

Explore the Bible: God Shapes

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- *The Explore the Bible lesson for July 2 focuses on Jeremiah 18:1-12.*

My father was very old school. He believed in firm discipline and accountability for all his children. At times, however, he would break from the normal “do the time, do the crime” approach and went in a different direction. Sometimes this creativity involved gracious forgiveness. Sometimes it involved redirecting my activities to something productive. And sometimes it involved ignoring the crime altogether.

Later in life, I discovered his response largely was driven three things. First, the nature of the action. Was it a personal affront, was it something that caused long-term damage and/or was it something that already hurt me to begin with? Second, my response to the crime. He knew the difference between sincere sorrow and manipulative sorrow in my response—like no one else did. Third, the lesson he wanted to instill. It was not always just about not repeating the offense. Sometimes there was a bigger lesson.

In our passage today, we see God interacting with Jeremiah about his approaches to Judah’s sins. He expresses his thorough authority over every circumstance with the capacity to completely remake his people like a potter can remake a flawed piece of pottery—likely driven, in part, by how serious the status of that flaw was. God relates his approach to any nation’s status is responsive to their reactions to him. Finally, he reveals his goal in his current interactions with Judah is to break their stubbornness and turn them into the people he desired them to be from the beginning.

Remade (Jeremiah 18:1-4)

Jeremiah's visit to the potter's house in the first few verses of chapter 18 is one of the central passages expressing God's absolute sovereignty. The image of being so in control of humanity that, like a malformed clay vessel, he can essentially start from scratch is powerfully evocative. The language used in reference to the clay reveals the flaw within it made it unusable for its original purpose. But the potter, like God, did not let such resistance stop him. If the clay could not be used for its intended purpose, he would reshape it into something else entirely. Furthermore, the verbs suggest this process was done repeatedly as Jeremiah watched.

Can you think of another creative image that might further illustrate God's interaction with his people? What limits have you placed on God's ability to deal with your life? How does God's absolute sovereignty instill hope in our future?

Sovereign (Jeremiah 18:5-10)

Like most analogies, there are limits to the connections that can be made between the two referents. In this particular case, the difference between clay and humanity is the God-given ability to respond and change according to the work that is being done on us. So, as God continues to reflect on his right to do with humanity whatever he wishes, he brings in the somewhat paradoxical truth of the role of humanity's response to his sovereign intervention in their future.

Like the Trinity or the reality of Jesus being fully God and fully human, the relationship between God's sovereignty and human free-will is one of the great mysteries of biblical revelation. God is completely free to do as he wills with any of his creation. That goes with the status of being God. Yet, somewhere within the truth of his sovereignty, he also has allowed us to

make authentic choices and for those choices to have a real impact on our outcome. The limits of language and our understanding prevent a description of this interaction that adequately explain it, but God's words to Jeremiah reveal the heart of the matter being that both are true.

One of the most striking elements of this section is how God shifts from asserting his right to do with Judah whatever he pleases to his sovereign power over all nations. Reflecting back on the temple sermon of earlier years, we remember one of Judah's problems was her belief that her special status left her immune from judgment. By broadening his comments to include all nations, God simultaneously is asserting his unmeasured power and authority and reminding Judah their special status did not include removing them from responsibility for sin.

What elements of everyday life do you find possible to understand, but difficult if not possible to explain? How do the limitations of reason and knowledge help instill a sense of awe and trust in the God that we serve? In what ways has God shown you he is bigger than the constraints of identity that have sometimes been wrongly placed upon him?

Warned (Jeremiah 18:11-12)

Having laid out that a people's response to him directly affects their outcome, God concludes the passage with a statement of judgment on Judah. He has built the case of both his rights and their responsibility and now communicates that their failures have led to one well-merited outcome of judgment. What is imbedded in this warning, however, is the truth of the previous verses that such words of judgment can be turned to words of blessing if Judah changes her direction. Such hope serves both to offer a way out and further incriminate a people who end up in exile. Perhaps future generations would learn from the exchange.

How does knowing that within every warning, there is imbedded an offer of

hope as well affect your reading of judgment passages in the Bible? How does the destruction of Jerusalem and Israel's subsequent survival as a people shape your understanding of God's purposes in expressing this warning?

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