

Jeremiah 18 "A Trip to the Potter's House" **

Main Idea: In Jeremiah 18 the Lord sent Jeremiah on a trip to the potter's house where he gave him two things to help him persevere in the hardness of his mid-life years. The passage teaches us two important truths regarding our own perseverance.

- I. In order to persevere in life we need a clear picture of who God is (1-10).
 - A. Jeremiah saw a potter (1-4).
 - B. Jeremiah learned that God is the Potter (5-10).
 1. He is sovereign (6a).
 2. He is purposeful with His people (6b).
 3. He is prepared to pardon an evil nation that repents (7-8).
 4. He is prepared to judge a privileged nation that does evil (9-10).
- II. In order to persevere in life we need a clear understanding of what God has said (11-23).
 - A. The Lord's word helped Jeremiah know what to do with his life (11).
 1. He was to tell his people that judgment was coming.
 2. He was to tell his people that the Lord was calling them to repent.
 - B. The Lord's word helped Jeremiah know what to expect out of life (12).
 1. The people won't listen to you.
 2. The people will insist they keep living their own way.
 - C. The Lord's word helped Jeremiah know how to see the big picture in life (13-17).
 1. We get in trouble when we forget the Lord.
 2. When that happens, we start living for things we can see.
 3. When that happens, we can expect serious consequences.
 - D. The Lord's word helped Jeremiah know how to handle critics in life (18).
 1. The critic loves to attack God's messenger in order to ignore God's message.
 2. The critic often sounds very spiritual.
 - E. The Lord's word helped Jeremiah know how to pray (19-23).
 1. In this prayer Jeremiah isn't being vindictive.
 2. In this prayer Jeremiah is simply asking God to do what He said He would do.

Application: Ask yourself three important questions...

1. How do I view God?
2. How am I treating God's Word?
3. How am I going to respond to what I've learned today?

I guess it's official. At the age of 48, I'm an experienced mid-life man.

Mid-life does interesting things to a man. I assume that's true for women too, but I can only speak from experience as a man. Actually, I'm not so sure the mid-life years do anything *to* a man so much as they expose what's *in* a man. That's why I don't think the phrase "mid life crisis" is particularly accurate or helpful. It makes it sound like there's an inevitable crisis out there that every man is doomed to face. That sort of label undermines the truth of Christ's sufficiency, for it implies there's a calamity that every man must go through that even Christ can't prevent. That's just not true.

Please don't misunderstand me. Do some men have a crisis? Sure, but not all. Just because a man turns forty doesn't mean the crisis switch clicks on.

Having said that, are their changes that occur? Absolutely. When you hit mid life you begin to discover that your body isn't quite as strong as it once was, and you don't feel quite as refreshed when your feet hit the floor in the morning. And your view of life begins to change, too, with the idealism of your youth now giving way to the realism of your life experience.

From my assessment, the mid-life is a revealer. Quite frankly, men, if you've been setting your affection on temporal things in your 20s and 30s, it will probably become apparent when you hit your 40s. If you've been finding your sense of worth and significance in your appearance or your accomplishments or your possessions (that's what I mean by temporal things), then you'll probably begin to slide, or worse, even fall when you hit the revealing mid-life years.

When mid-life arrives, you find yourself asking the question, "Now what?" As you look back you see some accomplishments—you've raised your kids or mostly so, you've met some goals in your career. And that brings some fulfillment, perhaps, and maybe some regrets.

And then as you look ahead you see some challenges facing you—you know your body isn't going to get any younger. You watch your children begin to make decisions over which you have little control. Your parents, if they're still living, are facing some health issues and now need the care they once gave you. You wonder if you're doing the right things to prepare for retirement, and so on.

I have good news for you. Through Jesus Christ the Living God gives us everything we need to please Him in every phase of life. That's true for you, young children. And you, teens. And you, young adults, and seniors, and mid-lifers.

This morning, we come to a mid-life text. In Jeremiah 18, the Lord did something with Jeremiah in his mid-life that I find intriguing. He sent him on a trip to a potter's house, and that field trip had a profound effect on this man of God. In fact, it reloaded him for the rest of his life.

We're doing a biographical series of highlights from the life of Jeremiah and we've looked at two scenes thus far. Two weeks ago we watched Jeremiah buy a field in chapter 32, and that event took place when he was in his sixties. And though the Babylonian army was about to take Judah captive, Jeremiah bought that field as evidence that he was indeed living by faith in his senior years.

Last time we looked at Jeremiah's call to the ministry in chapter 1, an event that took place when he was a young man around twenty years of age. We marveled at how Jeremiah responded in faith as a young person to God's call on his life. He was willing to put God above personal plans, men's applause, even family, such was his faith.

So by God's grace he started well and then he finished well. How did he do in the middle of his race? Quite frankly, he hit a wall. In fact, he kept hitting walls all his life, for his people never responded to his preaching. But he kept going, through the rejection and discouragement and hardship, he kept going. How'd he do it?

We find the answer in Jeremiah 18, for in Jeremiah 18 the Lord did something very special and very timely for this prophet. He sent Jeremiah on a trip to the potter's house where He gave him two things to help him persevere through the hardness of his mid-life years so he would finish well.

I need what God gave Jeremiah at that potter's house. You need it too. And what we need our gracious God offers us through this passage. Jeremiah 18 teaches us two important truths regarding our own perseverance. Let me identify them up front, and then we'll look at them carefully in this wonderful text. One, if we are going to persevere in life we need a clear picture of *who God is* (1-10), and two, a clear understanding of *what God has said* (11-23).

I. In order to persevere in life we need a clear picture of who God is (1-10).

Verse 1 begins, "This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD." The Lord gave Jeremiah a special word. When? There's no date in the verse, is there? To date this chapter we must look at the content of it and the location of it in the book, and then compare it with the time indicators we do have of the various reigns of the kings in Judah, and then make an estimated guesses. I'm not going to bore you with the details in this message, but simply give you the bottom line assessment. The *NIV Study Bible* says Jeremiah went to the potter's house "probably before 605 B.C."^[1] The *Old Testament Survey* by LaSor, Hubbard, and Bush say it happened after Josiah died between 601-598 B.C.^[2] *The Chronological Bible* puts the date of 603 B.C. with chapter 18. So we're talking somewhere in the neighborhood of 605 B.C.. Jeremiah 1:2 says he was called into the ministry in 626 B.C. around the age of twenty. It's now twenty years later, give or take, which means he's now forty or so.

Verse 2—"Go down to the potter's house," the Lord told him, "and there I will give you my message." Why didn't God just give him the message? Apparently because he wanted Jeremiah to see something. And so he went to the potter's house. Not surprisingly...

A. Jeremiah saw a potter (1-4). Verse 3—"So I went down to the potter's house, and I saw him working at the wheel." Feinberg says the potter's house was probably located on the slopes of the Valley of Hinnom, south of Jerusalem, since there was plenty of water and clay there.^[3] The potter was working, says Jeremiah, at his "wheel" (actually, the text reads "the pair of stones."^[4]).

In verse 4 Jeremiah tells us what he saw, "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." So the first pot didn't turn out, says Jeremiah. After working with it for some time, the potter noticed an unacceptable flaw.

How did the first pot get marred? "It could have been any number of things," explains Walter Kaiser. "There could have been a grain of sand in it. It could have been that the consistency of the clay was not right. Or it could have been that there was too little clay and too much sand. At any rate, by the time he got to the finishing part, something happened. The vessel was marred."^[5]

And so the potter threw the clay onto the wheel and began his work all over again. He fashioned a second pot, one that did please him, says Jeremiah. As Feinberg points out, "The chief point here is the power the potter had over the clay...The defects were in the clay, not in the hand of the potter."^[6]

You say, "How do we know that?" We know it because the Lord Himself interpreted this object lesson for His servant. Notice verse 5, "Then the word of the LORD came to me." God Himself spoke, and God Himself explained the point of it all.

B. Jeremiah learned that God is the Potter (5-10). In this powerful illustration God

communicated to Jeremiah, and to us, four important insights concerning Himself.

1. *He is sovereign (6a)*. Notice the first part of verse 6, "O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter does?" declares the LORD."

What's the obvious answer to that rhetorical question? Can the Lord do what the potter did? Yes, He can do anything He chooses to do. He is the Creator of heaven and earth. He's the One who formed Israel into a nation in the first place. All power and ability belongs to Him. He can do whatever He wants to do with His people. He is sovereign.

2. *He is purposeful with His people (6b)*. Listen to the second part of verse 6, "Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel." Jeremiah saw it. That potter had his hands all over that lump of clay. He pushed it. He squeezed it. He moulded it. He shaped it. And then He threw it on the stone and reshaped it. You're the clay, Israel, and I will do whatever it takes to form you into what I want you to be.

Beloved, our God is purposeful with His people. Let me personalize that thought. He is purposeful with you and me. He will do whatever it takes to make us become what He wants us to be. Hear His question, "Can I not do with you as this potter does?"

By the way, there's another way to take that question. *Can* means He has the ability, but it also means He has the *right*. In other words, "Do I not have the right, can I not do with you as this potter does?" What's the answer to that question? He does have the right, doesn't He? But is that *your* answer for *your* life and for those closest to you? Does He have the right to do with you what that potter did with that clay?

The truth is, sometimes the potter does unpleasant things to us and with us—Jeremiah knew that well. Last week while preparing this message I received a series of emails regarding the condition of our sister in Christ and ABWE missionary, Jan Gebert, who was fighting for her life in ICU in Istanbul, Turkey. In the prime of her life she became deathly ill to the point where the doctors had to intubate her and medically paralyze her. She and her husband, Harry, have devoted their lives to making Christ known in the Muslim world. Why would the Lord take His servant to such a bed of suffering? On Tuesday an email came from Harry in which he wrote:

"I have been able to pray with a number of people who I meet in the ICU waiting room. One lady has a husband with ALS. I was reading Scripture...and she said, 'That's beautiful - what is it?' I was able to share a bit. The next day she stated 'you prayed and my husband is better today'. She sought me out later and asked if I could help her with research on her husband's medical condition when I return to the states. I asked her then if I could pray for her, and she said 'What do I have to do?'. She has no religious background, but said she is drawn to our joy and strength. Today she came again (her husband is now on another floor) and sought Anna and me out. I shared with her how much God loves her and wants to help her in her pain. We asked if she had a Bible - no. Anna gave her hers. We read Scripture and I wrote down Psalms and verses that are comforting me right now, and when she read Psalm 23 she put the marker in that page and was greatly touched. I also gave her salvation verses to look up and read on her own. I challenged her to relationship with Jesus and shared my testimony and prayed with her. She ended up with saying 'Do you mind if I come back other days when you're here and talk with you?' God is seeking His own - please pray for Elza."

"Can I not do with you as this potter does?" asks the Lord. What's your answer? If He wants to take you and me or our family members to a bed of affliction in order to make Himself known to lost people around you, can He? Can the Potter do what He wants with us? Are we truly yielded to Him?

You say, "I want to be, but I'm struggling. What's needed?" It's the same thing Jeremiah needed. You and I need to make sure we have a clear picture of who God is. He is sovereign. He's also purposeful with His people.

And what is His purpose for His people? In the following verses He gives two scenarios of application.

Listen to the first in verses 7-8, "If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned."

Did you hear the Potter? He says...

3. *He is prepared to pardon an evil nation that repents (7-8).* Some resist the doctrine of God's sovereignty because they think it leads to fatalism. But please notice that we see divine sovereignty and human responsibility side by side in this passage, as in many other passages. Is God sovereign over every detail in His plan for the universe? Yes, He is the Potter. But here we learn that He includes conditions and contingencies in His sovereign plan. Here He says that if He announces that a wicked nation is going to be destroyed, and that wicked nation repents, He will relent and spare that nation. What a merciful God He is!

But don't presume upon His mercy. Listen to His second scenario in verses 9-10, "And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, 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." What did the Potter say? He said...

4. *He is prepared to judge a privileged nation that does evil (9-10).* When I read this, I can't help but think of our beloved nation, the United States of America. God raised up this country for a purpose, as He does with every country. He built up our country and has used it to promote justice in the world and provide a launching pad for world-wide gospel proclamation. But hear His announcement. He says that if a nation does evil and refuses to obey Him, He will reconsider the good He intended to do for it. Which means, He's going to bring down that proud nation that turned from Him.

Beloved, unless we repent, the Potter says that judgment is coming. And by the way, what's true of nations is also true of the individual people that make up those nations. The Lord forgives sinners who repent on the basis of His Son's death in their place on the cross. And the same Lord brings down those who've enjoyed His blessings, yet turned from Him.

Is that's your picture of God? Do you see Him as the sovereign and purposeful Potter who is prepared to pardon the repentant and judge the self-righteous? That's the picture that will sustain you when life gets tough, as it did for Jeremiah. We must have a clear understanding of who God is.

II. In order to persevere in life we need a clear understanding of what God has said (11-23).

"Man shall not live by bread alone," said Jesus, "but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God (Matt. 4:4)." In this second scene Jeremiah was reminded of the importance of living by God's Word—not by his feelings, not by public opinion, not by his instincts, but on the basis of what God has said. In verses 11-23, the Lord's word helped Jeremiah in five ways, and it will do the same for us.

A. The Lord's word helped Jeremiah know what to do with his life (11). "Now therefore say to the people of Judah and those living in Jerusalem..." This was Jeremiah's God-given assignment. He was to say *to the people*. Say what? Actually what the Lord told him to preach, namely a twofold message.

1. *He was to tell his people that judgment was coming.* 'This is what the LORD says: Look! I am preparing a disaster for you and devising a plan against you.' In the Hebrew the verb for "preparing" (*yoser*; "shaping" in the RSV) has the same root as "potter." By using this word the Lord was making it quite clear that a national disaster wasn't just coming, but rather that He the Potter intended to use it to shape up His wayward people.^[7]

2. *He was to tell his people that the Lord was calling them to repent.* "So turn from your evil ways, each one of you, and reform your ways and your actions." That's what I want you to do, Jeremiah.

Preach that message. Tell my people that judgment is coming and that I am calling them to repent.

Now answer this. Does that message sound familiar? If you were here last week, it should. It's the same message the Lord told Jeremiah to preach twenty years earlier when He called him to preach. Why the repetition? Because Jeremiah needed it. He'd been preaching for twenty years and didn't have much to show for it. His nation was going down the tubes. *Maybe I'm not cut out to be a prophet. Maybe I need a career change.*

Do you ever second guess yourself? A lot of people do when they hit mid-life. I've heard more than one person tell me things like, "I've had it with my marriage. I'm not happy anymore." Or, "I can't take my job anymore. I feel so unappreciated." Or, "I'm done with my ministry. I'm just not seeing the results I thought I'd see."

If I'm reading your mail I urge you to read Jeremiah's mail. Don't make your decisions based on how you feel, or how people are treating you, or how the results appear. Resolve to make every decision on the basis of a clear understanding of what God has said. The Lord's word that helped Jeremiah to know what to do with his life.

B. The Lord's word helped Jeremiah know what to expect out of life (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.'"

I love how practical the Lord was with Jeremiah. He told him what to do, namely keep preaching. And then He told him exactly what to expect, two things.

1. *The people won't listen to you.* They'll say, "It's no use.^[8] You might as well stop wasting your breath, Jeremiah, because we're not listening."

2. *The people will insist they keep living their own way.* Even though they know deep down that it's destroying them, Jeremiah, they're going to keep running down that slippery slope that leads to destruction.

Sin blinds us, beloved. It blinds us to reality. Our national debt as a country right now is measured in the *trillions*. Do you know how big a trillion dollars is? To get a handle on how big a trillion is, let's use the term in reference to seconds. Going back in time a *million* seconds will take you back 12 days. Going back a *billion* seconds will take you 31 years. To go back a *trillion* seconds you would have to go back 32,000 years. We are in debt trillions of dollars, say the experts. And yet we keep on borrowing like there's no tomorrow. Crazy?

Not as crazy as spiritual debt, and that's what we all have. "The wages of sin is death," says Romans 6:23, "but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." The price for just one sin is eternal separation from God. Yet the good news is that God offers to remove our debt if we'll but turn from our sin and believe in His Son, for He paid sin's debt on Calvary. But I know people, and so do you, who hear God's amazing offer, refuse to receive it, and choose instead to keep piling up their debt of sin, a debt that could be forgiven but apart from Christ a debt for which they will pay for all eternity. Now that's insanity, and if it's describing you I call on you now to bring your sin debt to Christ and accept Him as your Savior and Lord.

The Lord's word helped Jeremiah, first, to know what to do in life; second, to know what to expect out of life; third...

C. The Lord's word helped Jeremiah know how to see the big picture in life (13-17). In verses 13-17 the Lord speaks again to Jeremiah, and this time He gives him the big picture on what's happening in his country:

"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. Does the snow of Lebanon ever vanish from its

rocky slopes? Do its cool waters from distant sources ever cease to flow? 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. Their land will be laid waste, an object of lasting scorn; all who pass by will be appalled and will shake their heads. 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.”

Why did the Lord tell Jeremiah that, and why now? Think about it. Put yourself in Jeremiah’s shoes. It must have frustrated him to no end that year after year he preached, and year after year he had hardly anything positive to show for it. *I keep telling my people that judgment is coming, and I keep urging them to repent, but they refuse! Why won’t my people believe me?*

I’ll tell you why, says the Lord. I’ll let you in on my assessment of the situation. It’s not you they’re rejecting. It’s Me. The problem is threefold, and since the problem is as true today as it was six centuries before Christ, I’ll personalize the summary.

1. *We get in trouble when we forget the Lord.* “My people have forgotten Me,” says the Lord. They don’t deny Me, just ignore Me and fit Me into their schedule when it’s convenient.

2. *When that happens, we start living for things we can see.* You mean, like stone idols? Yes, and new homes, too, with plasma television sets and a new car in the garage. The problem is as old as time. First we forget the Lord, and then we start living for the things we can see. Then...

3. *When that happens, we can expect serious consequences.* And none worse than this one, to hear God say, “I will show them my back and not my face.”

D. The Lord’s word helped Jeremiah know how to handle critics in life (18). If you’re going to live for God, you’re going to have critics and you’re going to have to learn how to deal with them. In verse 18, we hear what Jeremiah’s critics were saying:

“They said, ‘Come, let’s make plans against Jeremiah; for the teaching of the law by the priest will not be lost, nor will counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophets. So come, let’s attack him with our tongues and pay no attention to anything he says.’”

Notice two things about the critic here.

1. *The critic loves to attack God’s messenger in order to ignore God’s message.* It’s true. To ignore God’s message Jeremiah’s critics tried to discredit God’s messenger.

2. *The critic often sounds very spiritual.* In fact, they will often find so called spiritual leaders who agree with them, like Jeremiah’s critics did. Note how they cited the teaching of the priest, the counsel of the so-called wise, and the word of other prophets in their attack of Jeremiah. I hate to say it, but you can always find plenty of clergymen to support your sin if you look hard enough. Remember what they did to Jesus?

Watch what Jeremiah did in response to his critics. He prayed, and we’re told what he prayed in verses 19-23, “Listen to me, O LORD; hear what my accusers are saying! Should good be repaid with evil? Yet they have dug a pit for me. Remember that I stood before you and spoke in their behalf to turn your wrath away from them. So give their children over to famine; hand them over to the power of the sword. Let their wives be made childless and widows; let their men be put to death, their young men slain by the sword in battle. Let a cry be heard from their houses when you suddenly bring invaders against them, for they have dug a pit to capture me and have hidden snares for my feet. But you know, O LORD, all their plots to kill me. Do not forgive their crimes or blot out their sins from your sight. Let them be overthrown before you; deal with them in the time of your anger.”^[9]

You say, “Wow! What a prayer! Sounds like Jeremiah’s fed up with his people!” Actually, while I’m sure Jeremiah had his moments, this isn’t some “I’m want to get my pound of flesh” prayer. In reality Jeremiah’s prayer is shaped by God’s Word. It’s true.

E. The Lord's word helped Jeremiah know how to pray (19-23). Jeremiah is actually taking to heart the Lord's command in back Jeremiah 14:11-12, "Then the LORD said to me, 'Do not pray for the well-being of this people. Although they fast, I will not listen to their cry; though they offer burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Instead, I will destroy them with the sword, famine and plague.'"

Don't pray for My people, said the Lord. Specifically, don't pray for their blessing for they've passed the point of no return, and they're going into captivity.

1. *In this prayer Jeremiah isn't being vindictive.* To the contrary, we know Jeremiah loved his people, and we know that because throughout his life he kept reaching out to them and trying to help them. That's why he wrote Lamentations, to help them grieve and get back right with God. No, he's not being vindictive. Rather...

2. *In this prayer Jeremiah is simply asking God to do what He said He would do.* Lord, You said You were going to show them Your back and not Your face in the day of disaster (verse 17). So if that's what it's going to take to turn this beloved nation around, then do it. Bring it on for the honor of Your name!

I'd say that was quite a field trip, wouldn't you? The Lord took his mid-life man to the potter's house and reminded him precisely what he needed to finish his course. He needed a clear picture of who God is, and a clear understanding of what God has said. And in God's kindness, we too have traveled to the potter's house today. And now it's inventory time.

Application: Ask yourself three very personal and very important questions...

1. *How do I view God?* Do you view Him as you've seen Him today in His Word? Is He the sovereign Potter who has the right to do as He pleases with your life, and are you the soft and pliable clay that's yielded to His good purposes? If you think wrongly of Him, it will show up when the heat is turned up. But if you think rightly of Him, you'll be able to stand come what may.

2. *How am I treating God's Word?* The Lord's word helped Jeremiah know what to do with his life, what to expect out of life, how to see the big picture in life, how to handle the critics in life, and how to pray when life is hard. You have the completed Word of God. How are you treating it? If you want to persevere in this life, you need to know this Book. You need to pour over it daily, to memorize it, to meditate on it, to pray in light of it, and to live according to it. And most of all, you need to make it your number one aim in life to know the person that this Book is all about, Jesus Christ.

3. *How am I going to respond to what I've learned today?* You've been to the potter's house today, and there's only one fitting response. Have Thine own way, Lord, have Thine own way. Thou art the Potter, I am the clay. Mold me and make me after Thy will, while I am waiting, yielded and still.

****Note:** This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

[1] See *NIV Study Bible*, p. 1146.

[2] *Old Testament Survey*, p. 429.

[3] Feinberg, p. 491.

[4] R. K. Harrison explains (p. 108), "On a vertical axis two circular stones were fitted, the lower one being spun at the potter's feet."

[5] Walter Kaiser, Jr. *The Old Testament in Contemporary Preaching*, p. 110.

[6] Feinberg, p. 491.

[7] R. K. Harrison, p. 109.

[8] Jeremiah 2:25 "But you said, 'It's no use! I love foreign gods, and I must go after them.'"

[9] Keep in mind that these are enemies of God, not merely personal enemies of Jeremiah.

