

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

- I. When times are hard, 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. When times are hard, 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).
 - B. The Lord’s word helped Jeremiah know what to expect out of life (12).
 - C. The Lord’s word helped Jeremiah know how to see the big picture in life (13-17).
 - D. The Lord’s word helped Jeremiah know how to handle critics in life (18).
 - E. The Lord’s word helped Jeremiah know how to pray (19-23).

Make It Personal: Let’s ask ourselves 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?

Life is hard. But knowing and believing the truth about God makes all the difference. That’s what we’re learning in our current mini-series, *Learning from the Lamentor: Living By Faith When Times Are Hard*. We’ve looked thus far at two texts from the book of Jeremiah (with two to go). We began by looking at the end of Jeremiah’s life in Jeremiah 32. Last week we went back to the beginning and contemplated the call of God in Jeremiah’s life in chapter one. Now it’s time to take a field trip with Jeremiah.

Scripture Reading: Jeremiah 18:1-4

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, it’s not that 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. Do some men have a mid-life crisis? Sure, but 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 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 likely 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, fall when you hit the revealing mid-life years.

^{**}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 For a previous look at messages from the life of Jeremiah, see the WBC series in 2010.

When mid-life arrives, you find yourself asking the question, “Now what? This is it?” 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 coming. 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.

God’s Word is so timely. Today we’ve 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 field trip to and it had a profound effect on this man of God. Indeed, 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.

By God’s grace this man started well and then 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 appreciated his preaching. But he kept going even through the rejection and discouragement and hardship, he kept going. How did he do it?

We find the answer in Jeremiah 18. It’s here that the Lord did something special and very timely for the good of this mid-life man. He sent Jeremiah on a trip to the potter’s house where He gave him clarity regarding two subjects. This clarity would 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 gives us clarity regarding two important subjects that are vital to our own perseverance. Let’s identify them up front, and then ponder them carefully as we work our way through this wonderful text.

Subject one, if we are going to persevere through hardship in life we need a clear picture of *who God is* (1-10). And subject two, we need a clear understanding of *what God has said* (11-23).

I. When times are hard, we need a clear picture of who God is (1-10).

Verse 1 begins, “The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD.” Again, Jeremiah was something we are not. He was a prophet and we learned about his calling to this prophetic office last time. This man received direct revelation from God Himself.

As he did here. One day the Lord gave Jeremiah a special word. When? There’s no time indicator identified in the verse. To date this event, 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. Then we can make an estimated guess. I’m not going to bore you with the details in this message, but simply give you the bottom line. The

NIV Study Bible says Jeremiah went to the potter's house "probably before 605 B.C."² In their *Old Testament Survey*, LaSor, Hubbard, and Bush say it happened after Josiah died between 601-598 B.C.³ *The Chronological Bible* puts the date at 603 B.C.

So we're talking about this field trip to the potter's house occurring somewhere in the neighborhood of 605 BC, maybe a little later. Jeremiah 1:2 says he was called into the ministry in 626 B.C. around the age of twenty. It's now twenty to twenty-five years later, give or take, which means he's now forty or forty-five or so. He's a mid-life man.

In verse 2 the Lord told him, "Arise, and go down to the potter's house and there I let you hear my words." That's interesting. Why didn't God just give him the message where he was? Why tell him to arise and go somewhere else first? Apparently because he wanted Jeremiah to *see* something. So Jeremiah went to the location, to the potter's house. And what did he see there? Not surprisingly, he saw a potter.

A. Jeremiah saw a potter (1-4). Verse 3 says, "So I went down to the potter's house, there he was working at his 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.⁴ The potter was working, says Jeremiah, at his "wheel" (actually, the text reads "the pair of stones"). R. K. Harrison explains, "On a vertical axis two circular stones were fitted, the lower one being spun at the potter's feet."⁵

In verse 4 Jeremiah tells us what he saw. "And the vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to do." The NIV says, "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."

Simply put, 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."⁶

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.

I took a field trip recently to a potter's house and saw the same thing. Actually, it was a trip to my four year old grandson's house and we were playing with his playdough factory. He used his hands to make something (a hot dog maybe?), but he was frustrated because it didn't right to him. So he threw it on the table, smashed it, and started over. He's the boss. The potter can do whatever he wants with the clay.

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."⁷

You say, "How do we know that?" We know it because of the interpretation that the Lord Himself gave regarding this object lesson in verses 5-10.

B. Jeremiah learned that God is the Potter (5-10). Verse 5 says, "Then the word of the LORD came to me." God Himself spoke, and God Himself explained the point of this field trip. This object lesson is about Me, says the Lord. I am the Potter. What you've just

² See *NIV Study Bible*, p. 1146.

³ *Old Testament Survey*, p. 429.

⁴ Feinberg, p. 491.

⁵ 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."

⁶ Walter Kaiser, Jr. *The Old Testament in Contemporary Preaching*, p. 110.

⁷ Feinberg, p. 491.

seen will help you navigate the turbulent season of life you're in, Jeremiah, and finish well. As it will us, brothers and sisters. In this simple yet memorable illustration, God gives us four important insights into who He is.

1. *He is sovereign (6a)*. He says in the first part of verse 6, "O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter has done? declares the LORD." And the obvious answer to this rhetorical question is what? Can the Lord do what the potter did? Yes, He can do that. Indeed, He can do anything He chooses to do. He is the Creator of heaven and earth. He's the One who formed planet earth and later formed Israel into a nation. It's all His and all power and ability belongs to Him. Yes indeed, He can do whatever He wants to do with His people for He is sovereign.

Can He do things we like? Yes, and He does so all the time. Can He throw the lump of clay on the table and reshape it? Yes, He can and does.

2. *He is purposeful with His people (6b)*. Listen to the second part of verse 6, "Behold, like clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel." Jeremiah saw it firsthand. That potter had his hands all over that lump of clay. He pushed it. He squeezed it. He molded it. He shaped it. And then He threw it on the stone and reshaped it. You are 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. Allow me to personalize that. Our God 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?"

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 to 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?

Sometimes the Potter does unpleasant things to us and with us. Jeremiah knew that quite well. So do we. The story of WBC is a story of the Potter working in the lives of His people, squeezing, pushing, twisting, and at times throwing them on the table. Not in haphazard anger, but with purposeful outcome in mind.

Sometimes we see glimpses of the purpose. Our sister Nancy Rae becomes a quadriplegic at age 18 and does life from a wheelchair for over fifty years. But she doesn't just do life. She sees the Potter shape her life and use her life to make His gospel known to people as far away as the Angor villages in PNG.

Our sister Marcella, due to her own health challenges, became housebound and couldn't drive herself to church any longer. So her unsaved husband, Alfred, agrees to take her to church. And in time, he stays, and the Lord breaks through his hard heart and saves him.

Sometimes we struggle to see His purpose. A tornado hits our town in 1968 and our pastor's wife dies. So does Nancy Rae's sister, Anna Lou, who leaves behind three young boys and a husband serving his country in Vietnam.

Our dear sister, Tammy, battles cancer and leaves this world at the age of 37, leaving behind a grieving husband and four children and parents and many others. A few days ago, I looked back at my notes from Tammy's funeral and was reminded that I shared these words from her journal which she had written just three weeks before her passing.

As she was reflecting on Psalm 115, Tammy wrote, "Not to us, O Lord, not to us, O Lord, but to Your name be the glory." Yes, God deserves all the glory so give it to Him! The nations' gods have ears, eyes, feet, mouths but can't hear, see, walk, or talk, but our God does what He pleases and I need to praise Him for what He does."

Then Tammy penned these words, "The joy I have, because I'm a believer, no one can take away from me. My joy isn't hinged on happenings; it's hinged on a person; that person, of course, is Jesus Christ. So, when I am joyful, even though I have cancer, I can

say, 'its not of me, this joy comes from having a relationship with Jesus Christ.' Wow! What a great God I serve who would save me and then give me joy!"

And I could go on and on with the examples, past and present.

"Can I not do with you as this potter does?" asks the Lord. What is our answer to that question this morning? 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 us, 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? He doesn't always tell us the detailed plan ahead of time. He wants us to trust Him. But in this case with Jeremiah, He does. In the following verses He gives two scenarios of application. This is what the Potter says.

3. *He is prepared to pardon an evil nation that repents (7-8)*. Hear Him speak in verses 7-8, "If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, ⁸ and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it."

Did you hear the Potter? He says He is prepared to *pardon*. Pardon whom? An evil nation. Every evil nation? No. An evil nation that *repents*.

Some resist the doctrine of God's sovereignty because they think it infringes on man's freedom and 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 let us never presume upon His mercy. And to help us see the danger in such presumption, He describes a second scenario.

4. *He is prepared to judge a privileged nation that does evil (9-10)*. The Lord says in verses 9-10, "And if at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, ¹⁰ and if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will relent of the good that I had intended to do to it."

So the Potter says He will pardon an evil nation that repents. That's who He is, a God who pardons. But the Potter also says he will judge a nation that has enjoyed His privileges that persists in doing evil. That too is who He is, a God who judges.

When I read this, what comes to your mind? 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 relent of the good He intended to do to it. Which means, He's going to bring down that proud nation that turned from Him and refused to listen to His Word.

Beloved, unless we repent, the Potter says that judgment is coming. And what's true of nations is also true of the individual people that make up those nations.

The Lord says He will forgive any sinner who will repent of their sin and believe in His Son who died in their place on the cross and conquered death for their salvation in His resurrection. That's who He is.

And this too is who He is. He is the One who says He will bring down those who have enjoyed His blessings, and even affirmed that the blessings came from Him, but ignored Him, and turned from Him.

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

What steps are you taking to grow in your knowledge of God? May I suggest a two part field trip tonight? Part one, go outside and look up at the stars. Marvel at the One who created the vast lights in the sky. And then part two, go inside and get out your Bible and read what He says about Himself in Psalm 19. He says the heavens declare the glory of God and pour out their speech night after night (verses 1-2). And then He says that His law, His precepts, His Word is perfect and will revive your soul and is more to be desired than gold (verses 7-11). And He even gives you a prayer to pray to close out your field trip in verse 14, “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.”

When times are hard, we need a clear picture of who God is. But there’s more to be gained at the potter’s house. We need clarity regarding a second subject.

II. When times are hard, we need a clear understanding of what God has said (11-23).

In this second scene, the Lord reminds Jeremiah of the importance of living by His Word. Not by his feelings, not by public opinion, not by his instincts, but on the basis of what God has said. As Jesus later stated, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God (Matt. 4:4).” In verses 11-23, God’s Word was going to help 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). In verse 11, the Lord says, “Now, therefore, say to the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: ‘Thus says the LORD.’” This was Jeremiah’s God-given assignment. He was to *say to the people*. Say what? The Lord told him to preach a twofold message.

First, he was to tell his people that judgment was coming. In the middle of verse 11, “Thus says the LORD, Behold, I am shaping disaster [NIV ‘preparing a disaster’] against you and devising a plan against you.” In the Hebrew the verb for “preparing” (*yoser*; “shaping” in the RSV) has the same root as the noun “potter.” By using this word, the Lord is 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.⁸

Second, he was to tell his people that the Lord was calling them to repent. Look at the end of verse 11, “Return, every one from his evil way, and amend your ways and your deeds.” The NIV says, “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.

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.

Back in chapter two he had announced, “Be appalled, O heavens, at this; be shocked, be utterly desolate, declares the LORD,¹³ for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water (Jeremiah 2:12–13).”

But His nation was still refusing to drink from the fountain of God Himself and choosing to drink the stinking water from their own broken cisterns. *Maybe I’m not cut out to be a prophet. Maybe I need a career change.*

⁸ See R. K. Harrison, p. 109.

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 just 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 what God has said in His word. 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). In verse 12 the Lord tells Jeremiah exactly how his people are going to respond to his message for the rest of his life. In the NIV, "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.'"⁹

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 outcomes.

One, the people won't listen to you. They'll say, "It's no use. You might as well stop wasting your breath, Jeremiah, because we're not listening."

Two, the people will insist they keep living their own way. It's the same response they gave Jeremiah back in Jeremiah 2:25, "It's no use!" they said. "I love foreign gods, and I must go after them." 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. And yet we keep on borrowing like there's no tomorrow. Crazy? Yes.

But not nearly as crazy as spiritual debt, and that's something we all have in common. "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 who paid sin's debt on Calvary's cross.

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. They have a debt that could be forgiven today but apart from Christ it's a debt for which they will pay for all eternity. Frankly, that is insanity, and if I'm describing you, I also now invite you, indeed, exhort you to bring your sin debt to Christ and accept Him as your Savior. And He will do as promised, and you will become as we are, another of His grateful followers.

Don't miss this. It's the Lord's word that brought needed clarity to Jeremiah, as it does for us. We need to hear His Word, first, so we know what to do in life; and second, so we know what to expect out of life.

C. The Lord's word helped Jeremiah know how to see the big picture in life (13-17). If there's anything we need to see in the middle of life, it's this. The big picture. We're working hard. We're running on fumes. But to what end? Why am I doing this again? In verses 13-17 the Lord speaks again to Jeremiah, and this time He gives him the big picture on what's happening in Jeremiah's country:

"Therefore thus says the LORD: Ask among the nations, Who has heard the like of this? The virgin Israel has done a very horrible thing. ¹⁴ Does the snow of Lebanon leave the crags of Sirion? Do the mountain waters run dry, the cold flowing streams? ¹⁵ But my people

⁹ Here's the ESV, "But they say, 'That is in vain! We will follow our own plans, and will every one act according to the stubbornness of his evil heart.'"

have forgotten me; they make offerings to false gods; they made them stumble in their ways, in the ancient roads, and to walk into side roads, not the highway,¹⁶ making their land a horror, a thing to be hissed at forever. Everyone who passes by it is horrified and shakes his head.¹⁷ Like the east wind I will scatter them before the enemy. I will show them my back, not my face, in the day of their calamity.”

Why did the Lord tell Jeremiah this? 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 listen to 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*. This is so helpful. The Lord is giving Jeremiah the big picture of what’s happening. He’s facing a threefold problem. And it’s the same threefold problem we are facing.

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

Two, when that happens (when we forget the Lord), we start living for things we can see. You mean, like stone idols? Yes, sort of. New homes made out of expensive brick, 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, three, when that happens, we can expect serious consequences. Like troubled minds and anxious hearts. Or worse, minds that aren’t troubled or hearts that aren’t anxious because we’re distracted by the good life. Or far worse than all of that, to hear God say as He said to Jeremiah, “I will show them my back and not my face.”

This is the big picture Jeremiah. This is the big picture, men and women of WBC who are in the middle of life. We need to have the big picture in mind. This brings us to a fourth way a clear understanding of God’s Word can help us.

D. The Lord’s word helped Jeremiah know how to handle critics in life (18). If we are going to live for God in this world, we are going to have critics and we are going to have to learn how to deal with them. In verse 18, we hear what Jeremiah’s critics were saying: “Then they said, ‘Come, let us make plots against Jeremiah, for the law shall not perish from the priest, nor counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophet. Come, let us strike him with the tongue, and let us not pay attention to any of his words.’”

Notice two insights regarding the critic here. *First, the critic loves to attack God’s messenger in order to ignore God’s message.* It happens all the time. You Christians hate people. You are narrow-minded. You think you’re better than others. It’s the same thing Jeremiah faced. Attack the messenger. Discredit him. Then you don’t need to pay any attention to his message.

Second, the critic often sounds very spiritual. They will talk about God and loving people and wanting the good of the country. And they’ll identify with so called “spiritual leaders” who agree with them. This is precisely what Jeremiah’s critics did.

Did you notice how the critics 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 am saddened to have to say this, yet it’s true and must be said. You can always find plenty of clergymen to support your sin if you look hard enough.

Are you struggling with same sex attraction? Are you bitter against the church and looking for a way to justify your “I have Jesus, I don’t need the church” mentality? Are you in a tough marriage and looking for a way out? Are you struggling with hard to love children, or hard to obey parents? There’s always a bestseller or a podcast or a Youtube video that will tell you in very spiritual terms what you want to hear.

But what you need to hear, what we always need to hear and then embrace is what God Himself says in His unchanging Word. Watch what Jeremiah does next in response to his critics. He prays a very “biblical” prayer in verses 19-23:

“Hear me, O LORD, and listen to the voice of my adversaries. ²⁰ Should good be repaid with evil? Yet they have dug a pit for my life. Remember how I stood before you to speak good for them, to turn away your wrath from them. ²¹ Therefore deliver up their children to famine; give them over to the power of the sword; let their wives become childless and widowed. May their men meet death by pestilence, their youths be struck down by the sword in battle. ²² May a cry be heard from their houses, when you bring the plunderer suddenly upon them! For they have dug a pit to take me and laid snares for my feet. ²³ Yet you, O LORD, know all their plotting to kill me. Forgive not their iniquity, nor blot out their sin from your sight. Let them be overthrown before you; deal with them in the time of your anger.”

You say, “Wow! Doesn’t sound like a very spiritual 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. Keep in mind that these are enemies of God, not merely personal enemies of Jeremiah. In reality Jeremiah’s prayer is shaped by God’s Word. This brings us to a fifth way God’s word can help us.

E. The Lord’s word helped Jeremiah know how to pray (19-23). Let’s compare this prayer text in Jeremiah 18 to an earlier prayer text in Jeremiah 14. Back in Jeremiah 14:11-12, we are told, “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.’”

Interesting command, isn’t it? The Lord told Jeremiah *not* to pray for His people. Specifically, don’t pray for their blessing for they’ve passed the point of no return, and they’re going into captivity. And what did Jeremiah do? He obeyed the command. We might say, he prayed according to the Book. After all, this is what redeemed people do. They pray the Word.

This is what Jeremiah is doing in chapter 18. *In his prayer Jeremiah isn’t being vindictive.* No matter how his words might sound at first. We know this because we know that Jeremiah loved his people, and he has been proving his love for his people for twenty-plus years by ministering to them and trying to help them. That’s why he wrote Lamentations for them, to help them grieve properly and get back right with God.

No, he’s not being vindictive. Rather, *in his 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!

This is the kind of clarity that God’s Word can give us. It shows us what to do with our lives, what to expect out of life, how to see the big picture in life, how to handle critics in life, and how to pray when life is hard.

I’d say that was quite a field trip, wouldn’t you? The Lord took this mid-life man to the potter’s house and reminded him precisely what he needed to know to finish his course. Jeremiah, you’ve preached my word faithfully for twenty years. Well done, my servant. Except you’re not done yet. Here’s the question. Now what? Now what are you going to do with the rest of your life?

It’s the same question for us. So, we’ve trusted in the Lord in the past. Now what? Men and women, so you trusted in the Lord and He provided you with an education and perhaps a marriage and some children. Now what? Or perhaps His plan for you was singleness for His kingdom purposes and you joyfully embraced it. Now what?

Men, you've resisted sexual temptation and remained sexually pure. Good. Now what? Or you didn't remain pure and now regret it. Now what?

You've joined a local church and served faithfully in the nursery, teaching a children's class, and made fellowship with your brothers and sisters a priority. All good. Now what?

Now you're looking in the rearview mirror wondering where the years went. Now your schedule is more packed than ever and you have less energy. Now you're wondering how in the world you're going to finish this race well when so many are falling. What is it you need?

What you and I need when we're in the midlife years or the retirement years or the teen years is this. We need clarity regarding two subjects. We need a clear picture of who God is and what God has said. And in God's kindness, we too have traveled to the potter's house today and He has given it to us. So now it's inventory time.

Make It Personal: Let's ask ourselves three very personal and very important questions.

1. *How do I view God?* Do you view Him as He has revealed Himself to us today in His inerrant 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 we are thinking wrongly of Him, it will show up when life gets hard. But if we think rightly of Him, He will enable 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. We have the completed Word of God. How are we treating it? If we want to persevere in this life, we need to know this Book. We 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, we need to make it our number one aim in life to know the Person that this Book is all about, Jesus Christ.

Do you know Jesus? Jeremiah has been called the most Christlike of all the prophets. Charles Feinberg points out several parallels.¹⁰ Here are some of them.

One, their historical settings were similar. "Jerusalem was about to fall; the temple was soon to be destroyed; religion was buried in formalism; there was need for emphasis on spiritual life," said Feinberg.¹¹

Both had a message for Israel and the world. Both were conscious of their call from God. Both condemned the commercialism of temple worship. Both were accused of political treason. Both were tried, persecuted, and imprisoned. Both foretold the destruction of the temple. Both wept over Jerusalem. Both condemned the priests of their day. Both were rejected by their kin. Both were tenderhearted. Both loved Israel deeply. Both knew the meaning of loneliness. Both enjoyed unusual fellowship with God. "One of the unique features of Jeremiah's life was that he could be so free and honest in communion and conversation with God," says Feinberg.¹²

3. *How am I going to respond to what I've learned today?* We've been to the potter's house today, and there's only one fitting response. Do what Jeremiah did. Keep running my friend. The race isn't over yet. Keep affirming who the Potter is. Keep putting your total trust in what the Potter has said.

Song of Response: #482 "*Am I a Soldier of the Cross?*" (all four verses)

This evening: Labor Day Sunday Outdoor Service – singing, a message from Ephesians 2:8-10, "Because God Works, We Work: The Result of Salvation By Grace", a food and fellowship time to follow

¹⁰ Charles Feinberg, *Jeremiah*, p. 361.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.