

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 typescript in parentheses.

Places and dates used:

Manitou, Colo., 8<sup>30</sup> 11<sup>00</sup>, Feb 21, 1965  
Lawson & Blanca, Colo. 10/30/66  
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*Manassah, Pa., 1965  
Chambersburg, Pa., 10/24/65  
... ..*

Introduction:

1. 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 Old 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

Introduction:

1. 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. "Max Vachon," they proclaimed. "Last Days of Glorious 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 graduated from college next month, he told me," and I don't know what to do with him."

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2. Going out of business might be thought of as the theme of the great Old Testament book of Jeremiah. Only Jeremiah means 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

quotations and warnings of and by God to 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 familiar with.

3. Let us, then, do two things today: (1) seek to understand a few of the more pertinent facts which might help us understand Jeremiah; and (2) 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 earn 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 ~~soon~~ becomes apparent that the conclusions presented by the scholars are based not on their own theories alone, but on thorough familiarization with the Bible itself.

1. 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 manage," 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 ~~don't~~ do without study of the opinions and findings of the full-time Bible scho-

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2. The scholars tell us that Jeremiah lived in 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 Neo-Babylonian Empire under 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.

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into a priestly family, the members 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 prophet he came into frequent conflict with the priests, even with members of his own family.

Jeremiah's poems contain many allusions to nature, reflecting 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 prophets, especially of Hosea. His early messages, including the one that we read today, show the deep influence of Hosea, both in his thought and in the figures in which he clothed it. Jeremiah probably was born about 626 B.C..

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later priestly writers. Scholars come close to agreeing on which sections are the work of the prophet, and which are the work of somebody else. 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 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 ~~XXXXXX~~ waterless, muddy cistern to die, and being rescued from 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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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 ~~otherwise displaced~~ taken into exile out of the country, or otherwise displaced, according to the fancy of ~~the~~ 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 foreign protection for brief times. None of them was strong in emphasizing the pure, temple-centered worship of God in the way their father had done; and so <sup>the</sup> met the disapproval of Ezra, an earlier prophet who thoroughly approved of Josiah.

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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 worshipped ~~by~~ God, but that they were used by God to prevent the corrupting alliance with Egypt. 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 independence than to ally with one which ~~demanded and practiced~~ and demanded of its provinces the practice of idolatry and pantheism.

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

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participation in the ordinary joys and sorrows of his fellows, and was 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 hesitate 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 quality of his outer life was courage, with complete fidelity to his prophetic office.

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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 end.

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 ~~potter~~ potter"; 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.~~

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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 overflowing and creative. In the Scripture we read today, he speaks of God as "the Potter"; a figure he did not originate, but which he established in the thinking of the Hebrews. Let us 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-

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

~~Through~~ 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 hold 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 book, 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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the passage we read, words to which we have referred. They are words of God, spoken by the prophet ~~for~~ 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 potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel". People of faith in the one God ~~x~~ 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 choices; ~~or~~ most of the time he gives us such understanding 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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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 ~~he~~ 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. Our willful disobedience is not going to change the course of the universe, nor change the moral laws which are eternal. History has shown again and again that "modern ethics", ~~which is as old as~~ sin and disobedience to God, <sup>AND</sup> always ends with ~~the~~ destruction ~~of~~ the one who practices it. God is in control still, and if we choose some other way, we will ~~en~~ have to ~~en~~ 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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