

Jeremiah 18:1-17: The Potter's Clay

A Bible Study on Jeremiah 18:1-17

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The Relational Images of God

The Scripture contains several relational images of God and His people. Images bring out the true characteristics of both God and His people, and give an insight into what it means to be in such a relationship with Him. Let us look at a few of these to bring home the point under discussion. The list is merely representative and by no means exhaustive.

Shepherd and Sheep: this illustrates the guidance, provision, and protection of God available to His people.

Then we have Vine and Branches, illustrating the spiritual connection and life-sustaining flow of God's power and grace — just like the arteries in the human body.

And today we will look at the Potter and Clay relationship: the ongoing process of sanctification and transformation by God in the lives of His people. There are many references to this relationship in the Scriptures.

We read in Genesis chapter 2, verse 7:

And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.

Again, in Job chapter 33, verse 6, we read:

Behold, I am according to thy wish in God's stead: I also am formed out of the clay.

Yet again, in Isaiah chapter 64, verse 8, we read:

But now, O LORD, thou art our father; we are the clay, and thou our potter; and we all are the work of thy hand.

How God Communicates with His People

Another aspect I wish to briefly touch upon before we discuss chapter 18 is how God has been communicating with His people throughout the

history of mankind. At sundry times, and in diverse manners, God was pleased to speak to our fathers through the prophets; finally, of course, He spoke to us through His Son, our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ. To Elijah, He revealed Himself in a small, still voice; to Jacob, in a dream. To Moses, He spoke face to face.

Sometimes God would send a favourite prophet on some special errand, with orders to deliver, without reserve, a specific message — as was the case with Jeremiah.

The Bible also teaches the truth "here a little, there a little, line upon line, precept upon precept." Unlike a textbook or an encyclopaedia, God reveals information on a given subject in a distributed form, from Genesis through Revelation. Often truth is made known through stories and lessons from history, or is depicted through the use of symbols.

Against the backdrop of today's verses, we find Jeremiah struggling in the midst of a totally unrepentant nation. No threats or cautions against the imminent dangers of judgement made any impact on the people of Israel. The more they were warned, the more deeply they entered into sinful ways of living. Jeremiah would then turn to God, pleading with Him to forgive the people and not to bring His judgement upon them. God then sent him on a field trip to witness, first hand, a potter's work, so that he might grasp the real import of what God was trying to impress upon him, and then carry the message to the people of Israel.

The theme of the potter and the clay in the Bible gives us one of the most beautiful, impressive, and breathtaking pictures of the sovereignty of God over both men and history, and shows us vividly His constant, loving, artist's hand in all our affairs.

Let us quickly refresh our memories with Jeremiah chapter 18, verses 1 to 6:

1 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 thee to hear my words. 3 Then I went down to the potter's house, and, behold, he wrought a work on the wheels. 4 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. 5 Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying, 6 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.

Our Study Perspective

Let us ask ourselves the critical question: who or what is shaping our lives — physically, emotionally, intellectually, and, most importantly,

spiritually?

Our physical being is often shaped by the things we eat or do not eat, and also by the physical exercise we do or do not do.

Our emotional being is often shaped by the influence our parents, teachers, friends, and mentors have on us, or the lack thereof. This is further supplemented by the words spoken to us and about us.

Our intellectual being is shaped largely through the education we receive, the mistakes we make (and the lessons we learn from them), our workplace exposure, the general environment of our upbringing, and also through the media — films, television, music, sport, news, and so on.

The most critical question we need to answer is who or what is shaping our spiritual being. The first six verses exemplify this important aspect. We need to look within ourselves very closely and find answers to these questions.

Is it Jesus, our Potter, or some motivational practitioner?

Is it the Holy Spirit, or some other spiritual influence?

The Scriptures, or self-help philosophy?

As good Christians, well versed in what the Scriptures have to say, our answers to these questions are quite obvious. Even so, we should examine ourselves to determine whether we truly are amenable to God reshaping and reforming our lives.

We must remember that quite often we get carried away by the nuances, compulsions, and distractions of our environment — the lifestyles of the modern world. In the process, we tend not to leave enough space for God to work on us and within us.

We will look at these principles in three lessons.

Transformation Is a Continuous Process

The first lesson for us is that transformation is a continuous process.

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.

God instructed Jeremiah to visit the potter and see for himself how the potter makes clay pots. He must have observed how carefully the potter prepares the clay from dry earth by moistening it with the right quantity of water (the Holy Spirit?), obtaining the correct consistency (a receptive mind-set), before the clay is placed on the wheel. He also

must have observed the manner in which the potter shapes the clay into vessels, using his two hands, while all this time the design of the vessel was only in the potter's mind — God's will for us.

During the course of these highly skilled operations, the pottery may not turn out perfect, or may get marred due to imperfections in the clay. But the potter is not discouraged, nor does he ever throw the clay away as waste, not to be looked upon again. So long as the clay is moist and soft, yielding to his hands (receptiveness), he will re-use it to re-shape and make another vessel. He is constantly at it, and tirelessly works on the vessel to shape it the way he wants it shaped.

Having observed all this first hand, Jeremiah was now amply equipped to address the unheeding population effectively, and to convince them of the impending judgement that would be meted out by God if they did not turn away from their sinful lives.

This message is very much relevant to us even in today's context.

As long as we remain soft like the moist clay, our Potter — our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, who is full of mercy — can form, reform, and transform us. He is unlikely to give up on us, so long as we are receptive to Him.

On the other hand, if we become stubborn, rigid, hard, and set in ungodly form, we will continue to lead broken lives. The unrepentant person will carry the heavy burden of his sins all through his life.

God loves us just the way we are. But being a perfectionist, He refuses to leave us that way; He wants to shape us into the likeness of Jesus Christ. The process of refinement, and the re-shaping of our spiritual being by our Lord, continues forever.

One may ask how vessels become marred, even while in the potter's skilful hands.

It happens when we are not centred (imbalanced) on the wheel of life, because we live unchaste, unrestrained lifestyles, upsetting our spiritual alignment. Only we have ourselves to blame for this.

Secondly, it happens due to internal imperfections beneath the surface — in other words, due to secret and hidden sins that surface as the potter's hand touches the unresolved strongholds of sin within us.

The third reason is that the clay dries out, or we neglect to hydrate our lives with the Holy Spirit's baptism.

Tenderness Is Required for Transformation

The second lesson to be learnt from these verses is that we require tenderness within us if we are to be transformed.

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.

We know that the potter never discards the spoiled, flawed, or disfigured clay, just as our Lord never discards us, irrespective of our present state of life. But this is not without a precondition. Let us look at the potter again.

As long as the clay is tender, the potter continues the work of transformation. The reasons he never discards the moist clay are these:

- Potters love clay — God loves us despite our failings.
- The potter sees the potential — we are part of His grand plan, and He cannot give up on us.
- The potter has much invested in the subject — so much so that it cost Him His only Son, who died for us.
- Potters are faithful and committed to their craftsmanship — from Genesis to Revelation we see His relentless attempts to reform us.

However, He expects us to be receptive to His proposal to change us. Let us look at Colossians 3:8 and 10:

8 But now ye also put off all these; anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy communication out of your mouth... 10 And have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him.

Now we look at how we can stay tender, to enable God to remove our deficiencies and re-shape our lives.

First, we must submit to our Potter's control. This means we submit to the speed of the wheel — that is, the cycle of life offered to us by Him. It also means that we should be amenable to the use of His tools for correction, alteration, and the re-design of our life's cycle.

If we are receptive, God will undoubtedly re-build and re-shape our broken lives.

Secondly, we must allow regular spiritual irrigation. We know that dry clay, which has lost its moisture, cannot be re-shaped or re-formed.

God ensures moisture in our lives by pouring out His Holy Spirit daily. Look at what the Scriptures say on this matter:

And it shall come to pass in the last days, saith God, I will pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh: and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. (Acts 2:17)

*Which he shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Saviour.
(Titus 3:6)*

His Touch Is Constant

The third lesson for us is that his touch is constant.

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.

We should be assured of the potter's constant contact. We know the consequences of being otherwise.

Disconnection from God will result in:

- The clay not being placed on the wheel in the first place — God has turned His back on us.
- The clay spinning off the wheel after the first cycle, so that it self-destructs — on our own, our lives head for destruction.
- The clay never being able to form or transform itself.
- The clay not being able to be shaped by centrifugal forces — we need the redemption available through the blood our Lord shed for us.

We need to stay connected to our Lord Jesus Christ at all times. He will continually sanctify us.

When the clay is infected by sin and disobedience, it is all the more reason that we should permit God's constant contact.

Be assured of the potter's commitment to the clay:

- He continually tries to soften the clay.
- He constantly tries to transform the clay.
- He relentlessly tries to shape vessels to be used for His kingdom's purpose.

Jesus is waiting to be invited into our lives. He will shape us, transform us, lead us, and use us for His kingdom.

7 At what instant I shall speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, and to pull down, and to destroy it; 8 If that nation, against whom I have pronounced, turn from their evil, I will repent of the evil that I thought to do unto them. 9 And at what instant I shall speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to build and to plant it; 10 If it do evil in my sight, that it obey not my voice, then I will repent of the good, wherewith I said I would benefit them.

In these verses, and the verses to come, God warns, through Jeremiah, what would happen to them if they stayed stubborn and would not change their sinful ways.

The power to judge and the power to reconstruct are in His hands. God reminds the Jews how marvellously He had delivered them from their original degradation. God's unchangeable principle is to do the best that can be done under all circumstances. We also see that though He had announced impending judgement, the marred nation could be restored as a good vessel by God, who would hold off the judgement if only they would turn away from their sinful ways.

This brings out two great truths: that God has both an incontestable authority and an enticing ability to form and fashion kingdoms, nations, and people as He pleases, so as to serve His own purposes; and that it is a very easy thing with God to make what use He pleases of us, and what changes He pleases in us, and that we cannot resist Him.

11 Now therefore go to, speak to the men of Judah, and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, saying, Thus saith the LORD; Behold, I frame evil against you, and devise a device against you: return ye now every one from his evil way, and make your ways and your doings good. 12 And they said, There is no hope: but we will walk after our own devices, and we will every one do the imagination of his evil heart.

All the ceaseless efforts of Jeremiah were in vain. The people stubbornly remained unrepentant. While they were honest in stating their situation, they remained unrepentant. Jeremiah's conveying of God's message to Israel, and of the impending destruction, was lost on them, as they were far gone — abandoned to their sins and to the penalties of them. Jeremiah's prayers were misplaced, as Israel had steeled themselves against any change towards God's will for them.

13 Therefore thus saith the LORD; Ask ye now among the heathen, who hath heard such things: the virgin of Israel hath done a very horrible thing. 14 Will a man leave the snow of Lebanon which cometh from the rock of the field? or shall the cold flowing waters that come from another place be forsaken? 15 Because my people hath forgotten me, they have burned incense to vanity, and they have caused them to stumble in their ways from the ancient paths, to walk in paths, in a way not cast up; 16 To make their land desolate, and a perpetual hissing; every one that passeth thereby shall be astonished, and wag his head. 17 I will scatter them as with an east wind before the enemy; I will shew them the back, and not the face, in the day of their calamity.

We see in these verses that God invites them, by repentance and reformation, to meet Him in the way of His judgements, so as to prevent His further proceedings against them. However, it served no purpose for the prophet to say any more to them, or to use any more arguments; they had decided to have their way, whatever it cost them. Israel should have preserved herself pure and chaste for God, who had espoused her to Himself; but she estranged herself from Him, and refused to return to Him. When men are dehydrated with heat and drought, and meet with cooling, refreshing streams, will they not make use of them? Will they turn their backs upon it? God wondered.

God continued to tell them what would befall them, now that they had turned a deaf ear to His caution to reform. They left the ancient paths, which were appointed by the divine law, which were therefore the right way to their journey's end — a safe way, and, being well-tracked, both easy to find and easy to walk in. But they chose by-paths; they walked in a way not cast up, not in the highway in which they might travel safely, but in a dirty way, a rough way, a way in which they could not but stumble. They would not only flee before the enemy, but would be scattered, some one way and some another. And the final blow would fall when God showed them His back, and not His face, in the day of their calamity.

Learnings and Challenges

God formed us out of the clay (Job 33:6), and we are still as clay in His hands (Isaiah 64:8). Are we allowing the Potter's hand to shape us continuously, removing our imperfections, and transforming our being into the likeness of our Lord Jesus Christ? Do we believe that God can as easily raise up penitent people from their ruins as the potter can make anew the marred pottery in his hands? Do we know that sinners call it liberty to live at large, whereas for a man to be a slave to his lusts is the worst of slaveries? Our calamities may easily be borne if God looks towards us and smiles upon us. Are we receptive to God's calling?

Amen.