

Welcome to the church at Bethel, where we gather for one reason and one reason only: the gospel. Jesus Christ in our place. His righteousness for our sin. His death for our judgment. His resurrection for our hope.

To those joining us online and to our guests in the room today, we are grateful you are here. Church family, can we welcome them this morning?

I often try to think of ways, “**sign acts**” to demonstrate the love of Christ in your life. Sometimes, those images are common, and easy to relate to your life. And living illustrations are not unique to my preaching or to modern exposition, the prophets in the Old Testament: Hosea, Ezekiel, and Jeremiah also performed or used daily objects to remind people of Yahweh’s covenantal love.

But as I was praying and reading the word this week, the three images have echoed in my spirit: fully formed jar, clay, and linen underwear.

### **Rotten Garments and Shattered Pots (Jeremiah 13:1-2)**

**Fastened to the Lord (Jeremiah 13:1-11).** Let’s begin with the obvious: any prophet using underwear as a gospel metaphor immediately gets your attention. Linen was a valuable material in the ancient world. Jeremiah, coming from a priestly family, may have immediately thought of the holy linen garments worn by the priests.

Most of us, however, do not stumble over the material but over the clothing itself: linen underwear (“girdle” in the KJV). Yet in the ancient Near East, undergarments were hidden because they were *personal*. By design and definition, **underwear** is worn beneath other clothing. It is the garment **closest** to the body.

**Take-Home:** Here we are reminded of the personal love of God for His people. Little did Jeremiah know just how close that love would become—that one day the Father would send His one and only Son to die in the place of guilty sinners.

Now Jeremiah is commanded to perform a strange prophetic sign. Take the linen undergarment, but do not wash it. The garment must remain unchanged for what comes next. Put it on. Then take it to the Euphrates and hide it in the crevice of a rock.

That raises an obvious question because the Euphrates was a long journey—some estimate two to four months. Some scholars argue Jeremiah only saw this in a vision. Others suggest he went to a town in Judah called Parah, a name similar to Euphrates.

The [Euphrates](#) itself symbolized Babylon, the very place where Judah would soon go into exile. I believe Jeremiah likely went to the town in Judah, but the symbolism remains unmistakable: the shadow of Babylon and the certainty of [judgment had already reached Judah's doorstep](#) (actually on their soil).

**Take-Home:** Friend, if you believe you are beyond the judgment of God or immune from the consequences of sin, think again.

At the Euphrates, Jeremiah hides the undergarment in the [crevice](#) of the rock. The word “[crevice](#)” is used elsewhere as a place of [refuge or hiding](#). That may also be part of the imagery here: the very place that appears safe ultimately provides no safety at all. Jeremiah leaves the garment there for many days. When he returns, it is [ruined](#) and useless. The picture is devastating. **Sin always corrupts** what it touches.

**Take-Home:** Yet the gospel points us to something greater. God's people were never meant to remain [ruined](#) (or be ruined in the first place). In Christ, sinners are cleansed, forgiven, and clothed in righteousness through the blood of Jesus.

But here is the central image of the passage: “[As underwear clings to one's waist, so I fastened the whole house of Israel to Me.](#)” God had bound His people to Himself for His glory, praise, and honor. This is covenant language—language of nearness, affection, and belonging. It echoes the promise that His people are the “[apple of His eye](#)” (Zech. 2:8). The image is one of closeness and treasured affection (so close you can see the reflection in a person's eye).

**Take-Home:** In Christ, you are fastened to the Lord and treasured as the apple of His eye.

Graciously, Yahweh gives Jeremiah another picture of covenantal love. **Read 18:1-4.**

**Formed by the Lord (Jeremiah 18:1-4).** People in the same profession often lived together in the ancient world, so there was likely an area of Jerusalem where the potters gathered and worked—something like a “[Baker Street.](#)” Jeremiah goes there to observe the potter at work.

First, notice the [relational picture](#). Scripture often uses the image of a [shepherd and sheep](#) to emphasize God's wisdom in guiding and His compassion in caring for His people. But the image of the [potter and the clay](#) emphasize something different: the Lord's authority over His people and the necessity of their submission to His will.

Now, if the **sovereignty** of Yahweh causes you anxiety, remember this: God is not anxious about His sovereignty. He reigns whether humanity acknowledges Him or not. The sovereign **Lord does not wring His hands in insecurity**. Yet God is not merely concerned with displaying power; He is sovereignly relational. His sovereignty and His love are not at odds. They meet perfectly in His character. God rules over you completely, and yet He lovingly draws near to you personally.

**Take-Home:** God is the loving, sovereign Potter you need, and His good purposes will stand in the end.

Jeremiah finds the potter “working away.” The image is important because God’s love for His people is not passive. The Potter is actively shaping the clay. And yet the clay is not entirely passive either. The Lord is constantly, daily, patiently at work in the lives of His people. God is always willing to take the long view. Time is never working against Him. The Potter is content to keep working the clay until His purpose is accomplished.

**Take-Home:** How is the Lord working in your life right now?

But then the jar becomes flawed. Uh oh. You have heard this word before. It is the same word used to describe the ruined linen undergarment in Jeremiah 13:7. In both places, the object becomes spoiled or ruined. At this point, we might expect the potter to throw the clay away and start over with a fresh lump. But not this potter. He reshapes it into another vessel.

The phrase “made it again” does not fully capture the Hebrew imagery. Literally, “**he turned (repented) and made it into another vessel**.” Repentance makes you moldable. Potter does not abandon the clay; He reworks it.

**Take-Home:** Just as the potter patiently works the clay until the vessel becomes what he intends, so God is shaping every believer according to His purposes.

Then comes the great “aha” moment: “Just like clay in the potter’s hand, so you are in My hand.” When mixed with water, clay becomes soft and **moldable**. That is how our hearts should be before the Lord—softened by the gospel and moldable for His glory. Clay also **holds its shape** once formed and hardened. In the same way, believers are called to stand firm upon the unchanging foundation of Jesus Christ.

**Take-Home:** During Yom Kippur, a traditional Jewish prayer says, “**Like clay in the hands of the potter, if he wills, he can expand it, if he wills, he can contract it; so too are we in Your hand**,” How much more should Christians rest in the hands of the Savior?

But there is one more picture of God's holy love. Read [Jeremiah 19:1, 4, 10](#).

**Fractured before the Lord (Jeremiah 19:1).** We do not know for certain whether Jeremiah purchased the clay jar from the same potter's house as chapter 18, but the imagery clearly continues. Yet something has changed dramatically. In chapter 18, the clay was still soft enough to be reworked by the Potter. The vessel was [flawed but not abandoned](#). Here in chapter 19, however, the people have become hardened by persistent sin and rebellion.

**Take-Home:** It is easier to get there than we think. A heart can become so hardened by suffering, disappointment, pride, and sin that it is no longer soft and moldable in the hands of the Lord.

Jeremiah is then commanded to go to the [Valley of Ben Hinnom](#)—the very place where Judah committed some of her darkest sins. **This was the valley associated with idolatry, false worship, and even child sacrifice.** The people had not merely stumbled into sin; they had continually hardened themselves against the voice of God.

But this time the imagery changes. In chapter 18, the Potter [reshaped](#) (turned) the spoiled clay because the people had inclination to [repent](#). In chapter 19, the jar is no longer [reworked](#)—it is [shattered](#). The hardened vessel cannot simply be remolded because the people have continually refused the warnings and mercy of God.

Friend, it is possible to resist the gracious voice of the Lord for so long that all that remains is the severe mercy of judgment. Persistent rebellion always hardens the heart. [Sin never leaves a person neutral](#). Either the heart is softened by repentance or hardened through resistance.

**Take-Home:** Yet even here, the warning itself is an act of mercy. The Lord still sends Jeremiah to speak because God takes no delight in the destruction of sinners. The shattered jar stands as both a warning and a call: *repent while your heart is still soft before the Lord.*

**So What?** And now the lingering question of Jeremiah's sermon becomes the question of ours: ***how moldable are you today?***

Some of you are resisting the shaping hand of God even now. You stiffen every time the Lord presses upon an area of pride, bitterness, lust, greed, anger, or unbelief. The very pressure meant to sanctify you has instead revealed how hardened you have become.

But oh, what mercy there is in the hands of the Potter. The gospel reminds us that Jesus Christ was Himself “[crushed for our iniquities](#)” so ruined vessels like us might be remade by grace. The nail-pierced hands of Christ are still forming sinners into saints.

Like clay in the hands of the potter, if he wills, he can expand it, if he wills, he can contract it; so too are we in Your hand, Preserver of kindness and not the accuser!

## Exegetical Notes

### LINEN UNDERWEAR

**Jer. 13:1** This is what the LORD said to me: “Go and buy yourself a linen undergarment and put it on. But do not put it in water.” <sup>2</sup> So I bought underwear as the LORD instructed me and put it on.

God's initial request (v. 1) seems bizarre, probably as much to ancient audiences as to modern. God tells Jeremiah to buy a new change of linen underwear (=loincloth), to put it on, but not to dip it in water before doing so (apparently to assure its newness).

Jeremiah is now enjoined to carry out a symbolic performative act, following the precedent of Hosea and to be continued by Ezekiel. These might be regarded as dramatic visual illustrations of the prophecies. A loincloth that has fallen apart, as this one will do, exposes the genitals, and in the poetic prophecy that follows this prose prophecy, the skirts of the personified people will be hitched up to expose her shame (Altar, 904).

#### Linen undergarment

A loincloth was an undergarment—a personal piece of clothing—that was wrapped around the middle of the body. Linen was a valuable, if common, material used for clothing, household accompaniments (e.g., curtains), and various rituals (e.g., burial shrouds). See Fretheim, 203.

The loincloth was of linen, but nothing in the narrative itself indicates whether the material itself carried any symbolic value. Since, however, priests wore linen garments (Exod 28:39), one thinks immediately of the vocation of the people to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exod 19:6); the fact that earlier in Exodus 28 the garments for Aaron are intended to be “for honor” (v 2 there), the same expression found here in v 11, may reinforce this interpretation (Halladay, 397).

#### Water

This slightly puzzling item in the instructions may be to ensure that nothing in the fabric of the loincloth is in any way damaged before it is hidden in the crevice (Altar, 904).

**Jer. 13:3** Then the word of the LORD came to me a second time: <sup>4</sup> “Take the underwear that you bought and are wearing and go at once to the Euphrates and hide it in a rocky crevice.” <sup>5</sup> So I went and hid it by the Euphrates, as the LORD commanded me.

## **Euphrates**

Given the exilic audience for this material, the river Euphrates (whether actual or symbolic) would have carried still further significance; they were exiled as a ruined people in the very place that Jeremiah was asked to hide his loincloth. Some scholars think that Jeremiah undertook no literal journey at all, and that the entire narrative is to be symbolically interpreted (as, say, a vision, a dream, or a street theater). Yet, the relatively straightforward sequence of commands and obedient responses, and the absence of any language associated with dreams or visions, suggests a greater degree of realism (Fretheim, 205).

Then Jeremiah is told to go to a river called Perah, the ordinary Hebrew name for the Euphrates River. The River Euphrates would carry a further significance, for the people will be ruined in the very place where Jeremiah was to hide the loincloth (Kaiser, 185).

The act symbolizes the threat of the Euphrates to inundate Judah even though Judah might want to wish to hide. Now it is clear what the word-play between Parah and the Euphrates represents: not simply that the local village is a convenient symbol for the Euphrates, a place closer to home so that Jrm will not have to walk to the actual Euphrates and back: no, Parah represents the Euphrates on Judah's soil, the symbolic fulfillment of Isaiah's words in Isa 8:7-8 (Halladay, 398).

## **Crevice**

Accordingly, the prophet is instructed to put the linen loincloth in a "crevice in the rocks." The word "crevice" (P) is used elsewhere only in Isa 7:19 and Jer 16:16 as a place where people seek refuge and safety. This could also be part of the imagery intended here as well, where a place of perceived safety provides no safety (Kaiser, 185).

**Jer. 13:6** A long time later the LORD said to me, “Go at once to the Euphrates and get the underwear that I commanded you to hide there.” <sup>7</sup> So I went to the Euphrates and dug up the underwear and got it from the place where I had hidden it, but it was ruined—of no use at all.

**Jer. 13:8** Then the word of the LORD came to me: <sup>9</sup> “This is what the LORD says: Just like this I will ruin the great pride of both Judah and Jerusalem. <sup>10</sup> These evil people, who refuse to listen to me, who follow the stubbornness of their own hearts, and who have followed other gods to serve and bow in worship—they will be like this underwear, of no use at all. <sup>11</sup> Just as underwear clings to one’s waist, so I fastened the whole house of Israel and of Judah to me”—this is the LORD’s declaration—“so that they might be my people for my fame, praise, and glory, but they would not obey.

### **Clings**

Verse 11 steps back from this vivid word of judgment and recalls the divine decision originally to enter into a binding relationship with Israel. Just as the loincloth is purchased new and clings to Jeremiah's loins (hence the reason Jeremiah was to wear it), so God long ago elected Israel and bound himself to this "unsoiled" people (see 2:2-3; both North and South are in view here). [Loincloth] God entered into this relationship so that they might be God's own people (see Exod 19:5-6). Using the language of Deuteronomy 26:19, God has set them "high above all nations that he has made, in praise and in fame and in honor." But, even with all of these benefits, the people rejected the relationship and refused to listen (Fretheim, 205).

## PARABLE OF THE POTTER

**Jer. 18:1** This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: <sup>2</sup> “Go down at once to the potter’s house; there I will reveal my words to you.” <sup>3</sup> So I went down to the potter’s house, and there he was, working away at the wheel. <sup>4</sup> 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.

Commentators have differed on the basic meaning of this narrative. Some have thought it a message of hope: the potter will not accept spoiled vessels but will remake them to his satisfaction; thus, Yahweh will not accept defeat but will accomplish good with his people (Cornill). Others have thought it a message of doom (Holladay, 514).

18:1-4 This passage marks the second of three instances (cf. Ch. 13) of Yahweh's communication through the life of Jeremiah the messenger as part of his message. Like similar sign-acts in the book of Ezekiel (e.g., exile depicted through the prophet's carrying baggage and digging through the city walls in Ezekiel 8; 12), the symbolic stories of Jeremiah 13; 18; 19 use the prophet as both a witness and an illustration of Yahweh's word (ESV, 568).

### Potter

First of all, we consider the potter (God). The potter initiates all stages of work with the clay. [Pottery Making To make the vessel is the potter's will as is the decision to rework it when it turns out badly.

The potter certainly wants to make the best vessel possible with the materials with which he has to work and will work perseveringly to that end. At the same time, this potter is faced with a problem; his work now and then turns out badly. The story does not assume an ideal situation in which the potter's work always turns out well. Given the analogy that the potter is God, it can be assumed that God is not the reason for the inferior results; it is the clay/people that are corrupt. The issue for the potter, then, is to make the best pottery out of the situation that he possibly can (Fretheim, 269).

The word "potter" is simply the participle \* "shaper." Since the verb is used often of Yahweh's creative ability (Gen 2:7, 8, and often in the Psalms, for example Ps 94:9), the analogy easily suggested itself (Halladay, 515).

People in the same profession used to live together, so there was probably an area where potters lived, just as there was a "bakers' street" (37:21). Jeremiah watches carefully what the potter is making at the wheel (TOTC, 168).

Whereas the Bible uses the figure of shepherd and sheep to stress God's wisdom to guide and compassion to care for his people (Ps 23:1-4; Isa 40:11; Jer 23:3-4; Ezek 34:11-16; John 10:11-18), this figure of the potter and the clay stresses the Lord's authority over his people and the importance of their submission to his will (Isa 29:16; 45:9; 64:8). See NAC, 181.

### **Potter – sovereignty**

One is that God isn't very worried about his sovereignty. If you are sovereign, you don't get anxious about it. You know your intentions will come about in the end. Another is that God is more concerned about his relationship with his people than with his sovereignty over them. Another is that God is always happy to take the long view. Time is on his side (Goldingay, 44).

### **Working Away**

Verses 4-6 have proved to be the most difficult to interpret. Most scholars translate the verse as a general, iterative reference to the potter's activity rather than a one-time event. NEB puts this well: "Now and then a vessel he was making out of the clay would be spoilt in his hands, and then he would start again and mold it into another vessel to his liking (Fretheim, 270)."

Two things must be emphasized. First, the clay is not altogether passive. Any potter will affirm that because of the centrifugal force developed on the wheel the clay presses against the hands of the potter.!! The process of shaping pottery is therefore an extraordinarily apt analogy for the work of Yahweh with his people: though he is sovereign, the people have a will of their own which they exert against him. Second, Yahweh can change his mind if the decision of his people warrants it (Halladay, 515).

the potter works in a flexible fashion. It's as if the clay is alive and has a mind of its own (as Judah and Nebuchadrezzar do). If it doesn't yield to the potter's attempt to make one sort of pot, he abandons that aim and makes it into something else (Goldingay, 44).

### **Flawed**

This exact verbal form is found elsewhere in the OT only in 13:7, where, in another object lesson, Jeremiah's once-new belt is found "useless" or "ruined" after it was hidden in the rocks near what some have thought to be the Euphrates River. It is important to note that the failure that developed in the clay pot is not a problem that originated with the potter—or by analogy in the object lesson, with God, who is the chief potter and Creator of the nation of Israel; the problem is with the clay: that is, the people (Kaiser, 231)!

### **Made/reworked**

The amazing thing is that the potter does not suddenly swipe the clay off the wheel with his hand, saying, "You can't get good clay anywhere these days," or something of that sort. No, he "turned it]" (210). Since "turning" sometimes refers to repentance in the OT, this word could serve here as a reminder of the need for repentance. The pot the potter made was the one he wanted to come from his own hands and the one that would be "best" (nt, "straight, upright") in his own eyes or opinion (Kaiser, 233).

The potter is not thwarted by any perversity of the clay; the potter is able to change his intention in order to accomplish his ultimate goal, the making of an acceptable vessel (Halladay, 517).

Just as the potter works with clay until he has shaped the pot the way he wants it, so God has a plan for each believer's life (see 29:11). He does not reject us when we fail but continues his patient work until he makes us what he wants us to be (Phil 1:6). He is the God of the "second chance" (as he was with Jonah and Peter). God's sovereignty as taught in these verses, however, must not be interpreted as arbitrary or capricious. He always acts in ways consistent with his character and in accordance with how we respond to him (NAC, 181).

**Jer. 18:5** The word of the LORD came to me: <sup>6</sup> "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.

**"Like clay in the hand..."**

This entire sentence was imported for an impressive liturgical poem in the Yom Kippur service. The symbolic use of the potter harks back to the version of the creation of humankind in Genesis 2, where God fashioned-the potter's verb *yatsar* is used—the human creature from the soil (Altar, 921).

This classical Yom Kippur *piyyut* (liturgical poem) compares our relationship with God to various kinds of craftspeople who shape and mold raw materials.

[Machzor Yom Kippur Ashkenaz, Maariv Service for Yom Kippur Eve, Yaaleh 78-84](#)  
(78) **Like clay in the hands of the potter**, if he wills, he can expand it, if he wills, he can contract it; so too are we in Your hand, Preserver of kindness and not the accuser!

The one who "fashions" (both from the Hb. root *yatsar*) are generally positive for emphasizing the personal touch of the Creator's workmanship (e.g., Gen. 2:7, 8, 19; Pss. 95:5; 139:16; Isa. 44:21; 64:8). But in Jeremiah 18:6 Yahweh's use of the simile "Like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand" presents the incomparable power of his "hand" as a warning to Judah, not a comfort. At this juncture, when Judah's exile is nearly beginning, Jeremiah portrays the same powerful (ESV, 569).

**<sup>7</sup> At one moment I might announce concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will uproot, tear down, and destroy it. <sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> At another time I might announce concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it. <sup>10</sup> 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.**

These verses reuse the agricultural verbs of uprooting and planting found in Jeremiah's commission to prophetic ministry (1:10). But now they appear in a double if then framework in which human responses to the divine word determine whether deliverance or destruction will be the result. Walter Moberly insightfully summarizes, Yahweh's sovereignty is not exercised arbitrarily but responsibly, considering the moral or immoral actions of human beings.

This episode of the potter's house becomes a striking formulation of the relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility (ESV, 569).

**<sup>11</sup> 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.' <sup>12</sup> 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.'"**

## **Hopeless**

The sense of the statement is: There is no point in hoping we will change our ways, for we are set on them. Lundbom, amusingly but also relevantly, proposes that the phrase means something like "we couldn't care less (Altar, 922)."

## THE CLAY JAR

**Jer. 19:1 This is what the LORD says: “Go, buy a potter’s clay jar. Take some of the elders of the people and some of the leading priests**

### **Potter’s clay jar**

The earthenware jug (Pa?), baqbuq; only here and in 1 Kgs 14:3) is made of clay, as evidenced in its capability of being broken, and ties in with the clay vessel in chapter 18 (Kaiser, 242).

Another change that has occurred between chapters 18 and 19 is that, in the symbolic action of chapter 18, the clay is still pliable and worthy of being reshaped by the potter, but by now the vessel has been completed and baked hard in the oven; that particular piece can only be smashed to pieces without being restored (19:10). See Kaiser, 242.

### **Elders and Priests**

Notice the audience change.

**<sup>2</sup> and go out to Ben Hinnom Valley near the entrance of the Potsherd Gate. Proclaim there the words I speak to you.**

Jeremiah is instructed to take them to a place of idolatry where sacrifices to Molek have been conducted (cf. 7:31; 32:35; 2 Kgs 23:10; 2 Chr. 33:6).

**<sup>3</sup> Say, ‘Hear the word of the LORD, kings of Judah and residents of Jerusalem. This is what the LORD of Armies, the God of Israel, says: I am going to bring such a disaster on this place that everyone who hears about it will shudder <sup>4</sup> because they have abandoned me and made this a foreign place. They have burned incense in it to other gods that they, their ancestors, and the kings of Judah have never known. They have filled this place with the blood of the innocent. <sup>5</sup> They have built high places to Baal on which to burn their children in the fire as burnt offerings to Baal, something I have never commanded or mentioned; I never entertained the thought.**

**Illustrations**