

When Things Shatter and Don't Go Back

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Preacher: Anthony Parrott

[0 : 0 0] So thank you for being here. Again, my name is Anthony. We are in part two of a series on the book of Jeremiah, the prophet Jeremiah. In the first half of our series, we are focusing on the Saturday moments. So there's Good Friday, there's crucifixion, there's Easter, Resurrection Sunday, and there's Saturday, the moments of the in-between, the uncertain, where you don't know resurrection is coming. And now we're in part two of Jeremiah for our Lenten series, Stone to Flesh, Becoming Tender, Becoming Whole. And one of the themes of the prophet is the idea that the law has failed. The law, the covenant has failed at keeping God's people God's people, and that God is going to create a new covenant. He's going to replace our hearts of stone with hearts of flesh. And in the first part of the series, I preached on Jeremiah chapter 18, which is the potter shaping the clay. And the main takeaway of that sermon is that the clay is still wet. We can be a people of hope even in despairing times, even when they are taking trans people's driver's license away in Kansas, even when we are dropping bombs in Iran. We can still be a people of hope, not a people of naive optimism, not a people pretending like none of this exists. We can be a people of hope because we can believe that the clay is still wet, that God is still at the potter's wheel, and that we can have soft hearts that can be molded, and that we can work for the molding of our country into something better because God knows that it needs to be something better. Are you with me? Yes. Now, if you turn the page from Jeremiah 18 to

Jeremiah 19, we get a different story. And it's important that we get both of these stories because our lives are made up of not only the moments of reshaping and remolding and something being made new out of that wet clay, but of also moments that are not quite so beautiful. So if you have a Bible, I invite you to turn with me to Jeremiah chapter 19. I've got my trusty iPad here, so you can use your phone, your iPad, or your Bible to join me in Jeremiah 19. And as a reminder, Jeremiah is preaching over this sort of arc of Judah's history where there's this revival and then a very quick descent into disaster where Babylon will come and exile the people, destroy the temple, destroy Jerusalem, and that's what leads into lamentations. And as I preached about a couple weeks ago, Jeremiah is the prophet that failed. He preached the truth and he failed at convincing his people. And so we are reading the failed prophet's prophecies. So this is what he says in Jeremiah chapter 19. Thus says the Lord, go and buy a potter's earthenware jug. Take with you some of the elders of the people and some of the senior priests and go to the valley of the son of Hinnom at the entry of the potsherd gates and proclaim there the words that I tell you. Now, very briefly, we don't have time to get into all of this, but the valley of Hinnom will eventually be known by the time we get to Jesus in the New Testament as the valley of Gehenna. Gehenna, starting with the King James Bible, was translated as hell. And so when you have Jesus' sayings about hell, it's actually talking about Gehenna, which is actually talking about this valley of the son of Hinnom. And the valley of the son of Hinnom is where there is child sacrifice. It's eventually will become a graveyard. And when Jerusalem is destroyed in 70 AD, as Jesus predicts, it's where there's going to be a lot of bodies being buried and burned. So that's an aside for a different sermon about hell. But just so you know, here we are.

Valley of the son of Hinnom at the entry of the potsherd gate, proclaim there the words that I tell you. Verse 3, you shall say, hear the word of the Lord, O kings of Judah, inhabitants of Jerusalem. Thus says the Lord. Man, you've got to love the Bible. Thus says the Lord. Hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord. Quotation marks are a mess. The God of Israel, I am going to bring such disaster upon this place that the ears of everyone who hears of it will tingle. This is not a good thing. You don't want your ears to tingle. Thank you, Shunia. Because the people have forsaken me and have profaned this place by making offerings in it to other gods who neither they nor their ancestors nor the kings of Judah have known, because they have filled this place with the blood of the

innocent and gone on building the high places of Baal to build, burn their children in the fire, which I did not command or decree, nor did it enter my mind. Therefore, the days are coming, says the Lord, when this place shall no more be called Topeth or the valley of the son of Hinnom, but the valley of slaughter. And in this place I will make void the plans of Judah and Jerusalem, and will make them 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, to the wild animals of the earth, and I will make this a city of horror, a thing to be hissed at. Everyone who passes by it will be horrified and will hiss because of all its disasters. Have you ever been so horrified that you hiss?

Man. Verse 9, I will make them eat the flesh of their children and their neighbors in the siege and in distress which their enemies and those who seek their life will afflict them. Verse 10, then you shall break the jug. So verse 1, go buy a jug. Verse 10, then you shall break the jug in the sight of those who go with you. So this is like performance art. Lots of the prophets do this.

[5 : 41] Go buy a jug, gather some of the people, proclaim this terrible prophecy, and then shatter the jug. And you shall say to them, thus says the Lord of hosts, so will I break this people and the city as one breaks a potter's vessel so that it can never be mended. This is the word of the Lord. And again, with a question mark, we say, thanks be to God.

So chapter 18, go to the potter's house, see the potter. He messes up his pot, but he reworks it. Something new, something beautiful is made out of it. Chapter 19, go buy a pot, go tell the elders and the priests that the city will be destroyed and hissed at, and then shatter the pot in a way that will never be mended. The Hebrew word is the Hebrew word, I'm sorry, the Hebrew word is the word shavar. Let me hear you say shavar. And it means shattered. It's irreparable. It's fragments. It's the kind of breaking where you don't get to go back to the shape you were before. Chapter 18 is a God who reshapes. Chapter 19, we see a God who shatters. And again, for this series, we're putting aside the question of whether or not God is the one who does the shattering.

Okay, and we're going to set that question aside. I know it brings up some things in us. We're just going to say that we have all had things in our life where things have been reshaped.

[7 : 10] Something's changed. Something's been needed to be remolded. And we're grateful for the remolding. And we've had things in our life where something has shattered. And you can't go back to the way what it was before. And we need both Jeremiah 18 and 19 to tell us what do we do in these things in our lives when things need to be reshaped and when things shatter. And notice that in both of these cases, the difference is not the severity of the crisis. The crisis is bad. It's awful. It's terrible.

Bad things are going to happen. The difference between chapters 18 and chapter 19 is the condition of the material. Soft clay bends. Hardened vessels shatter. I'll say it again.

Soft clay, it's moldable. It bends. It's flexible. And hardened vessels shatter. So the question for us is what is our heart made out of when the pressure arrives?

Now, let me tell a personal story about some reshaping and some shattering in my own life. So if you've been around, you've heard the beginning parts of my story. So very quick thumbnail sketch. I lived for the first seven years of my life with my paranoid, schizophrenic, biological mom. I had a heart condition that she did not treat because she was believed that the doctors were lying to her.

[8 : 45] She had some sort of delusion of grandeur that she was going to move us to Cairo, Egypt. And so we drove there from Indiana by car through Alaska. Got stopped in Alaska.

That's where I was put into a foster family. They discovered this heart defect. And I was moved to live with my aunt and uncle in Indianapolis, Indiana to have the repair for my heart, which was like very, very, very late.

And what happened in Indianapolis was that I lived with my aunt and uncle, my cousin, who was a year or two older than me, Melissa, and lived there for a couple of years, second, third, and fourth grade.

Made friends, went to school. Went to this Lutheran school where I memorized most of the scripture I know now, because that's just how Lutheran school is. And when I got to fourth grade, it seemed clear to me that something was changing in the relationship.

I, in the spring of 97, I was moved out of my aunt and uncle's house. I was placed back in the foster care. And I landed with the Parrott family. And this is the family who adopted me, gave me my last name.

[9 : 51] The family that I call my own today, the family that gave me mom and dad, Deb and Dale, my siblings, the last name that I have that I'm genuinely grateful for. But for 27 years, from when I

moved out to a year and a half ago, I carried a story with me about why I left the balance.

And the story went like this. When I was nine years old, my cousin, Melissa, she grabbed my journal and she read it. And I was furious. So I got the journal back and I wrote, I'm so angry I could kill Melissa.

Well, she found the journal again and she read it. She gave it to her aunt. And from that point on, I was no longer wanted. I was put back into foster care.

And my angry nine-year-old journal entry cost me a family. Because I had already been taken away from my mom. I had lived with this family for three years. And then I was sent away.

And so I wrote in my journal as a teenager, the same one that I had kept since I was seven, for someone whose name means priceless, the name Anthony, theoretically, according to books that say what names mean, means priceless.

[11:02] For someone whose name means priceless, I certainly get passed around like someone who's worthless. I could have started an emo band at that point, right? So that was my Jeremiah chapter 19.

My jar of clay was shattered. I built my understanding based on those fragments. I was the kid who got sent away. I was taken away from my mom, even though she was very mentally ill.

I didn't know any better. I just wanted to be with her. And even though the state had offered her the ability to visit me, she rejected that offer because of her schizophrenia. And so I was the kid who wasn't worth anything.

I wasn't worth keeping. And I made that into the foundation of my identity, a whole architecture of unworthiness that I lived inside for decades. And it informed just about every decision that I made about my life and my career.

And my heart around that story turned to stone. Now, during the summer of 2024, I finally got up the guts to get some closure on that story.

[12:06] So my wife Emily and I, we reached out to my aunt, my uncle, my cousin. My cousin and I had reconnected over Instagram. God, thank you for Instagram. And it had been 19 years since we'd really had any real contact.

But I reached out, said, hey, when we're in Indiana visiting friends and family, can we see you all? They said, yes, of course, that would be great. And so we went down to Indianapolis and we went to a British restaurant that was called, I kid you not, Cheeky Bastards.

Meeting at a place that made reference to my illegitimate birth made me laugh. And so we caught up. We had dinner. We caught up over the decades. And then as carefully as I could, I asked this burning question that had been with me for years.

At some point, Mike and Jody, aunt and uncle, you decided I could no longer live with you. Can you tell me more about that?

And there was this beat of confused silence. To which then my aunt said, Anthony, we didn't decide that. That's not what we wanted at all.

[13:13] And then she said something that turned 27 years of inner life story inside out. She said, you were the one who wanted to move out.

So the truth, as we kept talking, was more complicated than either one of our stories. What had happened is that the state of Indiana had a legal preference for family reunification.

And there's good historical reasons why foster systems generally move towards reunification. Because there were decades where that was not the case. And you would have children being removed and never being reunited with their families.

And that's a different form of childbirth. So states sort of over-optimized towards reunification. And that happened to me as well. They wanted to get me closer to my biological mom, Tony, to work towards some kind of visitation.

This was, to use a very technical term, stupid. Two reasons. One, Tony had been, up to that point, still institutionalized.

[14:16] She was very, very, very ill. She was never going to raise a child again. And, in fact, I found out after I did some paperwork with me, at that time in history, when I was nine and they were working towards reunification, they didn't even know where she was.

So, I was nine, ten years old. I still had this fantasy of being reunited with my mom. Because that's what ten-year-olds do. And the state's machinery just sort of went into default mode.

A child's longing converged. And I was moved. But the reality was, I told my aunt and uncle this journal story. I could kill Melissa's story.

This moment I had built my entire life narrative of rejection around. And they didn't remember it. The event that I had treated as this seismic, foundation-cracking, family-ending catastrophe of my childhood was a forgettable episode for them.

They not only didn't push me out, they fought with the state of Indiana to keep me. At that dinner, they told me they would have adopted me if the state had let them. So, for all these years, I had carried the grief of being unwanted.

[15:27] And for all those years, they carried the grief of being, and this is to quote my aunt, unable to love you enough that you wanted to stay. Two families, one shattering, and two completely different stories about what the fragments meant.

Now, back to Jeremiah. Jeremiah 29, so skipping ahead 10 chapters, is this letter. And it's written to a people by this point who are already in exile.

Babylon has come. They've carried away people. They've carried away stuff, everything that made them who they were, their city, their temple, their land, their identity. They had all been living in Babylon, which is a polite way of saying that they're living in the wreckage of their world.

They are shattered. And there are these false prophets. You can read about them in chapter before Jeremiah 28. Hananiah, who keeps telling the people, don't worry, you'll be home soon.

This is temporary. God will fix this any day now. Okay? Just telling the people what they want to hear. It's too bad scripture has nothing to say to modern times. Jeresemiah's letter says the opposite.

[16:40] This is Jeremiah chapter 29. Starting in verse 4. I'm sorry, verse 5. God says build houses and live in them.

Plant gardens and eat what they produce. Get married. Have children. Make sure your children get married. That they may bear their own children.

Multiply there. Do not decrease. Seek the welfare, the shalom, the goodness, the health of the city where I have sent you into exile and pray to the Lord on its behalf.

For in its welfare, you will find your own. For thus says Adonai, Do not let the prophets and the diviners who are among you deceive you.

Do not listen to your dreams that you dream. It is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name. I did not send them, says the Lord. So, Jeremiah preaches.

[17:44] He fails. Babylon comes. They exile the people. Send them far away. Destroy their lands. And the prophets keep prophesying. It's fine.

It's fine. Okay, fine. We were wrong about the temple. The temple is destroyed. We were wrong about the exile. The exile happened. Jeremiah was right. Forget Jeremiah, though. Everything is going to be fine.

Don't worry about it. You're going to be restored soon. The end of Jeremiah 28, by the way, about Hananiah, is so funny because Jeremiah is like, May it be so. And then the end of the chapter is like, And then Hananiah dies.

It's like, have you ever been so wrong that you died? Jeremiah 29. No. It's not going to end soon. It's going to be multiple generations of exile.

So in that case, here are your instructions for survival. It is not a promise of restoration. It is not that the shattered pot gets put back together in the way that it is before.

[18:47] There is something new happening. Your spiritual work is to build life among the broken pieces. One of my favorite books is by Kate Bowler called, Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I've Loved.

Not everything happens for a reason. I don't think God gave my mother schizophrenia so that I could one day go through the foster system and come out the other side to preach to you.

God did not give me a heart defect so I could have a great inspirational speech at the local cardiology conference. God did not mess up a foster system's plan for reunification and some paperwork that got lost and a person they couldn't keep track of so I would have a good anecdote in this sermon.

Not everything happens for a reason. And we can make meaning out of what happens. Saying everything happens for a reason implies there's some divine plan and this little marionette God who's pulling strings to make things happen in a certain way and I, that God, makes no sense to.

But as meaning-making people, human beings, we get the ability to make meaning for the things that happen in our life.

[20 : 20] Not explaining why the vessel broke but rather picking up the fragments and building something new with them. Jeremiah 29, of course, is where we get that famous verse plastered on graduation cards everywhere.

I know the plans I have for you. Says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for your harm. To give you a future with hope. And in this context, Jeremiah 29, 11 comes in a letter to exiles that says, you're not going home.

It comes in a letter that says, you need to put down roots in the shattered life that you find yourself in. So the future with hope that God is promising is not a return to the old shape.

It's a new shape entirely. Now, this community, the Table Church and Resurrection City, we know some things about shadow.

We know some things about what it's like to lose our shape. In 2019, the founding pastor left suddenly and disappointed a lot of people.

[21 : 37] That was a shattering. In 2020, Resurrection City, D.C. was supposed to launch into the world a new thing full of energy and hope and a global pandemic shut the doors before they opened.

That was a shattering. And then came the merger between Res City and the Table Church, a predominantly black and queer church joining with a majority white church. And that constant exhausting cost that racially minoritized people have to pay just to be in the room.

Then an ongoing shattering that some of you live every single week and others of us have never had to think about. For years, this community refused to be explicit in its affirmation of LGBTQ people.

For years, it hedged on racial injustice and people left because of that silence when they were right to. That silence was its own kind of shattering. And then when we did become explicit, other people left because they didn't want a church that said those things out loud.

More shattering. And I'm a pastor who I know I have disappointed a lot of you. I've taken this church in directions that some of you did not want to go.

[22 : 52] Some of you are sitting here despite that. I'm grateful. And some of you aren't here anymore because of that. And I grieve it. Happy homecoming, y'all. And that's just us.

That's just this room. Zoom out to the multiple shattering realities. People in the city and this congregation who are living under active existential threat right now.

Trans folks and queer folks and people of color and immigrants and federal employees and contractors who showed up to serve their country and are now being discarded. And if you're in one of those categories, you don't need me to explain shavar shattering fragmentation to you.

You're living. This administration is smashing the potter's work in the valley of Hinnom and calling it good policy. So when Jeremiah says, seek the welfare of the city where you've been carried, that's not much of a platitude for this room.

But maybe it's a survival. Every person here is interpreting their own survival. If you've stayed at the table through all of that, you're carrying a story about what it means.

[24 : 04] Maybe faithfulness. Maybe stubbornness. Maybe both. If you've left, you're carrying a story as well. Maybe freedom. Maybe guilt. Maybe relief. And I bet that some of those stories, like mine about the Ballards, my aunt and uncle, built on assumptions that would fall apart if we actually had the conversation and the mutual pain in the room.

So here's what Jeremiah 29 says to this room today. Seek the welfare of the city where you've been carried. That's always been the table's verse. When we first moved here, the McGills gave us a piece of art with the outline of DC and that verse on it.

And it hangs in my office to this day. We look outward towards DC, towards the neighborhood. But on a day like today, we look inward as well. That's okay. What does it look like to seek our own welfare?

Some of you were carried here. Some of you were carried somewhere else. And in both cases, the instruction is the same. In the shattering build, plant, God is in that place.

The shape that we were before is not the shape that we'll be again. Nostalgia will not build anything new. And that's not failure. The old decimal served its purpose.

[25 : 26] But God is not kind and does not rewind. Thank you, millennials who understand that reference. God is not done.

God is doing something new. Paul, writing to the church in Corinth, the church that itself was a mess of factions and fractures, says this in 2 Corinthians 4.

But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way but not crushed, perplexed but not driven to despair, persecuted but not forsaken, struck down but not destroyed, always carrying in our body the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.

Jars of clay is what that treasure is in. We've been talking about pottery this entire series. The potter's wheel in chapter 18, the smashed flash in chapter 19 and now Paul picks up the same image and says, the treasure of God, God's presence, God's spirit, God's power lives in clay jars. Not marble, not bronze, not some indestructible container. Clay. Fragile, ordinary, breakable clay. And the point is not that God makes the jar unbreakable.

[26 : 50] Read the list. Afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, struck down, the jar takes hits, the jar cracks but the treasure survives what the jar cannot because the power belongs to God.

Which means that my goal is not to become an unbreakable vessel. My goal is not to arrive at a point where life can't touch me anymore. My goal is to carry something real inside a container that will inevitably show the wear.

And the power, the surpassing power is visible precisely because the container is so obviously not the source of it but rather the cracks let the power shine through.

Jesus launches his ministry by announcing the kingdom of God and the kingdom is not some place that you go when you die. The kingdom is the reality of God's reign breaking into the present. It's inaugurated here now in the middle of everything including the middle of the shattering. And look at the places where Jesus goes. He doesn't go to the temple first. He goes to the broken places.

[27 : 57] The lepers and the possessed and the hemorrhaging women and the dead girl and the tax collectors who've sold out their own people. He walks straight into the broken fragments and says the kingdom of God is among you.

Not that the kingdom of God will be here once you all get it put back together but here and now. The resurrected Jesus still has nail marks in his hands.

The breaking is never erased. It's transfigured. The jar is cracked open and what pours out is life for the world. So the series is called stone to flesh and Jeremiah promises that God will remove our hearts of stone and give us hearts of flesh and I want to land there in that image because this is where all these mixed metaphors come together.

A heart of stone cannot be reworked on the wheel. Stone does not yield. Stone does not bend. When force meets stone, stone shatters. That's chapter 19.

But a heart of flesh, tender and pliable and alive, that's the clay that can be reshaped. That's chapter 18. The difference between a life that shatters beyond repair and a life that can be reworked is not the severity of what happens to you, it's the condition of your heart when it happens.

[29 : 16] So the work of Lent and the work of the series is fine. The slow, sometimes painful process of letting enough stone heart to become flesh again.

And if you've been paying attention, you know that falling is not comfortable. Flesh bruises. It feels things. The movement from stone to flesh is not a movement toward invulnerability.

It's a movement toward being alive enough to feel it all. The shattering and the remaking both. So some of us need to keep our hearts tender, which is so hard to do with our own grief, the exhaustion of being targeted or being in solidarity with people who are targeted.

And the temptation is always there to calcify, to harden, to stop feeling because feeling costs too much. That's understandable. But a heart that hardens to protect itself becomes the very kind of thing that can't survive the next glow.

Now some of us already have hearts that have solidified. Years of disappointment, betrayal, and institutional failure, and unanswered prayer.

[30 : 31] You did what any reasonable person would do. You hardened. You cocooned. You put a shell around yourself. And so the work for you is the thawing.

And thawing is terrifying because it means letting yourself feel things you sealed off a long time ago. It is hard to rewrite a narrative that says, I am unwanted.

And then to hear that on the other side they thought they were unwanted. And it can feel good just to stay in the cocoon. No, no, no, no, no. I'm the unwanted one.

It's much harder to open up and say, what if I've been wanted the whole time? Some of us, you've already been shattered.

The vessel broke a long time ago. The pieces are on the ground. And you are not coming to church looking for advice on how to stay pliable. You're way past that. And what I need you to hear this morning is that God is not finished with the fragments.

[31 : 37] The treasure that Paul talks about does not require an intact jar. The kingdom of God shows up in the broken pieces and creates something new.

If I had a time machine, I don't know if I wish I could go back and change my own story. People ask me that sometimes and the answer is I don't know.

Going back and changing the past means saying goodbye to Emily and Audrey and Wesley which is unimaginable. But it also means saying goodbye to years of fundamentalism.

No terrible rupture with my family. No decades of believing I was unwanted. To mix a metaphor again, the fork in the road cuts both ways.

And I can't see where either path leads. I just know the one that brought me here. What I do know is that the story that I told myself about the shattering was wrong.

[32 : 40] For 27 years I interpreted my survival as evidence that I was worthless. And the real story was that I was wanted the whole time. The fragments were real.

The shattering was real. The interpretation was not. Not everything happens for a reason but we can make new meaning. Some of us are sitting in a story like that right now.

A narrative that we built in the aftermath of something that broke us. And maybe the narrative is accurate but maybe we could be open to the fact that the story that we're telling ourselves about the breaking is not the only story there is.

You're here today. Whether you're here every Sunday or you haven't been here in a year you're here. Jeremiah's word to a scattered people is not come home.

It's where you already are that's home. Find shalom. The vessel is not the shape it was before and it won't be again.

[33 : 44] But we have this treasure in jars of clay. A jar that is sometimes cracked and the treasure is still inside. So build, plant, seek the welfare of this place, this city, this community, this life that you've been carried into.

Let your heart thaw. let it stay tender. And if it's already in pieces bring the pieces. The kingdom of God is not waiting for you to be whole. The kingdom of God is here in the fragments and the surpassing power that was never ours to begin with.