

Tempered By Trials

Sermon # 6

Jeremiah: Learning God is In Control!

Jeremiah 18:1-6

Jeremiah is sent by God to the potter house to watch him as he worked. There Jeremiah learned some invaluable lessons about the work and will of God.

Although the potter's wheel was one of mankind's earliest inventions it has changed surprisingly little in the last 6,000 years. Although the modern potter's wheels may not be powered by the potter's foot they follow the same basic design and work much the same.

"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 you to hear My words." (3) Then I went down to the potter's house, and there he was, making something at the wheel. (4) And the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hand of the potter; so he made it again into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to make. (5) Then the word of the Lord came to me, saying: (6) "O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter?" says the Lord. "Look, as the clay is in the potter's hand, so are you in My hand, O house of Israel!"

So what did Jeremiah learn at the Potter's house that we can apply in our own lives.

First, God is the Potter. (v. 6)

"...Look, as the clay is in the potter's hand, so are you in My hand, O house of Israel!"

The image of the potter conveys to us that we are not in the hands of some invisible "force" or blind chance but rather in the hands of Almighty God.

It is obvious that the clay cannot form itself – it is powerless. Only God has the power to guide our lives. God is sovereign over all men it is senseless to argue with Him or attempt to tell him what to do. The Apostle Paul writes in Romans 9:20-21, "But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, "Why have you made me like this?" (21) Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor?"

The potter begins his work with a plan in His mind for the clay. He alone can see the finished product he desires to bring into existence. As Paul says in Philippians 1:6,

"being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it..."

God is the Potter and...

Secondly, Man is the Clay

(v. 6) "... Look, as the clay is in the potter's hand, so are you in My hand, O house of Israel!"

Think for a moment about the characteristics of clay. First, Clay is of little value in itself. Clay can become something of immense value if molded by the right hands for the right purpose. Secondly, the most important quality of the clay is its ability to be molded by the potter. "Before using the wheel, a potter must knead his clay to rid it of impurities and air. He "wedges" it—slicing it in half and slamming the halves back together to force out air bubbles. When he feels the clay is ready, the potter places a container of water at his workbench (to keep his fingers wet) and turns to his wheel.

The potter next throws the ball of clay down on the upper wheel. Then he sets the wheel in motion and surrounds the clay with his hands, forcing it true to the center of the wheel head. Now the potter must "master" the clay, making it responsive to his touch. He applies pressure at the base of the clay ball, causing it to rise up in [a] sort of rounded cone. Then he pressed on top of the clay with his thumbs or the palms of his hands. Repeating this three or four times increases the flexibility of the clay and increases its strength.

At this point the potter "opens up" the clay ball by pressing his thumbs into the center, gradually hollowing it out. Applying pressure with his fingers, he evens out the thickness of the cylinder walls. Finally he shapes the clay into a vase, a pitcher, or whatever he chooses.

As the terms force, master, and throw imply, clay is not always easy to work with. Jeremiah 18 describes God as a potter having trouble at His wheel because His people refused to obey Him. This was a familiar image to people in biblical times, because they could see the potter's wheel in the marketplace of virtually every village and town." [J. I. Packer, Merrill C. Tenney, William White, Jr., editors. The Bible Almanac. (Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville; 1980), p. 275 ww.bible.org/illus/Potter]

Man is the Clay and...

Third, Life Is the Wheel

F. B Meyer points out that the potter achieves his purposes by means of the wheel. The wheel, he says, speaks of he rounds of life, those routines of life that seem so dull and boring. As the wheel goes around and around it is hard to tell one revolution from the next. But with each revolution the pressure of the master's hands, he makes small changes until the potter feels that the process is complete.

Our lives are controlled by chance or by luck they are controlled by God. He arranges the circumstances of our lives to mold us. He arranged Joseph's life in Egypt for over twenty years

until he was positioned as Prime Minister of the land in order to see his people through the great famine in Egypt. He arranged Moses to have forty years on the back side of the desert to prepare him to lead his people from bondage in Egypt. Our lives are not some random chance but the ordered plan of ruler of the Universe.

Life Is the Wheel and...

Fourth, Disobedience is the Marring.

It would be wonderful if the clay always yielded to the potter's hand. Yet the prophet saw the vessel marred. Would the potter cast away the clay and start with new clay. No, for in verse four we read, "And the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hand of the potter; so he made it again into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to make." No, the potter did not cast away the clay, he made it again. As author William Peterson writes, "Perhaps the most surprising thing is that the potter doesn't throw His stubborn clay away. Once He has been molding and shaping it. He keeps working on it. At times, He may have to start from scratch with it, but he doesn't throw it away." [William J. Peterson. Jeremiah: The Prophet Who Wouldn't Quit. (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1984) p. 61.]

The clay was marred when it refuses to yield to the potter's hand, so we are marred when we refuse to yield our lives to God.

But there is always a cost to disobedience. There is a loss of time and a loss of beauty. God will mold us again but we are never quite the same as before. Sin always leaves scars.

We serve the God of the "second chance." The Bible is a record of God giving individuals a second chance after disobedience marred their lives. He gave second chances to David, Peter, Mark and many others.

Closing – Illustration of the Sovereignty of God.

Howard Hendricks tells the following story. "The phone rang and I greeted a young pastor friend from Arlington, Virginia. "What are you doing?" he asked. "Studying," I replied. "Nothing special." "Are you sitting down?" "Yes, why?" "Your father just trusted Christ this evening." "He what? You've got to be kidding!" I blurted out.

Such an inappropriate response grew out of long detours in our father-son journey. Ever since I received Christ as a boy my concern has been for the salvation of my family and loved ones. On repeated occasions I had broached the subject of the gospel with dad, but his response was less than excited.

My father has always been a very important person to me. Not that I approved of every-thing he said or did or that I imitated him consciously in any way. We weren't really close friends, either. But he was important in my life because of the indirect impact he made upon me.

Dad was a military man. He had seen action around the world. During the periods when he was embroiled in battle, I would become very sensitive to his spiritual need. I and my family prayed for him, but at times I'm afraid my faith sputtered. His response was always the same: Son, don't worry about me. I'll work it out with God (as if God could be manipulated like a Pentagon official).

God brought a man into my life, a man with a passion for men. His name was Butch Hardman. One day before we knew each other Butch was boarding a plane in Detroit when a friend handed him a cassette tape.

"Ever hear Hendricks? Here's a tape you should listen to." On that tape I related my father's spiritual need.

Butch listened and something about the anecdote reminded him of his own father with whom he had shared Christ shortly before he died. He began to pray for this unknown man, George Hendricks. Some months later Butch attended a pastors' conference in Philadelphia where I was the speaker. He shook my hand afterward. That was the only time our paths crossed before a remarkable incident in Arlington.

Butch was driving the church bus down the street, having discharged all his passengers. He saw a man standing on the corner who reminded him uncannily of Howard Hendricks. Could it possibly be...? He backed up the bus, stopped, got off, and went over to the man.

"Are you by any chance Howard Hendricks' father?" It is easy to imagine the startled response. "Er-ah (I can envision my father's critical once-over with his steely blue eyes) yeah—you a student of my son?" "No, I'm not, but he sure has helped me. Got time for a cup of coffee?"

That encounter began a friendship, skillfully engineered by the Spirit of God. Butch undoubtedly sensed dad's hesitancy when he discovered he had met a preacher. For a long time Butch did not invite him to attend his church. He simply suggested that dad drop by the office of coffee. Patiently he endured dad's cigars and his endless repertoire of war stories. Before long he also learned that dad had been diagnosed as having a terminal throat cancer.

Months later Butch was at his bedside. "Mr. Hendricks, I'll be leaving shortly for a Holy Land trip. Instead of my listening to you tonight, would you let me tell you a story?"

Butch had earned his hearing and he began simply to relate the interview of Jesus Christ with Nicodemus as recorded by the Apostle John. At the conclusion dad accepted Butch's invitation to receive Jesus Christ as his own personal Savior. Then dad got up out of bed, stood, and saluted with a smile. "Now I'm under a new Commander-in-Chief!" That night Butch called Dallas.

The last time I saw dad alive I could not believe he was the same man I had known. His frame was wasted, but his spirit was more virile than I had ever known. In accordance with

dad's specific provision in his will, Butch Hardman conducted the crisp military funeral in Arlington cemetery where the gospel of Jesus Christ was presented to the small group of family and military attendants. As the guns saluted their final farewell, I knew God had vindicated forty-two years of prayer." [Howard & Jeanne Hendricks. *Footprints*. (Multnomah Press, 1981) pp. 16-19]