

# Jeremiah: Answering the Call

Wednesday, June 20, 2018

The rabbis called him “the Weeping Prophet.” They said he began wailing the moment he was born. When Michelangelo painted him on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, he presented him in a posture of despair. He looks like a man who has wept so long he has no tears left to shed. His face is turned to one side, like a man who has been battered by many blows. His shoulders are hunched forward, weighed down by the sins of Judah. His eyes also are cast down, as if he can no longer bear to see God’s people suffer. His hand covers his mouth. Perhaps he has nothing left to say.

His name was Jeremiah. His story begins like this:

*The words of Jeremiah son of Hilkiah, one of the priests at Anathoth in the territory of Benjamin. The word of the Lord came to him in the thirteenth year of the reign of Josiah son of Amon king of Judah, and through the reign of Jehoiakim son of Josiah king of Judah, down to the fifth month of the eleventh year of Zedekiah son of Josiah king of Judah, when the people of Jerusalem went into exile. (Jeremiah 1:1-3)*

This introduction tells us a great deal about Jeremiah. He was a preacher’s son, for his father Hilkiah was a priest. He was born in the village of Anathoth, close enough to Jerusalem to see the city walls, but at the edge of the wilderness, where the land slopes down to the Dead Sea. He labored as God’s prophet for forty years or more, from 627 b.c. to some time after 586 b.c. Four decades is a long time to be a weeping prophet.

Jeremiah lived when little Israel was tossed around by three great superpowers: Assyria to the north, Egypt to the south, and Babylon to the east. He served — and suffered — through the administrations of three kings: Josiah the reformer, Jehoiakim the despot, and Zedekiah the puppet. He was a prophet during the cold November winds of Judah’s life as a nation, right up to the time God’s people were deported to Babylon. Jeremiah himself was exiled to Egypt, where he died.

## A Divine Call

Jeremiah’s sufferings began with a divine call:

*The word of the Lord came to me, saying,  
“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,  
before you were born I set you apart;  
I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.” (Jeremiah 1:4-5)*

God did wonderful things for Jeremiah before he was even born. He knew him. He formed him. He set him apart and appointed him as a prophet to the nations. He did all this long before Jeremiah drew his first breath or shed his first tear.

The call of Jeremiah is rich in its doctrinal and practical content. Among its important teachings are the following:

**1. God is the Lord of life.** God formed Jeremiah in the womb. Jeremiah had biological parents, of course, but God himself fashioned him and knit him together in his mother's womb. Telling children who ask where babies come from that they come from God is good theology. And it is not bad science either. The Lord of life uses the natural processes he designed to plant human life in the womb.

**2. A fetus is a person.** A person is a human being, created in the image of God, living in relationship to God. This verse testifies that the personal relationship between God and his child takes place in the womb, or even earlier.

Birth is not our beginning. Not even conception is our real beginning. In some ineffable way, God has a personal knowledge of the individual that precedes conception. "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you." This is the strong, intimate, Hebrew word for "know" that is also used to describe sexual intimacy between husband and wife.

"I knew you." What a beautiful thing for God to say to his children! "I loved you and cared for you in eternity past. I made a personal commitment to you even before you were born." And what a beautiful thing for parents to say to their children: "God knows you, God loves you, and God has entered into a personal relationship with you." This verse holds special comfort for mothers who have had miscarriages. It gives hope to parents who have lost children in infancy, and even for women who aborted their own babies. God knew your child, and he knows your child.

**3. We do not choose God before God chooses us.** If you want to know who you are, you have to know whose you are. For the Christian, the answer to that question is that you belong to Jesus Christ.

When did Jeremiah start belonging to God? When did God choose him? The prophet was set apart before he was born. While Jeremiah was being carried around in his mother's womb, God was making preparations for his salvation and his ministry. To set something apart is to sanctify it or to dedicate it to holy service. Long before Jeremiah was born, God chose him and consecrated him for ministry.

Given the intimacy of God's knowledge of Jeremiah, it is appropriate for Jeremiah to address him with the title "Sovereign Lord" ([Jeremiah 1:6](#)). God is sovereign. He not only forms his people in the womb, he sets them apart for salvation from all eternity.

God's choice is not unique to Jeremiah; it is true for every believer. This is known as the doctrine of divine election. "You did not choose me," Jesus said to his disciples, "but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit" ([John 15:16](#)). "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. . . . For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight" ([Ephesians 1:3-4](#)). This promise is for the whole church. Therefore, it is for the comfort of every Christian. God not only knows you, he chose you; and he did so long before you were ever conceived.

Eugene Peterson offers these practical conclusions about God's choice of Jeremiah:

My identity does not begin when I begin to understand myself. There is something previous to what I think about myself, and it is what God thinks of me. That means that everything I think and feel is by nature a response, and the one to whom I respond is God. I never speak the first word. I never make the first move.

Jeremiah's life didn't start with Jeremiah. Jeremiah's salvation didn't start with Jeremiah. Jeremiah's truth didn't start with Jeremiah. He entered the world in which the essential parts of his existence were already ancient history. So do we.<sup>1</sup>

**4. Every Christian has a calling.** There is a general call, of course, to believe in Jesus Christ. But everyone who believes in Christ also has a special calling to a particular sphere of obedience and ministry. Jeremiah was not just set apart for salvation, he was set apart for vocation. God had work for him to do. The prophet had a mission to accomplish and a message to deliver to his generation.

Jeremiah's unique appointment was to be a prophet to the nations. God intended his ministry to be international in scope. Part of Jeremiah's job was to promise God's grace to the nations, proclaiming, "all nations will gather in Jerusalem to honor the name of the Lord" ([Jeremiah 3:17](#)).

But to be a prophet to the nations also includes announcing God's judgment. By the time he reached the end of his ministry, Jeremiah had pronounced a divine sentence of judgment upon every nation from Ammon to Babylon. Just as all nations receive God's sovereign grace, all nations are subject to God's severe justice.

Jeremiah's calling is not for everyone. The first chapter of Jeremiah is mainly about his call for his times, not your call for your times. But you do have a call. God not only knows you and chose you, he has a plan for your life. As F. B. Meyer so eloquently puts it, "From the foot of the cross, where we are cradled in our second birth, to the brink of the river, where we lay down our armor, there is a path which he has prepared for us to walk in."<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps you are still trying to figure out what God's plan is for you. Many Christians long to know what God is calling them to do. If you are not sure, there are at least two things you ought to do.

The first is to do everything you already know God wants you to do. You cannot expect to be ready for God's call, or even to recognize God's call, unless you are obeying what God has already revealed to you. This includes the obvious things, such as spending time in prayer and [Bible](#) study, serving the people with whom you live, remaining active in the worship of the church, and being God's witness in the world.

Second, ask God to reveal his will for your life. If you ask, he has promised to answer. "If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him" ([James 1:5](#)).

### **A Dubious Candidate**

Jeremiah knew what God wanted him to do. Yet even after he received his divine call, he was still a dubious candidate: "Ah, Sovereign Lord," he said, "I do not know how to speak; I am only a child" ([Jeremiah 1:6](#)).

Jeremiah had two main objections to becoming a prophet: his lack of eloquence and his lack of experience. To paraphrase: "Ahhh, wait a second, Lord, about this whole prophet-to-the-nations thing . . . It doesn't sound like that great an idea. Prophecy is not one of my spiritual gifts. As you know, I am getting a C in rhetoric at the synagogue. Besides, I am just a teenager."

Was Jeremiah being modest or faithless? Was it right for him to object to God's call or not?

A good way to answer those questions is to compare Jeremiah with some other prophets. Later the Lord reaches out his hand and touches Jeremiah's mouth ([Jeremiah 1:9](#)). This reminds us of Isaiah's experience when he saw "the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple" ([Isaiah 6:1](#)).

Isaiah had one or two doubts about his calling too, but his doubts were different. Isaiah's main problem was that he had a guilty conscience: "'Woe to me!' I cried. 'I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty'" ([Isaiah 6:5](#)[Jeremiah 1:5](#)). Isaiah did not doubt his ability, he doubted his integrity. When the seraph flew from the altar to touch Isaiah's lips with a live coal, he said: "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for" ([Isaiah 6:7](#)).

Isaiah's experience was somewhat different from Jeremiah's. When God touched Jeremiah's lips, it was not to take away his sins, it was to give him God's words.

What about the call of Moses? Was Jeremiah's call like the call of Moses? Jeremiah's objection sounds very much like the objection Moses made when God called him: "O Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue" ([Exodus 4:10](#)). Unlike Isaiah, Moses doubted his competence rather than his righteousness.

This was precisely Jeremiah's objection. He was not sure what to say or how to say it. He may have even been concerned about his foreign language skills, since God was calling him to an international ministry. Perhaps his grasp of Akkadian and Ugaritic was deficient. In any case, Jeremiah had his doubts about whether he could do the job.

Jeremiah's doubts find an echo in J. R. R. Tolkien's novel *The Fellowship of the Ring*. A hobbit named Frodo has been chosen to make a long and dangerous quest to destroy the one ring of power, a quest he himself would not wish to choose. "I am not made for perilous quests," cried Frodo. "I wish I had never seen the Ring! Why did it come to me? Why was I chosen?"

The answer Frodo is given is similar to the one God's prophets often receive: "Such questions cannot be answered. . . . You may be sure that it was not for any merit that others do not possess; not for power or wisdom, at any rate. But you have been chosen and you must therefore use such strength and heart and wits as you have."<sup>3</sup>

When God gives his servants a clear calling, he does not accept any excuses. "The Lord said to him [Moses], 'Who gave man his mouth? Who makes him deaf or mute? Who gives him sight or makes him blind? Is it not I, the Lord? Now go; I will help you speak and will teach you what to say'" ([Exodus 4:11-12](#)).

God said much the same thing to Jeremiah. To put it plainly, he said, "Don't give me that stuff!" "Do not say, 'I am only a child.' You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you'" ([Jeremiah 1:7](#)). "Then the Lord reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, 'Now, I have put my words in your mouth'" ([Jeremiah 1:9](#)).

God did not disqualify Jeremiah on the basis of his youth and inexperience. In fact, he treated him the same way he treated Moses. He did not deny the basis for the prophet's objection. He did not argue with Jeremiah about his speaking credentials or quibble with him about his age.

Jeremiah may have had reasonable doubts. But God exposed his false humility for what it really was: a lack of faith.

Jeremiah had forgotten that God is not limited by human weakness. God himself possesses everything Jeremiah needs to answer his call. In fact, enabling weak tools to do strong jobs is God's standard operating procedure. His entire work force is comprised of dubious candidates. When God calls someone to do a job, he gives him or her all the gifts needed to get the job done. With God's calling comes God's gifting.

This does not mean that your gifts and abilities do not matter when you are trying to figure out what God wants you to do with your life. They do matter. If you do not know what God is calling you to do, take an honest look at the gifts he has given you. If necessary, ask others to help you figure out what your gifts are.

But once you know what God has called you to do, trust him to equip you to do it. God equipped Jeremiah to be an international prophet in some amazing ways. He was a polymath, a great scholar, a man of prodigious learning. He was able to converse in the fields of politics, economics, comparative religion, geography, theology, botany, zoology, anthropology, military strategy, architecture, industry, agriculture, fine arts, and poetry.<sup>4</sup>

If God has actually called you to do a particular job, then he will do for you what he did for Jeremiah: He will give you everything you need to do that job. If you think you know what the Lord wants you to do with your life, get busy, trusting him to give you the grace to answer his call.

### **A Dangerous Commission**

Once God had issued his divine call and dealt with his dubious candidate, he gave him a dangerous commission: "You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you" ([Jeremiah 1:7-8](#)).

Frankly, that sounds a little ominous! God does not spell things out, but it is easy to tell that Jeremiah's job will be dangerous. Telling someone "Do not be afraid" is the kind of advice that tends to have the opposite effect than the one intended. The more people tell you not to be afraid, the more you start to wonder what you ought to be afraid of! It is like the king who sent one of his knights off to rescue his fair princess. Just as the knight rode away from the castle, and just as the drawbridge was closing behind him, the king yelled down from the ramparts, "Don't be afraid of the dragon!" "Dragon? What dragon? You didn't say anything about dragons!"

God's promise to rescue Jeremiah is also a bit worrisome. Rescued from what? The promise suggests that the prophet will fall into grave danger. God does not promise that Jeremiah has nothing to fear or that he will not need to be rescued. But he does command him not to be afraid, and he does promise to rescue him.

The reason Jeremiah did not need to be afraid was that he had the promise of God's presence. The Lord gave him the same promise he made to Moses, to Joshua, and to all his children: "I will be with you."

Once there was a man who understood the danger of the prophet's commission and the comfort of God's presence. He was an evangelist God used to bring renewal to the Colombian church during the 1980s and 1990s. Since he was an enemy of the drug cartels,

his life was in constant danger, until he was finally gunned down by assassins. Yet shortly before he died, he said, “I know that I am absolutely immortal until I have finished the work that God intends for me to do.” God’s servants are indeed immortal until they have completed their service.

Not only did Jeremiah have God’s presence at his side, he also had God’s words on his lips: “Then the Lord reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, ‘Now, I have put my words in your mouth’” ([Jeremiah 1:9](#)). This is another connection between Jeremiah and Moses. God promised that he would raise up a prophet for his people like Moses: “I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him” ([Deuteronomy 18:18](#)).

Whenever Jeremiah spoke in God’s name, God was the one doing the talking. Who wrote the book of Jeremiah? From one point of view, it contains the words of Jeremiah, as the Scripture says: “The words of Jeremiah son of Hilkiah” ([Jeremiah 1:1](#)). From another point of view, however, these are the words of God himself: “The word of the Lord came to him” (v. 2).

The Bible is never embarrassed to speak this way. There is a meaningful sense in which the words of Jeremiah are recorded in the pages of the Old Testament. The book of Jeremiah gives us a glimpse of the personality and experiences of the man, Jeremiah. But at the same time the Holy Spirit is the One who breathed out the words of the book of Jeremiah. “Prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” ([2 Peter 1:21](#)). The book of Jeremiah is God’s words and Jeremiah’s words. When we read them, we do not just see God through Jeremiah’s lens; God speaks to us directly.

The reason Jeremiah has authority “over nations and kingdoms” ([Jeremiah 1:10](#)) is that he is not speaking on his own behalf. God is sovereign over the nations, and he rules them by his Word. When prophets speak in his name they are mightier than kings. When preachers preach according to God’s Word they are mightier than presidents.

Once when I was interviewed by a pastoral search committee, I was asked if I was easily intimidated. (The church was frequented by scholars and other learned individuals.) “Would you feel comfortable preaching to so-and-so?” I was asked. Before taking time to think about my answer, I blurted out, “Yes, I’d preach to the Queen of England.”

I think it was a good answer. God rules the nations of this world by his Word. Those who have been appointed to preach that Word have a spiritual authority over the nations. The Lord instructed Jeremiah to be a bold prophet, not because of his preaching ability or because of his age and experience, but because he was called to speak God’s own words.

### **A Depressing Conclusion**

It was not always easy for Jeremiah to speak God’s words. His commission was not only dangerous, it was often depressing. We have already been given a clue that the book of Jeremiah does not have a happy ending. It ends with the people of Jerusalem being sent into exile. Thus the book of Jeremiah is a tragedy rather than a comedy. It is about the unraveling of a nation. It is the sad story of the decline of God’s people from faith to idolatry to exile.

It is this decline that makes Jeremiah a prophet for post-Christian times. He lived in a time very much like our own, when people no longer think God matters for daily life. Public life is

increasingly dominated by pagan ideas and rituals. Some people still meet their religious obligations, but they do so out of duty rather than devotion.

The spiritual problems we face at the dawn of the twenty-first century were the same problems that Jeremiah found depressing 2,500 years ago. The discouragement of his ministry is evident from the verbs God uses to describe it: “See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant” ([Jeremiah 1:10](#)). The prophet’s job description includes six tasks, and four of them are negative. Two to one, his words to the nations will be words of judgment.

“To uproot” is to dig up nations by the roots and turn them under. It is a word that Jeremiah uses more than all the other biblical writers combined, often to describe the uprooting of idols (e.g. [Jeremiah 12:14-17](#)). To “tear down” is to tear down a standing structure, like knocking down a city wall or toppling a tower. “To destroy” is another word for knocking things down. To “overthrow” is to demolish, to bring to complete ruin.

Once the Lord uproots, tears down, destroys, and overthrows a nation, there is not much left. There is a great deal of that kind of judgment in the rest of Jeremiah’s book. This verse is not only Jeremiah’s job description, it is also a helpful plot-summary of his book. He lives in such evil days that judgment will outnumber grace two to one.

But grace will have the last word. When the cities of evil have been torn down and plowed under, God will start afresh. He will begin a new work. He will “build” and he will “plant.” He will bring renewal out of demolition.

This is God’s plan for the kingdoms of this world (cf. [Jeremiah 18:7-10](#)). He is the one who is in charge of the beginnings and endings of history. He is the one who uproots some nations and plants others. He is the one who tears down some kingdoms and rebuilds others.

This is also God’s plan for salvation in Jesus Christ. Jesus said, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days” ([John 2:19](#)). The temple of Jesus’ body was uprooted and torn down from the cross. It was destroyed and overthrown to the grave. But God built and planted resurrection life into the body of Jesus Christ.

Now God builds and plants that same resurrection power into the life of every believer. First the Holy Spirit uproots and tears down sin in your heart, and then he plants faith and builds obedience into your life. Like Jeremiah, you were a dubious candidate at the beginning. Yet God has known you from all eternity, and he has set you apart for new life in Christ.

If God has done all that for you, will you go wherever he tells you to go, and say whatever he wants you to say, even if it turns out to be a dangerous commission?

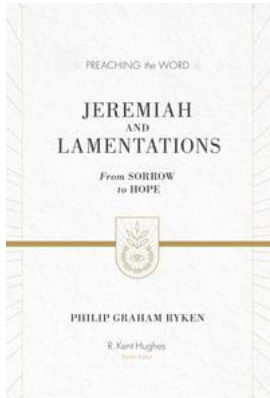
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## Notes

1. Eugene H. Peterson, *Run with the Horses: The Quest for Life at Its Best* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1983), p. 38.
2. F. B. Meyer, *Jeremiah: Priest and Prophet*, rev. ed. (Fort Washington, PA: Christian Literature Crusade, 1993), p. 17.
3. J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), p. 70.

4. R. E. O. White, *The Indomitable Prophet: A Biographical Commentary on Jeremiah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), pp. 4-5.

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Taken from [Jeremiah and Lamentations: From Sorrow to Hope](#) by Philip Graham Ryken. Used by permission of Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers, Wheaton, IL 60187, [www.crossway.org](http://www.crossway.org).

While the book of Jeremiah shared the last, desperate days of the Jerusalem the prophet loved, Lamentations expresses the cries of his heart. Yet they reveal more than the prophet's grief—they are an attempt to reflect on the meaning of human suffering. Lamentations gives voice to the deepest agonies, with the hope that some comfort may come from crying out to God for mercy. Together the two books illustrate the eternal principle that man reaps what he sows.

<https://www.biblestudytools.com/bible-study/topical-studies/jeremiah-answering-the-call.html>



HOLMAN  
*Old*  
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Commentary



*Jeremiah, Lamentations*

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# *Introduction to*

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## **Jeremiah**

English historian Lord Macaulay wrote:

It is difficult to conceive any situation more painful than that of a great man, condemned to watch the lingering agony of an exhausted country, to tend it during the alternate fits of stupefaction and raving which precede its destruction, and to see the symptoms of vitality disappear one by one, till nothing is left but coldness, darkness, and corruption.

Yet Jeremiah of Anathoth found this exact fate thrust upon him! All of the Old Testament prophets ministered during crisis periods in their nation's history. Jeremiah, however, faced not only personal opposition and emotional trauma but physical discomfort and pain as well. Like our Savior, Jeremiah grieved over the sins of his people. The prophet wore these scars as badges of bravery, credentials of consecration, and tokens of triumph. Jeremiah combined in his life and ministry the salient features of both our Redeemer and his greatest interpreter.

As you prepare your mind and heart to teach this book, you will find God sent more than a series of sermons to ancient Judah. He sent a man! In these fifty-two chapters you will meet a prophet who delivered God's message not just with his lips but with his heart and his life. May the Lord bless as you prepare to share his message with those whom you lead.

## **THE WORLD IN WHICH JEREMIAH LIVED**

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The prophets of Israel wore “two hats.” They foretold, but these men of God also served as “forthtellers.” With keen accuracy, inspired by the Spirit of God's holiness (Hebrew concept of Holy Spirit), they predicted events centuries before these happenings occurred. But these men of God did even more. They spoke to their own generation about the evils of society.

To interpret Jeremiah's sermons, one must know of the major movements and trends in the political and economic world of that day. In Judah five different kings sat on the throne during Jeremiah's forty-plus years of

ministry.

*Josiah* (639–608 B.C.), a good king who honored Yahweh and sought to do his will. Josiah brought reform and revival to the land, seeking the aid of Jeremiah in calling the people back to observance of the Mosaic law. But in his latter years he became involved in international politics. He tried to stop Egypt from going to help Assyria against Babylon at the Battle of Carchemish and met his death in 608 B.C. (2 Kgs. 22:1–23:30a; 2 Chr. 34:1–35:27).

*Jehoahaz* (reigned three months), son of Josiah. Jehoahaz was a wicked king whom the people put on the throne after Josiah's death. Neco, king of Egypt, deposed and imprisoned him and placed Jehoiakim, a second son of Josiah, on the throne (2 Kgs. 23:30b–33; 2 Chr. 36:1–3).

*Jehoiakim* (608–597 B.C.), son of Josiah, a wicked king. Jehoiakim was the opposite of his father in almost every way. He reversed all the godly policies of Josiah and made Jeremiah's life miserable. Reviving the pagan practices of Manasseh, a former king, Jehoiakim began the final process that led eventually to Jerusalem's destruction and captivity. In 597 B.C. Nebuchadnezzar, Babylon's king, unseated, imprisoned, and probably killed him (2 Kgs. 23:34–24:5; 2 Chr. 36:4–8).

*Jehoiachin* (reigned three months), son of Jehoiakim. Jehoiachin followed Jeremiah's advice and surrendered to Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar imprisoned Jehoiachin in Babylon but treated him well. Thirty-seven years later, Evil-Merodach, then king of Babylon, released him. He also gave Jehoiachin a stipend and a degree of dignity for the rest of his life (2 Kgs. 24:6–16; 25:27–30; 2 Chr. 36:9–10).

*Zedekiah* (597–586 B.C.), third son of Josiah to rule over Judah. Zedekiah was weak and compromising. He vacillated between doing God's will as he received it from Jeremiah and following the demands of people who controlled him. During Zedekiah's reign, Nebuchadnezzar invaded Judah and Jerusalem three times (605, 597, 586 B.C.). On the third and final invasion, he destroyed the temple, burned the city, and carried all but a few people into captivity (2 Kgs. 24:17–25:21; 2 Chr. 36:11–21).

## **DATES AND EVENTS**

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To study the Book of Jeremiah effectively, one needs to keep in perspective several important events that occurred during the prophet's ministry.

639 B.C.: Accession of Josiah to Judah's throne.

621 B.C.: Cleansing of temple and discovery of law book, probably the Book of Deuteronomy or portions of it. Beginning of great reformation.

608 B.C.: Battle of Megiddo. Death of Josiah.

608 B.C.: Accession of Jehoiakim to Judah's throne after the brief reign of Jehoahaz.

605 B.C.: Battle of Carchemisch. Babylon defeats Assyria, who was probably helped by Egyptian forces. Assyrian Empire absorbed into Babylonian Empire.

605 B.C.: First invasion of Judah and Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar.

597 B.C.: Second invasion of Judah and Jerusalem. Death of Jehoiakim. Nebuchadnezzar takes ten thousand captives, mostly skilled workers, to Babylon.

597 B.C.: Accession of Jehoiachin to throne of Judah. After three months, he surrenders to Nebuchadnezzar and is carried to Babylon.

597 B.C.: Accession of Zedekiah to Judah's throne.

586 B.C.: Third invasion of Judah and Jerusalem. Temple burned and city destroyed. Almost all remaining inhabitants carried to Babylon. Jeremiah given his choice to go to Babylon or remain in Judah with the few people left there; he chooses the latter. Later, Nebuchadnezzar appoints Gedaliah as governor of those still in the land of Judah. Ishmael kills Gedaliah. A remnant flees to Egypt and forces Jeremiah to accompany them. Last recorded account of Jeremiah is in Egypt.

## **CHRONOLOGICAL ARRANGEMENT OF JEREMIAH'S LIFE AND PROPHECIES**

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A person who approaches the Book of Jeremiah will soon notice its lack of chronological arrangement. For its readers, it is a “jigsaw puzzle” that requires careful attention. The book contains prophetic discourses, biographical material, and historical narratives, arranged without apparent chronological sequence. The fifty-two chapters cover a period of more than forty years. It seems impossible to detect any principle of arrangement. As a result, those who attempt to read the book straight through may find themselves in a state of confusion.

The material begins with an account of the prophet's call and earlier prophecies. The successive chapters, however, wander hither and thither over the long and rugged course of Jeremiah's active life. Without warning, the scene shifts. The same chapter may contain sections that belong to widely different periods in the prophet's ministry. In other sections, the reader may not find any specific indication about the situation or period of the prophet's life reflected in the portion he is reading.

As an illustration of the chronological disorder, consider some of the chapters that are definitely dated in the text. Chapters 21 and 24 are designated as occurring during the reign of Zedekiah. Chapter 25, on the other hand, though appearing later in the text, is dated "in the fourth year of Jehoiakim ... king of Judah." Chapters 27 and 28 belong to Zedekiah's reign, but chapters 35 and 36 go back to the time of Jehoiakim. The latter chapter goes as far back as the fourth year of that king. The Jewish captives carried to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar are addressed in words of comfort several chapters before the announcement by Jeremiah to Jehoiakim that the event was about to happen. The prophecies relating to the foreign nations form the bulk of the book's latter portion. Most of them were delivered long before the final overthrow of Jerusalem and Judah.

Chapters 26–45, for the most part, contain biographical material. Normally one would expect that if any kind of writing should be chronological, it would be biographical data. But the last chapter in the "Biography of Jeremiah" contains the description of an event that occurred at least twenty-one years earlier than those in the immediately preceding chapter.

When the writer of this commentary began graduate work, his major professor came to him with a suggestion. He said, "We need a doctoral thesis dealing with the chronology of Jeremiah's book. The problem with all works of this type is that the writers end up denying some of the material was written by Jeremiah. We need someone who holds to the integrity of Jeremiah's authorship with reference to the entire book. Yet we want this writer to do an objective and exhaustive study of the background related to every passage in the book. Would you accept the assignment?"

The product of a three-year study by this writer was a thesis entitled "A Chronological Reconstruction of the Life and Prophecies of Jeremiah." Part of the thesis was to arrange the prophecies and other material in chronological sequence. Another result was to investigate why the material in the book is not in chronological order. The conclusion was that the book is a collection of

separate documents dealing with Jeremiah's ministry. They were gathered either by Jeremiah himself; by Baruch, his secretary (see chs. 36 and 45); or by someone else. They were placed side by side to form the present canonical book, but no effort was made to integrate them into chronological order.

## **SUMMARY OF JEREMIAH'S CAREER**

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Most Old Testament students agree that Jeremiah was called to be a prophet in 626 B.C. They do not know his age at the time. He called himself a “child” (Jer. 1:6). The normal Old Testament meaning of the word translated “child” is a young boy. Other meanings of the word are lad, youth. While admittedly the word is used in the Old Testament for Joshua when he was forty-five years of age (Exod. 33:11), the subsequent ministry of Jeremiah leads us to believe that Jeremiah was a very young man.

When God called Jeremiah to be a prophet “to the nations,” Judah's light was flickering, and the entire region of which Judah was a part was in turmoil. During the prophetic ministry of Isaiah (740–700 B.C.), the nation had almost gone under. Because good king Hezekiah had taken his troubles to the Lord's house and spread them before him, however, God delivered his people.

But that was another day and another century. Hezekiah's good reign had been followed by fifty-five years of Judah's most wicked king—Manasseh. During his reign, Manasseh sought to undo all the good Hezekiah had done through his religious reforms. He brought the land to a worse condition than when Joshua led the Israelites into the land of Canaan.

In the eighteenth year of his reign, Josiah launched a reformation, based on a book of the law discovered in the temple when it was being cleansed. It was probably the Book of Deuteronomy or a part of it. The young prophet enthusiastically supported the king. Later, however, when Josiah's reform movement turned into a nationalistic crusade rather than a spiritual movement, Jeremiah became disillusioned.

In 608 B.C., Egypt under Pharaoh Neco started north to aid Assyria against Babylon in a battle at Carchemisch. Josiah and his army tried to stop Egypt at Megiddo, and Josiah was killed. The people of the land chose Jehoahaz, son of Josiah, as king. But Neco deposed him and placed Jehoiakim, another son of Josiah, on the throne. That's when Jeremiah's severe troubles began.

Jehoiakim was one of the most wicked men ever to sit on Judah's throne.

He exploited the people unmercifully for his personal gain. In addition, he led the people to reestablish the pagan religious practices of Manasseh's day. Jeremiah opposed Jehoiakim. After the prophet's famous temple sermon (chs. 7 and 26), Jehoiakim banished him from the temple area.

Following God's orders, Jeremiah wrote in a book (36:1–32) the messages he had delivered since the beginning of his ministry. When it was brought to Jehoiakim's attention, he cut it to pieces and burned it. Jeremiah rewrote it and added more. This is the first record we have of Jeremiah's prophecies being gathered for future generations. Jeremiah continued his preaching during Jehoiakim's reign. His messages grew increasingly pessimistic about Judah's future.

In 605 B.C., the third year of Jehoiakim's reign, Babylon defeated the combined forces of Assyria and Egypt at Carchemisch. Having become master of that region, Nebuchadnezzar immediately invaded Judah and Jerusalem. He carried a number of captives to Babylon. In addition, he levied an annual tribute or tax on Jehoiakim and Judah. During this time, Jeremiah continued to preach but could not come into the temple area.

In 597 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar made a second visit to Jerusalem. This time he came to punish Jehoiakim for withholding tribute money. He carried ten thousand captives to Babylon. They were mostly the leadership of the land and skilled workers. Jehoiakim met his death during this chaotic period, and his son Jehoiachin became king. The young monarch submitted to Babylon, was taken to Babylon, and was treated kindly for his cooperation with Nebuchadnezzar. Zedekiah, a third son of Josiah, became king. He ruled until the final fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.

Zedekiah's main problem was his indecisiveness. From all appearances, this king wanted to do right. His deficiency of character lay in his inability to do what his better self told him was for his country's political and spiritual good. Zedekiah ran first to one group and then to another. He seemed incapable of making a decision and standing by it. As he began reigning, he took an oath of allegiance to Babylon, but the pro-Egyptian party would not let him enjoy peace of mind. Rather than fulfill his vow and hold fast his loyalty to Babylon, Zedekiah chose another course. He sought to determine which action was politically expedient. This policy eventually resulted in national suicide.

During the early years of Zedekiah's reign, Jeremiah's task was twofold. He sought to convince the people who remained in Judah that the future of the Jewish nation lay in those who had been carried into Babylon. Second, he

insisted that those in Babylon should settle down for a long captivity, but he promised the nation would eventually be restored to their land.

At first, Zedekiah allowed Jeremiah freedom and even came to him for advice. The prophet advised surrender to Babylon. But Zedekiah chose to obey the strong nationalists who demanded that he hold out against the enemy. Babylon, however, refused to let up on Judah. Late in Zedekiah's reign, Nebuchadnezzar threw a siege around Jerusalem that, with one brief respite, lasted for more than eighteen months.

The major crisis of Jeremiah's life and ministry was the siege of Jerusalem. In the siege, the prophet of God was brought to the level of his people. He shared their dangers and duties, their heartaches, and hunger. If his faith did not waver and his judgment remained mature, his opportunities for service were great.

As events unfolded, Jeremiah's crisis grew progressively worse. The siege was temporarily interrupted because of the approaching Egyptian army. Jeremiah left the city and started for his home, Anathoth, a few miles away, to transact some personal business. He was accused of deserting to the Babylonians and arrested. At first, he was more or less under house arrest in the "courtyard of the guard" (37:21).

Later, Jeremiah was thrown into a dungeon. This was actually an underground cistern. An Ethiopian eunuch rescued him. Jeremiah then persuaded Zedekiah to put him back in the "courtyard of the guard" (38:13). He remained there until Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians.

Drained and desolate, Jerusalem's day of destruction finally arrived. The Babylonian army broke through the wall. King Zedekiah fled. The Babylonian army caught him in the plains of Jericho. They sent him to King Nebuchadnezzar. The Babylonians killed the king's sons, executed the leaders, put out Zedekiah's eyes, and carried him in chains to Babylon.

What about the people? Nebuzaradan, captain of the Babylonian guard, carried them to Babylon. He left only the poor of the land and gave them the vineyards and fields to tend as vassals of Babylon. These events and other details are found in 39:1–10 and 52:1–34. The latter is a historical appendix added to the book containing an account of Jerusalem's fall. The same material in 52:1–34 is found also in 2 Kings 24:18–25:30.

What about Jeremiah's future? One final chapter of his ministry awaited him. Chapters 40–44 contain the remaining record about the life of Jeremiah. The material is chronological with the exception of 39:15–18, which is the



promise made to Ebed-Melech, the Ethiopian eunuch who rescued Jeremiah from the dungeon.

This was a difficult period for Jeremiah. He faced a traumatic emotional adjustment when he saw the temple go up in flames. Jeremiah loved the temple. He had condemned it only because of the perverted worship that had been carried on in it.

When Nebuchadnezzar captured Jerusalem, he commanded his general, Nebuzaradan, to release Jeremiah. The prophet was committed to Gedaliah, the Babylonian governor of Judah, and he lived with his own people. Jeremiah was later given a choice. He could go to Babylon and be treated favorably, or he could stay with the people who remained in Judah. He preferred to remain with his people.

Later chapters tell of the prophet's further difficulties. Conspiracy seized the land. Gedaliah was murdered by Ishmael. Johanan then became the people's leader. Chapter 42 tells how the people decided they would go to Egypt. Under the guise of seeking advice, they went to Jeremiah. Actually, they wanted a confirmation of their decision.

Jeremiah told the people they had no need to fear the Babylonians, and he advised them to remain in Judah. They ignored his advice and went in a group to Egypt. The last picture we have of Jeremiah is his brief ministry with the people in Egypt. He continued to warn the people of coming judgment because they had rejected God's will.

## **JEREMIAH THE MAN**

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Jeremiah's greatest teachings came out of his heart. Early in his ministry he was alarmed because he felt certain judgment was coming immediately. He spoke of being in pain: "Oh, the agony of my heart! My heart pounds within me, I cannot keep silent" (4:19). When reform swept the land, he was carried away with its enthusiasm. But he snapped back to reality at the death of Josiah and saw the tragedy of a nation deceived by a shallow religious program.

The bitter days of Jehoiakim's ungodly reign brought a rapid maturity to the prophet. During those days he learned the true meaning of prayer. The prophet discovered through his prayer life the world's chief problem is a heart "deceitful above all things and beyond cure" (17:9). He came to possess in his heart a fire shut up in his bones that made holding back from delivering the divine message an impossibility.

During the time of Zedekiah, Jeremiah urged the captives in Babylon to submit to and support their captors. With the group left in Judah, he pleaded for surrender to the invading army. The prophet was convinced that Judah's hope for the future did not lie in seeking to defend a country guided by a corrupt leadership. It consisted rather in finding Yahweh by seeking him with their whole heart (29:13).

The destruction of Jerusalem and the burning of the temple prepared Jeremiah to understand a truth he had partially understood throughout his ministry: fellowship with God is the greatest good. As he absorbed this truth into his ministry, he could speak authoritatively of the divine ideal. It is a community of people on whose hearts God's will is written (31:33).

Underlying all of Jeremiah's thinking and preaching was his faith in the future. Even when Jerusalem was surrounded by the Babylonian army, he purchased a piece of property in nearby Anathoth. By doing this, he affirmed, "Houses, fields and vineyards will again be bought in this land" (32:15).

## **COMMENTARY ON JEREMIAH**

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This commentary is designed for those who teach the Word of God to laypersons. For that reason, we will avoid some of the issues that scholars deal with when they approach Jeremiah.

Few writers approach the Book of Jeremiah from a chronological standpoint. This approach requires an exposition of the material in a way that traces the spiritual development of Jeremiah's life as he served and preached. This commentary will make a concentrated effort to do this very thing. It will present each Scripture passage against the background of the time and the occasion when it was delivered. This will be done in order to show the prophet's growth from a young zealous, almost fanatical prophet, to a mature, godly statesman. But he remained unyielding in his convictions and refused to compromise his message. This approach will require some subjective decisions. No claim is made for absolute certainty in every case.

The study will be based on an unqualified acceptance of the words often spoken by Robert G. Lee about both the Old and New Testaments. He described the Bible as "supernatural in origin, divine in authorship, human in penmanship, infinite in scope, inspired in totality." The fact that we find progress in Jeremiah's understanding of God's will and purpose in no way dilutes his authority at any stage of his prophetic career.

At the close of this book, you will find a bibliography. It lists a number of

works you are encouraged to explore. These books will increase your appreciation for the prophet whom many people consider the greatest in the of Old Testament.

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Q u o t e

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**“**It is most comfortable to stride unknown through the world, without being known to His Majesty the King... . To be known by God in time makes life so acutely strenuous. Wherever He is, there every half hour is of tremendous importance. But to live in that manner is not endurable for sixty years.”

Soren Kierkegaard



**I N A N U T S H E L L**

*When God called Jeremiah to be a prophet, he told Jeremiah he had known him since before Jeremiah was formed in his mother's womb. Before the prophet was born, God had a plan and ministry for him. Jeremiah attempted to avoid God's call to service, but God addressed his inadequacies and spoke directly to his fear. Then the Lord made a threefold promise and issued a threefold challenge to the prophet.*

# Jeremiah's Calling to a Twofold Task

## I. INTRODUCTION

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### Nothing Ever Happens Around Here

**J**ohn McCutchen, the famous illustrator, drew a cartoon for the one-hundredth anniversary of Abraham Lincoln's birth. The drawing shows two men standing on the edge of a snow-covered forest in Kentucky on a cold February morning in 1809. A man in the general store asks, "What's the news around here?" The other man answers, "Nothing much. Oh, there's a new baby over at Tom Lincoln's. That's all. Nothing ever happens around here" (Grant, *The Way of the Cross*, 137–38).

Many important events in history began with the birth of a baby. The names of Isaac, Samuel, Samson, John the Baptist, and Jesus quickly come to mind. But the account of Jeremiah's call takes us back to before his birth—to his development in his mother's womb. Indeed, the story goes even farther back—back to the mind of God.

## II. COMMENTARY

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### Jeremiah's Calling to a Twofold Task

**MAIN IDEA:** *The days demanded a forceful messenger from God warning his people of imminent danger. To function effectively, he must possess a twofold nature—conviction and compassion for the task of destroying and rebuilding.*

#### **The Time of Jeremiah's Call (1:1–8)**

**SUPPORTING IDEA:** *Timing plays a vital role in everything. Jeremiah was a man for whom the time was ready.*

**1:1.** Jeremiah came from the priestly family of Hilkiah, one of the priests at Anathoth. An old cliché says that a person who wants to train a boy to become a man should begin with his grandfather. The spiritual roots of Jeremiah, however, go back at least three centuries before his grandfather.

The history of this priestly family dates back to the time of David and Solomon.

Anathoth was located in the small territory possessed by the Benjamites. This put Jeremiah in the same geographical family as Saul, the first king of Israel. It also identified him genealogically with Saul of Tarsus, the persecutor, who became the great Christian apostle. This tribe's territory included a small amount of land, stretching only about twenty-six miles in length and twelve miles in width. Judah bounded it on the south and Ephraim on the north. Jeremiah's home lay about three or four miles northeast of Jerusalem.

**1:2–3.** God called Jeremiah to be a prophet in the thirteenth year of Josiah's thirty-nine-year reign. This means the prophet received his call in 626 B.C. According to the Scriptures, he prophesied until the eleventh year of Zedekiah's reign.

Jeremiah's prophetic ministry, therefore, spanned at least forty years. He served as both an official and an authentic messenger of Yahweh until the destruction of both the temple and the city. But he did not cease to minister as a prophet when the city of Jerusalem fell. When some of the survivors migrated to Egypt, Jeremiah went with them. We have no record of how long he remained as spiritual advisor and counselor for the people or even whether he remained in Egypt.

**1:4–5.** At this point the record changes from a third-person account, which might be labeled as a title introduction, to an autobiographical version. The prophet told of the call in his own words. A sudden change of person takes place frequently in the book. It occurs most often in Jeremiah's prophetic oracles. One has difficulty determining when the prophet is speaking and when the words are directly from Yahweh. The prophet so identified with Yahweh that his word actually became Jeremiah's word.

According to Jeremiah 1:5, God had been at work in the life of Jeremiah before he was born—indeed, before he was even conceived. A series of four verbs points to God's work before Jeremiah's birth: God **formed** him, **knew** him, set him **apart**, and **appointed** him. The biblical teaching is consistent and constant: God is involved in the forming and shaping of the preborn in the womb. Job testified to this truth (Job 10:8–12). But nowhere is it stated more eloquently than by David in Psalm 139:14–16. God personally weaves the preborn child together in the secret place of the womb. He causes the development of the bodily frame.

But more than just forming the preborn, God said to Jeremiah, **I knew you**. A careful reading of verse 5 indicates the knowing actually came before the forming: **Before I formed you in the womb I knew you**. God took an interest in and had an intimate knowledge of Jeremiah even before the first cells and sinews began to develop. There is more. For Jeremiah, before he was born, God set him apart. God put Jeremiah in a special category. He was consecrated or sanctified to God's service. And then, still before he was born, God appointed Jeremiah to a particular service—to be a prophet for him, to be a prophet to the nations.

In verse 5, the Hebrew word translated “formed” is the same one used in Genesis 2:7. The root idea is to be straitened or distressed. From this comes the meaning of “to form, fashion, make.” Another derivation is “to devise, meditate.” The nouns *maker*, *creator*, and *potter* come from the participle form of this verb. As a composer constructing the instrument on which the music will be played, God created Jeremiah to be a spokesman for him.

The word translated “knew” has a broad usage. It indicates more than factual knowledge, meaning experiential knowledge as well as sexual intimacy. It is consistently used for physical intercourse. In this present context, the verb indicates a relationship. God chose Jeremiah and set him apart before he was born to share a special affinity with his Creator.

The expression “to the nations” poses no problem for the person who knows the political climate of that time. Jeremiah's call coincided with the death of Ashurbanipal, king of Assyria, and the beginning of Assyria's decline as the dominant power in the Middle East. Babylon, under Nabopolassar, was entering the struggle for world domination. Egypt was watching with hopeful eye the decadence of the Assyrian Empire. Jeremiah was called that year to be a prophet. How could one with the broad insight he would develop be anything less than a prophet “to the nations”?

**1:6–8.** The dialogue that took place between Jeremiah and Yahweh parallels in many ways that of Moses and Yahweh. Jeremiah, like the great Lawgiver, protested that he was not able to speak, but he also pointed out his tender age. Where Moses may have felt he was too old for such a task, Jeremiah felt he was too young.

The Hebrew word translated **child** covers a broad range. It is used of Moses when he was a baby (Exod. 2:6) and of Joshua when he was a seasoned soldier in his mid-forties (Exod. 33:11). The normal usage, however, is of a youth, a very young man.

Yahweh refused to accept Jeremiah's plea of inadequacy. He repeated his commission and command. He gave no opportunity for the young man to come up with other reasons for refusing to accept the assignment. God combined his mandate with a word that served as an assurance to Jeremiah: Do not be afraid ... for I am with you.

## **B** Yahweh's Touch on Jeremiah (1:9)

**SUPPORTING IDEA:** *The touch of God transforms mediocrity into excellence.*

**1:9.** All four of the major prophets received a divine touch, but two were transformed by it. Isaiah and Jeremiah present a marked contrast in the effect of God's touch in their call experience. Jeremiah did not respond as enthusiastically as Isaiah. Many writers have commented on the difference. Jeremiah did not volunteer for service. He was drafted. All his life, he remained an unwilling spokesman. The lad did not want to begin, and often he wanted to quit. But he had the marks of a true prophet: In one moment of despair, he said, "If I say, I will not make mention of him, nor speak any more in his name, then there is in my heart ... a burning fire shut up in my bones, and ... I cannot contain" (see Jer. 20:9 ASV).

The problem of Jeremiah differed from that of Isaiah. Both prophets received God's touch, but he had a different purpose for each. Yahweh touched Isaiah's mouth for cleansing. He was a young man with a consciousness of unclean lips. Yahweh touched Jeremiah's mouth for empowering. He was a child with a consciousness of inadequate lips.

The prophets Ezekiel and Daniel had similar experiences. The former was given a scroll with the message of God for the people. He was told to "open thy mouth, and eat that I give thee" (Ezek. 2:8 KJV). He did, and "it was in my mouth as honey for sweetness" (Ezek. 3:3 KJV). Daniel's experience came later in his ministry but was no less vivid and vital. In his vision of the son of man (Dan. 10), the prophet fell with his face to the ground when "one in the likeness of the sons of men touched my lips" (Dan. 10:16 ASV). All four major prophets thus received a divine touch. Isaiah for cleansing, Jeremiah for empowering, Ezekiel for food, Daniel for strength.

## **C** Yahweh's Task for Jeremiah (1:10)

**SUPPORTING IDEA:** *All effective work for the Lord consists of a twofold thrust—positive and negative.*

**1:10.** God next made Jeremiah's task explicit. It consisted of two essential



elements. He must **tear down**. He must **build up**. Good preaching is always thus divided. Today's secular world cries loudly and insistently for the "positive approach." It resents the condemnation of anyone who refuses to recognize the value of pluralism and diversity. But God called Jeremiah first to **uproot** and to **destroy and to overthrow**. Then, of course, he called him also to **build and to plant**.

### **D** The Tree's Message for Jeremiah (1:11–12)

**SUPPORTING IDEA:** *God's "got the whole world in his hand," and he never comes too early or too late.*

**1:11–12.** These verses give a beautiful interpretation, in metaphorical terms, of Yahweh's first specific words to the prophet. Jeremiah was in a rural section. As he walked along, he saw the bud of **an almond tree**. This was one of the first signs that spring was approaching. Yahweh asked, "Jeremiah, what do you see?" The lad replied, "A *shaqad*." The Hebrew word *shaqad* means "to be awake, keep watch." Its root also produces the word for "an almond tree." Yahweh replied, **You have seen correctly, for I am watching to see that my word is fulfilled.**

This message gave great assurance to Jeremiah. He understood that God is active in the affairs of history. He is willing to intervene to help his people. God is awake (*shaqed*) and watching (*shoqed*) over Judah's destiny.

Yahweh would make certain his word would not return void. It would be **fulfilled**. After a long spiritual freeze, Judah's springtime was approaching. God's activity was about to begin. It might be an activity of judgment or of mercy—depending on the people's response. God was ready to act—either for Judah's deliverance or doom.

### **E** The Boiling Pot's Warning for Judah (1:13–16)

**SUPPORTING IDEA:** *Judgment awaited Judah because of the people's rebellion against Yahweh and his moral requirements.*

**1:13–16.** Jeremiah was passing by a cottage. God directed his attention to a seething pot or boiling cauldron, a common object near every house. On three sides, stones stood in place. The fourth side remained open as a spot from which to feed the fuel. The pot tilted away **from the north**, that is, toward the south. Its scalding liquid contents were about to boil over. This showed that God intended to send fierce judgment on Judah.

What was the significance of "north" in the vision? The contour of the

land of Judah almost demanded that any invasion must come from the north. The adjacent land on the east and south was barren desert. On the west lay the Mediterranean Sea. Almost always invasion came from the north.

J. A. Thompson says, “Many of Israel's troubles had originally come from the north over the centuries, from the Philistines, the Assyrians, and the Arameans. The *north* was a symbol for dark powers often of uncertain origin” (p. 479). Robert Davidson agrees and adds, “The vision, and the expanded reference in verse 15 to 'all the people of the north and their kings,' do not clearly identify the northern peril. As Jeremiah's ministry progressed, however, it became even more clear that the foe from the north was to be identified with neo-Babylon empire.” We will discuss this subject more thoroughly in commentary material on subsequent chapters.

Verses 15 and 16 contain words conveying the same general thought as Yahweh's words through his prophet, Habakkuk. Jeremiah's contemporary said, “Look at the nations and watch—and be utterly amazed. For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told. I am raising up the Babylonians, that ruthless and impetuous people, who sweep across the whole earth to seize dwelling places not their own. They are a feared and dreaded people; they are a law to themselves and promote their own honor” (Hab. 1:5–7).

One undeniable truth comes to us from Yahweh's words to Jeremiah. Judah's God visits with stern punishment those who transgress his laws. Earlier prophets had spoken when hope of recovery still existed. But God called Jeremiah to a nation that had almost exhausted his patience. In the prophet's ministry, he would address people who were totally rebellious and facing complete disaster. The day called for every measure of effort to awaken, convince, and turn them back from the certain judgment that awaited such conduct. This advanced stage of moral deterioration called for severe messages and extreme action.

In this lesson from the boiling cauldron, Yahweh conveyed to his prophet a truth he remembered as long as he lived. Punishment is the inevitable consequence of sin. He regarded the nation's coming calamities as the visitations of God. But he did not think of Yahweh as just a vengeful deity who rejoices in vindicating his majesty through the discomforts of his people. Jeremiah understood punishment as an integral part of God's moral character.

Yahweh and Jeremiah both knew this message of impending disaster would not be a popular one for that day. Jeremiah must accept the fact that he was not to court popularity or be concerned with the nation's political future.

He was to be God's prophet, and he must deliver God's message regardless of the cost.

## **■ Yahweh's Promise of Eventual Triumph (1:17–19)**

**SUPPORTING IDEA:** *Jeremiah's greatest legacy would be not his personal fame but his dedicated faithfulness.*

**1:17–19.** These two visions were “strong meat” for a small lad. We can easily understand why he recoiled and insisted he was not equal to the task. But Yahweh's concluding words assured him of divine resources for the struggle. Yahweh declared, **Get yourself ready! Stand up and say to them whatever I command you. ... Do not be terrified by them, or I will terrify you before them... . They will fight against you but will not overcome you, for I am with you and will rescue you.**

Again, the call of Isaiah comes to mind as a contrast. Isaiah was cautioned against optimism while Jeremiah was comforted against pessimism. Isaiah was told he would fail. But he succeeded in a sense because Jerusalem was saved from Assyria's armies, to a large extent because of his ministry. Jeremiah was told he would succeed. But he failed in a sense because Jerusalem fell to the Babylonian armies, in spite of his ministry and his warnings. In his last days, though, Jeremiah was a hero, and he probably died a peaceful death in Egypt.

Yahweh prefaced his remarks to Jeremiah with a command, followed by a warning. “Strip yourself for action. And do not be paralyzed with fright before them, or I will make you paralyzed with fright before them.” This meant whatever attitude Jeremiah took when the enemy came against him, Yahweh would intensify and make it of an even greater degree. “Be strong and I will strengthen you more. Grovel before them, and I will make you grovel even more.” This sounded like a harsh warning, but it was realistic. If Jeremiah panicked when opposition arose, he would be totally discredited. As Yahweh said to Joshua, so Yahweh said to Jeremiah, “Be strong and of good courage” (Josh. 1:6 NKJV).

In verses 18 and 19 God made a threefold promise to Jeremiah. First, God promised to strengthen the prophet. In this promise God used three comparisons. He promised to make the prophet like **a fortified city, an iron pillar and a bronze wall**. The first of these images speaks of a city with high walls and strong towers that render it inaccessible and impenetrable. Against it even great multitudes would battle in vain. The second term points to Jeremiah as a man of steel. He would be firm and unmovable, a tower of

strength. The third term, “a bronze wall,” involves the toughest metal known to the ancients. Bronze was an alloy of copper and tin, not an alloy of copper and zinc, like modern brass. Jeremiah would not be a wall of wood, which fire could burn down, or a wall of stone, which battering rams could knock down. He would be solid bronze, against which all weapons were ineffective.

Second, God promised Jeremiah, **They will fight against you but will not overcome you.** The prophet was to go to the front in a war zone. He would be under constant attack by seemingly overwhelming forces. But God assured Jeremiah that his side would win.

Third, God promised the prophet, **I am with you and will rescue you.** God did not promise to keep Jeremiah from experiencing difficult times; the Lord promised to be with Jeremiah as he faced difficulties from **the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests and the people of the land.** Notice the pronouns. God said it would be “they” against “you,” but “I” who would be with “you.” *They* would be many and powerful. *You*, Jeremiah, by nature are weak, frail, and alone. But I, the invincible Lord, will be with you and will rescue you.

To obey Yahweh's summons to service meant Jeremiah would plow a lonely furrow, with almost every segment of Judah's society against him. He was destined to learn later that he would not even have a wife to serve as companion and comforter.

In verse 19, Yahweh used a strong verb translated **rescue** to indicate the extent of his involvement with his prophet's need. It is the same one used to describe his promise to deliver Moses from the clutches of a powerful foe who would try to destroy him (Exod. 3:8; 18:4,8–10).

Yahweh's call made clear to Jeremiah that he must give up any thought of prosperity, popularity, or fame. Every prophet in every generation succeeds only if he is faithful in declaring God's will to the people of his own time.

Yahweh's call to Jeremiah was a real summons to a real world. The record of it is not just the recital of a dialogue; it is the description of a dynamic and authentic encounter with God. The account stands with moral authority as a certification of Jeremiah's right to speak for God. These words have meaning for us today. God is alive and active in the world in our generation. He is at work in nature as seen in the almond tree and at work in history as shown by the boiling pot. He is at work in human hearts as proven in the life of the young prophet.

**MAIN IDEA REVIEW:** *The days demanded a forceful*

*messenger from God warning his people of imminent danger. To function effectively, he must possess a twofold nature—conviction and compassion for the task of destroying and rebuilding.*

### **III. CONCLUSION**

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#### **GOD'S LAST VOICE TO A DYING NATION**

In every crisis God has one or more voices that stand out above the crowd calling the people to repentance. He has never left himself without a witness. In every generation, he calls on people to forsake their sinful lifestyles and, by doing so, delay the coming judgment.

When the people were slaves in Egypt, God raised up Moses to bring words of assurance and supernatural deeds that led to deliverance. During the Philistine crisis, Samuel served as Yahweh's spokesman. He was the last of Israel's judges. And, though not the first to be called a prophet, he began the prophetic movement in Israel.

The last generation before Jerusalem's fall, however, produced one who, in many ways, was the greatest prophetic word of all. For forty years, Jeremiah exhorted, warned, begged, implored, and pleaded with his fellow countrymen to turn from their spiritual harlotry. When they refused, he called for peaceful surrender to Babylon, the nation God had chosen as his agent of discipline. His counsel was rejected, and as a result Judah paid a great price—seventy years of exile in a foreign land.

Jeremiah shared many of the common characteristics of his fellow prophets. He was also unique. Midway in his ministry, he suffered a midlife crisis. This was brought about, in many ways, by his complex personality. Tough-minded but tenderhearted, Jeremiah was the most introspective of all the prophets. He dared to dialogue, even debate, with God. This great man never wanted to preach. Only the fire shut up in his bones kept him from quitting.

#### **PRINCIPLES**

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- God is involved in the forming and developing of the preborn in the womb.
- Too often, when God calls people, they respond with excuses

emphasizing their weaknesses rather than relying on his strength.

- When God calls people to his service, he equips them for the task.
- The main reason people are slow to respond to God's call is fear.
- Those who serve God sometimes must tear down what needs to be removed before they can build and plant the new.
- God is aware of what is going on in his world and how people are responding to his message.
- Those who speak for God do not speak on their own authority but God's.
- Those who declare God's Word can expect opposition.
- God promises to be with his servants who obediently serve him.

## **APPLICATIONS**

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- Consider the issue of abortion in light of God's knowing and having a purpose for persons even before they are conceived.
- Write a brief description of how you now understand God's plan for your own life.
- List some reasons you have offered God to avoid his call to service.
- Evaluate the validity of those reasons.
- Make a comparison of your inadequacies with God's adequacy.
- Describe circumstances in which God has called on people to tear down what is in opposition to God's ways.
- Recall words of positive rebuilding you have recently spoken.
- List some people you have known who faced opposition for upholding or declaring God's word.
- Evaluate the extent to which you rely on the Lord's promise that he is with you.

## **IV. LIFE APPLICATION**

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### **Responding to God's Call**

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, was born into the home of a devout high-church Anglican minister in Epworth, England, in 1703.

When John was six years old, the rectory at Epworth caught fire and

burned down. John appeared at a second-story window amid the flames and was rescued by neighbors. Thus from early childhood, Wesley felt the call of God was upon him. He referred to himself as “a brand plucked from the burning.”

At seventeen Wesley entered Oxford University. In 1726 he was elected a fellow of Lincoln College at the university. Two years later he was ordained to the Anglican ministry even though his own conversion—his Aldersgate Street experience—did not occur until May 24, 1738.

In the England of Wesley's day, conventicles, or meetings of small groups, were forbidden by an Act of Parliament. Church of England ministers preached only in churches, avoided emotional “enthusiasm,” and limited their ministry to their designated parishes. In February 1739, when George Whitefield began to preach in the open fields near Bristol to hardened coal miners who never darkened the door of a church, God blessed Whitefield's preaching, and many became believers. Whitefield pleaded with Wesley to come to Bristol and follow his lead of preaching in the open fields.

Wesley wrote in his journal for March 10, 1739: “I had no thought of leaving London, when I received ... a letter from Mr. Whitefield ... intreating me, in the most pressing manner, to come to Bristol without delay. This I was not at all forward to do, and perhaps a little less inclined to it.”

Wesley, who never dreamed of doing such open-air preaching, continued to struggle with accepting God's call. On March 29 he recorded: “I could scarce reconcile myself at first to this strange way of preaching in the fields ... having been all my life so tenacious of every point relating to decency and order, that I should have thought the saving of souls almost a sin, if it had not been done in a church.”

By June, Wesley had made a breakthrough. He accepted God's call. He wrote in his journal: “I looked upon all the world as my parish. ... I judge it ... my bounden duty, to declare unto all that are willing to hear, the glad tidings of salvation. This is the work which I know God has called me to; and sure I am, that his blessing attends it.”

From that time on Wesley preached to prisoners in jails, to wayfarers in inns, to passengers on ships, to people in fields and on hillsides. He proclaimed the Word of the Lord to small groups and to gatherings of thousands. During his lifetime he traveled 250,000 miles in England, Ireland, and Scotland—much of it on horseback—proclaiming God's Word. Indeed, the world was his parish!

Jeremiah, like John Wesley, was conscious of God's call upon his life from the time he was a child (vv. 6–7). Both men resisted God's call initially. Jeremiah's reason for resisting God's call turned out to be the same as John Wesley's—fear. And their reason turns out to be the same reason so many believers today resist God's call—fear. But our Lord has promised to be with us (Matt. 28:20). We should not be afraid to accept his call and the assignments he has for us. He supplies all we need to accomplish the work to which he calls us.

## **V. PRAYER**

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*Eternal God and Father, who knew us before we knew you, help us to respond to your call to service not with excuses but with readiness of heart and mind. Remove all our fears. Put your word in our mouths and make us bold to speak for you, knowing when to tear down and when to build up. May your name be praised in all nations. Amen.*

## **VI. DEEPER DISCOVERIES**

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### **A. Josiah, Son of Amon (1:2)**

Many Old Testament students consider Josiah, Judah's fifteenth king, as the nation's greatest king. Like Uzziah and Hezekiah, his zealous predecessors, he sought to restore Judah to the glory days of David. Josiah came to the throne at the age of eight, following the assassination of his father Amon (2 Kgs. 21:19–23; 2 Chr. 33:21–24), who reigned only two years.

In Josiah's eighteenth year, 621 B.C., a book of the law was discovered in the temple. Most scholars agree it was the Book of Deuteronomy or at least a part of it. He consulted with some of his religious advisors and learned how Judah had violated God's will as revealed in the book of the law. Using this book as his guide, Josiah began an extensive reform movement. Jeremiah, the young prophet, joined the king's team and promoted the program vigorously.

The Bible is silent for much of this period. It picks up again, however, with a reference to the king's military campaign against Egypt's Pharaoh Neco in 608 B.C. Josiah set out to engage Neco in battle as Neco rushed to help Assyria against Babylon. Josiah was killed, and Jeremiah lost a friend and spiritual ally.

Josiah left an enviable legacy. The sacred historian wrote, “Neither before nor after Josiah was there a king like him who turned to the LORD as he did



— with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his strength, in accordance with the Law of Moses” (2 Kgs. 23:25).

## **B. Prophet (1:5)**

Old Testament writers used three Hebrew words to denote those men of God who directed, encouraged, comforted, chided, and warned Israel for centuries. The first two words, *roeh* and *hozeh*, are translated “seer.” They are associated with the ecstatic group who preceded the mainline prophets designated by the Hebrew word *navi*.

Scholars disagree about the meaning of *navi*. Some claim it means “to effervesce.” Others insist it indicates “one who was called.” Most, however, believe it means “to speak.” A large majority add the thought “to speak with authority.” This would, of course, be influenced by the concept of having been called by Yahweh.

Although the prophetic succession seems to have begun officially with Samuel, such men as Abraham and Moses were also called “prophets.” They stood equally along with other such personalities as Elijah, Elisha, Hosea, Amos, Micah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the other canonical spokesmen for God.

The prophets interpreted the law and called the people back to obedience of the law. Mingled with these messages demanding repentance and change of lifestyle were predictions about future events. God gave the prophets amazing insight into his purposes of redemption and knowledge of some minute details. These could only have been perceived by a person in unique fellowship with Yahweh. Among these detailed revelations were the birthplace of the Messiah and his virgin birth.

The prophets' messages were always spoken within the context of Israel's spiritual need. They condemned sin, warned of certain judgment, but always saw beyond the punishment to ultimate victory for God's people.

## **C. “Before you were born I set you apart” (1:5)**

Jeremiah felt strongly that God had brought him into the world for a special purpose. He labored incessantly under this conviction. The Scriptures support the truth that God sets people apart to special tasks without their prior knowledge of it.

Theologians discuss at length the relationship of predestination and foreknowledge to a person's capacity to choose. Centuries of dialogue and debate have not solved this problem to everyone's satisfaction, nor will the matter ever be completely settled. Both are true though our limited minds

cannot see how. The emphasis in this verse, however, is on God's foreknowledge and predestination. God chose Jeremiah, called him, and he obeyed.

## **VII. TEACHING OUTLINE**

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### **A. INTRODUCTION**

1. Lead Story: Nothing Ever Happens Around Here
2. Context: The year of Jeremiah's call was 626 B.C. Judah was facing what would be its last forty years as a kingdom. The dominant world power was Assyria, but that was about to change. Babylon would usurp that position. God was planning to send one final prophetic voice to the nation. God had chosen Jeremiah, before his birth, to give the nation a final opportunity for repentance.
3. Transition: When Jeremiah was a youngster, God called him into his service. The prophet, like many of the great biblical figures, was reluctant to accept God's call. Jeremiah suggested reasons he was not equipped and adequate for the tasks God wanted him to do. God addressed the prophet's fear and promised he would be with him, protect him, and deliver him. Then the Lord challenged Jeremiah to stand up and speak for him.

### **B. COMMENTARY**

1. The Time of Jeremiah's Call (1:1–8)
2. Yahweh's Touch on Jeremiah (1:9)
3. Yahweh's Task for Jeremiah (1:10)
4. The Tree's Message for Jeremiah (1:11–12)
5. The Boiling Pot's Warning for Judah (1:13–16)
6. Yahweh's Promise of Eventual Triumph (1:17–19)

### **C. CONCLUSION: GOD'S LAST VOICE TO A DYING NATION**

## **VIII. ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION**

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1. When does a fetus begin to be a human person? To what extent is God involved in the development and formation of the preborn? How does a person's theology affect his or her view of abortion?
2. What excuses do believers offer to God to avoid his call to service? How does God respond to these excuses?
3. From a Christian perspective, what types of thinking, values, and arguments do Christians need to be involved in tearing down, uprooting, and overthrowing in our post-Christian, postmodern society?
4. In a world of endless opinions, suggestions, and ideas, how important is it for believers to speak God's Word?
5. Why do people ridicule, reject, and persecute those who speak God's Word to them?