

The Potter and the Clay

Rev. Derek Geldart

Potter; Clay; Change / Jeremiah 18:1–6

Jeremiah 17:9 NIV

The heart is deceitful above all things

and beyond cure.

Who can understand it?

Ever try to correct someone who is clearly heading in the wrong direction, only to discover they have already convinced themselves they are right? Scripture tells us that “iron sharpeneth iron” ([Proverbs 27:17](#)), yet it also warns that “the way of a fool is right in his own eyes: but he that hearkeneth unto counsel is wise” ([Proverbs 12:15](#)). One of the most dangerous conditions of the human heart is not ignorance, but stubbornness—the refusal to listen when God lovingly sends truth, correction, and warning into our lives. Long before Jeremiah was born, God had already set him apart and ordained him to be a prophet to the nations ([Jeremiah 1:4–5](#)). Yet Jeremiah’s calling would place him into one of the darkest and most spiritually rebellious periods in Judah’s history. Jeremiah did not preach during revival, peace, and repentance, but to a nation collapsing morally, spiritually, politically, and emotionally beneath the weight of its own sin.

When Israel first entered the Promised Land, God commanded them to live as a holy and distinct people ([Leviticus 20:26](#)). The land itself did not ultimately belong to them, but to God ([Leviticus 25:23](#)). They were called to love the Lord with all their heart, walk in obedience to His commands, and worship no other gods before Him ([Deuteronomy 6:4–5](#)). Yet slowly, over generations, their hearts

drifted from God. Idolatry spread. Covenant faithfulness faded. Though the nation had clearly broken God's covenant and wandered far from Him, many of Judah's leaders still felt secure. Even as Jeremiah openly wept over the coming judgment of Babylon, pleading with the people to repent, the leaders refused to believe him. Had not God miraculously delivered Jerusalem from Assyria in the days of Hezekiah? Surely the city that housed God's Temple could never fall. They trusted in their religious identity, their history, and the presence of the Temple more than they trusted in obedience to God Himself. But while the leaders projected confidence, many of the ordinary people feared what was coming. Babylon's armies were fierce, relentless, and growing stronger with every conquest. The people knew the nation had spiritually fallen, and deep down many feared that the same judgment God once brought upon Egypt and the nations of Canaan was now approaching them through invasion, famine, destruction, and exile. Into that atmosphere of fear, denial, pride, and spiritual rebellion, Jeremiah was sent to give Israel news of God's discipline.

Upon hearing what God was about to do to His people, Jeremiah repeatedly pleaded with the Lord to relent and withhold His hand of judgment. Though he faithfully proclaimed coming destruction, his heart was shattered by the message he carried. Jeremiah did not preach judgment with joy. As he prophetically heard "the sound of the trumpet" and "the battle cry," and foresaw the land lying in ruins ([Jeremiah 4:19-20](#)), the anguish within him overflowed in tears. Then listen to the anguish in Jeremiah's voice:

Jeremiah 9:1 NIV

Oh, that my head were a spring of water

and my eyes a fountain of tears!

I would weep day and night

for the slain of my people.

Jeremiah understood that Judah's sins testified against them, yet he still cried out, "Do something, Lord, for the sake of your name" ([Jeremiah 14:7](#)). Perhaps Jeremiah remembered how Moses once stood before God after Israel worshiped the golden calf at Mount Sinai. When God's wrath burned against the nation, Moses pleaded that destroying His people would cause the nations to question His name and His covenant promises, and the Lord relented from immediate destruction ([Exodus 32:11-14](#)). Jeremiah likewise confessed the wickedness of the nation and begged God not to reject or abhor His people ([Jeremiah 14:20-21](#)). Yet this time the answer was different. God would not relent, because Judah's rebellion had become persistent, deliberate, and unrepentant. Again and again they rejected His warnings, hardened their hearts, embraced idolatry, oppressed the vulnerable, and refused to return to Him. One of the hardest lessons of faith is discovering that sometimes God lovingly says, 'No.' Yet even His discipline is not cruel, but purposeful. There are seasons when the most loving thing God can do is allow us to walk through hardship, correction, and brokenness so that stubborn hearts might finally surrender to the Potter's hands.

The Potter's Workshop

Jeremiah 18:1-2 NIV

This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: "Go down to the potter's house, and there I will give you my message."

God often uses vivid and deeply personal images throughout both the Old and New Testament to describe what our relationship with Him is meant to be like. He speaks of a shepherd caring for his sheep, a father loving his children, a husband faithfully pursuing his bride, and a vine sustaining its branches [1]. Yet when God desired Jeremiah to understand both His sovereignty and the necessity of His coming judgment upon Judah, He did not send the prophet to a palace, a battlefield, or even the Temple courts. Instead, He sent him to a dusty

potter's workshop where ordinary people crafted ordinary objects for everyday life. In Jeremiah's day pottery was woven into nearly every aspect of society. It was one of humanity's earliest trades [2], dating back as far as the Neolithic period around 8500 BC [3]. Clay vessels carried water, stored grain, preserved food, held oil for lamps, and served countless daily needs. Every household depended upon the work of a potter. That is part of what makes this scene so striking. God often reveals eternal truth through ordinary life. While Judah searched for political alliances, military solutions, and religious reassurance, God essentially said to Jeremiah, "Jeremiah, go watch the Potter."

The potter's house was likely located in the lower portion of Jerusalem near the Valley of Hinnom [4], an area suitable for obtaining clay and operating kilns. The workshop itself would have been larger than many imagine, requiring space for the potter's wheel, furnaces for firing clay, storage areas for finished vessels, and piles of discarded shards from ruined or unusable pottery [5]. Jeremiah would have heard the steady turning of the wheel, felt the heat of the kiln, smelled the damp clay, and watched the potter's hands skillfully press, shape, collapse, and remake vessels according to his will. As Jeremiah observed the clay spinning beneath the potter's control, God was teaching him a sobering truth: just as the potter possesses full authority over the clay, so God possesses absolute sovereignty over His creation. Nations rise and fall beneath His hand, and the Creator has every right to shape, discipline, remake, or judge His people according to His perfect wisdom and holy purposes.

Constant Motion Under the Potter's Control

Jeremiah 18:3 NIV

So I went down to the potter's house, and I saw him working at the wheel.

Jeremiah entered the potter's house and quietly watched the craftsman at work. As the wheel continuously spun beneath the potter's hands, powerful

spiritual truths likely began unfolding before his eyes. Life often feels like a spinning wheel we cannot slow down. Through loss, illness, disappointment, suffering, uncertainty, and death, people can feel as though they are being tossed helplessly from one circumstance to another. Everything around Judah was collapsing. Babylon was approaching like an unstoppable storm, ruthless in power and unmatched in military strength. From a human perspective, Jerusalem's future looked hopeless. Yet as Jeremiah observed the potter shaping the clay, the truth of Israel's position before God became clearer. Though the wheel spun rapidly, the potter's hands never lost control. In the same way, though nations tremble and lives seem chaotic, the sovereign God of heaven never loses His authority over the clay He has formed. While God certainly possessed every right to destroy His people because of their rebellion, His sovereignty was still tempered by mercy and grace. Even now, if the people would humble themselves, pray, seek His face, and turn from their wicked ways, the Potter stood ready to forgive and heal their land ([2 Chronicles 7:14](#)).

As Jeremiah continued watching the clay turn beneath the potter's hands, another truth likely settled deeply into his heart: even when God feels distant, His hands never leave the clay. Though Babylon would soon invade Jerusalem and carry the people into exile, God had not abandoned them for a single moment. His discipline was not evidence of hatred, but of covenant love and correction [6]. Perhaps Jeremiah remembered the wisdom of Solomon:

Proverbs 3:11-12 NIV

My son, do not despise the LORD's discipline,

and do not resent his rebuke,

because the LORD disciplines those he loves,

as a father the son he delights in.

God was far from finished molding and shaping His people. Though the exile would last seventy long years, it would not be the end of Israel's story. Through hardship, discipline, and captivity, the Lord would humble the hearts of His people, bring them to repentance, restore them to their land, and draw them back into covenant faithfulness. The Potter still had His hands upon the clay; He was still shaping it according to His purposes.

As we watch the potter mold the clay, should this not also fill our hearts with hope? After all, humanity itself was formed from the dust of the earth, and in many ways we have much in common with the clay spinning upon the wheel. Clay, as it is first found in the ground, is not immediately useful. It must first be dug up, weathered over time, soaked in water, softened, purified, and prepared before it can ever become a vessel fit for the potter's use [7]. In the same way, we are all formed from the same fallen clay of humanity. Until the Potter Himself seeks us and draws us unto Himself ([John 6:44](#); [John 15:16](#)), we remain lost in our sins and under condemnation apart from Him ([John 3:18](#)). How beautiful are the feet of those who brought us the Good News ([Romans 10:14-15](#)), and even more beautiful is the Savior who bore our sins upon the cross and through faith has set us free indeed ([John 8:36](#)). Because of Christ, we now possess the assurance that the Potter remains sovereign over every detail of our lives. Life often feels like a spinning wheel—mountaintops one moment, valleys the next—but the Potter's hands remain upon the clay. He is shaping, refining, correcting, and preparing His people for His kingdom. May we never resist His loving guidance, but instead humbly allow every step of our lives to be directed according to His perfect will ([Proverbs 16:9](#)).

Marred Clay Was Expected - Not Exceptional

Jeremiah 18:4 NIV

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.

The clay becoming marred in the potter's hands would have stirred powerful imagery within Jeremiah and the people of Judah. In the ancient world clay was rarely found pure and ready for immediate use. As the potter shaped the vessel upon the spinning wheel, he would often stop to remove stones, roots, debris, and hidden air pockets that would weaken or destroy the vessel during the firing process. What is remarkable is that the potter did not throw away the clay simply because flaws were present. Instead, he patiently worked through the impurities, removing what did not belong while continuing to shape the clay for his intended purpose. What a vivid picture this must have been for Jeremiah as he considered the spiritual condition of God's people.

The Potter had repeatedly exposed the impurities hidden within Judah's heart. They had "forsaken" God, "the spring of living water," and instead "dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water" ([Jeremiah 2:13](#) NIV). They turned from worshipping the living God to pursuing Baal, Asherah poles, heavenly bodies, and pagan idols. They stole, murdered, committed adultery, and falsely assumed they could still stand safely in God's presence ([Jeremiah 7:9-10](#)). Their leaders abused authority for selfish gain ([Jeremiah 6:13](#)), while the vulnerable—the widow, the orphan, the foreigner, and the poor—were oppressed and neglected ([Jeremiah 7:5-6](#)). God's Word no longer brought conviction because they had "no delight in it" ([Jeremiah 6:10](#)), and their consciences had become so hardened that they were no longer even ashamed of their sin ([Jeremiah 6:15](#)). Yet despite the depth of their corruption and rebellion, Jeremiah likely stood in awe as he watched the potter continue working with the clay. The flaws in the clay did not stop the Potter from continuing His work. In the same way, Babylon was not the end of God's people, but rather an instrument of divine discipline and covenant love. The Potter was not destroying the clay—He was purifying it!

The Potter Reworked

Another truth that likely caused Jeremiah to marvel was that when the clay collapsed in the potter's hands, the potter did not simply throw it away. Instead, with patience, wisdom, and purpose, he carefully gathered the marred clay together and reshaped it into another vessel according to his design. What a powerful picture this must have been for Jeremiah as he reflected upon the history of Israel. Whenever Israel humbled itself and returned to God, the nation reflected the holy people God had called them to be. Yet time and again the vessel seemed to collapse under the weight of sin, pride, and rebellion. As Jeremiah watched the clay being skillfully formed into something beautiful only to suddenly buckle and fall apart upon the wheel, he may well have thought about the reforms under King Josiah. Not many years earlier, Jeremiah had witnessed a season of spiritual renewal sweep through Judah. Josiah tore down idols, removed pagan altars, destroyed the high places, restored the Passover, cleansed the Temple, and called the nation back to covenant faithfulness ([2 Kings 22-23](#)). For a moment, it looked as though the vessel was whole again.

Yet despite the national reforms, the hearts of many people remained unchanged. The reforms changed Judah's appearance more than its heart. After Josiah's death the nation quickly returned to corruption and idolatry. No doubt this filled Jeremiah with deep sorrow. Yet even in the midst of such heartbreak there remained hope, because the Potter had not abandoned the clay. The God who had patiently dealt with Israel's failures throughout generations would not cast His people aside now. Again and again God had shown Himself rich in grace, mercy, and steadfast covenant love. Even through judgment He continued working for the good of those who truly loved and sought Him ([Romans 8:28](#)). Though the coming exile in Babylon would be painful beyond imagination, it was not meaningless destruction. The furnace of captivity would become the Potter's instrument of reshaping, humbling, and purifying His people so that Israel might once again become the vessel God had intended them to be from the beginning.

The Clay Belonged to the Potter

Jeremiah 18:5-6 NIV

Then the word of the LORD came to me. He said, “Can I not do with you, Israel, as this potter does?” declares the LORD. “Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, Israel.

The potter and the clay remind us that God is sovereign over the work of His hands. Humanity itself was formed from the dust of the earth, and life began only when God breathed into man the breath of life ([Genesis 2:7](#)). As Jeremiah watched the potter reshape the marred clay according to his own design, he was being reminded that the Creator possesses full authority over the work of His hands. Yet the Potter’s authority was never cold or cruel. The Potter was deeply invested in the clay. God demonstrated the depth of His love by sending His own Son, Jesus Christ, to atone for the sins of humanity ([John 3:16](#)). The Potter was not casually discarding vessels He no longer cared about; He was lovingly working with the clay He Himself had formed and redeemed [8]. Jeremiah may have remembered the many times in Israel’s history when God had shown mercy and delivered His people from destruction, but past deliverances did not mean that discipline was no longer necessary. God declared to Jeremiah that sending Babylon to judge and discipline Judah was His sovereign right [9]. Yet this judgment was not the action of a cruel tyrant or “a conscious despot who was displaying arbitrary power by mere caprice” [10]. Rather, it was the loving correction of a holy God whose actions were perfectly aligned with justice, righteousness, truth, and covenant love. Just as the clay upon the wheel could not determine whether it would become a lamp, bowl, water jar, or storage vessel, neither could Israel persist in rebellion and paganism without the Potter’s notice or discipline. The clay belonged to the Potter, and the people belonged to God.

At the same time, unlike the passive clay upon the wheel, humanity is called to respond willingly to the Potter's hands. This passage confronts the spirit of modern individualism that resists surrender and insists upon self-rule. God has granted humanity the ability to choose, but our freedom must be exercised with humility and wisdom. Apostle Paul reminds believers that while we may claim "I have the right to do anything," not everything is beneficial ([1 Corinthians 6:12](#)). Too often we resist the very hands trying to reshape us. Yet the trials, afflictions, and hardships God allows are never meaningless in the hands of the Potter. Though we may not always understand why suffering enters our lives, Scripture assures us that "in all things God works for the good of those who love him" ([Romans 8:28](#)). In faith we must humbly acknowledge that God's ways are infinitely higher than our own ([Isaiah 55:8-9](#)) and trust that the path He ordains ultimately leads toward grace, holiness, mercy, and righteousness. When believers surrender themselves fully to the Potter's will, they become vessels fit for His kingdom and His glory. What greater joy could there be than to stand before our Creator one day and hear the words, "Well done, good and faithful servant"? Praise God that we belong not to ourselves, but to the loving hands of the Potter.

The Unspoken Step: The Furnace is Coming

Yet Jeremiah knew the wheel was not the end. The furnace was still coming. A vessel was not complete simply because it had been molded into the desired form. Without the fire of the kiln, the clay remained fragile, unfinished, and unable to fulfill its intended purpose. The fire hardened what the Potter had shaped. In much the same way, God often uses the furnaces of life to complete His work within His people. Trials, suffering, persecution, waiting, grief, disappointment, and seasons of testing become the very fires through which faith is refined and strengthened. Scripture repeatedly reminds us that the fire is not meaningless. Peter writes that trials come so that our faith, "of greater worth

than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire,” may prove genuine and bring glory to Christ ([1 Peter 1:6–7](#)). James declares that the testing of our faith produces perseverance and spiritual maturity ([James 1:2–4](#)). Malachi speaks of the Lord sitting “as a refiner and purifier of silver” ([Malachi 3:2–3](#)), while Paul reminds believers that suffering produces perseverance, character, and hope ([Romans 5:3–5](#)). The furnace is painful, but it is also purposeful.

Throughout Scripture, God repeatedly revealed His presence in the midst of the fire. When Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were cast into Nebuchadnezzar’s fiery furnace because they refused to worship idols, the flames did not destroy them; instead, the fire revealed the presence and power of God walking beside them ([Daniel 3](#)). Even our Lord Jesus Christ walked willingly into the furnace of suffering. In the Garden of Gethsemane, knowing the agony of the cross that awaited Him, Jesus humbly prayed, “Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done” ([Luke 22:42](#) KJV). Christ submitted Himself completely into the hands of the Father, trusting fully in the will of the Heavenly Potter.

And so, the question before us today is deeply personal. As the wheels of life continue spinning beneath your feet, are you confident that God’s will is being accomplished within your life? Can you sense the hands of the Heavenly Potter patiently, lovingly, and faithfully shaping you into the image of Christ? Perhaps today the Potter is removing things that cannot remain in the vessel. Perhaps He is reshaping areas that have collapsed. Perhaps you are presently walking through the furnace itself. Yet through every season, the Potter has never abandoned the clay. His hands remain upon His people. The invitation of this passage is not to resist His work, but to surrender to it. Will you come to Jesus today and place yourself afresh and anew into the hands of the Heavenly Potter? Will you trust Him enough to let Him mold your life according to His perfect will, so that you might become a vessel of honor prepared for His kingdom and for His glory? Praise God that the Potter never abandons the clay.

Footnotes

- [1] Alan Carr, “Lessons from the Potter’s House ([Jeremiah 18:1–6](#)),” in *The Sermon Notebook: Old Testament* (Lenoir, NC: Alan Carr, 2015), 1830.
- [2] Charles L. Feinberg, “Jeremiah,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 6 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1986), 491.
- [3] John H Walton, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary (Old Testament): Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel*, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 276.
- [4] F. B. Huey, *Jeremiah, Lamentations*, vol. 16, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1993), 180.
- [5] Ibid.
- [6] Alan Carr, “Lessons from the Potter’s House (Jeremiah 18:1–6),” in *The Sermon Notebook: Old Testament* (Lenoir, NC: Alan Carr, 2015), 1833.
- [7] Alan Carr, “Lessons from the Potter’s House ([Jeremiah 18:1–6](#)),” in *The Sermon Notebook: Old Testament* (Lenoir, NC: Alan Carr, 2015), 1831.
- [8] Alan Carr, “Lessons from the Potter’s House (Jeremiah 18:1–6),” in *The Sermon Notebook: Old Testament* (Lenoir, NC: Alan Carr, 2015), 1835.
- [9] Charles L. Feinberg, “Jeremiah,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 6 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1986), 491.
- [10] H. D. M. Spence-Jones, ed., *Jeremiah*, vol. 1, *The Pulpit Commentary* (London; New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1909), 444.

