Scripture: Jeremiah 18:1-12.

Sermon Topic: The Potter's Hand.

Text: Jeremiah 18:6 ... "O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter has done? says the Lord. Behold, like the clay in the potters hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel."

Proposition: Although God gives mankind a great deal of choice and freedom, He is still in control of man's destiny. This is the chief message of Jeremiah.

Date written: February 20, 1965

Sources: indicated in typesript in parentheses.

Places and dates used:

Montros, colo, 839119, Sorzing

Saucoca & Oliveca, colo, 10/3/16

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## Introduction:

l. For as long as anyone could remember, a furniture store owner had his store windows plastered with signs announcing he was going out of business. "Must Vacate," they proclaimed. "Last Days of Closing Sale". But he still kept open -- with flourishing business--without any thought of closing.

One day, however, he confided to a friend that he had a problem. "My son graduates from college next month; he told him, "and I don't know what to do with him."

"Why not buy him a store of his own," suggested the friend, "and let him go out of business for himself?" (Charles V. Mathis, Seng Book, hm, Seng Co., as quoted in Quote, the weekly digest, Feb. 14, 1965).

2. Going out of business might be thought of as the theme of the great 6ld Testament book of Jeremiah. Only Jeremiah meant it. He was dead serious. He wasn't talking about any furniture or other commercial enterprise going out of business, either, but about the nation of Israel. Really, his book for the most part is a rather long series of

Jeremiah 18:1-12

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familiar with.

- quotations and warnings of and by God ato the people of Israel unless they should change their ways. It has some very positive truth, which is timely for us still, however, and is a Scriptural book which, like all the other Bible books, is worth being
- 3. Let us, then, do two things today: seek to understand a few of the more pertinent facts which might help us understand Jeremiah; and then seek out the main truth the book presents and see if we can commit ourselves to an acceptance of this truth.
  - I. The facts about Jeremiah are best found out, as for any Bible book, by two methods. One is by reading the book for yourself, in the honored old King James version of the Bible and in a newer, more modern version which speaks much as we do today. The other way of understanding the
- book is to read some of the writings about it which are published by full-time, capable scholars, who dern their living by finding out all they can about the background of the Biblical books. If you read Jeremiah first,

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then read what the condensation of agreement from the scholars as we can find it in publications like The Interpreter's Bible and other commentaries, and then return to read the book again, it seen becomes apparent that the conclusions presented by the scholars are based not on their own theories alone, but on throfough familiaritation with the Bible itself.

l. One of the men from the sales department of a large company was summoned to the office where his expense account was being checked. "This expense account is amazing," said the man behind the desk. "How in the world did you manage to spend \$18 a day for food?"

"I managed," replied the salesman,
"by not eating breakfast". (Anderson,
S.C.. Independent), as quoted in

Quote, Feb. 14, 1965).

Sometimes we hear so many different interpretations of various Bible books that we don't know which to believe. We wonder how folks manage to read the same words and come up with so many ideas. Perhaps one of the big reasons is that they dentity do without study of the opinions and findings of the full-time Bible scho-

then real xxxx the contensation of agreement from the scholars as we can find it in publications fixe The interpretar's Sible and other commentantes, and then return to seed the book scain, it sees becomes apparent that the concensions presented by the scholars are based not on their own theories alone, but on threfourn family ritual that the Sible itself

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- 2. The scholars tell us that Jeremiah lived inm an important transitional period in the history of what is now called the Near East of the world. He witnessed the fall of the Assyrian Empire, and the rise of the New-Babylonian Empire ander a Chaldean king. He saw his own country lose its political independence and become a Babylonian province. Though not recognized as such at the time. Jeremiah was the outstanding personality of his age. He helped his fellow countrymen to survive the crises through which they had to pass, and to find new foundations for their faith. In doing this he became one of the dominant figures of Old Testament history.
- 3. We are in the position of having more authentic information about Jeremiah than about any other Hebrew prophet. His book is one of the longest (52 chapters) in the Old Testament.

Jeremiah was born and grew up at Anathoth, a small village two miles northewest of Jerusalem. He was born

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2. The coholers tell as that Ifal and beggenfired . birow end to of the Assyrtan as the and the rare of the Neo-Nabylonian Emoire ander a Chaldean King, He sair has own ... -megeth's Looittiog and egol videop ngers Though not recommed as such at the time, derentan was the outell .one ein to willancereq anibests -about wen built of the lesed of bed Lions for their faith, in doing has of Old Fest ament history.

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of which may have served in the local sanctuary, or synagogue, at Anathoth; or who may have served in the temple of Jerusalem, only an hour's walk away. Jeremiah never served as a priest; and in his career as a proper he came into frequent conflict with the priests, even with members

allusions to hature, feflecting the experiences of his childhood in a rural village. He must have become acquainted very early with the capital city of Jerusalem, since it was so close; and it was in Jerusalem that he spent his adult years. He probably came to know in his childhood the written messages of former propets, especially of Hosea. His early messages, including the one that we read teday, show the deep influence of Hosea, both in his thought and

in the figures in which he clothed it.

Jeremiah's poems contain many

4. Star Some of the present book of Jeremiah was written by him, but some of it also was written as connecting and explanatory passages by

Jeremiah probably was born about

into a or (ostly family, the members of which may have served in the lost senotuary, or synagogue, at Anathoth; or who may have served in the temple of Jerusalem, only an hour!s walk away, Jeremiah maver served as a propriest; and in his career as a propert ne came into frequent conflict will the priests, even with members of his own family.

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i. Sine of the present book of derection was written by him, but some of it also was written as concecting and explanatory passages by

- later priestly writers. Scholars come close to agreeing on which sections are the work of the prophet, and which are the work of some body else. They can even tell you what the goal
- They can even tell you what the goal or teaching or belief of the somebody else who rewrote or joined together Jeremiah's work might have been.

  They know that Jeremiah did not do the mechanical handwriting of the
- the mechanical handwriting of the book, for in the book he speaks of dictating to his secretary, or scribe, a man named Baruch. If you want to check how they know that Jeremiah didn't write it all himself, read the book yourself. You'll find that he says at times that God "spoke to me" and told "me" to say certain things. At other times the book describes
- the man Jeremiah as being punished,
  put in stocks overnight, thrown in
  a **mixture** waterless, muddy cistern
  to die, and beingrescued firom it.

  The book, without doubt, is composed
- of both writings by Jeremiah and about Jeremiah. All of which backs up the statement that to rate so much attention he must have been very important, and must have some lasting value; else the book of Jeremiah would not

still be in the Bible.

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still be to the Broke.

Jeremian 10:1-12

5. As pointed out earlier. Jeremiah lived at a time when the kingdom of Judah, the people of Israel, was being deprived of its status as an independent, self-ruling nation. Josiah, the king, who had tried to restore all worship of the one God, Jehovah, at the temple in Jerusalem. only to have his effort at ridding the country of/f alse worship degenerate into a spiritless thing of form and law at the temple. The people continued much of their evil, godless ways after Josiah died. A series of the sons of Josiah reigned for brief periods after his death, each being placed there or executed or EXHERWISEX DISEXTAXEX taken into exile out of the country, or otherwise displaced, according to the fancy of them then-current foreign conqueror and ruler. Zedekiah. Johiakim and Jehoiachin are the names of at least some of these sons of Josiah who ruled under foreigh protection for brief times. None of them was strong in emphasizing the pure, templecentered worship of God in the way their father had done: and somet the disapproval of Ezra, an earlier prophet who thoroughly approved of Josiah.

-erel tres duc bedriou at .? of Judeh, the people of Israel, was intependent, self-ruling natuou. Josian, the king www had tried to to a li worship of the one flet, dehoven, at the demonstrate derugelen, the country of f gise worshin decensidoed edl .eldmer edd fa wel bas continued anoth of their evil, redlets wave after Josiah Sied. A Series of the some of Jesian reigned for brief periods after his death, each no between to, erent becald taled out of the country, or otherwise displaced, according to the lancy of and relevant Jedeklan, Johrskim and ruled under foreigh probettion for brief times, those of them was strong in emphasizing the pure, temlethat's farmer had done; and so the the disapproval of Egra, as estiter . deisob

- 6. Many of the people, and the kings from time to time, wanted to ally the nation with Egypt in the hope of throwing off Assyrian, and later Babylonian, rule. Whenever they proposed this, Jeremiah protested. His protests were not put as just his own opinion, but as the word of the Lord. He was ridiculed,
- persecuted, punished, exiled at various times for his opinions and messages, but he stuck by them. He saw any alliance with an image-worshipping, sensual Egyptian regime as a way of destruction contrary to God. He saw the Babylonians and the Assyrians as the agents of God; not that they were used by God to prevent the corrupting alliance with Egypt.

  Invariably, his prophecies of dire
- Invariably, his prophecies of dire things, with which the book is filled, worked out as he quoted God saying they would, when the country tried
- to break away from Babylonian and Assyrian influence. For Jeremiah, it was far better to be ruled by another nation which allowed religious
- which demanded and practiced and demanded of its provinces the practice of idolatry and pantheism.

6. Many of the peorle, and the dings from time to time, wanted to hope of throwing off Assyrian, and later Babylonian, rule. Whenever they proposed this, Jeremiah protested. His protests vere not but as just his own opingen, but as the word of the Lord. He was ridiculed, persecuted, punished, exiled at messages, but be stuck by them. He sew any alliance with an image-worshipping, sensual Eryptian regime God. He saw the Sabylonians and the sevreans as the agents of Cot; not thet they worshipped at God, but that nev ware used by God to prevent the corrupting alliance with Eypt. Invariably, his prophecies of dire thin s, with which the book is filled they would, when the country tried Assyrtan uniluence, For Jeremiah, it was far better to be reled by and hirwylls of mand some merabat base beobecand kakkykennosky dolla demanded of its provinces the practice of idolawry and pantheism.

7. Jeremiah's own personality constitutes one of his most important contributions to the history of Hebrew religion. He was one of the most subjective of the prophets;

his personal experiences and his inmost feelings are more vividly reflected in his words than is the case with any other prophet. It may be that Jeremiah's life is not

wholly typical, but it shows one important aspect of Hebrew prophecy; as a messenger of God to the people of his time; the prophet was not a mechanical puppet but a strong individual. The prophets did not lose their individuality and personality in performing their office.

Jeremiah's inner life was marked by a strong tension between his natural desires and inclinations on the one hand and his deep sense of vocation on the other. He was by nature sensitive, reticent, and introspective, and like most men wanted the good will of his fellow men. But he had a very deep sense of his com-

mission as a prophet, and his loyalty to the commission caused him to be hated and even persecuted, since his message was acually one of violence and destruction. He was denied

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participation in the ordinary joys and sorrows of his fellows, and was for forbidden to marry. He thus felt that he must live alone, with the hand of God upon him.

This inner tension made Jeremiah a man of fluctuating, sometimes violent, moods. In his most despondent times he wished that he had never been born, or he wanted to run away from his people and from his prophetic commission, to live alone in the desert. He even reached the point of shaking his fist at God, calling him a "deceitful brook, ...waters that fail" (15:18).

Yet, Jeremiah had his periods of exaltation, when he had great faith in God and pleasure in his task. He could say, "Thy words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart" (15:16).

On account of his deep faith in

God, and because he did not he sitate
to give vent to his feelings of despair and bitterness, the tensions
of his inner life did not cause him
to break down. The characteristic
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Jeremiah 10:1-12

end.

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8. Like all the Hebrew prophets, Jeremiah was not a theologian or a systematic thinker. He was a spokesman for God to the people of his times. Yet, he necessarily dealt with many problems that were basically theological.

He believed in the majesty and transcendence of God, but this did not leave him adoring God in awe, as it did Isaiah and Ezekiel. Rather, we see him wrestling and struggling with God, perplexed and sometimes even defiant. But his faith in the power and goodness of God won in the

Jeremiah used a number of vivid

figures to describe God. He speaks of Him as "a fountain of living waters"—that is, one who is ever available, always invigorating and creative. In the Scripture we read today, he speaks of God as "the patter"; a figure he did not originate, but which he established in the thinking of the Hebrews. We'll pay more attention to that as we near the end of this in a few moments.

Jeremiah believed God to be a Deity of love as well as of justice and power. He was both a God at hand and a God afar off. He re-

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Derty of love as well as of justice and power. He was both a God at an and and a, God afar off, He re-

- quires of men not sacrifice and ritual, but repentance and obedience to his moral laws, which would result in righterous living.
- Akanga Jeremiah condemned sin, and had a special interest in trying to see what caused it. He said that it originates in the weakness and corruption of the hearts of men.
  - "O Jerusalem, wash your heart from wickedness, that you may be saved.
    - How long shall your evil thoughts lodge within you? (4:14).
  - "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately weak; who can understand it?"(17:9).

In looking to the future, Jeremiah does not mention eternal life. But he does held that people can be true to God even while in the midst of evil and strife; and that eventually God will restore their nation, or their future, with love and justice.

II. The heart of the beek, the chief message of Jeremiah, if any part can be said to be the chief message, is pointed out in the words we have in

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quires of men not sacrifice and rough rough, but repentance and obedrence to his moral laws, which would result in righteous living.

Example description condemned sin, and had a special interest in trying to see what caused it. He send that it originales in the weakness and corruption of the hearts of men.

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<sup>11.</sup> The beart of the book, the chief measure of level to be the chief be said to be the chief measure, is contact to be the chief measure, is

the passage we read, words to which we have referred. They are words of God, spoken by the prophets for God, to Israel: "O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter has done? says the Lord. Behold, like the clay in the potters hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel". People of faith in the one Gods have for generations taken this saying as applying to them; and the word "Israel" as meaning the people of God, not just of the

Jewish race or the nation of Israel.

1. If we are as potter's clay in the hand of God, does this mean that we have no freedom at all? Not by a long shot. God gives us freedom to make our own choices. of selfishness or generosity, of good or evil. He also gives us understanding of the consequences of our chaices; we most of the time he gives us such undersatanding in advance. Jeremiah was God's instrument to ancient Israel to bring such understanding in that day. We can refuse to understand, we can make wrong choices deliberately. Then we run afoul of eternal fact, and are broken or ruined. At that

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the passage we read, words to which we have referred. They are words of God, spoken by the prophets for God, to Asrael: "O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter has done' says the Lord. Behold, like the clay in the control here to are you into land, the house of Israel". People of Taith in the one for momentations taken this saying as applying to inem; and the word Tirael" as meaning the people of Cod, not just of the people of Cod, not just of the design race or the nation of Israel.

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point the eternal Potter still wants to take us in hand, as the potter does the soft, ruined lump of clay, and straighten us out. He could do it without our consent; but the does not force himself upon us. If we will let him, however, he will reshape us and start us out again anew, again and again.

- 2. Bur willful disobedience is not going to change the course of the universe, nor change the moral laws which are eternal. Mistory has shown again and again that "modern ethics", which is as old as sin and disobedience to GodAN always ends with xxxx destruction of the one who practices it. God is in control still, and if we choose some other way, we will have to kk pay a price. That was the experience of the people of Jeremiah's time. That was what God warned the people about again and again, through Jeremiah and other prophets. That is still the truth today.
- Conclusion:
  The Potter's Hand in our lives is
  the hand of God. As no human potter
  can do with a lump of clay, God has

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point vin eternal Folter still wants to take us in hand, as the polter does the soft, ruined lump of clay, andpraighten us out. He could do it without our consent; but he does not force himself upon us. If he will let him, however, he will reshape us and start us out awain anew, again and sgain.

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Gonclusion: The Fotler's Hand in our lives as the hand of God. As no human notter can do with a lump of clay, God has given us a great deal of choice.

He is still available to reshape us
when our choice results in somisshapenperson. God is still in control
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