

BIBLE STUDY HELPS

TITLE: Shapes

TEXT: Jeremiah 18:1-12

TARGET: SESSION IN A SENTENCE

God is in control, shaping His people for His purposes.

LOOK UP: FOCUSING THE GROUP

Discuss: Has anyone ever visited a place that makes pottery, or have you personally made pottery? What happens if, while you are shaping the clay, it gets a flaw or crack, or fails to conform to the shape that you desire? You start over with the lump of clay. The potter is in control of the outcome for the piece of clay.

Video Option: This is illustrated in this video – https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8B4_ePuVPd4

The Lord instructed Jeremiah to visit the potter's house to learn an important spiritual lesson about God as the Potter. Jeremiah 18:1-12 describes Jeremiah's visit and the lessons he learns regarding God being in control of shaping His people for His purposes. The lessons God provided as he watched the potter at work were valuable for the people of Judah—and for us.

LOOK IN: UPACKING THE BIBLICAL TEXT

The Master Potter doesn't give up on a flawed lump of clay—Jeremiah 18:1-4

¹ This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: ² "Go down at once to the potter's house; there I will reveal my words to you." ³ So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was, working away at the wheel. ⁴ But the jar that he was making from the clay became flawed in the potter's hand, so he made it into another jar, as it seemed right for him to do.

Discuss: Who was in control of the clay in this passage? What kind of vessel did the potter make? How does this relate to how God works with us and with our flaws?

When Jeremiah followed God's instruction and arrived at the "potter's house," God immediately began to teach Jeremiah a special lesson. Jeremiah noticed the potter's clay had become "flawed" as he shaped it. The word translated "flawed" indicates the state of being corrupted or ruined. Something in the clay was not right. Instead of throwing out the clay, though, the potter simply restarted his project. Because the clay wasn't dry yet, he could put it back into its original shape and begin something new. As long as the clay stayed in the potter's hand, he could shape it for his purposes.

Discuss: What would be the inclination of someone who isn't a skilled potter, when a piece of clay develops a flaw? What does the skilled potter's response communicate about the character of God and His relationship with His people?

Illustrate Option: Imagine your life is a piece of pottery clay in the hands of God. What kind of vessel do you believe He is shaping, and how would that vessel illustrate how God is working in your life?

God used the picture of the potter working the clay to show Jeremiah how He was working to shape His people for His plans and purposes. Next, He reminded Jeremiah that He was (and still is) in complete control of our lives.

We are in the hands of the Master Potter—Jeremiah 18:5-10

⁵ The word of the Lord came to me: ⁶ "House of Israel, can I not treat you as this potter treats his clay?"—this is the Lord's declaration. "Just like clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, house of Israel." ⁷ "At one moment I might announce concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will uproot, tear down, and destroy it." ⁸ However, if that nation about which I have made the announcement turns from its evil, I will relent concerning the disaster I had planned to do to it." ⁹ "At another time I might announce concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it." ¹⁰ However, if it does what is evil in my sight by not listening to me, I will relent concerning the good I had said I would do to it."

The Lord asked a question all mankind, especially believers, must answer, "Can I not treat you as this potter treats his clay?"

Discuss: What are possible responses people might give to this question? Why would many be inclined to respond with "no"? Does answering "no" change the fact that everyone is still in the hands of the Master Potter?

The question was rhetorical and anticipated an affirmative response. Naturally, God is God and can do whatever He pleases.

The Lord answered His own rhetorical question: *just like clay in the potter's hand, so you are in my hand*. Jeremiah had seen the *potter's hand* rework the clay. Likewise, God could refashion His people for His purpose.

God then elaborates on what it means to be a lump of clay in His hands in verses 7-10.

Respond: Describe what you think the Lord is stating in Verses 7—10 regarding his work as the Master Potter.

God affirmed His sovereignty over everything and everyone. The verses stress the thoroughness of God's judgment. He remained true to His righteous character, even when executing judgment on those who oppose Him. As sovereign, God can also change the course of His actions if a nation *turns from its evil*. The word translated *turns* also can mean "repents." In context, it carries the basic idea of coming back to God. Sadly, verse 10 announced the consequences if a nation *does what is evil* and rejects Him.

God was showing Jeremiah that His sovereignty gives Him the right and power to forgive those who repent and to judge those who do not. However, we will see that some clay is just not pliable. This is when the potter must determine what happens next.

The Master Potter determines what happens to the clay—Jeremiah 18:11-12

¹¹ "So now, say to the men of Judah and to the residents of Jerusalem, 'This is what the Lord says: Look, I am about to bring harm to you and make plans against you. Turn now, each from your evil way, and correct your ways and your deeds.'"¹² "But they will say, 'It's hopeless. We will continue to follow our plans, and each of us will continue to act according to the stubbornness of his evil heart.'"

Just as the potter fashioned his clay, the Lord was fashioning His plan against His people. Their flaws were just too much to continue. Yet, God still offered them a choice: "Turn now." The wording expresses a special urgency to God's command. The people needed to repent quickly!

When a potter begins to see a flaw in a vessel, his first inclination might be to just stop and start over. But usually, the potter will work to remove the flaw before starting over, even though, an experienced potter will know that the flaw most likely won't correct itself. God knows our future and knows when or if we will repent. Yet He still works with us as the Master Potter. Yet, at a point, it's time and His discipline and judgment will come in order to correct the flaw and restore the vessel.

Notice, though, how Judah responded to God. As Judah's circumstances deteriorated, the people yielded to despair rather than turning to the God who could rescue them. They chose to follow their own plans. The people determined to stay with their own futile ways and to *act according to the stubbornness of their evil heart*. God warned His people of disaster, and the hope of restoration was always present. Sadly, most residents of the nation were determined to choose their own course, even if that course inevitably led to ruin.

Discuss: In what ways might believers react as the Israelites did? Why is it so hard to repent?

It's hard for people to admit they have fallen short of God's standard. Regardless, God stands ready to forgive anyone who confesses their sins and puts their faith in Jesus. When we do, the sovereign God will shape us for His purpose and use our lives to the fullest.

LOOK OUT: LIVING OUT THE TARGET

Respond: Would you say you are a lump of clay, a vessel on the potter's wheel, a vessel in need of being remade, or one that is complete?

Recall an occasion when you refused to do what you knew God wanted you to do and you experienced consequences as a result. Consider the actions you will take this week to conform more completely to God's purposes? Take time this week to reflect on how God might be shaping you for His purposes, and ask God for the strength to remain pliable in His hands.