

A Visit to the Potter's House

Written by Bob Stone

I want to restate a question I asked in [our last session](#) : How do we get truth from the Scripture into our lives? How do we bridge the gap from content to conduct?

How do we get our theology, what we believe, translated into our biography

?

This is a step that must be taken if our faith is to work! It does no good to have a list of things we believe, if that list doesn't work for us.

So the place to begin is with

1. an understanding of the Scriptures
2. and application

That's why an effective teacher will take great care to explain the meaning of a passage so that a person can come to a well-thought-through and appropriate application. Often we take the *familiar* experiences we observe everyday to explain and apply the *unfamiliar* truth. The known is used to explain the unknown—the familiar to explain the unfamiliar.

I want you to see, for example, how the Master Teacher—God Himself—explains how He prepares a person, or in this case a nation, to be used by Him. Turn to Jeremiah 18, where God uses a visit to familiar surroundings to explain some profound truths that may not be understood by His people!

Jeremiah 18:1 says: 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."*

The Message Explained

The message is promised at a particular place—vv. 1-2.

The Lord had His prophet Jeremiah take a road trip to the Potter's house and observe what was happening there. He wanted as many of his senses to be engaged as possible. I did that this week when I went down to three pottery shops in our city. I walked around the store and observed one man making clay products for his shop. I could smell, touch, see, and hear the whole process.

This is what God wanted Jeremiah to do: as a master teacher, God was using a real-life situation to explain how He desires to work with people. He wanted Jeremiah and us to see the truth in operation—to see and hear the truth.

As we know, this approach is not unusual in Scripture. Think about the types of pictures, scenes, objects and everyday occurrences that are used in Scripture to communicate truth. We can see parables and teachings based on the familiar settings of agriculture, work, the landscape, relationships, the body, creation and the building of houses. Some of you may not have thought about this, but God uses the same method to speak to us today, using everyday items to communicate. These insights, of course, are not on the same level of Scripture, but they can be very enlightening to the application of the Scripture to our lives (e.g., Jesus told the disciples to consider the lilies of the field in Matt. 6. Viewing them made His teaching more real).

Think with me of some of the familiar images, settings, objects, or experiences that God has used to speak spiritual truth to you. God speaks to me through ocean, its tides and power and lighthouses. I don't know how many pictures I have taken of lighthouses in the Northwest. They speak to me of the need to be light for the Lord, of my need to be a strong and consistent witness, to stand strong in a storm and not be afraid to give a warning if it will save a person's life or soul.

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Obviously, not everything that inspires us is a specific means God uses to communicate to us, so how do we know when spiritual impressions are from Him? I want us to pause and talk about this for just a few moments, because I think many of us are missing some of the very helpful ways God communicates to us. Here are some ways we can discern if an experience has a message from God in it.

1. **Your eyes/meditation become curious about something you see/hear.** A good example is the burning bush that Moses saw in the desert. If you want to refresh your memory about what happened to Moses, you might want to turn to Exodus 3:1-22 and read about how God used that incident as a means to speak to Moses.
2. **The message/encouragement draws attention to God and humbles you—3:4.**
3. **The message accurately represents the Word/facts—v. 5.**
4. **The message is verified with prayer/time/counsel—3:12-4:12.**

You may never have taken seriously the impressions you have had as you looked over a vista from the top of a mountain. You may not have remembered the way you began to reflect on your life when you walked along the shoreline of the ocean. But these, and hundreds of other experiences, are being used by God every day to speak to us about our lives and His love for us. We need to pay more attention.

With that in mind, let's look back at the book of Jeremiah and see how God used a visit to the Potter's house to speak to the prophet! We can learn some wonderful lessons if we will look closely and ask some good questions about what we see in this passage.

The message God has for Jeremiah is made clear in a familiar

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setting—vv. 1-4.

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...."*

What a poignant message. Let's try to imagine what Jeremiah saw that day, beginning by observing the obvious:

The pot was being shaped and formed.

v. 4—*"But the pot he was shaping from the clay..."* What kind of clay was this? In Jeremiah's day, pottery was made of local and ordinary red clay. It was prepared for the potter by being exposed to the sun, rain and frost to break it up and remove impurities. This is so important, because if the clay is to be thrown on a wheel, it must have no stones, impurities, or foreign elements in it. Otherwise, it will fold on the wheel or explode like a bomb in the kiln (the firing process).

After the impurities were removed, water was added and the potter would pound all the air out of the clay with his feet until it became mud—Isaiah 41:25. Good clay/pure clay was unusable, however, if the consistency was not right. It could not be too hard and dry, nor too moist and thus sloppy and muddy. The right amount of moisture had to be added to the clay.

In Jeremiah's day, the potter did not alter the quality of the clay except by mixing it occasionally with ground limestone which was readily available. This enabled the finished pot to withstand heat, a quality important in cooking pots! Finally, the clay had also to be warmed and softened by the kneading of the potter's hand.

How is this clay like us? We are made of clay, too! Jeremiah's message, of course, was

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directed at the nation of Israel; but it is appropriate for us to apply this passage to our lives as well. As we saw in [our last session](#), we are clay jars who have the unbelievable privilege of being containers of God's Spirit—2 Cor. 4:7ff. In that teaching, we concentrated on the treasure God places within us—the all-surpassing power that is resident in us as clay jars.

7] But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. 8] We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; 9] persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.

Because of the treasure, we are able to withstand four ongoing stages in our lives—being hard pressed, perplexed, persecuted and pummeled (struck down). As a result, we are not crushed, in despair, abandoned or destroyed! In our lesson today, we want to see how we as clay pots are prepared so we can contain the treasure of Christ and the all-surpassing power of God Himself.

Let me state the obvious preparation:

1. All the impurities must be worked out of us, too, before we become clay that God can use!—1 Peter 2:1-3.

2. If the clay is to have maximum value, it must be molded for the right purposes; therefore, we must be in God's hands! (Rom. 12:1-2)

3. The most important quality of the clay is that it *submits*; for if we fail to yield to the hands of the Potter, we will be spoiled. We cannot mold ourselves (James 4:7). Only God has the power to guide our lives. He makes it clear in verses 6-10 that He is sovereign over all men. We cannot argue with Him or tell Him what to do (see Rom. 9:20-24).

4. In order for us to withstand the elements and be strong, we not only need the power of God within us, but we also need God to help us add character and Scripture to our lives so we may go through the fire to strengthen ourselves—Col. 3:12-13.

5. We need the right combination of water and clay, strength and humility if we are to be useful in all the circumstances the Lord has in mind for us—James 4:10; 2 Cor. 4:7ff.

So with that potential in mind, let's look at the scene in Jeremiah and observe the obvious:

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A pot was the product being made (4] *"But the pot he was shaping..."*) and the Potter is God. These verses make that clear. If the clay is properly prepared, the Potter will take responsibility for the way the pots look. He is the only One qualified and experienced enough to mold us. Our lives are not in the hands of some invisible "force" or blind "fate;" no, we are in the hands of the Master Potter—Isaiah 64:8.

God is not just our Creator; He is our Father, and has a perfect plan for our lives (Rom. 12:1-2, Eph. 2:10, Phil. 1:6). God sees the finished product in His mind and promises us that it will be wonderful (1 Cor. 2:9).

Besides the potter, a wheel is the means being used to prepare the pot. (3] *"So I went down to the potter's house, and I saw him working at the wheel."* There are three methods open to the potter for working with the clay: it can be pressed into a mold; molded freehand; or (most frequently) shaped on a wheel. The passage doesn't allude to this, but we should know that placing the clay on the wheel, also called centering, is one of the most difficult segments of the process. With a skilled potter, however, it is extremely graceful and beautiful to watch.

Centering the pot is not done by muscling the clay into submission; rather, a firm and "unshakable" hand centers the clay quite nicely. Water is also used during this centering process so that the potter's fingers glide over the clay. If the clay becomes too dry, the potter's hand will stick to the clay vessel and may mar it. During the centering process, the potter is careful not to handle the clay too much, because that causes the vessel to lose its "life."

We should also notice that during the centering process the wheel turns at a fast speed. It is difficult, if not impossible, to center a pot on slow speeds.

So let's bring all of this together and compare ourselves to the process. What are the key elements in the process as the potter works with the clay?

1. Centering
2. Yielding

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3. Working Together (not too much, not too little)
4. Movement—sometimes it must be done fast to achieve the desired results

Obviously, for the best result it is important we yield our lives to the Lord's forming process. Yielding is essential so that we can be kept in the center of His plan for our lives. Yielding may be one of the greatest struggles we have, but it leads us to our biggest success—being moldable clay in the Father's hands.

I think it is interesting to hear potters talk about the process of "working together" with the clay on a wheel; they ascribe human qualities to the clay. Most potters agree that the finest creations happen when there is a good relationship between the potter and the clay. Skilled potters, in fact, hold two views as to why a pot does not mold or form into the creation the potter had planned. Either:

- The potter was not in tune with the clay and he forced his will, weakness, or brutality on the clay, or
- The clay was not in tune with the potter and either resisted the potter or did not submit, thus the clay's modulability was dulled or lost.

If we hold to the view that the Potter is the Lord, we know God is kind, gentle and loving. When He is strong and forceful, we know it is for good reason. It is our responsibility as the clay, then, to yield, communicate, relate and love all that the Potter does as we are being formed into His image.

How about the speed of the wheel? Sometimes it takes speed to achieve the desired results. We must prepare to go fast and change quickly when we yield ourselves to God's hand. Our molding is not always fast—He may take us beside still waters for a season—but there will be times when all we can do is hold on and trust God's quickly occurring sovereign adjustments.

Remember, God knows what is ahead and what we need to be prepared for, so it just

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makes sense to stop our resistance and trust the wheel of change, not the wheel of fortune.

One author said, "The wheel was spun around swiftly by the potter himself, and he alone guided its speed. Our lives as Christians are not controlled by chance or luck, they are controlled by God. He arranges the circumstances of life that mold us. It was God who arranged for young Joseph to go to Egypt where he was molded into a king. We may wonder about the circumstances of our lives and think that God has been unkind to us, but one day we will realize the truth of Romans 8:28 and agree that all things did work together for good. The most important thing about a wheel is not its size (some lives are shorter than others), but its center. If the wheel is 'on center,' then everything will be balanced. Christ is the center of the dedicated Christian's life (Matt. 6:33)"—Warren W. Wiersbe.

If we read on, we see something went wrong in the forming of this pot.

The pot was marred.

v. 4b—*"But the pot he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands..."* There was an imperfection in the pot, or impurities in the clay. It would be very interesting to ask a potter what he does when he notices an imperfection in the pottery he is molding. Is it normal to have imperfections? Does he expect to have to adjust the clay object he is working with? Does he as a potter throw the clay away and start with a new lump when he sees the pot is marred, or does he reshape it? (Most often, he'll reshape it.)

What did the potter do in Jeremiah 18? He reshaped the marred pot. As we look at God's word here, try to pick up the reasons for the marring, and then we can see the way the pot is reshaped!

Who was/is responsible for the marring? Was it the potter? If the Potter is God, then we have to conclude He does only what is best for us, so He is not responsible for our failures, imperfections, or impurities. Was it the wheel that was responsible for the marring? If we have been yielded to the Master Potter and have submitted to His plans, we can't blame our circumstances for the trouble in our lives, though it is sometimes convenient to do so!

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Was it the clay, then, that was responsible for the marring? Jeremiah makes it clear that the marring occurred because the clay wanted to have its own way (see 18:11-12). We have to believe it is our bad choices that make for negative results in our lives. How often we as Christians mar our own lives by making our own plans outside of the will of God.

I am convinced, however, that if only we could see the finished product God has planned, we would never disobey Him! The beauty, the glory, the eternal joy of God's plan would be so impressive, we would do anything to be in His will!

Here's the sad thing about us all, however: from time to time we think we know more about life than God does. How about that for being the most ludicrous thought we have ever had? "I know better than God!"

Beyond rebellion and going our own way, are there other reasons for the marring that happens in our lives? Can the interference of others cause it, too? We all know that other people can seek to disrupt, injure and do evil against us, and we are not responsible for the injury that occurs. So many lives in our world have been marred by the excesses and the outright harm inflicted by others. Think of the possible causes of marring:

- abuse
- rape
- verbal attacks
- war and terrorist attacks

The list goes on and on. How should we respond to the evil in us and that which is inflicted upon us from others? (I refer you to [A Response To Terrorist Attacks](#) where we addressed that issue.) In summary, I want to note very carefully that whether because of our rebellion or the pain inflicted upon us, there are limits to the impact of evil, and there is One watching over us. This is especially true for believers! As I said a couple of weeks ago in my message on terrorist attacks, we don't know why some people were spared evil and others were victims! We don't know when God will make allowances for evil; or when in other instances, He will rescue us from it. We simply don't have all the answers.

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Quote from *A Response To Terrorist Attacks*: "I believe the answer to our questions is all wrapped up in the meshing together of God's sovereignty (His complete and absolute authority and dominion) with our free will, the free will of mankind to choose to follow God or reject Him; to choose to do good or to do evil. This meshing of God's sovereignty and man's free will is a mystery that is greatly debated..."

We don't have all the answers to our questions about the *why* of evil, but we do know that God is not the author of evil, and that Scripture clearly teaches us that adversity and suffering are never a good indicator of how God feels about us as much as it is an indication of the consequences of evil among us.

Looking back at Jeremiah 18, it is also very significant and helpful to notice the location of the solution

v. 4b—*"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."*

What do these verses tell us about our Potter? Is the marring beyond His ability to repair it? Does the Potter give up? Does the marring cause the Potter to throw up His hands in disgust and discouragement? Is He at a loss as to what He should do? **No!** Even though for some reason God allows us to be inflicted by our sin and that of others, we at the same time have the great comfort to know that the solution to the marring **is in God's hands**

! If we submit to the hands of the Potter, we have a solution for every circumstance that comes our way.

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The new product is also a pot. This is good news. When it comes to marring because of our own sin, God is gracious to forgive and to "make us again." Sometimes God must use drastic disciplines to get us to yield to Him. He spent 20 years working on Jacob, but in the end he became a useful vessel to the Lord. He gave David another chance. He also reshaped Jonah and Peter.

It is sad when the clay rebels, because there is always a loss of time and sometimes beauty in the next creation—but God molds us again, even though we are never quite the same as before. First John 19 is a wonderful promise of forgiveness. *"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."*

There is a criteria for reshaping: *"...so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him."* Reshaping demands "reyielding," but the submission guarantees the promise of a new pot as it seems best to God! That is a great promise for previously rebellious clay.

The Message Applied to Israel and to Us—18:5-19:1.

Let's see how God explains this parable—this field trip to the potter's house.

Here God describes:

The potential for Israel—vv. 5-6.

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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.*

Let's review the elements of this parable, this teaching from God in vv. 5-6.

- The **clay** is the people of Israel.
- The **Potter** is God.
- The **location** for the molding is in God's hand.
- The **product** to be made is another pot, or a plant if He changes the metaphor.
- The **wheel**, therefore is life itself under God's control.

So what does this explanation say to us? It says we as individuals and even nations are presented with some choices.

The potential for all people—vv. 7-10.

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."*

He's the God of the whole earth and of the individual.

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I want us to see that the potential reshaping can be halted or never started. There is no guarantee that reshaping will follow the marring—vv. 7-8a. There is only one way that destruction can be prevented and reshaping take place!

The criteria for reshaping is repentance—v. 8b; 17:9-10. *"...and if that nation I warned repents of its evil..."* If we restate the obvious applications of those verses:

Sin will mar our life, but repentance brings forgiveness and reshaping. Oh, how gracious God is. Notice the repentance takes place at a point in time, but reshaping may be a process that takes some time. The promise of the Reshaper is found in verse 8. If we repent, He relents and reshapes.

Repent means to go in the opposite direction from where we are going; it literally means *to heave a sigh of relief*—2 Pet. 3:9.

Reshape means to form again as God seems best.

So here are the key questions you should ask if you are not a hopper, or a shopper, but a genuine seeker:

Can we trust God to do what is best? Rom. 9:20-21; 2 Tim. 2:20-21.

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Romans 9:20—*"But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? "Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?'" 21] Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?"*

If God is the Potter, we must trust His reshaping will ultimately be for our good—Rom. 8:28. He has the right to make us whatever He desires us to be—v. 21.

What do we learn about God here? 18:6-8; John 10:28. We have learned that the original shaping or the subsequent reshaping is done safely in His hands. John 10:28—*"I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand."*

We should also know that if conditions for reshaping are not met, there will be consequences from God for our resistance! God offers a wonderful chance for reshaping, but if we refuse His plan for us, the potential is that God's good plan can be reconsidered. If we choose to walk in disobedience, here are the serious and logical consequences in vv. 9-10.

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. (In other words, He won't fulfill His good plans for him/her/it.)

Think of the good plans of God that have not yet been realized because of disobedience in people and nations. Look at verse 11. For the willfully disobedient; for the hard clay, a disaster is prepared—v. 11a.

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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.'" (God was preparing a disaster, designing a plan against Israel.)*

Again, however, an alternative is offered—v. 11b.

"So turn from your evil ways, each one of you, and reform your ways and your actions."

Sadly, in Israel's case they refused God's offer—v. 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.'"

So the result is illustrated for Israel and for us—18:13-19:13. In keeping with His method of using the familiar to teach the unfamiliar, here's what God tells Jeremiah to do:

- Go and buy a clay jar—Jeremiah 19:1.
- Gather some elders and priests and go to a specific spot—vv. 1b-2.

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"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..." (This was the garbage dump of Jerusalem.)

- List Israel's sins before them—(listed in vv. 3-9).

4)After He is finished, he is to smash the jar before them and declare their judgment will be like the pot. vv. 10-13—"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.'"

I'm sad I have to bring this strong message, but here it is.

There is no guarantee that as rebellious clay we will have endless opportunities to repent and turn from our self-centered ways. If we persist in our rebellion, we may receive the logical consequences. In the case of the people of Israel, they were smashed!

Conclusion

Obviously, that is not God's desire for us! His intentions for us are good—v. 10. So today, when we see we are in the Potter's hands (walk over to the clay), feeling His pressures, feeling the molding of His fingers, we should be able to relax and trust Him even though the shaping and reshaping will be painful at times.

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God has a purpose in mind—to make us vessels fit for His use—2 Tim. 2:19-21. What a great thing it is to be a vessel, a clay jar for God. A vessel does not manufacture anything; it only receives, contains, and shares. God wants us to receive His blessings and share them with others. All He asks is that we be available, clean, and empty.

If we choose to go our own way with our own plans, however, we should understand that the smashing of our lives will come. If the smashing does come, though, remember that even *that* is designed to get our attention. God can pick up the pieces of our shattered lives and miraculously form something new if we turn to Him!

We should all ask ourselves:

- How are we illustrations of this passage right now?
- Are we repenting or resisting?
- Are we moldable or unbending? Are we hard or soft?

My straight encouragement is to yield your life to the Potter's hands and say, "Have your own way, Lord, have Your own way. You are the Potter, I am the clay. Mold me and make me, after Your will. While I am waiting, yielded and still."

Personal Application Questions

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1. What kind of clay do you desire to be, moldable or unbending? From our passage, why might you choose each of these alternatives? What is the most difficult and painful thing about being unbending? What is the most rewarding thing about being soft and pliable clay in the Master Potter's hands?

2. In ministering to the following types of people, what should be remembered, and what action should be taken?

1.

1. **The moldable:** The one who is willing to be shaped as the Master sees fit—2 Tim. 2:20-21. What is the most difficult thing about being molded in the Potter's hands? Does reshaping always imply unrepentant sin? Explain. What conditions might require reshaping for the obedient saint today? Can you think of any biblical examples? How can suffering be used of God to reshape us? (See 1 Pet. 3:8-4:2; 4:12-19; James 1:2-4.) Can success or obedience help to shape us, or do we always need a hard time before we are pliable? Explain.

2. **The broken:** The one who wants to return to God from the shattering experience of their rebellion and sin—19:11. What Scriptures would you use from this passage? Other passages? What will the returnee experience from his reshaping? Share personal experiences and observations. Why must we be careful not to be superficial in ministering to people who have been marred and have thus manifested the following actions: suicide, alcoholism/drugs, adultery? Brainstorm about what might be the deeper cause for each of these conditions. What attitudes are helpful in our ministry to the marred and broken?

3. **The religious.** The one who appears to be a clean vessel on the outside—Matt. 23:25-26. What Scriptures would you use to show the religious person his need? (In other words, clean on the outside of the cup, but not on the inside, not containers of God—2 Corinthians 4:7ff.) What will help them see their sinfulness?

Assignments

1. Using the language of Jeremiah 18-19, what is your prayer for your own life? Write it out.
2. Using a piece of clay, explain to someone the lessons of this passage.

Sources Used

Whole Bible Study Course

Originated by D. B. Eaststep, Outline and Comments by Warren W. Wiersbe, Pastor, Calvary Baptist Church, Covington, Kentucky. 1968