

## Jeremiah 18:1-11

Jer. 18:1 The 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.” 3 So I went down to the potter’s house, and there he was working at his wheel. 4 The 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.

Jer. 18:5 Then the word of the LORD came to me: 6 Can 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. 7 At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, 8 but 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. 9 And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, 10 but 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. 11 Now, 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.

## A PLAN THAT CAN BE CHANGED

Does God have a plan for your life? Yes he does. Can you mess up God's plan for your life? Yes you can.

But, despite our unfaithfulness, God can and does use our imperfect lives for His perfect plan.

This is the most amazing part of the biblical message. Our God is flexible! Our God adapts his purposes to the reality of an evil and sinful world.

Some like to think of God as the One who never changes.

In fact many of our confessions describe God in that way. And this passage suggests that in the end God is going to shape all of us so that God's will prevails.

But, until the day that the final trumpet sounds our relationship with God is a dynamic interaction between God's will and our faltering efforts to follow God's will. The sovereignty of God does not negate the free agency of men and women.

In other words God has given us the terrible freedom to make the wrong choice. And we often do just that. But, do not be afraid. God's ability to save is greater than our ability to destroy!

## A RELUCTANT PROPHET

The prophet Jeremiah is often referred to as a reluctant prophet. He thought he was too young and too inexperienced to take God's word to the people. And he was.

But, God said," The important thing is not who you are. The important thing is who I am. With your call comes the power to do the job. Before you were even born I had my eye on you."

But, the real reason Jeremiah had such a problem with God's call was the message that Jeremiah was called to preach. In a time when foreign powers threatened Israel, Jeremiah was called to preach a word of judgment. Jeremiah had the unenviable task of telling the people: "God is going to judge you for your unfaithfulness and your unrighteous ways."

How would you like that task? How would you like to tell a threatened nation that their country's misfortune was a judgment from God? Take that

message to the pulpit after 911 and see how long you last!

If God called a modern day Jeremiah to bring that word to our country, it would happen today just like it happened back then. There would be false prophets who would denounce you. There would be politicians who would seek to eliminate you. Your message would be very unpopular with the people. You would be despised.

## PROPHECY AND CHANGE

That's why God's prophets had to be courageous. They had to love God's word more than they loved life itself. And they had to believe that change was possible. They had to believe that people could change in response to God's word.

And they had to believe that God could change in response to what the people did. In our lesson for today and many other times in the Old Testament we read that God changed His mind in relation to judging His people.

The stories of the Bible clearly illustrate this dynamic and changeable aspect of God's nature. And yet, at the same time, though God may change in response

to the actions of human beings, God's character never changes.

God is always a just and a gracious God. And this just and gracious God keeps giving us second, third and fourth chances. God has His prophets speak a word of judgment to us not to destroy us, but to encourage us to turn from our evil ways and go in a different direction.

That's what repentance means. It means to go in a different direction.

## THE POTTER

The illustration that God gives Jeremiah is the vision of the master potter skillfully making something at his wheel.

I have seen award-winning potters at the wheel, and it is amazing how skillfully they can shape the clay. But, even the best potters run into clay that is not ready to be shaped. Perhaps it doesn't have enough water or maybe it has too much water.

Whatever the case the fix for the master potter is easy. He or she just reworks the clay. Maybe they will even make something entirely different from

what they were first making. It is their choice, and it is this creative freedom that makes turning pottery such a great hobby.

God told Jeremiah. This is how I work. I am the potter. You are the clay. If you refuse to follow my will, I will reshape you into something else that will suit my purposes. I will judge you in order to make something better.

And if you repent, if you turn from your evil ways I will withhold judgment.

## BAD THINGS, GOOD PEOPLE

Several years ago Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote a book entitled, “When Bad Things Happen to Good People.” The popularity of that book can only be explained by the fact that many people of all faiths want an answer to the existential questions posed by misfortune.

In the face of tragedy we often ask, “Why did this happen to me?” (In fact, Rabbi Kushner says that people often misquote the title of his book, reading it as “Why do bad things happen to good people?” instead of its true title, “When Bad Things Happen to Good People.”)

There are reasons that we read that question into Kushner's book and into our life. Many of us have some deeply held faith assumptions. First, we believe, "I'm a good person." And second we also believe, "God should not let bad things happen to me."

According to the Bible, neither of these assumptions is true.

## REPENTENCE, THE FREEDOM TO CHANGE

In our passage for today Jeremiah notes that sometimes God's people refuse to follow God's will. They are like stiff unworkable clay. They are unwilling to change and cling stubbornly to their own plans. (Jeremiah 18:9-12)

And so, God adapts to the situation. God changes his mind. God judges His people. God breaks his people so that they can be reformed. God destroys so that He can build up. God judges so that He can save.

We see this over and over again in the Bible. Judgment is often the means God uses to get our attention because we are sinful. We reject God's will

for our life, but God loves us too much to just leave us alone. God judges us in order to save us.

And it is never too late to repent.

Notice that Jeremiah also considers another question. Can “bad” people repent and be saved?

Yes they can. Nations that are on the road to destruction do not have to stay on that path. God’s message of judgment gives them an opportunity to go in a new, better direction. God can change his mind about the “bad” people and deliver them from their own sinfulness. (Jeremiah 18:7-8)

## THE EXAMPLE OF JONAH

An example of this is the story of Jonah. You’ll remember that Jonah was called to preach a message of judgment to the Assyrians in Nineveh. There were two reasons that Jonah didn’t want to do this. First, the Assyrians were really mean people. They had been known to literally “skin” their enemies. And second, Jonah didn’t want to warn these people. He wanted them to be judged.

But, God through the persuasion of a big fish made sure that Jonah preached the message. And it



happened just as Jonah feared. The people repented of their evil, and God changed his mind. God spared Nineveh.

The whole thing sent Jonah into a deep depression. And it often does the same thing to us. We like to think of ourselves as God's people. We like to believe that God is on our side and that God is against our enemies.

But, God is on the side of compassion and justice. And sometimes that means that God's people are judged while mercy is shown toward our enemies. That's what Jesus preached too, and nobody liked that message any better. In fact they wanted to kill Jesus for saying that. (See Luke 4:14-30)

## ALL HAVE SINNED

Tom Long wrote an article in the magazine, *Theology Today* entitled, "God be Merciful to Me, a Miscalculator." His point was to talk about our tendency to underestimate the importance of sin.

Tom wrote, "... the word sin has all but disappeared from the theological landscape, covered over by the kudzu of ... the seemingly more pertinent and positive language of therapy."

Then he quoted a character from a short story who said, “There was a time when we were afraid of being caught doing something sinful in front of our ministers. Now we are afraid of doing something immature in front of our therapists.”

According to the Bible we need a lot more than therapy. We need to be changed from the inside out. We, all of us, are not the people we should be. And it is sin that places us on common ground.

The Bible teaches us that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. The religious and the irreligious alike stubbornly cling to self-destructive plans.

Our whole world wants to go its own way and do its own thing with no regard to God at all. All of us, religious and irreligious alike deserve destruction.

But, God does not give us what we deserve; thank God for that.

According to the Bible in this interim time, in this time between the beginning and the end of all that is, God has chosen to operate in this world by beating sin and evil at its own game. God has chosen to

shape the sinful desires of people and nations in such a way that His kingdom does eventually come, and His will is eventually done.

There are many stories in the Bible that illustrate how this works.

## JOSEPH

For example, think about the story of Joseph. His brothers sold Joseph into slavery. It looked like his life was over. But, through many struggles and God's providential care, Pharaoh finally appointed Joseph to a high post in Egypt.

Later after Joseph's father died, he had the opportunity to take revenge on those brothers who treated him so shamefully.

But, he didn't do it. Joseph told his frightened brothers, "Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people as he is doing today." (Genesis 50:19-20)

God took a situation distorted by sin and deceit and made it into a story of love and salvation. That's a

practical example of how God the Potter remakes a clay vessel that is misshapen by sin.

## THE CROSS

The best example of how this works is the death and resurrection of Jesus. God sent his Son into the world to tell us of His love. And what did we do? We killed him. True to our sinful nature we destroyed what we couldn't understand or accept. We distorted God's great message of hope into a misshapen story of betrayal and tragedy.

But, even a vessel as sinful and distorted as this was not too much for the Master Potter. They buried the Messiah whom they crucified on that cross.

But, he didn't stay buried. According to the Scriptures, on the third day God raised Jesus from the dead and in so doing transformed a local story about sin and revenge into a universal story of hope and salvation.

God continues to work in this way. God continues to judge and save His people in order to bring hope out of despair. God continues to tear down so that He can raise us up. He is the Potter. We are the clay.

## CLAY THAT TALKS BACK TO THE POTTER

Will we let the Potter shape our lives? In some ways, that seems like a foolish question. The Apostle Paul once asked rhetorically, “Can the clay talk back to the Potter?” (See Romans 9:19-21)

In the long run of course we can't talk back to God. God is in control and we're not. God's purposes and plans for our world will come to fruition.

But, in the short run we can bring judgment upon ourselves by resisting God's will.

That's what happened in our lesson for today. The clay talks back to the Potter with tragic consequences.

In verse 11 of our lesson Jeremiah summarized God's message by saying, “... 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.”

They could have changed. God's warning could have molded them, but they chose a different way.

In Jeremiah 18:12 we hear the tragic response of the people to the prophet's warning, "It is no use! We will follow our own plans, and each of us will act according to the stubbornness of our evil will."

I'm not so sure the people put it so honestly, but the verse does describe what happened. Israel was judged because she refused to be shaped by God's will for their lives.

And so they were judged. The Babylonians took them into captivity.

## A RETURN TO THE PROMISED LAND

But, that did not end the story. God preserved a righteous remnant that eventually returned to the Promised Land. And through this time of struggle a new era of salvation was born.

In exile the prophets spoke of a coming time of salvation, a Messiah who would bring salvation to the world. And eventually that hope was fulfilled in the ministry of Jesus.

Even during this time of judgment, God was making a way for salvation. God made a way when there seemed to be no way.

Ultimately that's how it works with us as well. God continues to contend with us. God continues to struggle with us as we persist in following our own plans instead of His.

Sin is deceptively persistent in our lives. It distorts even our best intentions and efforts. But, God has provided a way out. God tells us that we don't have to be shaped by our sin. We can be shaped by God's will instead.

This shaping process is not a thing that is done once and for all. It is a daily process of confessing our sins and opening ourselves to the possibility and promise of heeding God's call to go in a different direction.

## GOOD AND BAD; PLEASANT AND UNPLEASANT

Sometimes I think we confuse "good" and "bad" as synonyms for "pleasant" and "unpleasant."

Some things that are pleasant in the short run can be very bad for us in the long run. And some things that are very unpleasant in the short run can be good in the long run.

For example, smoking may be pleasant, but it kills.

On the other hand many medicines might be bitter but in the long run they can save our lives.

God can and does use the good and the bad to shape us for His purpose. Sometimes we cannot see the big picture because God is infinite and we are finite.

But, we can trust in the goodness of God and the promise of Scripture that in all things God is working for the good of His people. (Romans 8:28)

What we should fear more than anything is not having a purpose in life. We crave a connection with the Infinite from which we come. We have a God shaped hole in our heart that only God can fill.

Often we forget that. We fill our lives with things of little consequence and so we have no spiritual strength for the time of testing.

Sometimes only a time of judgment can reveal that truth to us.

Sometimes the old dreams have to die so that God's dream can live in our hearts.



## HAVE THINE OWN WAY LORD

Adelaide Pollard was depressed and thought that God had deserted her. She had a great burden for the country of Africa and she believed that she should go there as a missionary, but now as she was preparing to sail, it was evident that the funds she needed could not be raised.

That evening she read Jeremiah 18:3,4, the story of the potter. As she read she believed the story was her own.

"Perhaps", she said, "my questioning of God's will shows a flaw in life, so God has decided to break me, as the potter broke the defective vessel, and then to mold my life again in His own pattern."

That evening she wrote the poem, which became the hymn, "Have Thine Own Way, Lord."

"Have thine own way Lord! Have thine own way. Thou art the potter. I am the clay. Mold me and make me after thy will ...while I am waiting ... yielded and still."

I think that all of us would do well to make that hymn the theme song of our lives ... each day remembering

who we are and whose we are. That is the only path that leads to salvation.

Let's close this morning by praying the words of another hymn that we often sing. Let us pray.

“Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me. Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me. Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on us.”

Amen.