Let us turn to the word of God, the book of Jeremiah.

This morning we're going to read and study chapters 18 and 19. I apologize that I keep switching from the Living Bible to the Revised Standard Version. There are some passages where the Revised Standard Version is considerably more accurate and brings out the meaning in the actual words better than the Living Bible. There are other times when the Living Bible, with its fairly freely rendered paraphrase, comes home with more ***FEELING*** and more ***BITE*** and ***UNDERSTANDING***. Well now, you follow in whatever version you have. I hope you don't find that frustrating. But this morning there were a number of points where the Living Bible was not bringing out the meaning of the Hebrew words, and the Revised Standard Version does. Praise God that we've got so many versions of the Bible...we can chop and change, and we can search until we get the most accurate and the best one for the job. There are many nations in this world where they haven't got ***ONE*** translation at all. So, let's thank God that we can do this. Jeremiah 18 and 19---it's all about the same subject.

*The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord. "Arise and go down to the* ***POTTER'S HOUSE****, and there I will let you hear my words." So, I went down to the potter's house. And there he was working at his wheel; 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 for the potter to do.*

*Then the word of the Lord came to me, "Oh, 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****, oh, house of Israel. If at any time I declare, concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, and if that nation concerning which I have spoken* ***TURNS FROM ITS EVIL****, I will* ***REPENT OF THE EVIL*** *that I intended to do to it. And if at any time I declare, concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will build and plant it, and if it* ***DOES EVIL*** *in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will REPENT OF THE GOOD which I had intended to do it."*

*Now, therefore, say to the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, "Thus says the Lord, 'Behold I am shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you. Return everyone from his evil way and amend your ways and your doings.' "*

 *But they say, "That's in vain. We will follow our own plans and will everyone act according to the stubbornness of his evil heart."*

 *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. Does the snow of Lebanon leave the crags of Syrian? Do the mountain waters run dry...the cold flowing streams? But my people have* ***FORGOTTEN ME****. They burn incense to false gods. They've stumbled in their ways in the ancient roads, and have gone into* ***BYPATHS****---not the highway---making their land a horror, a thing to be hissed at forever. Everyone who passes by it is horrified and shakes his head. 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.' "*

*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 smite him with the tongue; and let us not heed any of his words."*

*"Give heed to me, oh Lord, and harken to my plea! Is evil, a recompense for good? Yet they have dug a pit for my life. Remember how I stood before thee to speak good for them to turn away thy wrath from them. 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 slain by the* ***SWORD*** *in battle. May a cry be heard from their houses, when thou bringest the marauder suddenly upon them, for they have dug a pit to take me and laid snares for my feet. Yet thou, oh Lord, knowest all their plotting to slay me. Forgive not their inequity, nor blot out their sin from thy sight. Let them be overthrown before thee; deal with them in the time of that anger."*

*Thus said the Lord, "Go buy a potter's earthen flask, and take some of the elders of the people and some of the senior priests, and go out to the valley of the son of* ***HINNOM*** *at the entry of the Potsherd Gate and proclaim there these words that I tell you. You shall say, 'Hear the word of the Lord, Oh kings of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem. Thus says the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel. "Behold, I am bringing such evil upon this place, that ears of everyone who hears of it will* ***TINGLE****, because the people have* ***FORSAKEN*** *me and have* ***PROFANED*** *this place by burning incense in it to other gods, whom neither they nor their fathers nor the kings of Judah have known. And because they have filled this place with the* ***BLOOD OF INNOCENTS*** *and have built the high places of* ***BAAL*** *to burn their sons in the fire as burned offerings to Baal, which I did not command or decree, nor did it come into my mind. Therefore, behold days are coming," says the Lord, "when this place shall no more be called to all the valley of the sons HINNOM, but the valley of* ***SLAUGHTER****; and in this place I will make void the plans of Judah and Jerusalem, and will cause their people to fall by the* ***SWORD*** *before their enemies and by the hand of those who seek their life. I will give their dead bodies for food to the birds of the air and to the beasts of the earth, and I will make this city a* ***HORROR****--- a thing to be hissed at. Everyone who passes by it will be horrified and will hiss because of all its disasters, and I will make them eat the flesh of their sons and their daughters, and everyone shall eat the flesh of his neighbor in the* ***SIEGE*** *and in the distress with which their enemies and those who seek their life afflict them." '*

*"Then you shall* ***BREAK THE FLASK*** *in the sight of the men who go with you, and shall say to them, 'Thus says the Lord of hosts, "So will I break this* ***PEOPLE*** *and this* ***CITY*** *as one breaks a potter's vessel, so that it can* ***NEVER*** *be mended? Men shall bury in* ***TOPHETH****, because there will be no place else to bury. Thus, will I do to this place," as the Lord, "and to its inhabitants, making this city like* ***TOPHETH****. The houses of Jerusalem, the houses of the kings of Judah---all the houses upon whose roofs incense has been burned to all the host of heaven and drink offerings have been poured out to other gods---shall be defiled like the place of* ***TOPHETH****." ' "*

 *Then Jeremiah came from* ***TOPHETH****, where the Lord had sent him to prophesy, and he stood in the court of the Lord's house and said to all the people, "Thus says the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel, 'Behold, I am bringing upon this city and upon all its towns,* ***ALL THE EVIL*** *that I have pronounced against it,* ***BECAUSE*** *they have stiffened their neck,* ***REEFUSING*** *to hear my words.' "*

This morning we are going to wrestle with the question of **PREDESTINATION**; so, our minds are going to be stretched. The great problem is how to reconcile **GOD'S FREE WILL** with ***MAN'S FREE WILL***...because you cannot have ***TWO*** parties both with ***ABSOLUTE*** free will in the same situation. Two people getting married ***CANNOT*** have absolute free will again. They are now involved in a relationship in which ***NEITHER*** party is as free as they ***WERE***. Just to balance that up so that you don't think I'm being cynical, somebody congratulated me (or at least commiserated rather with me) on the night before I was married in saying, "Well, your last night of freedom." And I said, "No, tomorrow I will be free... to be married." And there are different kinds of freedom. And the freedom that one has with one's wife is the freedom of ***RELATIVE FREE WILL***, and the freedom to be ***LIMITED*** by each other, and to enjoy the freedom together as a ***UNIT*** that was not possible ***BEFORE***. And I'm going to say in this sermon this morning, that ***GOD'S*** free will is not absolute but ***RELATIVE***; and ***MAN'S*** free will is not absolute but ***RELATIVE***, because God and man are in ***RELATIONSHIP***---and that ***LIMITS THE FREEDOM OF BOTH PARTIES***!

***The Potter and Clay: The Understanding of Free Will***

It is, however, still of God's grace that he has thus limited himself; for the day he created men, God ***LIMITED*** his own free will. However, that does not put God and men on an ***EQUAL*** basis. God may not have ***TOTAL*** free will now, but he does have the ***FINAL WORD*** in any situation. The picture of predestination and free will, which the Bible uses again and again---Isaiah uses it, Zechariah uses it, Jeremiah uses it (and that's the passage we're looking at) Paul uses It---is the picture of a ***POTTER WITH CLAY***. And this picture helps us as much as any other to understand the problem of predestination and free will ... and what control God has over us and what control he does not have over us. Now to those of us who have little experience of pottery or clay, we will almost certainly misinterpret this picture. And I didn't feel until this last week that I really, truly, understood this single sentence which is the theme for this morning: *"Behold, like the clay in the potter's hand; so are you in my hand."* Now the first reaction you have to that is that man has no free will at all. Man is simply a lump of plastic material, and God can do with that lump whatever he wishes, and that he decides to do this or that or the other, and everything is in the potter’s control, and he has absolute free will over the claim. And I read commentary after commentary this week in which the commentator said, "This is a picture of God's absolute control over men."

Now I do not believe that is the message of Jeremiah chapter 18 and 19. The message of Jeremiah here is this: the clay is in control of the situation, the ***CLAY*** not the potter. And if the first impression on you was that the potter was in control of this situation, then I want you to think again. The whole message is that the potter is ***LIMITED*** by the clay, and that's really the profound lesson we're going to learn about God's free will and man's free will this morning.

Chapter 18 is about clay in a ***SOFT*** condition when it can be molded in different ways. Chapter 19 is about clay after it is ***HARDENED***, when you only have two choices: one is to ***KEEP*** it and the other is to BREAK it. But in chapter 18 you've got the earliest stage of the clay when you don't break...in fact you can't break, a lump of clay. You can ***MOLD*** it. You can tear it. You can't break it. It's soft, it's pliable. But in chapter 19 it's become hard and there Jeremiah ***BREAKS*** the vessel. It's a very delicate balance we've got to strike this morning, very delicate indeed. And I want to go step by step so that you're with me all the way. And then you will understand that God has ***RELATIVE*** free will, man has ***RELATIVE*** free will; but that God has ***MORE*** relative free will than men has. That's the message of the chapter.

***Chapter 18: Importance of Having the Right Kind of Clay***

So, let's start with chapter 18. Clay is very much part of our lives. We wouldn't be sitting here without clay. It is very much part of this building and you---most of you I think---live in houses made of clay, ultimately. Clay is very plentiful in this area. The London basin of clay is just full of it, and you've seen the brick fields on the way up the M-1. You've seen Stag Hill...and our Cathedral is built of bricks for this reason: that normally a cathedral is built of local stone, but the local stone here is chalk and is too soft, and so, somebody had the great idea of building it from the clay of Stag Hill. And the clay from the bottom of the hill was baked into red bricks and built on the top of the hill; and we have a clay cathedral. Clay is very much part of our lives and, in particular in Sury, we tend to hang the top half of our houses with clay tiles. We cover the roofs with clay. We owe a very great deal to the gift of clay...and we live in it.

Having said that, have you noticed that there are hardly two bricks ever the same? Have you noticed that the clay produces entirely different colored bricks and tiles? Because clay varies enormously, and you've gotta have the ***RIGHT*** clay for the ***RIGHT*** kind of brick. If you want a hard ***ENGINEERING*** brick for foundations---such as is below the ground level in this very building---you've got to go to a certain place for a certain kind of clay. If you want a ***DECORATIVE*** sand-faced handmade brick, then you go to another brick field and another sort of clay. There's an infinite variety of clay...and if you know anything about bricks, you know that. Likewise, when you are making vessels of clay ---and I dare say that most of you had a clay vessel on your breakfast table this morning---you'll know that clay varies so much, that some clay is all right for thick mugs (about three-eighths an inch thick, glazed). But if you want really fine China in a beautiful vessel, then you'll have to go down to Cornwall, and you find there that deposit of the most fine beautiful China clay.

You see, you cannot do what you like with clay. It is the ***CLAY*** that determines what you can do with it. And you cannot say "Go to...I'm gonna make this shape a vessel and any lump of clay will do." You'd have to have the ***RIGHT*** kind of clay. The potter is limited by the ***CLAY*** all the time. Just thought, the architect of this building was Mr. Potter. And I remember the day...I remember the day when he brought different samples of brick for us to see...made of ***DIFFERENT*** kinds of clay. Which clay was suitable for what he wanted to do in this building? ... quite a decision to make. Any old clay would not do, for clay produces different appearance, different weathering, different texture. *"Jeremiah, go down to the* ***POTTER'S HOUSE****. I want to speak to you. I want you to learn a lesson about* ***ME*** *and* ***ISRAEL****."*

And Jeremiah trotted down the street and came to the potter's house. And he saw the potter trying to make a clay vessel. And he took a lump of clay. It's a vivid description, this. It says, "He was working with his ***'WHEELS'*** (PLURAL)." I'm afraid the Revised Standard Version says *'wheel'*, which is wrong. It is *'wheels'* - plural. And that means there were two wheels on a spindle, and the spindle was upright. The top wheel was for the potter's ***HANDS*** to work the vessel on. The bottom wheel was for his ***FEET***. And his feet would be doing this and turning the bottom wheel while his hands shaped the pot and the top wheel. So, you see how accurate the Bible is---it's we who don't know anything about it who say "*wheel*" instead of "*wheels*" and that's how we get misunderstandings.

So, the potter was working at his *'wheels'*, his feet going and his hands going. And Jeremiah watched, and he (the potter) took a lump of clay, and he tried to make it into a certain kind of pot. And it didn't work out. And the fault was ***NOT*** the fault of the ***POTTER***. It was the fault of the ***CLAY***! ***THAT*** clay was not right for ***THAT*** vessel. It wouldn't work. It wouldn't run. It wouldn't shape. Maybe it had grit in it. Maybe it wasn't soft enough or fine enough. Maybe it wouldn't stand that kind of shape. That's the situation. The ***CLAY*** was wrong. So, the potter put it into a lump again and made a totally ***DIFFERENT*** kind of vessel with it. Now this is the ***KEY*** to the whole chapter. He did not start again and manage to produce what he originally intended. What he originally intended had to be canceled. The vessel he wanted to make could not be made. So, he made a totally ***DIFFERENT*** kind of vessel---that did not come out in the Living Bible. It comes out partially in the Revised Standard Version (even more in the Hebrew) ---and he reworked it into another vessel. I'm going to put this very crudely; but I want to get this across to you so it's in terms you can understand, because most of us really have little experience of potteries. Instead of a ***VASE***, he made a ***CHAMBER POT***.

That's what was happening here. The clay was too rough to make a delicate ***BEAUTIFUL*** object. It must therefore be made into a vessel that would be useful, that he could sell, that would do something fairly ***ORDINARY***, maybe even used to contain dirt. It's this message---which we shall see is taken up by Paul in 2 Timothy 2--- that in many houses...in houses... there are many clay vessels, some for ***NOBLE*** use and some for ***IGNOBLE*** use. It's the same picture. And if the lump of clay will not shape beautifully and finely and stand the contours of a ***BEAUTIFUL FLASK***, then it's got to be made into a ***(CHAMBER) POT*** that will at least do something useful for the potter and for the person who buys it. Now, that is the picture. It's a very sad picture. It means the potter's original will was not fulfilled, and he had to change his plans and think up something else to do with that lump of clay because it was not responding.

***The Quality of the Clay Determines How God Will Use It***

Now are you beginning to get the message? Now we understand the word that came. Jeremiah watched the ***METHOD*** of the potter and then he got the ***MESSAGE***. And the message was this: *"Oh Israel, are you not in my hands as the clay in the potter's hands? Israel, I wanted to make you a vessel of my grace and mercy among the nations. I wanted you to hold my love for the nations. I wanted you to be a beautiful thing. And I've tried to mold you, and you will* ***NOT*** *mold. You will* ***NOT*** *conform. You will* ***NOT*** *respond to my hands. And the vessel is spoiling in my hands. And it's not* ***MY*** *fault, it's* ***YOURS****!"* Clay is not responding. *"And therefore Israel, listen carefully. If I decide to make a nation the vessel of my* ***GOOD GRACE****, and if I plan good for that nation, and I plan blessings for that nation, and that nation does NOT respond and will* ***NOT*** *listen and rebels, then I will make you a vessel to hold EVIL before the nations. I will still use you. You will demonstrate some part of me. And if you will not hold my* ***MERCY****, then you must hold my* ***JUDGMENT****. But you're gonna hold me. I'm going to use you for one purpose of the other."*

And similarly, God says, "Tell Israel, 'If I shape ***EVIL*** for a nation, and decide that I will make that nation a vessel of my ***WRATH***, and that nation turns and listens to me and amends their ways, then I will ***REPENT***.' " This is God speaking!! *"I will repent."* And you know that repent means *'change your mind'*. *"I will change my mind. I will devise another plan."* Now here is a God, not a God who makes decrees and says*, "That shall be that; and you're just a lump of plastic. And I will make you...I will* ***FORCE*** *you into my role."* But here's a God who says, *"I will make one plan for you. And if you respond to that, then we can carry out the plan. If you do not respond, then I will devise another plan; and I will still use you but in an entirely different way."*

You can't refuse to be used by God. You can ***CHOOSE*** whether you're used as a vessel of his ***WRATH*** or of his ***MERCY***. And it's the ***CLAY*** that decides. It's the clay that decides. God makes his original plan. We can refuse that original plan. God can make ***OTHER*** plans and make you a different kind of vessel. Now that's ***PREDESTINATION*** as it's taught here. It's not an arbitrary potter making any lump of clay into anything he chooses. It's a potter saying, "I'd like to do this with you, but if you don't respond, I will decide to do that." He's a potter who can still make you into something, but it will not be what he ***ORIGINALLY*** intended.

Now I want to apply that very ***PERSONALLY***. There may well be people here in this auditorium who are not now what God planned them to be in their life. There's nothing fatalistic about God's plans. There are people here for whom God had a dream and a vision. He wanted to shape you in a certain way. He wanted to use you in a certain way, and you did not respond. Some of you kept to yourselves the best years of your life, and you did what the Israelites here say: *"We will follow our* ***OWN*** *plans."* And you've kept that plan. Has that defeated God? No, it hasn't. He can ***CHANGE*** his plans. He can make you into ***ANOTHER*** kind of vessel. It'll not be as beautiful a one as it was originally meant to be. But he'll still use you. Sometimes he changes plans and uses you still for a good purpose though it's not the best, but he can still use you for good. It's glorious that some people that have wasted their lives come to God late in life, and God can make ***SOMETHING*** of them. He cannot make what he ***ORIGINALLY*** intended. The plan has had to be ***CHANGED***. But when they amend their ways and come to him, he can make something off them for ***GOOD***. But if a man spends his whole life ***REFUSING*** to be moldable---refusing to be malleable clay in God's hands---then ultimately God will make him a vessel of ***WRATH***.

***The Choice: Be Made a Vessel of Mercy or A Vessel of Wrath***

Everyone listening to me will one day be a vessel holding something of God. You will either be a vessel of his MERCY or a vessel of his **WRATH**, but you'll hold something for God. Your life will demonstrate God's ***MERCY*** or his ***JUSTICE***. You are a lump of clay, but he will use you for some purpose, for he is the potter. The tragedy is that many, many people whom he wanted to be vessels of grace---holding his mercy, holding the treasure of the glory of Christ in an earthen vessel---they cannot do that, because they were NOT responsive to his hands when he's sought to shape them.

Well now, that's the message. It's a pretty stark message; but hidden in it is a wonderful ***OFFER***. And the offer is to Israel: *"Behold,"* says God---see what he's saying. He's saying, *"In years gone by I called you, Israel, because I had a beautiful plan for you. You were going to be the most beautiful people on earth. You were going to be in a land flowing with milk and honey. You were gonna have my blessing poured into you. You were going to be full of grace. You were gonna be such a* ***LOVELY******VESSEL****. But now I am shaping you for* ***EVIL****. I've changed my plans. I have* ***REPENTED****. I've changed my mind. I am now going to demonstrate before the world my* ***JUSTICE****, my judgment; and you are going to be an ugly, dirty vessel holding my* ***WRATH****. But tell them, Jeremiah, if they will amend their ways---if they will return---I'll change my mind again. I'll change my mind again."* God is saying as clearly as he can, "*Clay, clay, will you change your mind? And I can change mine? Will you respond to my molding, and you can be a beautiful thing?"* There's an ***APPEAL*** here; and it's ***NEVER*** too late. I care not how how many years you've wasted, how many years you've been out of God's plan, how many years you've followed your own plans and not allowed him to mold your life. I care not. If you amend your ways and return, he can change his mind. And he can make you into something ***USEFUL***. He cannot give you back the years you lost. But he can make you into something very useful for the years to come.

***The Response: We Will Follow Our Own Plans***

What was their ***RESPONSE***? We turn from the potters to what I've called the ***PLOTTERS***, for that's what they became came. Verse 12 is their response to Jehovah---to God. Verse 18 is their response to Jeremiah's call. And their response is a very sad one. Verse 12: *"We will follow our* ***OWN*** *plans, thank you."* How utterly foolish people are to say that. This is where God has ***MORE*** relative free will than man, because God, while he has limited himself by making us clay and making us breathe and giving us minds of our own, he has not given us the ***ABSOLUTE*** free will to follow our own plans. No man can say that. No man can say*, "God, I will not have your plan for my life. I will have my own".* You cannot say that for the simple reason ***that CLAY CANNOT MOLD ITSELF.***..clay cannot mold itself. In fact, the only thing that I know that clay can do is to ***SETTLE DOWN***. That's precisely what most people do who follow their own plans. Have you noticed? They settle down to something or other, sooner or later. They finish up---settle down---in a retirement house on the south coast...settle down like clay...just settling down.

You can't mold your life yourself. You may think you can, but you can't. *"We will follow our own plans, thank you, God. We're not interested in being clay in your hands. We don't want anyone shaping us. We don't want anyone telling me what to do. I will follow my* ***OWN*** *plans."* How foolish; and God cries out from his heart, *"Have you ever heard anything like this? Have you ever heard people say this kind of thing?"* Well, I'm afraid we have. But in Israel's situation, it is even more stark. It's so ***UNNATURAL***. *"It's like the snow disappearing from the highest mountains,"* says God. *"It's like the mountain streams ceasing to flow."* It's so unnatural, so unnatural. It's as if the sky turned pink, and the trees turned to stone. It's unnatural. And yet people do this; and Israel did it. They ***FORGOT*** their God. Do you notice what God says? *"Soon as you forgot me, you got off the highway and you got into* ***BYPATHS****."* That's a vivid description. And as soon as a man says, "I will follow my own plans," he turns in to a cul-de-sac without realizing it. He gets off the road that leads to life. He gets off the road that leads to everything he wants, and he gets into a cul-de-sac. It may be a very nice cul-de-sac. It may be a beautiful one. But he gets to a ***DEAD END***. It's a bypath. It's a cul-de-sac. You get off the road when you say, "We will follow our ***OWN*** plans, thank you." And God says, *"If you do that, you'll see my* ***BACK*** *and not my* ***FACE****."* I think there are ... there's no more terrible thing could happen to a man than have God turn his back on him, because you can't talk to someone's back. There's something awful when you're talking to someone, and they turn their back. God says, *"I'll turn my back on a man who says, 'I'm gonna follow my own plans.' "* And so, Jeremiah told them the answer of God to their answer.

***Jeremiah Prays a Difficult Prayer***

And now comes their answer to Jeremiah. Their answer to Jeremiah is, "*Let's plot against Jeremiah too, for the law shall not perish from the priest nor counsel from the wise."* What does he mean? They mean this. *"We are perfectly happy with our own religious leaders. Who's this Jeremiah? He thinks he's gonna put all our priests and prophets out of a job. Who does he think he is telling us what to do? He has no authority. We've got priests; we've got prophets; we've got leaders. We don't need any others. Away with him."* And they began to plot to get rid of him. It was this that made Jeremiah realize that the clay had absolutely ***REFUSED*** to be molded. He changed his prayer. I don't know what you think about this prayer now. Just remember that for years---probably for about 15 years already---Jeremiah had spent his private prayer life ***PLEADING*** with God to forgive Israel and to turn wrath away from them and make them a beautiful vessel. He had pleaded and pleaded. Now, he realizes that clay ***CANNOT*** be made into that kind of a vessel.

And out comes, a very honest prayer. He's now switched over to ***GOD'S*** side from having been rebuked by God for being too sympathetic with ***MAN'S*** side. He has stepped right over; and now he prays an awful prayer. He says, Father, you know I've prayed for forgiveness for them. Now I pray, forgive them ***NOT***..., forgive them not. A terrible prayer. He prays all kinds of horrible things on them. Deliver up their children to famine. Let their wives become childless and widows, may their men meet death by disease. May their young people be slain in battle. It's a terrible prayer. But Jeremiah is being rung in the depths of his heart with the agony of clay saying, *"No God. I'm not going your way at all.”* And so, he prays this dreadful prayer, and I don't want to say any more about that prayer except it's a very **HONEST** prayer. He's on **GOD'S** side. That's why he's praying as he does. He's not praying out of personal revenge. He's not praying to get his own back. He's realizing the situation as it **REALLY** is. Man gone **TOO FAR**, the nation has gone **TOO FAR**. The enemies of his have gone **TOO FAR**... ever to be made into that beautiful vessel. And he's saying, *"Lord, make them into the* ***OTHER*** *kind of vessel. Demonstrate your* ***WRATH*** *through them. Demonstrate your* ***JUDGMENT*** *through them.”*

Now in the light of all that, may I read a passage from the New Testament where this same theme is taken up in the New Testament, lest you think I'm preaching a doctrine that is only in the old. Listen to Paul. *"What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means, for he says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.' So, it depends not upon man's will or exertion, but upon God's mercy. For the scripture says to Pharaoh, 'I have raised you up for the very purpose of showing my power in you, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth.' So, then he has* ***MERCY*** *upon whomever he wills, and he* ***HARDENS*** *the heart of whomever he wills.*

*"You will say to me then, 'Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?' But who are you, a man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder. 'Why have you made me thus?' Has the potter no right over the clay to make out of the same lump, one vessel for* ***BEAUTY*** *and another for* ***MENIAL*** *use? What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known His power, has endured with much patience, the vessels of wrath made for* ***DESTRUCTION****, in order to make known the riches of his glory for the vessels of* ***MERCY****, which he has prepared beforehand for glory, even us whom he has called."*

Do you understand that passage now? It is not sayingthatGod is arbitrary and saying, *"I'll pick* ***HIM*** *to be a vessel of* ***MERCY*** *and* ***HIM*** *to be a vessel of* ***WRATH****.*” No. The simple fact is that ***NO*** lump of clay walking the earth today has been fit to become a vessel of mercy. We've ***ALL*** refused God's plans. There was only ***ONE*** lump of clay that ever responded perfectly to the potter, and his name was Jesus. The rest of us have rebelled and said, we'll go our own way. So, we are all fit to make ugly vessels of ***WRATH***; and therefore, if God decides to have mercy on some, that's HIS prerogative. That's ***HIS*** free will. But notice it says there that he's had much ***PATIENCE*** with the vessels of wrath. He's tried. He's tried.

***The Clay Hardening Process***

Let's take the outstanding example of this: Pharaoh...Pharaoh. Pharaoh keeping the children of Israel under his iron grip...killing the little baby boys in Egypt. And God sent Moses to Pharaoh and said, *"Let my people go."* And if Pharaoh had said at that moment, *"Yes I will,"* history might have been different. But it says Pharaoh ***HARDENED*** his heart. The clay was that much less flexible. So, God said a second time, *"Let my people go."* And a second time Pharaoh hardened his heart, and the clay became ***TOUGHER***. God tried a third, fourth, fifth, sixth, seven times---and that's the perfect number. Seven times God had patience with that vessel of ***WRATH*** and tried to make him into something ***BEAUTIFUL***. Seven times it says Pharaoh ***HARDENED*** his heart. Three more times God said to him, "Let my people go." But on the last three times it does not say, *"****PHARAOH*** *hardened his heart."* It says, *"****GOD*** *hardened Pharaoh's heart."...*God hardened Pharaoh's heart. It's as if---indeed it is---that God by the seventh time said, *“Pharaoh, you will* ***NOT*** *respond. You're hardening. And so, before you are totally hard, I'm going to shape you into a* ***VESSEL OF WRATH****, and I'm gonna smash you and your army".* And God did that. It wasn't that God sort of picked names out of a hat like the "FA" Cup. He didn't just pick a ball out and read, *"Moses,"* and pick another one out and read, "*Pharaoh, right; Pharaoh---vessel of wrath; Moses---vessel of mercy."* He had great patience and he worked hard with Pharaoh. But Pharaoh's clay got harder and harder; and before it got ***TOO HARD*** to make anything, God produced a vessel of WRATH and hardened him in the shape he had chosen.

You see, it's not absolute predestination by ***DECREE*** that no one can do anything about. That's when predestination is used as an excuse for not responding to God. And people say, "Well, if God's chosen some to go to heaven and some to go to hell, nothing I can do about it." Robbie Burn's poem, what was it? *"Oh God, who pleases best thyself, sends one to heaven and 10 to hell, all for thy glory, and not for any good or ill they've done before thee."* That's blasphemy! It's a libel on God. As if God is an arbitrary picker and chooser of men. It isn't. God has had ***PATIENCE*** with vessels of wrath. He's tried to make people into something else; but if they ***DON'T RESPOND***, then he makes them into a vessel that will demonstrate his anger and hold his wrath. YOU therefore choose, not God. ***YOU*** choose to respond to God. ***YOU*** choose to be molded. ***YOU*** choose to be pliable in his hands.

*"Are you not in my hands, as clay in the potter's hands, Oh Israel? You won't respond, you won't be molded."* We've just sung--"Break me. Melt me. Mold me...mold me!!" Make me the vessel that you really planned first, Lord. Or, if it's too late for that then, would you think of another plan, Lord, that you could use my life in. If I've so messed things up that I've missed your original will, then Lord will you think again? And will you bring me **ANOTHER** plan for my life? To me this is lovely, because it means that if I have missed God's will and if I have made a mistake, the situation is not totally lost. Do you see that? I can come back and say, "Lord, there's still something you can do with me." And I think vividly of a man who came to Christ when he was 72. And he was an invalid; he had a lot of things wrong with him. He couldn't ever come to church because he couldn't go more than10 yards from a toilet. And he was just housebound. And at 72 his life was a wreck. But he came to Christ; and the Lord healed him---body, mind and spirit in one fell swoop. And he was baptized at 72. And after his baptism, he was weeping. And I said, "Whatever's the matter. You should be full of joy." And he said, "Well, when I think of all those wasted years." And we had to assure him that God could make another vessel--- not the one he could have made when the man was 20---but God could make ***ANOTHER*** vessel. And He did. And I think he lived about...seven years, was it? About seven. And for those seven years, he was a beautiful vessel of ***MERCY***. Oh, God doesn't harden people until they've hardened towards Him. God wants to make ***EVERY*** lump of clay into a beautiful thing.

***Chapter 19: Clay That Has Become Hard and Won't Mold***

But now we must turn to the other side of this chapter, or, the second chapter. Suppose that clay has gotten ***TOO HARD*** to be molded. You see, you've only a ***LIMITED*** amount of time once you've started working with a lump of clay. You've only a limited time. And every human being is just a lump of clay. And we've only got a limited time---70, 80 years. It's not long and it goes more and more quickly. God has only a ***LIMITED*** amount of time to work---the clay is malleable. And there's something quite profound in the fact that the moment you die, your clay goes ***HARD***. My clay is very flexible at the moment, very flexible, so soft and moldable. And my very body is a symbol of the fact that while I'm living, I am moldable--- things can change. But the moment I die, my body begins to stiffen... until it's a hard lump. And this mortal clay, having hardened, then disintegrates.

That's the meaning of chapter 19. *"Jeremiah go back to the potter and this time buy a jar that's hard, that's fixed (hardened). Buy one of those jars."* Now, which of the jars do you think he bought? I have the feeling---indeed the Hebrew implies it--- that he didn't buy a beautiful vase, but one of those ugly things---one of those I ignorable vessels. It's described here, not as a vessel, but as an ***EARTHEN FLASK***. A word which means a 'chamber pot' or something like that*. "Go and buy one of those vessels that might have been a beautiful thing, but the clay just wasn't up to it. Get one of those and take it out to the Potsherd Gate...to the Valley of Topheth."* I wish I could take you all to Israel one day. You've almost got to be there to see this. Oh, I think if I have an ambition for you, I'd love to take the whole church to Israel and just show you this... and show you Jerusalem on its hill---the hill of Zion. It's just like a ***HORSESHOE***, with a ring of hills around it shaped like a horseshoe. And then, if you know, the tongue in the middle of the horse's foot; that's the hill of ***ZION*** pointing down, and the ***TEMPLE*** at the top of it, and the city of Jerusalem below it.

And that sort of crevice---that deep horseshoe shaped valley between the bit in the middle and the shoe outside...the bit where your pen knife, the scout's pen knife, is meant to get stones out of that bit in there---if you can imagine that valley, the deepest part of it in the bottom part of the horseshoe, so deep that there are parts of it that never see the light of day...a deep ravine, it's called the Valley of Topheth. And then a man called Hinnom bought it, or his son. And it was called the Valley of the Son of Hinnom. Now, it was the obvious place to put the ***RUBBISH***; and that's what was put out there. And on the Hinnom Valley side there was a gate, and it was called the 'Gate of the Potsherd'. The reason for that was ***TWOFOLD***. Down in the ***BOTTOM*** of the valley there was a clay deposit, and a potter owned it. It was the *'Potter's Field'*. And IN through the Potsherd's Gate came the clay to be made into jars inside, and to be sold. And ***OUT*** through the Potsherd Gate went the jars that people were finished with---that had got chipped or cracked...that were leaking. They were taken ***OUT*** of the Potsherd 's Gate and smashed outside. And the ground was littered with broken clay pieces. You'll find this outside every ancient city in the near East. I remember walking around outside Beth-Shan and seeing a great area of broken pottery. There was Philistine glass there---beautiful pottery, two and 3000 years old just lying there for the taking. Just piles of broken pottery thrown out. As you see outside every city, you'll see it down by the riverway here---piles of rubbish with broken crockery lying in it. The Potsherd Gate.

*"Jeremiah go to the Potsherd Gate and carry that old pot that you've bought, and tell them what's gonna happen to that valley."* And that valley had already had certain things happen to it. Not only was it a rubbish dump, but because it was hidden and dark all kinds of things began to happen in its shadows. That's where people at first had gone to build little altars and ***BURN*** ***INCENSE*** to the stars of heaven. And that is the valley where people had gone and taken little babies and built a bonfire and thrown live babies on the bonfire to ***MOLECH*** and the stars of heaven. And God said, *"Jeremiah, tell them, 'That valley will be known as the Valley of* ***SLAUGHTER'*** *".*

***Unmoldable Clay: Smashed in Gehenna***

Do you know, when Jesus came preaching the good news, Jesus constantly used this valley in his teaching. He called it ***'GEHENNA'***. By the time Jesus came, the name *'Hinnom'* had changed to *'Henna'*, and it was called *'the Valley of Gehenna'*. And Jesus constantly said, *"It's better for you to enter into life maimed, than having all your faculties, to be cast into Gehenna,"*...Gehenna. And in our English Bibles it's translated ***'HELL’***. But just as the earthly Jerusalem provided a picture of heaven, the Valley of Hinnom---the Valley of Gehenna---was always the picture of ***HELL***. And Jesus said*, "That's where you finish up---in* ***THAT*** *valley"*. And when Jesus died on the cross of calvary, he was up at the TOP of the horseshoe. He was up on the hill at the other end. And at the same time, just a few hours before, one of his own followers died in the potter's field at the ***BOTTOM*** of Gehenna...and he hung himself. And the ropes snapped; and his body dropped into the valley, and his bowel's gushed out; and he finished up there a ***SMASHED VESSELL***, a broken flask. And ***JESUS*** died at the ***TOP***, and ***JUDAS*** died at the ***BOTTOM***---in this very valley that Jeremiah is saying, *"It'll be the Valley of Slaughter."*

And do you remember that the very money that Judas had got to betray his Lord, he threw back in their faces; and they went out and they bought the Potter's Field at the bottom of that valley. Do you remember all this? How the centuries roll away! Look, there's over 500 years between the events we're speaking of between Jeremiah and Judas; but this valley was there all those 500 years, and it stood there as the place to which the useless, hardened clay goes to be smashed. And it says of Judas, that when he went and hanged himself in the Potter's Field in that valley---the field of blood, Akeldama---it just says this, *"He went to his own place".* What an epitaph. There it is over his name, *"He went to his own place."*

 *"Jeremiah, go to that valley; take that pot and smash it and say to this nation,"* notice the words, *" 'you have stiffened your necks* ***REFUSING*** *to hear My word; therefore, I will* ***BREAK YOU****.' "* The tragedy is that a human being---made of clay out of the dust of the earth, breathed into by God, so, he is a living soul---that human being can so ***HARDEN*** himself and so ***STIFFEN*** his neck that God one day has no choice but to say, *"Go to your* ***OWN*** *place. I smash you in the Valley of Gehenna."*

Solemn words, which places before every one of us this supreme choice: either I ***RESPOND*** to God's loving potter's hands as early in my life as possible, that His ***ORIGINAL*** design for my life might be fulfilled. Or if I have ***REFUSED*** that, that as soon as possible I put my life totally in His hands, that He may still make ***SOME*** (good) vessel. Or....***EVERY*** time I hear His word, I become ***MORE*** critical, ***MORE*** hard, ***MORE*** resistant...till one day God says, *"You've stiffened too much. There's only one thing I can do with this lump of clay. And that's put you beyond mending."*

And God says through Jeremiah, "I will ***BREAK*** this people, as one breaks a potter's vessel, so that it can never be mended." And you know, to me, hell is the place where people can never be mended. That's hell. And so, while we're still ***MOLDABLE***, and while we're still soft clay, we're to ***RESPOND***! Yes, and then we can hold the glory in earthen vessels---poor vessels, we are! But we can hold this treasure in ***EARTHEN*** vessels. Or as Paul says, (listen again to it.... if I can find it quickly. Listen to Paul): *"In a great house, there are not only vessels of gold and silver, but also of wood and earthenware; and some for* ***NOBLE*** *use and some for* ***IGNOBLE****. If anyone* ***PURIFIES*** *himself from what is* ***IGNOBLE****,"* notice, *'himself'*, *"then he will be a vessel for* ***NOBLE*** *use, consecrated and useful to the master of the house, ready for any good work.”* It's the ***CLAY*** that decides! Do you understand? It's the ***CLAY*** that decides. The potter is not an arbitrary dictator. The potter can ***MOLD***. The potter will have the ***LAST*** word. The potter will use ***EVERY*** lump of clay in one way or another. And the potter will decide to ***SMASH*** those that go ***HARD***.

So, the potter has a lot of free will; but by making clay, he has put himself in the position where he will have to ***CHANGE*** his plans according to the clay's ***RESPONSE***. That I believe to be a profound insight into the doctrine of predestination and free will.

Just to bring it home to us: The ultimate, dreadful danger!! Before we look at the positive, we're going to have two pieces of MUSIC. We're going to sing one, but Barry's going to sing another. He's going to sing just one short solo from *"Handel's Messiah"*. A solo that we often forget. Indeed, in abbreviated versions, it's often overlooked, because we don't just like it. But he's going to sing this; part of *"Handle's Messiah".* Then we're going to pray. And then we're going to sing: *"Have Thine Own Way, Lord; Have Thine Own Way".*

***Song***

Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron. Thou shalt dash them, in pieces, like a potter's vessel. Thou shalt dash them, in pieces...in pieces, like a potter's vessel. Thou shalt break them; Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron. Thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel. Thou shalt dash them in pieces, like a potter's vessel... like a potter's vessel. Thou shalt dash them in pieces, like a potter's vessel.

*"Let us pray. None of us would ever be able to face God after this morning and say, 'God, we didn't realize; we didn't know.' And none of us can ever have today back again. None of us can have our previous life back again. But the future is still flexible. And God can yet make of us a vessel fit for the Master's use. Lord Jesus, we pray that You'll apply this word deeply to our hearts this morning and that we may yield to the potter's hands---not because He's forcing us to, but because we recognize that His plan was best, and because we desire to be what we were in His mind when He created us. And so, Lord, we bow before You.... just breathing lumps of clay. But thank You that You can make us, mold us, and fill us."*

*So, we're going to sing, from the bottom of our hearts: "Have Thine own way, Lord, Have Thine own way; Thou art the potter, We are the clay." Amen.*

***Song***