

Jeremiah Lecture Notes—Summer 2011
Sin & Judgment: Jer. 18:1-20:6

Jeremiah 18:1-17—At the Potter’s House

--At the potter’s house, the prophet sees a normal occurrence—a potter making a clay pot. Through this normal, everyday action, the LORD delivered a powerful message to Jeremiah concerning His sovereignty, Israel’s rebellion, and the possibility of repentance, reformation, and salvation.

--Jeremiah 18:1-12—Yahweh, the Potter

^{JER 18:1} This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: ² “Go down to the potter’s house, and there I will give you my message.” ³ So I went down to the potter’s house, and I saw him working at the wheel. ⁴ But the pot he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands; so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him.

^{JER 18:5} Then the word of the LORD came to me: ⁶ “O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter does?” declares the LORD. “Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. ⁷ If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, ⁸ and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned. ⁹ And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, ¹⁰ and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it.

^{JER 18:11} “Now therefore say to the people of Judah and those living in Jerusalem, ‘This is what the LORD says: Look! I am preparing a disaster for you and devising a plan against you. So turn from your evil ways, each one of you, and reform your ways and your actions.’ ¹² But they will reply, ‘It’s no use. We will continue with our own plans; each of us will follow the stubbornness of his evil heart.’”

--18:1-4—Jeremiah describes the parable, or action, in these verses, while the application of the parable is found in vv. 4-12. Since pottery was ubiquitous in his society (used for cooking, eating, carrying, and storage), Jeremiah would have seen this sight many times in his life. The potter is making a pot, but the clay becomes “marred” or “spoiled,” and the potter remakes the clay into another vessel. There is nothing spectacular in this event.

--18:5-10—The explanation, however, is spectacular. God begins with a question, “can I not do with you as this potter does?” God is now the potter, and His people are the clay. “As the clay sometimes frustrated the potter’s intention, Israel had perverted God’s purpose.”¹ If Israel, or any nation for that matter, fails to be obedient to God’s plan for them, they will be “uprooted, torn down, and destroyed.” These words echo Jeremiah’s call in chapter 1. On the other hand, the other facet of Jeremiah’s call are also mentioned. God sometimes announces that a nation should be “built up or planted”; however, even that nation will not escape the destructive hands of the potter if it does not obey God. God, like the potter over the clay, has complete sovereignty over nations and peoples.

--18:11-12—The application of the parable is a further word of judgment, sprinkled with a word of hope, if only they would repent. The LORD is “planning” disaster (=“evil,” Hebrew *ra`ah* רָעָה), unless the people will turn from the “evil ways” (the word for “evil” is again the

¹ Phillip J. Lee, “Exegesis: Jeremiah 18:1-17,” Unpublished paper presented to Ph.D. seminar, NOBTS, 1986.

Hebrew *ra`ah* רָעָה). The people's "evil" will continue to bring "disaster," just like the evil of the prophets in Jer. 23:11-12. Hope is present from the LORD's perspective, but the people are presented as completely unwilling to even consider repentance. They have hardened their hearts to the point that repentance is apparently impossible.

--As an application of the parable of the potter and clay, the reader must consider the full implication of this saying. The potter will crush Judah and, presumably, make the nation into something new. What will the new piece of pottery be? One wonders if "new covenant" of Jer. 31 could be the prophet's answer. This text was later taken as an interpretation of the work of Jesus by the author of the Book of Hebrews.

--What does this text say about the nature of God? God appears here to be subject to change based upon the actions of human free will. God does not surrender his sovereignty, but is willing to change his plans (for good or evil) depending upon the actions of people in response to His call upon their lives.

--What does this text say about human response to God? As clay to the potter, human response to God should be one of surrender, hope, and pliability.

--Jeremiah 18:13-17—Could Anyone Forget God?

JER 18:13 Therefore this is what the LORD says:

"Inquire among the nations: Who has ever heard anything like this?

A most horrible thing has been done by Virgin Israel.

JER 18:14 Does the snow of Lebanon ever vanish from its rocky slopes?

Do its cool waters from distant sources ever cease to flow?

JER 18:15 Yet my people have forgotten me; they burn incense to worthless idols, which made them stumble in their ways and in the ancient paths.

They made them walk in bypaths and on roads not built up.

JER 18:16 Their land will be laid waste, an object of lasting scorn;

all who pass by will be appalled and will shake their heads.

JER 18:17 Like a wind from the east, I will scatter them before their enemies;

I will show them my back and not my face in the day of their disaster."

--"Therefore" marks a transition, but it is a transition to a text that is based on the previous discussion. The words of judgment to follow are based upon God's role as potter and Judah's position as the clay in His hands. Because God is the potter, the judgments that follow are both possible, and to be expected.

--This text is in many ways a parallel to Jer. 2:13. The people of Judah have done the unthinkable. They have "forgotten" God. How could this happen? This is like the waters of the spring ceasing to flow. The forces of nature are dependable, and so should allegiance to one's God be dependable. The snow melting from Hermon is inconceivable, and Judah forgetting Yahweh should be as inconceivable.

--One might note the application to the post-modern lack of conviction in the 21st century. The ubiquity of doubt and the lack of passionate commitment to anything, as well as the multitude of media outlets displaying the worldwide ravages of natural forces, make this statement by the prophet almost unintelligible today. Without a concept of commitment, this text will be somewhat difficult to apply. In fact, the application may

well be that people desperately need commitments and passion.² In 21st century America, people change allegiances and beliefs like changing clothes.

--The reader should also note the immense textual issues in v. 14. The Hebrew MT is untranslatable, and the modern translations differ greatly. Scholars have suggested a variety of corrections or emendations to the Hebrew text, some based upon conjecture and others upon the versions, i.e. LXX, Latin, or Syriac, none completely satisfactory.³

--The people have forgotten the LORD and worshipped “worthless things.” These same “worthless things” are mentioned in the parallel passage in chapter 2 (see 2:8, 10). How could Judah leave Yahweh for “worthless things”?

--The worship of the “worthless things” has caused Judah’s deviation from the “ancient paths,” bringing to mind the call in Jer. 6:16 to find the “good way” in the “ancient paths.”⁴ They have left the highway for the bypass. In God’s “way,” taking the bypass leads to a multitude of dangers, much like Jesus’ warning concerning staying on the “narrow road” (Matt. 7:13-14).

--They have so strayed from their purpose that the people of Judah will be blown away by the east wind, the dry desert wind. God will turn his back on His people, refusing to allow His presence to be their salvation. What a terrible sight, and one that will be a matter of scorn for passersby. The nation that was meant to be a source of blessing for all nations has become a source of cursing by the nations. The potter has destroyed the pot.

--The image of the broken pot brings us to the next passage for consideration, which follows in Jer. 19.

Jeremiah 19:1-20:6—The Parable of the Broken Jar

19:1-13—Broken Jar, Broken People

JER 19:1 This is what the LORD says: “Go and buy a clay jar from a potter. Take along some of the elders of the people and of the priests ² and go out to the Valley of Ben Hinnom, near the entrance of the Potsherd Gate. There proclaim the words I tell you, ³ and say, ‘Hear the word of the LORD, O kings of Judah and people of Jerusalem. This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Listen! I am going to bring a disaster on this place that will make the ears of everyone who hears of it tingle. ⁴ For they have forsaken me and made this a place of foreign gods; they have burned sacrifices in it to gods that neither they nor their fathers nor the kings of Judah ever knew, and they have filled this place with the blood of the innocent. ⁵ They have built the high places of Baal to burn their sons in the fire as offerings to Baal--something I did not command or mention, nor did it enter my mind. ⁶ So beware, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when people will no longer call this place Topheth or the Valley of Ben Hinnom, but the Valley of Slaughter.

JER 19:7 “‘In this place I will ruin the plans of Judah and Jerusalem. I will make them fall by the sword before their enemies, at the hands of those who seek their lives, and I will give their carcasses as food to the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth. ⁸ I will devastate this city and make it an object of scorn; all who pass by will be appalled and will scoff because of all its wounds. ⁹ I will make them eat the flesh of their sons and daughters, and they will eat one another’s flesh during the stress of the siege imposed on them by the enemies who seek their lives.’”

² As a popular treatment of the lack of passion and commitment in modern society, one might take notice of Tony Campolo, *Carpe Diem* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995).

³ For a detailed discussion of the problem, see McKane, *Jeremiah*, Vol. 1, 429-432, or a much briefer explanation in Bright, *Jeremiah*, 124.

⁴ The Hebrew terms for “paths” in 6:16 and 18:15 are different. A multitude of synonyms for “path” occur in the Hebrew Bible.

JER 19:10 “Then break the jar while those who go with you are watching,¹¹ and say to them, ‘This is what the LORD Almighty says: I will smash this nation and this city just as this potter's jar is smashed and cannot be repaired. They will bury the dead in Topheth until there is no more room.¹² This is what I will do to this place and to those who live here, declares the LORD. I will make this city like Topheth.¹³ The houses in Jerusalem and those of the kings of Judah will be defiled like this place, Topheth--all the houses where they burned incense on the roofs to all the starry hosts and poured out drink offerings to other gods.’”

--Scholars tend to argue that this text is a composite of two separate events in Jeremiah's ministry. If they are correct, then the outline of the passage is something like this:

--The Broken Jar and Accompanying Message in the temple

I. 19:1-2a—Visual message to a small, select group of leaders

II. 19:10-11a—Breaking the jar and word of judgment

III. 19:14-15—Message in the temple

--The Topheth sermon of destruction and death

I. 19:2b-9—Word to the kings

II. 11b-13—Burial in Topheth

--Whether this division is necessary or not, the reader may benefit from recognizing the two-fold nature of the text. On the other hand, Jeremiah certainly could have delivered the message before breaking the bottle, but the message fits much better after the bottle is broken; and furthermore the message interrupts the actions of the prophets in a confusing way.

--The Broken Jar (1-2a, 10-11a, 14-15):

--Jeremiah is told to buy a jar from the potter, actually a bottle. This type of implement is a *baqbuq* (בַּקְבֻּק), which is an onomatopoeic word. It was a long-necked decanter that would have made a sound similar to its name when emptied.

--In v. 11, Jeremiah breaks the jar and announces judgment against Judah. If a flask was useless after firing, the potter would destroy it. After this, the flask was useless. A broken piece of pottery could not be mended. In the ancient world, broken pottery became note paper. The LORD would destroy Judah, making the nation that was created to be the deliverer of God's word and blessing nothing more than scrap paper.

--This is a message without hope. When Judah is described as a broken bottle on the ground, little more can be said.

--In vv. 14-15, Jeremiah takes the message of judgment into the temple courts for all to hear. The reason for the coming destruction was the refusal to hear Yahweh's word.

--The Topheth Sermon (2b-9, 11b-13)

--This sermon is addressed to the “kings of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem.” It describes the coming devastating judgment. The reason for the judgment would be the worship of false gods. The single point of reference is child sacrifice, which took place at Topheth in the days of Manasseh, which was destroyed by Josiah during his reforms. The people may have resumed this practice during the days of Jehoiakim.

--The first word of v. 7, “ruin,” is the verb form of *baqbuq*, which suggests a connection between these passages. If the text is a single event, then Jeremiah may have poured out the contents of the bottle at this point.

--In vv. 11-13, the Hinnom Valley is described as a burial place (which it was) that would be completely filled up. This description approaches apocalyptic proportions.
--One should note that these bodies would make the entire city ritually unclean. By extension, Yahweh (and those who worship Him) would no longer be in the city. This parallels the teachings of Ezekiel that God's glory would depart the city.

19:14-20:6—Pashhur and Jeremiah

^{JER 19:14} Jeremiah then returned from Topheth, where the LORD had sent him to prophesy, and stood in the court of the LORD's temple and said to all the people, ¹⁵ "This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: 'Listen! I am going to bring on this city and the villages around it every disaster I pronounced against them, because they were stiff-necked and would not listen to my words.'"

^{JER 20:1} When the priest Pashhur son of Immer, the chief officer in the temple of the LORD, heard Jeremiah prophesying these things, ² he had Jeremiah the prophet beaten and put in the stocks at the Upper Gate of Benjamin at the LORD's temple. ³ The next day, when Pashhur released him from the stocks, Jeremiah said to him, "The LORD's name for you is not Pashhur, but Magor-Missabib. ⁴ For this is what the LORD says: 'I will make you a terror to yourself and to all your friends; with your own eyes you will see them fall by the sword of their enemies. I will hand all Judah over to the king of Babylon, who will carry them away to Babylon or put them to the sword. ⁵ I will hand over to their enemies all the wealth of this city--all its products, all its valuables and all the treasures of the kings of Judah. They will take it away as plunder and carry it off to Babylon. ⁶ And you, Pashhur, and all who live in your house will go into exile to Babylon. There you will die and be buried, you and all your friends to whom you have prophesied lies.'"

--The overseer of the temple now attacks the overseer of God. The former may win in the short run, but the prophet makes clear who will ultimately triumph. Pashhur and those who follow him would meet "terror all around."

--This is a direct prediction of the exile to Babylon. The inhabitants and valuable belongings of Jerusalem would go to Babylon. In Babylon, Pashhur and all his false prophets would go, and there they would remain until their death.