

# **Dr. Gary Yates, Jeremiah, Lecture 17, Jeremiah 11-20, Prophetic Sign-Acts**

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This is Dr. Gary Yates in his instruction on the book of Jeremiah. This is section 17, Jeremiah 11-20, Prophetic Sign-Acts.

We are continuing to focus on Jeremiah chapters 11 to 20.

We spent some time dealing with the confessions of Jeremiah, the laments of Jeremiah that are in this section. And I think, in some ways, the laments not only reflect the struggles of Jeremiah, but they are also a reflection of the unraveling of the covenant that's taking place in Jeremiah chapter 11 to 20. In this section, we are going to focus more on Jeremiah's Sign-Acts that are also showing us how the covenant between God and Judah is unraveling and how Jeremiah is, again, trying to portray this in a people can't miss what he's saying.

This section, chapters 11 to 20, is introduced by a prose sermon that sets forth the primary theme of this section: the covenant between God and Judah has been broken, and as a result, God is going to bring judgment. Let me remind you of chapter 11, verse 10, and the trajectory of this that's going to be traced throughout the entire section.

The Lord says, the house of Israel and the house of Judah have broken my covenant that I made with their fathers. Therefore, thus says the Lord, behold, I am bringing disaster upon them that they cannot escape. Though they cry to me, I will not listen to them.

And I'm going to bring this judgment on them. We've suggested a couple of times that the prose sermons are the ways that Jeremiah often is going to summarize or introduces key themes that pull together all of the other things that are going on in that section. So, I believe Jeremiah 11 introduces the idea of covenant brokenness, the unraveling of the covenant at the seams.

That's going to be a key focus in chapters 11 to 20. We see that in the laments of Jeremiah in the sense that the prophet is caught in the middle of this. He's not allowed to pray for the people.

He begins to pray for God's judgment. Even when God tells him not to pray for the people, he still does, but God will not listen to his confession. And so, the relationship between God and Israel is coming apart at the seams.

We also see this in a number of prophetic sign acts that Jeremiah is going to perform throughout the book. But some of those sign acts are concentrated in this particular section of the book that we're going to be talking about. A sign act is where the prophet is going to make a type of nonverbal communication where in a more dramatic way, he is actually going to act out the message.

We've talked about in the book of Jeremiah, Jeremiah doesn't just preach the word of God. In a sense, he becomes the word of God in his person. And another way that that's reflected in the book is that Jeremiah is often not simply going to preach a message.

He's going to act it out. We also see this in the preaching of the prophet Ezekiel, and we're going to look at some examples there. But Kelvin Freibel has written an excellent dissertation talking about the prophetic sign acts in Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

And the point that he makes is that some people have tried to portray this as the prophet magically acting out something that he believes simply by acting it, he has the power to affect this by the action itself. And so, this becomes sort of a magical way of making the message come to pass. Freibel says that's not really the key idea or the reason why the prophets are doing these sign acts.

They're not magically trying to make this happen by these particular actions. It is a powerful form of nonverbal communication where the prophet is making sure that the people do not just hear the message but also see it. And we've seen the statistics about when we hear something, the percentage that we're likely to retain that when we hear something and see it, the tendency to remember that for it to be more vivid in our minds, the percentages increase.

In many ways, you also have to remember the prophets are confronting people with messages where these people are yawning. It's like, wow, we've heard these messages of judgment. Our fathers have passed them on to us.

We've heard about the other prophets in Israel, and they tend to yawn. It's like the prophets; by preaching the message and then acting it out, they are making sure that the people can't just pass it off.

They can't just yawn and say, we've heard all of this before. The prophet, in a sense, is going to get in their face; he's going to act the message out, and it's going to make that message more powerful. In Jeremiah 11 to 20, there are some important sign acts that convey the reality of the broken covenant between God and Israel.

The first one of those is the sign act of the buried loincloth, or Jeremiah is the prophet who buries his underwear. And a very effective way of conveying the

message of the broken covenant between God and his people, Judah. Let me read the account here.

God says to Jeremiah in chapter 13, verse 1, go and buy a linen loincloth and put it around your waist and do not dip it in water. So, I bought a loincloth according to the word of the Lord and put it around my waist. And the word of the Lord came to me a second time.

Take the loincloth that you have bought that is around your waist and arise, go to the Euphrates and hide it there in the cleft of the rock. So, I went and hid it by the Euphrates as the Lord commanded me. And after many days, the Lord said to me, arise and go to the Euphrates and take from there the loincloth that I commanded you to hide there.

Then I went to the Euphrates and dug, and I took the loincloth from the place where it was hidden, and behold, the loincloth was spoiled, and it was not good for; it was good for nothing. Then the word of the Lord came to me and said, thus says the Lord, even so will I spoil the pride of Judah and the great pride of Jerusalem. These evil people who refuse to hear my words, who stubbornly follow their own hearts, who have gone after other gods to serve them and worship them, shall be like this loincloth, which is good for nothing.

Okay. So yes, Jeremiah is the prophet who buries his underwear. And there are a couple of issues that come up.

First of all, the Zondervan Illustrated Bible background commentary on Jeremiah tries to depict for us what this particular piece of clothing might've looked like. There's a Canaanite depiction of a linen belt or a waist belt like this, which simply is a garment that is wrapped around the waist and worn in that particular way. There's an Egyptian piece of art though, that portrays the Syrians who are wearing strips of cloth that overlap and that actually passes through the legs.

So, there are a couple of different possibilities. I don't know that there's a lot of great theological significance in trying to determine whether Jeremiah wore boxers or briefs. Okay. That's not really relevant, but that gives us a little bit of background.

What does happen here and what the sign act is all about is that Jeremiah is commanded to wear this linen waist cloth close to his body. And then to take this to another location, to bury it in some rocks. And then after an extended period of time, after many days, to go back to dig up this ruined waist cloth.

And you can imagine what this looks like after he has worn it. He hasn't washed it. He buries it.

You can imagine what this garment looks like. And then the sign act involves him taking this ruined loin cloth, holding it up in front of the people, and saying, this is what you look like in the eyes of God. Now, in the ESV, as I read this, it says that God commanded Jeremiah to go to the Euphrates, and that was to be the place where Jeremiah was to bury this waist cloth.

The problem with that is that this would have involved a journey somewhere around 300, over 300 miles. And so it doesn't seem likely that God would have asked Jeremiah not only to make this trip once, but twice, to make this long trip, to bury this garment. It's possible that the Hebrew words here, Parah, could instead of being understood as a reference to the Euphrates, that's 350 miles away.

It could be a place called Parah, which is mentioned in a couple of places in the Old Testament and is only about four miles Northwest of Anathoth, Jeremiah's hometown. So, instead of the Euphrates, we probably have a reference to Parah. So he goes to Parah a few miles away.

He buries it, comes back at a later time, and then holds this cloth up in front of the people and reminds them that this is what God thinks of you. The punchline of the sign act is given to us in verse 11. It says, for as the loincloth clings to the waist of a man, so I made the whole house of Israel and the whole house of Judah cling to me to declare as the Lord, that they might be for me a people, a name and a praise and glory, but they would not listen.

Okay. So, there's a little bit more to this than simply a prophet holding up his holy underwear and telling the people that this reflects their ruined condition. First of all, the loincloth was made out of linen.

The loincloth was made out of an expensive, fine piece of material. Linen was the material that was used for the garments of the priest, Leviticus chapter 16. So, we may have a representation of the fact that by linen, this is representing the priestly status of the people of Israel.

Israel not only had Levites that served as priests, they as a nation were called Exodus chapter 19, a kingdom of priests. In the same way that there were consecration rituals for the priests when Israel entered into the covenant with the Lord, the Lord sprinkled blood on them and consecrated them. As a people, he was designating them as his priests.

And I think the linen, perhaps, is a representation of that. God also brought these people into a close, intimate relationship. The loincloth, this waist cloth, is something that is worn close to the body.

And so, this reflects the fact that God had a very close personal relationship with the people of Israel. And it says, in fact, in verse 11, as the loincloth clings to the waist of a man, so I have made the whole house of Israel and the whole house of Judah cling to me, declares the Lord. The verb that's used there is the verb *davaq*.

It reminds us of Genesis chapter 2, verse 24, where a man and a woman enter into a marriage relationship and cling, *davaq*, to one another. The young man abandons his father and mother and clings or cleaves to his wife, *davaqing* to them until they become one flesh. The Lord had brought Israel into that type of intimate relationship with himself.

The loincloth represents that as well. But at the end of this process, in spite of the linen material, in spite of the priestly status of Israel, in spite of the fact that this garment was worn close to the body, the ultimate significance of this is the ruined condition of the world. It is gross.

As Jeremiah brings it back, it is a reflection of what Judah had become to the Lord. It says that God had designed Israel to be a people, a name, a praise, and a glory. They were to reflect God's glory to the nations.

They were to attract, to magnify, and to exalt God so that these other nations would want to worship him. When someone looks at this ruined loin cloth, there's no way that they would find that attractive. As Judah went through this experience where they were attacked by the Babylonians, they were reduced to poverty, to cannibalism, to all the terrible things that were happening.

There was nothing about this that was attractive. Spiritually and physically, at this point in their existence, Judah had become a ruined nation. You can see how the sign act, the visual demonstration of the ruined loin cloth represents that much more effectively than simply the prophet preaching this message himself.

He holds up the loin cloth. You can see this is what God thinks of you. And it makes the words in the message even more effective.

Now, there's some discussion about this, but we may also have a sign act that follows in chapter 13, verses 12 to 14. We're not sure if Jeremiah here is simply using a proverb or whether there's a visual demonstration that goes along with this, but listen to what he says in 13, 12, and 14. Also reflecting the ruined condition of Judah, the broken covenant, and the fact that they no longer can fulfill the purpose that God has given to them.

Verse 12 says; you shall speak to them this word. Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, every jar shall be filled with wine. And so possibly we have a sign act here.

This seems to be maybe a proverbial statement or something like that. It's a quotation. Every jar shall be filled with wine.

Possibly, the prophet brings a flask or a jar or maybe even a wineskin that contains wine. He holds it up in front of the people, and it grabs their attention. The prophet's not just going to give us an oracle.

He's got a message about a wine flask here. What's he going to tell us? And he begins with this statement that says, every jar shall be filled with wine. Now it's like, okay, the people are going to respond back to him.

That seems kind of obvious and that's what the people are going to say back. And they will say to you, do we not indeed know that every jar will be filled with wine? It's almost like, duh, we understand. The purpose of a wine flask is to contain wine.

Jeremiah, you're not telling us anything that we didn't know. But they're still wondering as the prophet possibly is holding this flask, what's he going to say? He begins with this sort of obvious statement that annoys them a little bit, but the flask raises some questions. Wine would normally make us think about at least refreshment.

It would make us think about a festive occasion, a celebration, but the wine jar is going to represent something else. And here's the punchline. After they say to Jeremiah, don't you think that we know and understand that every jar should be filled with wine? Then you shall say to them, thus says the Lord, behold, I will fill with drunkenness all the inhabitants of this land.

The kings who sit on the throne, the priests, the prophets, and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem. All right, this is not going to be a positive sign. The flask of wine at this point is not representing refreshment or celebration or a marriage or a harvest time when the people would get together to celebrate.

The wine flask, in this case, represents judgment. And the people are about to become intoxicated with just the strong, powerful judgment of God that's going to overwhelm them. And just like a person who's drunk, they're going to stagger under the weight of this judgment.

The prophet uses wine in a similar way in Jeremiah chapter 25 when he talks about Judah drinking the cup of the wine of God's judgment and all of the other nations as well. And maybe in that particular situation, he may have performed another sign act. He may have held the cup of wine up.

And again, the people thinking that he's about to raise a toast and a celebration or something like that's being signified. And he talks about the intoxicating power of

God's judgment. This wine doesn't represent something joyful, and it's something negative.

And then it says this, verse 14, and I will dash them one against another, fathers and sons together, declares the Lord. I will not pity or spare them or have compassion that I should not destroy them. As the people are drunk, they will become like a wine flask that are banged against one another and they're ultimately going to break and be smashed.

We really have the same point that's made with the ruined loincloth. The object's purpose will not be carried out. The loincloth was designed to be worn close to the body.

It's become a ruined garment. Judah was designed to live in a close relationship with God and to reflect his glory, his name, and his honor to the nations. By their sin, they can't fulfill that purpose.

A wine flask was made to carry wine. It had a purpose. But these wine flasks are going to be smashed together because of the drunkenness that God's going to bring on the people.

Again, they will not fulfill their purpose. So we're not sure if there's an actual sign act carried out in chapters 13, 12 to 14 or not, but we can imagine that perhaps as he's preaching this message, Jeremiah is going to hold up this flask of wine, and it's going to create a question that the people ask. It's going to pique their interest.

It's going to make the message even more noteworthy in their minds. Now, these are the beginning of several sign acts that are going to be carried out throughout the book of Jeremiah, where again, the prophet is going to do everything that he possibly can do to make sure that the people hear the message. The message that God is preparing to send judgment against them is so urgent that the prophet will go to any extreme.

He will take any desperate measure that is necessary to make sure that the people hear the message. So let me survey some of these other sign acts that are used in the book of Jeremiah. Most of the time, they are used to convey a message of judgment.

There are going to be some occasions and situations where a sign act will be used to indicate something positive. The next sign act, and we're going to talk about this and focus on this one a little bit more, are the sign acts that are involved with Jeremiah's two visits to the Potter in chapters 18 and 19. In the same way that the sign act about the jar of wine involves pottery, we're going to see a sign act involving that in chapters 18 and 19 as well.

The next one is found in Jeremiah chapter 27. Jeremiah goes out into the streets of Jerusalem to tell the people about the judgment that's coming, that God is going to put them under bondage to Babylon. And again, to make that message more powerful and impactful on the people, Jeremiah doesn't just preach the message, he symbolizes the message by wearing an animal yoke on his neck and his shoulders as he's preaching the message.

So, Jeremiah is not just saying, thus says the Lord, look, you're about to go into bondage to Babylon, hear the word of the Lord. Jeremiah is carrying this yoke and maybe under the weight of it as he's walking around this wooden yoke, telling the people that they are going to be placed in bondage to Babylon. And this animal yoke effectively symbolizes their political subjugation to Babylon.

So, I think this is a message that the people definitely would be talking about after it was over. Did you see what Jeremiah did today? In Jeremiah chapter 32, we have a positive sign act where Jeremiah is going to buy back or to redeem family property from his cousin, Hanamel. Hanamel had had to sell this property.

In Old Testament law, Leviticus 25 says that when a family member had to sell the property because of debt, or for some other reason, it was the responsibility of other family members to help that person out by buying back the property. The property was to stay in the same family's hands because that was their heritage from the Lord. So, Jeremiah is fulfilling a legal responsibility that's laid out in the law, but this particular action becomes a sign act as well.

Because Jeremiah buys this property just before the time that the Babylonians are about to capture the land and send the people of Judah away into exile, I mean, in light of the political circumstances of that day, it really didn't make sense for Jeremiah to buy the land. He was fulfilling what Leviticus 25 said, but you know, hey, if the Babylonians are coming to take the land, why should we bother with this? But Jeremiah very carefully purchases the land.

Baruch carefully writes out these two documents attesting that Jeremiah has ownership of the land, that it's passing back into the family, and the purpose of this was to convey to the people the hope that they would return to the land and that the land would once again become theirs. Again, if Babylon is going to end up possessing this land permanently, there's no reason to buy back the field. There's no reason to go through this legal process where Jeremiah is establishing proper ownership of the land, but it was an effective way, not just of the prophet saying, look, the Lord's going to bring us back, the Lord's going to restore our fortunes.

This particular act impressed upon the people in a visual way, the hope of returning from exile. We have another sign act in Jeremiah chapter 43, and this was a sign act that was performed to the Jewish refugees who had taken Jeremiah to Egypt. They



had gone to Egypt because they were attempting to avoid reprisals from the Babylonians for the assassination of Gedaliah.

They believed that by going to Egypt and changing their geographical location, they could get away from Nebuchadnezzar. More importantly, they believed that they could escape the consequences of Judah's sinful choices over the past years. Well, Jeremiah reminded them, look, going to Egypt is not going to help you because God is going to judge the Egyptians in the same way that he's judged Judah.

Nebuchadnezzar is going to bring his armies to Egypt in the same way that he marched upon Judah. I am going to give the king of Egypt into the hand of Babylon in the same way that I gave the king of Judah. We know that later on, even though Nebuchadnezzar did not conquer Egypt, he did invade there.

Well, to make that message vivid and real, and again, because he's dealing with people that they're hard-hearted, they're rebellious, they don't want to really listen to what the prophet says, he's going to do something to make sure that he gets their attention. It tells us that Jeremiah goes to the place at the entrance of Pharaoh's house in Tophanes in Egypt. I'm not sure exactly how he carried this out, but Jeremiah is actually going to dig up the pavement at the entrance to Pharaoh's house.

He is going to bury stones in the ground there. What those stones represent are the foundations of the throne of Nebuchadnezzar that will be placed there when Nebuchadnezzar comes into the land. I can imagine him bringing the people out, showing them, look, this is where Nebuchadnezzar is going to establish his authority.

Hopefully he did this at a time when the Egyptians didn't exactly know what was going on either. But I mean, it's a pretty subversive thing. But Jeremiah wants them not just to hear the message but to see it.

We have the final sign act carried out in context with the ministry of Jeremiah in Jeremiah chapter 51. This particular sign act is carried out by Sariah, who is a scribe who appears to be the brother of Jeremiah's primary scribe, Baruch. Sariah goes with Zedekiah to Babylon at a time when Zedekiah is required to report there by the Babylonians.

He pronounces and proclaims the messages of judgment that Jeremiah has preached about Babylon. These particular judgments about Babylon, the prophet's messages, are on a separate scroll. Sariah takes that scroll with him.

Then, after reading it, it says that he takes the scroll, ties a rock to it, and throws the scroll into the Euphrates River, signifying through the reading of that message and the carrying out of that act the final judgment of Babylon. Babylon was going to be

destroyed, never to rise again. Babylon was like that scroll that was tied to a rock that was doomed and never going to rise again.

The prophet's message talked about the destruction of Babylon. The sign act demonstrated it in a more vivid way. I think this preaching is related to the fact that the people that Jeremiah is ministering to throughout the context of his ministry, they do have hard hearts.

It's like trying to get through to little children. Sometimes with little children, the best way to get their message is not just to tell them something, but to act it out; that's what the prophets are doing. Now we have other examples in the prophetic books, and I'm going to mention just a couple of these of other prophets who perform some pretty interesting sign acts to demonstrate and to vividly act out their message.

In Isaiah 20, the Lord commands the prophet Isaiah to go naked and barefoot and to preach that way for three years. I think that would grab people's attention on Sunday morning at church. Our preacher preached naked and barefoot this week.

But the purpose of this was to demonstrate what was going to happen to the Egyptians so that the people of Judah and the leaders of Judah would be discouraged from making any kind of military alliance with them. Do you think the Egyptians are going to help you get away from the Assyrians? It's not going to work because they're going to be subjected to humiliation themselves. Just to make that one point, it tells us that Isaiah preached naked and barefoot for three years.

I think the prophet, who may have been the master of the sign-act, is going to go even beyond burying his underwear. The prophet who is the master of the sign-act is the prophet Ezekiel. We read about some of the sign-acts that Ezekiel implemented in his ministry, again, as a way of making the message vivid to the people that he was preaching to.

Ezekiel was ministering to the exiles that were in Babylon at the same time that Jeremiah was ministering to the people in the land. The people who were the exiles that Ezekiel was preaching to were just as hard-hearted as Jeremiah. So, in any way possible, how do I make this message real to them? Ezekiel wanted them to understand that God's judgment was not over.

Even though they were living in Babylon, there was more judgment that was going to come, and there was going to be a greater exile when the Babylonians invaded and captured Jerusalem and brought more of their fellow countrymen there. They weren't going home anytime soon. So, to make that message vivid, Ezekiel 4 and 5 tell us that Ezekiel built a model of Jerusalem on a stone.

He built siege ramps on this little model. It's like a prophet playing with Legos. He puts an iron plate outside of this model and then sits on the other side of the iron plate, representing the separation of God from his people because of their sin, and the model represents the siege of Jerusalem that's going to occur as the Babylonians return and devastate the land again.

As part of that, Ezekiel goes out and lies down on his left side for 390 days, representing the guilt to the sins of Israel. Then he goes out, and he lies down on his right side for 40 days, representing the sin and the guilt of Judah. And he simply lies there.

And you can imagine the conversations that this started among the people. Did you see what Ezekiel's doing today? Well, he's doing the same thing that he's done 238 other days. He's lying on his side.

And at times, it tells us that Ezekiel was silent. He was unable to speak unless God put a message in his mouth. And so, the prophet is simply lying on his side.

Did you see him? Hopefully, after 430 days, they might get the message. But the reality is, they didn't really listen even after this. So, Ezekiel's going to do other things along with this that accompany this sign act to show the horrors and the realities of exile that the people are going to go through.

At one point, he shaves the hair that's on his face and his head. And it says that he takes the hair after he's made himself completely bald. He throws a third of it in the wind to represent the people who are taken away into exile.

He takes a sword and chops up a third of his hair to represent the people who were killed in battle. He burns a third of it. And then only a tiny few strands of hair, he takes those, puts those in his belt, and they represent the remnant that will be left behind after this judgment has taken place.

God commands him to make bread out of several different types of grain. And the purpose of this is not to give us a recipe for a really healthy form of bread. There's Ezekiel bread today that uses a similar, and I've had students who tell me it's pretty good.

But what the sign-act was designed to convey was the conditions of famine and how little food that they would, you would have to take everything that you had and make bread out of it. Ezekiel is only allowed to eat eight ounces of food a day with a small amount of water. Again, famine and drought and deprivation of food and water, those are going to be the conditions of exile.

And that's what that's designed to represent. God also tells him that he is to prepare this bread by cooking it over human excrement. Again, the conditions of exile are going to take Israel into an unclean land where they're not going to have to or they're not going to be able to worry about ideas and the practice of physical purity.

For Ezekiel, who was from a priestly family, this was a horrible thing. And he says, Lord, I've never defiled myself in this way. And so, God gives him permission to cook that bread over animal dung instead of human excrement.

In chapter 12, Ezekiel packs his belongings, he digs a hole in a wall, and portrays for the people what it's going to be like for the people of Jerusalem as they go into exile. So the prophets, particularly Jeremiah and Ezekiel, are often going to use sign-acts as a vivid way of trying to get through to some hard-headed people, maybe the same way that you would talk to your children when they're not going to listen to you. It's not conveying the inadequacy of the human words or the verbal words that Jeremiah was communicating to the people.

It's stressing their importance. You really need to listen to this. I'm going to do anything that I can to grab your attention.

Well, one of the most interesting of these sign-acts is Jeremiah's two visits to the potter in Jeremiah 18 and 19. All right, here's the passage, chapter 18, and here's the command that the Lord gives to him. Beginning in verse one, the word of the Lord that came to Jeremiah saying, arise, 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 to the potter to do. All right, what's this trying to convey? Here's the explanation, verses five and following. Then the word of the Lord came to me and said, O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter has done, declares the Lord? Behold, like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O 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 relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it. And if at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will bring and plant it, and if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will relent of that good that I intended to do to it. Now, therefore, say to the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, thus says the Lord, behold, I am shaping disaster against you and devising a plan against you.

Turn everyone from his evil way and amend your ways and your deeds. So here's what the visit to the potter conveyed. First of all, just the image or the idea of God as a potter is a very effective one.

It's a reminder of the fact that the Lord is the sovereign creator. He's the sovereign creator of all of humanity. The word for potter, *yotzer*, is the participle form used as a noun for the verb *yatsar* that's found in the creation story in Genesis chapter 2. God formed *yatsar*, the man.

We see God being pictured there in Genesis 2 as making man, making Adam, out of a mud doll. And God as the *yotzer*, as the potter, forms this mud doll and then breathes life into him. The same word is used here to describe God as the potter. Shaping and forming humanity, we can imagine God doing that in creation.

God was also the creator of the people and the nation of Israel. He had formed them and chosen them as a nation, and he had made them his special chosen people. Isaiah 64:8 says this, but now, O Lord, you are our father.

We are the clay, and you are the potter. We are all the work of your hand. And so God as the former, the shaper, first of all, the creator of all humanity, also the shaper and creator of the nation of Israel, all of that's related to the image of a potter.

We see the aspect of God's sovereignty in the potter. And Jeremiah is going to say here, O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter has done? Paul uses this image in Romans chapter 9, talking about God showing mercy to the people of Israel and God hardening the heart of Pharaoh. The Lord has the right to harden or to show mercy or to bring judgment because he's the potter.

He can do with people what he wants. And he creates some vessels to be vessels of mercy and others to be vessels of destruction. And when you read in that context, it's not divorcing their responses from God, but the Lord has that kind of sovereignty over our lives.

The Lord has that kind of sovereignty over the people of Israel. He can shape and form them and do with them what he wants. But the interesting thing is, is that in this statement that talks a lot about God and his sovereignty and God and his sovereignty can do with Israel what he wills, it's in a passage that has a lot to do with how Israel is going to respond to God.

And that God, as the potter, doesn't just simply form them and shape them and turn them into puppets. God shapes them and forms them in many ways based on their responses to him. And so, the message that we hear out of Jeremiah's first visit to the potter is exactly what we've been hearing in Jeremiah chapters 1 to 25 as a whole.

God is pronouncing judgment on Judah, but at the same time, he is offering them a chance to return. And in the book of Jeremiah, the early book or the early chapters of Jeremiah, return to the Lord, return to the Lord, those calls are all over the place. They gradually diminish in the section of the book that we're in now.

Then, in chapters 21 to 25 at the end of the section, there's very little about return. This passage is portraying for us that same thing. Israel has the opportunity to return to God.

Even though they have become spoiled and ruined, the clay is still wet. Their hearts can still be molded and shaped. And if they turn back to God, God will reshape them and reform them into something beautiful.

And so, this is exactly what we've seen in the book of Jeremiah up to this point. The emphasis that we've placed on the calls to return, there's still a chance to change their ways and to be spared from the judgment that God is planning to bring against them. In chapter 18 verses 5 to 11, those verses that we read maybe are one of the most important verses or passages in all the book of Jeremiah.

I think it's a theological principle that underlies all of Jeremiah's ministry and, in many ways, the ministry of the prophets. If the Lord announces judgment against a people, and it says in verse 7 particularly, if at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will pluck up and break down and destroy, remember those are those verbs from chapter 1 verse 9 that summarize Jeremiah's ministry. If God announces that he's going to judge, if he's going to pluck up and break down and destroy, if that nation turns from its evil, if they will shew, which God has been calling Israel to do, then God will relent of the day of the disaster that he has announced that he will bring against them.

So, whenever the prophets announced judgment, they simply weren't saying this is what God is going to do, it's fixed in stone, you can't fix this, you can't change this. What the prophets were saying is this is what God intends to do. And these are the things that are the shadows of what will happen if you do not change your ways.

But at this point, in the first visit to the potter, the potter taking that spoiled pottery and reshaping it and reforming it, Israel at this point, Judah at this time in their history, has the opportunity to change their ways and be spared from the judgment. And so, in many ways, I imagine the role of the prophets is similar to the ghost of Christmas Future in Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*. The ghost of Christmas future does not just show up to announce Scrooge's doom, and this is it, this is the way it's going to be. It's there to give him a warning so that he has a chance to change his ways and if he does, these shadows will turn into a different reality.

So, in a sense, the prophet is haunting Israel like the ghost of Christmas's future, saying this is what God is about to do, but there's still the opportunity to change their ways. God has entered into a give-and-take relationship with people where He is the sovereign potter. And He shapes and forms and does whatever He wills with people's lives.

But it's interesting that in a passage that stresses God's sovereignty so much, there's also an emphasis here on human response and God shaping His responses and His decisions in light of how people respond to Him. Now, sometimes in the prophets, they're going to say something like this: if you repent, if you change your ways, then God will relent and not send the judgment. But there are other times in the prophets where it doesn't appear like there are really any conditions or possibilities of change to offer.

But even in those cases, God is willing to change His course of action if people will respond to Him in the right ways. And this can happen in a positive way as well. If God promises to do something positive, and then it's going to, in verse 9, He's going to use the positive verbs for Jeremiah's ministry.

If at any time I declare concerning a nation or kingdom that I will build it up and plant it, remember that's Jeremiah's message of salvation. If that nation turns away and does evil, then God can relent from sending the good as well. And so, God's actions are based on the responses that people have to Him.

And whatever our theological system is, we have to realize that there's a real give and take taking place here. Wherever you place it, God is willing to change His mind. And again, it's not the idea that the Lord has limited information and or that He changes His mind on a whim.

But the Lord knows all of the varied possibilities of how people will respond to Him. His final course of action is based on their responses. Now, let me give you a couple of examples of this.

When the prophet Jonah goes to the city of Nineveh in Jonah chapter 3, the prophet says, In 40 days, Nineveh will be destroyed. There are no conditions attached to that. God does not say, I might send judgment.

There's a possibility that this could happen. Jonah doesn't say, If you don't change your ways, here's what God's going to do. In fact, Jonah doesn't want them to change their ways.

But in 3.5, it says that the people repent. They turn. They put on sackcloth.

And as a result of that, God relents and does not send judgment. And I mean, they really repented. They even put sackcloth on the animals.

When they did that, God relented, changed His mind, and did not send the judgment.

I think the interesting thing in the prophets is that it's the Ninevites who do this. And so, there's the question, in all these times that God called out to Israel, why didn't they do that? Micah chapter 3, verses 9 to 12, is another example of this. Micah gives this word of judgment.

And remember, Micah is the prophet who came to Judah in the century before Jeremiah. And he says to the people of Judah, Woe to those who are the heads of the house of Jacob and the rulers of the house of Israel, who detest justice and make crooked all that is straight. Okay, that's the accusation.

Here's the announcement. Or more of the accusation and then the announcement. Who build Zion with blood, Jerusalem with iniquity.

Its heads give judgment for a bribe. Its priests teach for a price. Its prophets practice divination for money.

And yet they lean on the Lord and say, is not the Lord in the midst of us? All right, verse 12. Therefore, because of you, Zion shall be plowed as a field. Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruin and the mountain of the house, a wooded height.

Micah says God is going to destroy Zion because of your injustice, your violence, your bloodshed, your treatment of the poor, the corruption of the leaders. Jerusalem is going to be turned into a heap of rubble. There are no conditions attached there.

Micah doesn't say, well, it might happen. It could happen. He simply says that it is going to happen.

But the interesting thing is, is that when Hezekiah and the people turned to the Lord in repentance, God again, relented just like he did with the Ninevites. And he did not send the judgment. The interesting thing is, is that the leaders of Judah remember Micah's message when Jeremiah was preaching his temple sermon in Jeremiah 26.

They begin by saying, you know, Jeremiah deserves to die for preaching judgment against the house of God. But then there are some elders who step into the discussion. And they say this in Jeremiah 26, verse 16.

The officials and all the people said to the priests and the prophets, this man does not deserve to die. He has spoken to us in the name of the Lord. And there were other elders of the land that spoke to all of the assembled people saying, Micah of



Moresheh prophesied in the days of Hezekiah, the king of Judah, and said to the people of Judah, thus says the Lord of hosts, Zion shall be plowed as a field, Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house of the Lord a wooded height.

That's chapter 3, verse 12. The verse that we just read. Here's the response though that Hezekiah had.

Did Hezekiah, king of Judah, and all of Judah put him to death? Did he not fear the Lord and entreat the favor of the Lord? And did not the Lord relent of the disaster that he had pronounced against them? But we are about to bring this great disaster upon ourselves. Look, Micah preached a message of absolute unconditional judgment, but when Hezekiah changed his ways and when the people repented, God relented. And so, there is always the possibility that if people have the right response to God, then God will relent from sending the judgment that he had determined to bring against them.

Now, there are going to be other times in the Bible and in the Old Testament where it says that God does not change His mind. 1 Samuel 15, after He's rejected Samuel. But those are places where God has issued a statement of judgment.

He's sworn an oath. He's made a statement. He's qualified by saying, I will not turn away.

Those are the cases where God does not change His mind. Numbers 23, 19. God does not change His mind.

He is not a man that He should lie or the son of man that He should change His mind. In that particular context, because God has made certain covenantal promises to Israel that He is obligated to fulfill, therefore, He will not change His mind and bring a curse on Israel no matter who tries to do so. So that's the first visit to the potter.

The real valid opportunity that Judah has to change their ways and to be spared from judgment. But chapter 19 tells us about the second visit to the potter. This time, the Lord tells Jeremiah to do this.

Go and buy a potter's earthenware flask. Take some of the elders of the people and some of the elders of the priest and go out to the valley of the son of Hinnom at the entrance of the potsherd gate and proclaim the words of the Lord. Okay.

So, he's now, the symbolism of all of this has absolutely changed. The potter is no longer working at the wheel with wet clay that can be shaped and remolded and reformed. The prophet now buys an earthenware vessel, a potter's jar.

It's been fixed. It's been fired. It's hardened in the condition that it's in.

And he goes out, and I think it's significant, even the location of where this takes place, at the valley of Hinnom, the place where they have worshipped idols and sacrificed children and shed innocent blood. And what the prophet does in this particular instance is that he takes this earthenware vessel, this potter's jar, and he smashes it to the ground. All right.

Judah, at this point, has lost the opportunity to repent. We have seen the closing down of the calls to return in Jeremiah 1 to 25, the reality of Jeremiah's ministry. The two visits to the potter represent exactly the same thing.

They have forfeited the opportunity to repent. Therefore, the only option that is left is for God to smash his people in judgment. We're reminded in a sense in chapter 19 of an Egyptian practice, where as the Egyptians were preparing to go into battle, the Egyptian priest, sort of a magical rite, they would write the names of the enemies of Egypt on these earthen vessels, and then they would smash them on the ground.

Sort of like to prepare the people during the pep rally, that the gods are going to bring about the judgment of our enemies. That same symbolism is being used here. Judah is God's enemy.

And because of the terrible things that they have done in the valley of Hinnom, God is prepared to destroy them. God is going to judge them. It did not have to be that way.

They brought this judgment upon themselves because the prophet repeatedly called to them: return to the Lord, come back to him, change your ways. The clay is still wet. It's still moldable.

In the early days of Jeremiah's ministry, before the Babylonian invasion occurred, you can avoid this judgment. God will relent from sending judgment if you will repent of your sin. But as time progressed and as time went on, they forfeited that opportunity.

They were hardened in their sin. And the only thing that was left was for God to judge and to destroy his people. In a lot of ways, we're going to hear again and again and over and over a very similar message in the book of Jeremiah.

The people had an opportunity to repent. God is a God who is long-suffering. He is merciful.

He is abounding in covenant faithfulness. He does not delight in the death of the wicked. God gave Judah every opportunity to repent.

The first visit to the potter represents that. But when the people would not repent, God would send judgment. And that's the message.

That's the sign act behind Jeremiah's second visit to the potter and the message that he communicated to the people and the leaders of Judah in that particular situation.

This is Dr. Gary Yates in his instruction on the book of Jeremiah. This is section 17, Jeremiah 11-20, Prophetic Sign-Acts.