

The Potter's House

Jeremiah 18-19

90 minutes • Win, Build, Send inductive format

SESSION OVERVIEW

Discovery Aim. Participants discover the two vessels of these chapters and the difference between them: wet clay on the wheel, which a spoiled start does not doom, because the potter reworks it into another vessel; and the fired flask of chapter 19, shattered beyond mending. They learn from the parable's own explanation that God's declared judgments are conditional on human response, and they take the Romans 9 objection head-on with Jeremiah 18 open on the table.

Catholic Touchstone. God created us without us, but He did not will to save us without us (St. Augustine, quoted at CCC 1847). God predestines no one to go to hell (CCC 1037). The window in which clay is still wet is called mercy, and it is open now.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

- **A parable you walk into.** God does not hand Jeremiah a metaphor; He sends him downhill to a working pottery shop to watch (18:2-3). The potter's house was ordinary industry, wheel and kiln and clay. Revelation comes through a craftsman at work. Encourage your group to picture the scene concretely: the spinning wheel, the wet lump, the collapse, the strong hands starting again.
- **The key verb: reworked.** The vessel is "spoiled in the potter's hand," and he "reworked it into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to do" (18:4). The spoiled start is not discarded. Same clay, new vessel. Everything pastoral in this session flows from that verb.
- **The parable explains itself, conditionally.** Verses 7-10 are rare and precious: God states His own hermeneutic of prophecy. A declared judgment against a nation or kingdom is revoked if it turns; a declared blessing is revoked if it turns to evil. Oracles of this kind are not fatalism; they are invitations with a deadline. This is the text that will carry the steelman.
- **The verbs return.** Look closely at 18:7 and 18:9: pluck up, break down, destroy... build, plant. Where have we heard those? Do not answer that question for the group; if someone notices aloud, congratulate them and move on. The Thread Watch has more.
- **Chapter 19: the fired flask.** The second sign act uses a finished earthenware flask, bought and then shattered in the valley of the son of Hinnom: "so that it can never be mended" (19:10-11). The sign's own logic supplies the contrast: wet clay can be reworked; a finished vessel, hardened past the wheel, can only break. The two chapters together preach one sermon: there is a window, and it closes.
- **Topheth, Hinnom, Gehenna.** The shattering happens at Topheth in the valley of Hinnom, where children had been burned to Baal (19:5-6; compare 7:31). In Hebrew, valley of Hinnom is *ge-hinnom*, which passes into the Greek of the Gospels as *Gehenna*: the word Jesus uses for hell. Jesus'

Gehenna imagery draws on this valley's dark history, Jeremiah 7 and 19 included, together with broader prophetic pictures of final judgment such as Isaiah 66:24.

OLD TESTAMENT ROOTS AND FULFILLMENT

Roots. The potter image begins on page two of the Bible: “the LORD God formed man of dust from the ground” (Genesis 2:7), where formed is the potter’s verb, *yatsar*. Isaiah uses the image for both comfort and rebuke: “we are the clay, and thou art our potter” (Isaiah 64:8), and woe to the pot that criticizes the potter (Isaiah 45:9). Nineveh proves 18:7-8 in narrative form: Jonah announced destruction with no conditions stated, Nineveh repented, God relented (Jonah 3:4-10), and Jonah was furious that the threat worked as an invitation.

Fulfillment. Paul carries the potter into Romans 9, the objection your group will press on tonight. Second Timothy carries it into hope: a person can purify himself and become “a vessel for noble use, consecrated” (2 Timothy 2:21), the same word over Jeremiah in the womb. And Matthew explicitly names Jeremiah when the Passion money buys the potter’s field (Matthew 27:9-10). Leader background: Matthew’s quotation is closest to Zechariah 11:12-13 in wording, yet he attributes it to Jeremiah, most likely to summon these chapters, the potter and the valley, as the backdrop of the Passion. Be honest about the puzzle if it comes up; the attribution is deliberate theology, not sloppiness.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

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St. Irenaeus · *Against Heresies, Book IV*

St. Irenaeus counseled the believer to offer God a heart soft and tractable, like moist clay, and to keep the shape the Artist gave, lest hardening lose the mark of His fingers. It is not you who make God, he said; it is God who makes you. The one thing the clay can do is stay wet: stay workable, stay on the wheel, stay in the hands.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Augustine · *Sermon 169, quoted at CCC 1847*

St. Augustine put the mystery of grace and freedom in one sentence: God created us without us, but He did not will to save us without us. The potter is sovereign over the clay, and yet in the order of salvation He has chosen to make our turning part of His working. Jeremiah 18:7-10 is that sentence in prophetic form.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. John Henry Newman · *Meditations and Devotions*

St. John Henry Newman wrote in his *Meditations and Devotions* that God has created me to do Him some definite service; He has committed some work to me which He has not committed to another. Take the encouragement his words offer the workshop: the vessel on the wheel is not generic stock,

and we may trust the Potter to work even our spoiled starts toward the service He intends.

CATECHISM CONNECTION

- **CCC 1847** · quoting St. Augustine: God did not will to save us without us; receiving mercy requires admitting our faults.
- **CCC 1431** · interior repentance is a radical reorientation of the whole life, a return to God with all our heart.
- **CCC 1037** · God predestines no one to go to hell; a willful turning away from God, persisted in until the end, is required. Essential for the steelman chain.
- **CCC 1033-1036** · the Church's sober teaching on hell as definitive self-exclusion: the fired flask in doctrinal form. Leader background; use with care and hope.

THREAD WATCH

THREAD WATCH · LEADER ONLY · NEVER APPEARS IN PARTICIPANT MATERIALS

Thread 1 · Build and Plant. The six verbs of 1:10 resurface almost verbatim in 18:7-10, and now we learn something new about them: they are conditional. Plucking up can be cancelled by repentance; building can be forfeited by evil. The demolition verbs are revocable. Which raises the question the group must not hear asked yet: what would it take for the building and planting to become unconditional, guaranteed, incapable of being forfeited? Hold that question until Session 8. If a participant notices the verbs, affirm the observation warmly and move on without developing it.

Thread 2 · The Prophet Like Jeremiah. Quiet accumulation tonight: Matthew 27:9-10 ties Jeremiah's name to the potter's field bought with the blood money of the Passion. The Evangelist wants Jeremiah in the reader's mind at the cross. Keep it in yours; leave it out of theirs.

Thread 3 · The Watched Word. Note 18:18: the response to the sermon is a plot, "come, let us smite him with the tongue." The word draws violence; the word survives it. Session 10 brings the direct assault.

SESSION GOALS

1. Participants can retell both sign acts, the wheel and the flask, and state the difference between wet and fired clay in their own words.
2. Participants discover from 18:7-10 that God's own stated rule makes prophetic judgment conditional on human response.
3. Participants hear the Romans 9 case for double predestination at full strength and answer it with Jeremiah 18 and Romans 11:32.
4. Participants can explain where the word Gehenna comes from and what its history contributes to Jesus' warnings.

5. Participants identify one spoiled place in their own lives and bring it to the wheel this week, concretely.

TIME NOTE (90 MINUTES)

Opening prayer and Win: 15 minutes. Build: 55 minutes. Send and Live It This Week: 15 minutes. Closing prayer and memory verse: 5 minutes.

If you are running long: cut Question 5 (Jonah and Nineveh) first, then compress the Gehenna material (Q10) by reading its answer as a summary. Never cut the steelman chain; Romans 9 is the single most quoted text against Catholic teaching on free will, and your group deserves the full treatment.

The Potter's House

Jeremiah 18-19

OPENING PRAYER

"Father, You formed us from the dust and You have never taken Your hands off the clay. We come to the wheel tonight. Where we are spoiled, rework us. Where we are hardening, soften us while there is time. Shape us into the vessel You intend, as it seems good to You. Through Christ our Lord. Amen." (Opening Prayer)

WIN • OPENING QUESTIONS (15 MIN)

W1. Have you ever watched a real craftsman work: a welder, a baker, a carpenter, a potter? What surprised you about how they handled mistakes?

W2. When something you were building goes wrong partway through, what is your instinct: scrap it, force it, or start the same material over? What does that instinct cost you?

BUILD • INDUCTIVE STUDY (55 MIN)

READ JEREMIAH 18:1-4 ALOUD.

1. Notice how this revelation is delivered: God's first word is not the message but a sending. What does He tell Jeremiah to do before the explanatory word comes, and what does that method tell you about how God teaches?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

"Arise, and go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words" (18:2). Jeremiah has to walk downhill and stand in a workshop watching a man's hands before the word comes. God teaches through the ordinary world: wheels, clay, craftsmen. It is the same divine pedagogy that will one day teach through seeds, nets, yeast, and vineyards. Creation is a classroom for those sent into it.

2. Verse 4 is the hinge. The vessel is spoiled in the potter's hand. What does the potter do next, and what does he not do? Stay inside the workshop image: what happens to the spoiled clay?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

He does not throw the clay away, and he does not pretend the vessel is fine. "He reworked it into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to do" (18:4). Same clay, new start, the potter's

judgment governing the new shape. A spoiled start is not a discarded life. If anyone in the room is carrying a collapsed vessel, a failed plan, a broken season, a ruined self-image, verse 4 is the whole Gospel in a workshop.

READ JEREMIAH 18:5-10 ALOUD, SLOWLY. VERSES 7-10 ARE RARE: GOD EXPLAINING HIS OWN RULES.

3. Walk through 18:7-10 carefully. God describes two announcements He might make about a nation. What cancels a declared judgment? What cancels a declared blessing? Who holds that variable?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

A declared judgment is revoked if the nation “turns from its evil” (18:8); a declared blessing is revoked if the nation “does evil in my sight” (18:10). The variable is human response, and God states this as His standing policy for announcements concerning nations and kingdoms. Warnings of this kind are not fate; they are invitations with a deadline. The point of announcing doom is precisely so that the doom need not happen. Every warning is mercy wearing work clothes.

4. Someone sharp may object: then is God changeable? He “repents” of evil He planned (18:8)? How do we say this correctly?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

God’s character never changes; that is exactly why His posture toward us changes when we change. A doctor who prescribes surgery for a sick man and cancels it when the man recovers has not been inconsistent; he has been consistently committed to health. The “change” is in the patient. Scripture speaks of God relenting from within our timeline; His eternal will, which includes His responsiveness to our turning, does not waver.

5. (*Cut first if short on time.*) The whole book of Jonah is 18:7-8 acted out. What did Jonah announce to Nineveh, what happened, and why was Jonah angry about it (Jonah 3:4-10; 4:1-2)?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Jonah announced unconditional-sounding doom, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown,” Nineveh repented, and God relented (Jonah 3:4-10). Jonah was furious precisely because he knew the rule of Jeremiah 18: “I knew that thou art a gracious God... and repentest of evil” (4:2). Even the prophet resented how reliably God’s threats function as invitations. Nineveh proves that the conditional clause is not fine print. Pagans can activate it.

Steelman: Has the Potter No Right Over the Clay?

BUILD THE CASE AT FULL STRENGTH: PRESENT THIS AS PERSUASIVELY AS A THOUGHTFUL REFORMED FRIEND WOULD

The case: “Paul takes this exact image and runs the other way with it. Romans 9: Jacob loved and Esau hated before birth, Pharaoh raised up to be hardened, and then the knockout: ‘Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for beauty and another for menial use?’ (Romans 9:21). Paul even voices your objection, ‘Why does he still find fault?’, and answers it by silencing it: ‘Who are you, a man, to answer back to God?’ (9:19-20). The clay does not talk back. And Romans 9:22-23 speaks of ‘vessels of wrath made for destruction’ and ‘vessels of mercy... prepared beforehand for glory’; from the sweep of the whole argument, Reformed readers conclude that both destinies rest on God’s sovereign decree. Isn’t double predestination simply what the potter image means?” This is the strongest text in the Reformed arsenal. Present it with full force; a weak version helps no one.

6. First press: Paul is quoting Jeremiah’s image, so go back to the source. In Jeremiah 18, the chapter that defines the potter and the clay, is the clay’s destiny fixed? What do verses 7-10, and verse 11, do to a fatalist reading of the image?

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

They forbid it. In the image’s own home chapter, the potter’s declared intentions reverse when the clay turns (18:7-10), and God immediately applies it: “Return, every one from his evil way” (18:11). You do not issue a call to return to clay whose destiny is sealed. Paul knew Jeremiah 18 intimately; whatever Romans 9 teaches, it cannot mean the potter image excludes human response, because the potter image was minted to include it.

7. Second press: never read Romans 9 without reading to the end of Paul’s argument. It runs through chapter 11. Someone find Romans 11:32 and read it aloud. Where does the potter’s argument actually land?

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

“For God has consigned all men to disobedience, that he may have mercy upon all” (Romans 11:32). The argument that begins with vessels of wrath ends with mercy upon all: even the hardening of Israel is temporary and serves salvation (11:11-12, 25-26). One important dimension of Romans 9 is God’s freedom in election to roles within salvation history, Jacob over Esau for the covenant line, Pharaoh as the stage for the Exodus, the office-versus-salvation distinction we drew in Session 1; and where the chapter does speak of wrath and glory, notice Paul’s own grammar: the vessels of mercy God Himself “prepared beforehand for glory,” while the vessels of wrath are simply “made for destruction”, with no matching claim that God prepared them for it, and even these God “endured with much patience” (9:22-23). The asymmetry is Trent’s and the Catechism’s: God’s initiative in salvation is absolute, and “God predestines no one to go to hell” (CCC 1037). A soul is only lost the way a flask is: by hardening itself past the wheel, freely, finally.

READ JEREMIAH 19:1-2 AND 19:10-11 ALOUD.

8. Chapter 19 is a second sign act with a second vessel. Compare the two: what kind of clay is on the wheel in chapter 18, and what kind of vessel does Jeremiah buy in chapter 19? Why can one be reworked and the other only shattered?

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Chapter 18: wet clay, still on the wheel, still in the hands, workable throughout this present time of mercy. Chapter 19: a finished earthenware flask, bought from the potter, its shape set. A finished vessel cannot be reworked, only broken: “so that it can never be mended” (19:11). In the sign itself, the shattering is Judah’s coming historical judgment; the Church’s teaching on the soul’s final state gives the image its full weight as a type: hell is definitive self-exclusion, what remains when a person has hardened into a final shape against God (CCC 1033-1037). There is a window while the clay is wet, and the window closes.

9. Where does God tell Jeremiah to shatter the flask, and what happened in that place (19:2-6)? Why is the location part of the message?

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

The valley of the son of Hinnom, at Topheth, where Judah burned their own children to Baal, “which I did not command or decree, nor did it come into my mind” (19:5). The place of the unthinkable sin becomes the stage of the irreversible sign. The flask shatters where the covenant people had already shattered everything the covenant meant. The geography preaches: some places in a life are where the breaking happens.

10. The valley of Hinnom in Hebrew is *ge-hinnom*. Say it a few times and guess what Greek word it became in the Gospels, the word Jesus uses for hell. What does this valley’s history pour into that word?

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Gehenna. When Jesus warns of Gehenna, the valley’s real history is in the word: the place where God’s own people did the unthinkable, alongside broader prophetic images of judgment like Isaiah 66:24. Hell in Jesus’ vocabulary is not a mythological underworld; and the flask gives us a fitting image for what the Church actually teaches: the shape a soul freely hardens into when it refuses the wheel to the end. The Church teaches it with the same sobriety: hell is definitive self-exclusion from communion with God (cf. CCC 1033), and God predestines no one to it (CCC 1037). The valley is avoidable. That is the entire point of the warning.

11. Live discovery. The clay is not always passive in the New Testament. In 2 Timothy 2, Paul describes what a person can become in a great house. Find verses 20-21: what can a vessel do, and listen for a word we memorized in Session 1.

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

"If any one purifies himself from what is ignoble, then he will be a vessel for noble use, consecrated and useful to the master of the house" (2 Timothy 2:21). The clay can cooperate: purify himself, and become consecrated, the very word spoken over Jeremiah in the womb (1:5). The wheel is where God's sovereign shaping and our free turning meet, and Scripture refuses to surrender either one.

SEND · CLOSING QUESTIONS (15 MIN)

S1. Where in your life is there a spoiled vessel: something that collapsed on the wheel, that you have been treating as garbage rather than as clay still in His hands?

S2. Hardening is gradual: clay dries before it fires. Is there any area where you can feel yourself drying, getting less workable, more defended, harder to turn? What would keep the clay wet this week?

LIVE IT THIS WEEK

- Take the spoiled thing you named tonight and hand it over explicitly in prayer once this week: Lord, this is the collapsed vessel. Rework it as it seems good to You. Then leave it on the wheel.
- Practice staying soft once this day: when you are corrected, criticized, or contradicted this week, resist the first hardening and ask instead, Lord, is Your hand in this pressure?
- Pray one Our Father slowly for someone you are tempted to write off as fired clay, finished, hopeless. God relents when people turn; ask Him for their turning.

CLOSING PRAYER

"Father, like the clay in the potter's hand, so are we in Your hand. We bring You our spoiled vessels and our drying edges. Rework what has collapsed. Soften what has hardened. And keep us on the wheel, under Your fingers, until we are the vessel You intended. Through Christ our Lord. Amen." (Closing Prayer)

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

"Behold, like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel." (Jeremiah 18:6, RSV2CE)

Every Passage in This Session

Jeremiah 18-19

Primary Text

- Jeremiah 18:1-4 · the workshop; the reworked vessel (Q1-Q2)
- Jeremiah 18:5-11 · God's stated rule of conditional prophecy (Q3-Q4, steelman Q6)
- Jeremiah 18:18 · the plot against the prophet (leader background, Thread 3)
- Jeremiah 19:1-6 · the flask, Topheth, the valley of Hinnom (Q8-Q9)
- Jeremiah 19:10-11 · shattered, never mended (Q8, contrast with 18:4)

Old Testament Roots

- Genesis 2:7 · the LORD God formed (yatsar) man from dust
- Isaiah 64:8; 45:9 · the potter image in comfort and rebuke
- Jonah 3:4-10; 4:1-2 · Nineveh proves the conditional rule (Q5, cuttable)
- Jeremiah 7:31 · Topheth introduced (cross-reference from Session 3)

New Testament Fulfillment

- Romans 9:14-24 · the potter and the clay (steelman)
- Romans 11:11-12, 25-26, 32 · where the argument lands (steelman Q7, live find)
- 2 Timothy 2:20-21 · the vessel that purifies itself (live discovery, Q11)
- Matthew 27:9-10 · the potter's field named for Jeremiah (leader background, Thread 2)

Catechism

- CCC 1847 · Augustine: He did not will to save us without us
- CCC 1431 · interior repentance, radical reorientation
- CCC 1037 · God predestines no one to hell (steelman)
- CCC 1033-1036 · hell as definitive self-exclusion (leader background)