those years than I can count.

Then came my last season. I came under an attack I never saw coming — slanderous words, false accusations, all of it aimed at bringing down leadership in our administration. I became the target,

the example they used to try to remove leaders and push other administrators to walk away. The family of leaders and workers I'd spent years building, the ones I'd have given anything to help succeed, got ripped away. And it didn't stay contained — word of the conflict reached my own church, and people there rose up against my leadership too, using the whole mess as a tool for their own ambitions.

I had to relocate and start completely over. By the grace of God I've been given a new family helping me pick up the pieces and make me whole again. God has me focused on my physical temple right now — time to work out, time to seek Him. And through all of it, I have never lost hope.

But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive.

— Genesis 50:20 (KJV)

The back door is bigger than the front door.

I've started reaching out to a new church, trying to find the right places to plug in. And even there, I've been amazed how hard it is to connect — how much bigger the back door is than the front door. I've only been a handful of times. Yesterday I went to the prayer service looking for some counsel, and I had to put my minister face on, because they weren't there to hear anyone's needs — just to pray over the growth of the next service. Don't misunderstand me: that's an important thing to pray for, and I jumped right in and called heaven down on the mission at hand. But it made me ask — when did we stop being a church that goes looking for the broken? Not just the person who's obviously hurting, homeless, out in the open — but the person sitting two rows back carrying brokenness and heartache nobody can see.

The next morning, Pastor Karen preached a word on this exact thing — how healing a wound takes time, patience, and care. The Potter wants to craft us into His image after we've been broken. So here's the question underneath the question: where are we crafting the broken people around us? How are we letting the Holy Spirit work through us to make someone else whole? The Holy Spirit is our Comforter and our Counselor, but He needs a vessel to actually connect with people. That vessel is us.

Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.

— James 1:27 (KJV)

And all that believed were together, and had all things common... And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, Praising God, and having favour with all the people.

— Acts 2:44–47 (KJV)

Be the vessel.

Jesus said to love your neighbor as yourself. I say this carefully, but I believe it: a lot of us don't know how to love ourselves, and that's exactly why we can't love other people well, and why we can't receive love when it's offered either. In this life, we are the only people we've got for each other — so when are we going to start embracing the charge Christ actually gave us: to go and carry the gospel to the nations, starting with the person you don't know who just walked through the door?

Learn to be an instigator. Spark up a conversation with the person sitting near you. Bring hope into someone's life by H.O.P.E. — Helping Other People Everyday. Give someone the room to break out of their shell and show you their brokenness. That's how the Potter uses His vessels — not just to carry water, but to carry each other.

We love him, because he first loved us. If a man say, I love God, and hate his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen? And this commandment have we from him, That he who loveth God love his brother also.

— 1 John 4:19–21 (KJV)

There's a song that's been sitting on my heart through this whole season: “Take My Life.” It's not really a song you sing — it's one you become. Years ago we added a verse to it, Brokenness, because after everything above, we felt like it was a verse that had been missing all along.

Brokenness, Brokenness is what I long for,

Brokenness is what I need.

Brokenness, Brokenness is what You want from me

So take my heart conform it

Take my mind transform it

Take my will and form it

To Yours, to Yours, O' Lord.

Here's my question for you this week: where do you feel marred right now? A relationship, a dream, a version of yourself you were sure was the final shape — a church that loved you loud for a month and then went quiet, a ministry that's worn you down further than anyone realizes, or a new place you're still trying to find your way into? I want to invite you to stop treating that as evidence God's finished with you, and start asking what it might mean that His hands are still on the wheel, even when human hands let go — and start asking who around you is waiting for someone to notice their brokenness too.

A Prayer for the Broken Places

Lord, I don't always know the difference between being ruined and being reshaped. Help me trust Your hands even when I can't see the shape yet. Don't let me pull away from the wheel just because it hurts to be reworked. And Lord, forgive us where we've let people walk in broken and walk out unseen — and remember the shepherds who've spent themselves pouring hope into others while quietly running dry. Teach me to love myself enough to receive love, and to love my neighbor enough to notice their brokenness. Make me a vessel Your Spirit can actually use to reach the person nobody else saw today. Make of me what seems good to You — and make me someone who stays close to the ones You're still shaping. Amen.

Sit With It

1. What in your life right now feels “marred” — beyond fixing, beyond hope?
2. Where might God still be shaping rather than discarding?
3. What would it look like this week to stay on the wheel instead of pulling away?
4. Is there someone in your life who was “on fire” once and has quietly disappeared? What would it cost you to find them this week?
5. If you're in ministry — who's checking on your shape lately? If you're not — when's the last time you asked your pastor how he's really doing?
6. Where in your own life is the “back door” bigger than the “front door” right now — a place you keep quietly slipping out of instead of being drawn further in?
7. Who could you be H.O.P.E. for this week — Helping Other People Everyday — by simply starting a conversation with the person no one else noticed?

— *BigTop*