



## REWORKED

Jeremiah 18:1-11  
Prophecies & Pottery Series  
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I once tried to make a clay pot and it was a disaster. The clay spun so rapidly on the wheel that each little wrong move I made created a weird imperfection.

First, I made one side higher than the other, so I molded the clay into a ball and started again. I made the edges too thick, then too thin.

When I finally made a rounded object, my thumb slipped and created a lip I didn't want. I finally gave up and said that I made an ashtray.

Clay may be supple and stretchy, but that doesn't mean you can make what your mind envisions without a great deal of skill and practice.

Jeremiah watched a potter at work and saw this analogy to God's work with humans. Sometimes the pot gets marred on the wheel; and sometimes humans, who are created to do good, go astray and do evil.

With clay, you can roll it back into a ball and start again, but with humans, we are more challenging. When I worked briefly with clay it felt like the clay had a mind of its own, and this is the issue with humans- we do have a mind of our own. So, while we may be easily shaped, we don't necessarily stay that way.

Think back to the creation story in Genesis 2, where God forms the first human from the dust of the ground, perhaps alluding to the way an expert potter forms the clay, and then breathes into the nostrils of this earthen vessel and makes it-us- alive; alive with free will.

We sometimes talk of humans being set in our ways, but our habits lead us down a path towards change. It may not be the change we like or anticipate, but one thing we can count on is change.

Our success as a species is our remarkable adaptability. We can live in many climates, make tools, tell stories and share

knowledge in ways that make our lives ever changing.

Unfortunately, we sometimes use our remarkable adaptability and God-given freedom in destructive ways. This issue creates great anguish for Jeremiah.

He sees Israel on the wrong track, acting in ways that are evil and unjust, oppressing the poor and forgetting God's commandments. They act as if they are a marred pot that can't properly hold or pour water, not like the beautiful vessels God created in Genesis.

Can God start again and mold humanity once more? This is an important question, one we all ask, especially on a bad day when we see human evil, stupidity or just flat out apathy.

Can we become less selfish, turn away from greed, war and prejudice? Can we overcome our addictions, apathy and anxiety?

Jeremiah was stern and blunt. While he may have been saying things that are hard to hear, he firmly believed in the possibility of repentance and change. His message in chapter 18 is that God is not done with us yet. That can be good news or bad news, depending upon your point of view.

If you want to change, that is the most hopeful thing you can hear. If you are comfortable with the way things are, perhaps even benefitting from evil things, then look out ahead. As Dante warned, "Hell is truth seen too late."

Jeremiah makes it clear that the nation of Israel, and all of us who come afterword, that they are still like clay in God's hands. He warns of disaster ahead if they do not change, but if the people repent of their ways, God will not bring about the planned destruction of Judah. There is a choice to make.

As it is written in Deuteronomy 30:19, “I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live.”

I am struck by the answer Jeremiah anticipates in verse 12. *People say, “It’s no use. We will continue with our own plans; each of us will follow the stubbornness of his evil heart.” The people have lost hope.*

“It’s no use!” people say, “Change isn’t possible for me. I’ve already been to therapy but it didn’t help. I tried every diet and it didn’t work.

The problems of the world are too big, so what can I do? Other people may be able to change, but not me. I’m a special case. I can screw anything up!” The national mood is so negative right now that we are skeptical of hopeful people. Hopelessness is an easily learned behavior.

I think for every person that says, “You can do it,” there are five others who will say, “Giving up? Great come down here and join me on the couch. And before you settle would you turn up the volume and pass the cheese dip?!”

Most people are not seeking to do the evil that Jeremiah warns against, we are just succumbing to the commonplace, armed with a cynical wit, a channel changer and a bag of Doritos.

I sometimes think the true road to Hell passes through a Lazy Boy. And it is hopelessness that gets us to the Lazy Boy. So how do we fight hopelessness? Listen to some selected verses from Psalm 139:

*O Lord, you have searched me and you know me.... You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely....*

*Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?*

*If I say, “Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,” even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you.*

This is where hope begins.

There is no place you can go, no situation you can encounter, where God is not there.

The image of the potter in Jeremiah is a powerful one if you know anything about pottery.

Potters never waste clay. Old, failed pots might get recycled into new ones, but potters would never just toss the clay. There is a thrifty economy at work in pottery, and that’s what seems to be happening in Jeremiah with regard to God and the world.

At issue in Jeremiah is not abandonment, but reworking; the idea proposed by Origen of Alexandria who believed that creation will be redeemed and reconciled to God in the end.

That seems to me to be very much in line with what Jeremiah’s image of the potter is saying.

Reworking isn’t always a punishment; sometimes it’s more than we could have hoped for.

Even when we believe we have been through the fire – hardened so to speak by life – broken into shards – the hand of the creator can take those pieces and rework them into something amazing.

The Apostle Paul has something to say about cracked pots in 2 Corinthians; he writes: We do not preach about ourselves. The subject of all our sermons is Jesus, the Anointed One. He is Lord and Master of all. For Jesus’ sake we are here to serve. The God who spoke light into existence, saying, “Let light shine from the darkness,” is the very One who sets our hearts ablaze to shed light on the knowledge of God’s glory revealed in the face of Jesus, the Anointed One.

But this beautiful treasure is contained in us—cracked pots made of earth and clay—so that the transcendent character of this power will be clearly seen as coming from God and not from us.

We are cracked and chipped from our afflictions on all sides, but we are not crushed by them. We are bewildered at times, but we do not give in to despair. We are persecuted, but we have not been abandoned. We have been knocked down, but we are not destroyed.

We may have been reworked over and over again during the course of our lives; our lives may not look anything like what we thought they would look like ten years ago or five years ago or even a week ago.

The good news is that we are God’s clay pots and God is always working in us and through us.

That is a grand and wonderful and mysterious thing indeed!