

LESSON ONE
*Commissioned
to Deliver God's
Message*

FOCAL TEXT

Jeremiah 1

BACKGROUND

Jeremiah 1

MAIN IDEA

God called and commissioned Jeremiah to do a difficult task, promising to deliver him in spite of all opposition.

QUESTION TO EXPLORE

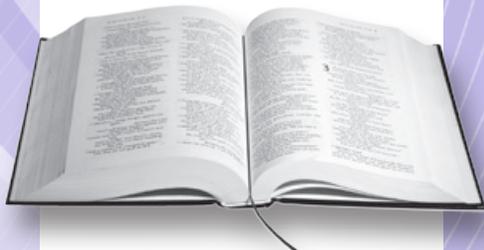
To what task—difficult or easy—is God calling you?

STUDY AIM

To summarize God's call to Jeremiah and to recall my experiences with God's call

QUICK READ

We should respond to God's call to serve him, confident that God will provide the power and strength to accomplish his purpose through us.



We make arrangements for it because we know it will happen. We record messages that say, *I am not available to take your call right now, or I'm sorry I missed your call.*

We prepare to miss telephone calls, but we don't like it when it happens. We never like to be *unplugged*. As a result we may annoy others and embarrass ourselves in restaurants, in meetings, at the theater, and in worship by insisting on keeping our cell phone on or forgetting to turn it off. When the flight attendant makes the announcement about the cabin door closing and the need to be turning those handheld devices off, some passengers can hardly bear to comply.

We dislike missing the moment when someone is calling us. I wish we had the same attitude when God is calling us. God does call us to enter into and enjoy a personal relationship with him. He calls us to grow in our understanding of his love and to serve him and others in ways that communicate his love to his world.

It is sad to miss an important call from God. As we study God's call on the life of Jeremiah, pray that God will speak to you about the ministries to which he may be calling you.¹

JEREMIAH 1

¹ The words of Jeremiah son of Hilkiah, one of the priests at Anathoth in the territory of Benjamin. ² The word of the LORD came to him in the thirteenth year of the reign of Josiah son of Amon king of Judah, ³ 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.

⁴ The word of the LORD came to me, saying, ⁵ "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."

⁶ "Ah, Sovereign LORD," I said, "I do not know how to speak; I am only a child."

⁷ But the LORD said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a child.' You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. ⁸ Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you," declares the LORD.

⁹ Then the LORD reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, "Now, I have put my words in your mouth. ¹⁰ See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant."

¹¹ The word of the LORD came to me: "What do you see, Jeremiah?" "I see the branch of an almond tree," I replied.

¹² The LORD said to me, "You have seen correctly, for I am watching to see that my word is fulfilled."

¹³ The word of the LORD came to me again: "What do you see?" "I see a boiling pot, tilting away from the north," I answered.

¹⁴ The LORD said to me, "From the north disaster will be poured out on all who live in the land. ¹⁵ I am about to summon all the peoples of the northern kingdoms," declares the LORD. "Their kings will come and set up their thrones in the entrance of the gates of Jerusalem; they will come against all her surrounding walls and against all the towns of Judah. ¹⁶ I will pronounce my judgments on my people because of their wickedness in forsaking me, in burning incense to other gods and in worshiping what their hands have made.

¹⁷ "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. ¹⁸ Today I have made you a fortified city, an iron pillar and a bronze wall to stand against the whole land—against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests and the people of the land.

¹⁹ They will fight against you but will not overcome you, for I am with you and will rescue you," declares the LORD.

Assigned to God's People (1:1–3)

This book contains the "words of Jeremiah" (Jeremiah 1:1). The only reason the words of Jeremiah were spoken in the first place and then preserved for future generations is that the words of Jeremiah communicated the "word of the LORD" (Jer. 1:2). Yahweh determined to deliver his important message to Judah through the proclamation of the man Jeremiah.

This prophet came from a priestly family in Anathoth, a village located in the tribal area of Benjamin, only three miles northeast of Jerusalem. It was one of the forty-two levitical (priestly) cities (Joshua 21:18).

Jeremiah 1:2–3 indicates that Jeremiah proclaimed the word of God during the reigns of three kings of Judah, Josiah (640–609 B.C.), Jehoiakim (609–598 B.C.), and Zedekiah (597–586 B.C.).² Only one message can be dated with confidence to the reign of Josiah (3:6). Jeremiah's ministry began in the thirteenth year of Josiah's reign (627 B.C.) and continued until the destruction of Jerusalem and the beginning of the Babylonian exile (586 B.C.). This book, however, also declares that Jeremiah continued his ministry after 586 B.C. among some of the people who went to Egypt to escape slavery in Babylon (Jer. 40—45).

In the same year that Jeremiah began his ministry (627 B.C.), Ashurbanipal, one of Assyria's greatest kings, died. This was the beginning of the decline of that powerful empire. Babylon and Egypt competed for the right to succeed the Assyrians as the dominant power in the region. King Josiah was killed in battle against the Egyptian pharaoh at Megiddo in 609 B.C. (In order to understand how devastating the unexpected death of Josiah was to Judah, see the small article titled "Josiah's

JOSIAH'S REIGN AND JUDAH'S REVIVAL

Only two kings of Judah received unqualified praise in 1 and 2 Kings. Josiah is one of the two, along with Hezekiah. He became the king of Judah when he was eight years old and died before he was forty after a reign of thirty-one years (2 Kings 22:1). He initiated a physical remodeling of the temple buildings in Jerusalem in his eighteenth year as king (2 Kgs. 22:3). The discovery of a law book during that renovation was the inspiration that produced the greatest spiritual renewal or revival in the entire Old Testament period.

Josiah declared that the idolatrous places and practices should be destroyed and terminated. He emphasized the temple in Jerusalem as the proper place for worship. The priestly historians asserted that Josiah began to seek the Lord in his eighth year, resulting in the early renewal of religious purity in his twelfth year (2 Chronicles 34:1–3). Was God's call of Jeremiah in Josiah's thirteenth year God's way of encouraging Josiah in this renewal through the proclamation of Jeremiah?

Reign and Judah's Revival.") Babylon defeated Egypt at Carchemish in 605 B.C., winning this contest for supremacy. Babylon would become the conqueror of Judah.

God called Jeremiah to service at a difficult time in the kingdom of Judah. It is possible that the revival gave the Judeans a measure of false security in their relationship to God, but the optimistic expectation inspired by the time of renewal and revival ended with the death of Josiah.

Too, the international context was chaotic. During the ministry of Jeremiah the world of Judah changed. Confused and despondent as they were, they needed a word from God. Jeremiah did not miss God's call. Rather, he responded to God's assignment and delivered the message of God faithfully for as long as God chose to use him.

Would you agree that many people today are confused and despondent and that our context is somewhat chaotic? People need a word from God, and God calls us to deliver his message.

Appointed for God's Purpose (1:4–10)

These verses assert that the ministry of Jeremiah resulted from the initiative and authority of God. "The word of the LORD came to me" (1:4; also 1:11, 13) usually introduced a prophetic message. Here it introduces an experience, the call of God on the life of Jeremiah.

God revealed to Jeremiah that his prophetic ministry did not begin during the reign of Josiah. Rather, it began before his birth in the determined purpose and plan of God for his life (1:5). Four verbs in this verse convey this truth.

"Formed" (1:5) is from the Hebrew verb *yatsar*. It denoted the work of a craftsman making something. It described the work of God in the creation of humankind (Genesis 2:7; see also Jer. 18:11). "Knew" (1:5) refers to the knowledge of experience in personal relationship, often with the implication of intimacy. In this context it probably means that God had chosen to have a relationship with Jeremiah (see Amos 3:2).

"Set apart" (Jer. 1:5) is the verb form of the noun translated *holy*. It was usually used for the practice of sanctifying or setting the priests apart for their holy service to God. This is the only place in the Old Testament where this word is used in the call of a prophet. "Appointed"

GOD'S CALL TO YOU

Almost ten years ago the brother of a woman in my congregation was in a battle with cancer. His church presented him with a *prayer blanket*. The woman related how meaningful this blanket was to her brother and wanted to share in that kind of ministry in our church.

Susan and the other ladies who share in this ministry sew Scripture squares together, hold the blanket as they pray for the person who will receive it, and then give it away. These blankets provide physical warmth and spiritual covering.

What new ministry is God calling you to begin in your church?

(1:4) is the common verb that means *to give (natan)*. The total picture of these thoughts is that God chose to relate intimately with Jeremiah, created him for that purpose, and shaped him to be holy and useful in order to give him and his ministry in service to his world.

Jeremiah 1:5 is one of the clearest statements in Scripture of the initiative of God in choosing to use us in this world. Here it is a predestination of vocation or profession rather than a predestination of salvation. In sharing Jesus with others, I have often made the statement, "Before you were ever born, God had a perfect purpose and plan for your life." After we affirm that God has a determined purpose for our lives, we must also declare that God gives us the freedom to choose or to reject his purpose.

Jeremiah expressed reluctance to accept this divine appointment (1:6). "Ah, Sovereign LORD" is customarily the language of complaint to God in prayer (Jer. 4:10; 32:17; Ezekiel 9:8; 11:13). The two excuses in Jeremiah's reluctance are his inadequacy to speak well and his inexperience. It is impossible to determine the age of Jeremiah at the time of his commissioning by God. The word "child" can refer to an infant (Exodus 2:6), a young child (1 Samuel 1:24), or a young man (Gen. 37:2; 2 Samuel 18:5; 1 Chronicles 12:28). The best speculation may be that he was an older teenager when God called him.

God was not angry with Jeremiah. Rather God reminded him that his responsibility was to go where God sent and to say what God commanded (Jer. 1:7). Jeremiah would need to rely on the confidence of that authority because his task would not be easy. That is implied in the

language about the possibility of fear and the need for God to deliver him (1:8). In fact, God would deliver Jeremiah from his own countrymen in Judah. The divine touch of Jeremiah's mouth (1:9) was for confirmation that he would speak the word of God rather than being a symbol for cleansing (as with Isaiah 6:6–7).

“Appoint” (Jer. 1:10) has the broad range of meaning *ordered, assigned, appointed, or entrusted with a task*. It is not that Jeremiah was called to preach to the nations surrounding Judah, for his primary ministry was to call Judah to account for her disobedience. It is true, however, that the ministry of Jeremiah would occur in an international context because during his lifetime the actions of the Assyrians, the Babylonians, and the Egyptians had an impact on Judah. This book recognizes that Yahweh is the God of all nations and not just the God of Judah.

Six verbs—“uproot,” “tear down,” “destroy,” “overthrow,” “build,” and “plant” (1:10)—provide the content of Jeremiah's assignment. His ministry would be heavily tilted toward judgment (four verbs) rather than hope (two verbs). The order is also important. He would first preach judgment, but as the judgment unfolded, he would declare the hope that comes only from God.

Affirmed by God's Presence (1:11–19)

Two symbolic signs provided visible affirmation of God's call (1:11–16). In the first one God showed Jeremiah “the branch of an almond tree” (1:11). The white blossoms of the almond tree were among the first blooms of spring. As a result it was designated as the *awake* tree. Anathoth is still a prominent almond growing area in Israel.

The English translations find it difficult to convey the connection between the almond tree and the fact that God is watching. In the Hebrew language, “almond” is *shoqed*, while the word for *watching* is *shaqed*. God was aware of the situation in Jeremiah's day. The idea is that God had not forgotten his previous promises and was watching over his people.

The second vision or symbolic sign Jeremiah saw was “a boiling pot, tilting away from the north” (1:13). This sign asserted that disaster or judgment would come from the north, a prominent theme in Jeremiah. Although Babylon was located due east of Judah, that enemy would

approach from the north because traveling up the Euphrates River and down through Damascus was easier than crossing the formidable Arabian Desert. God would use Babylon to bring judgment on the people of Judah for their rebellion and idolatry (1:16).

The second confirmation was the verbal reassurance of God himself (1:17–19). “Get yourself ready” (1:17) is found elsewhere only in God’s response to Job’s request (Job 38:3–4; 40:7–8). Since Jeremiah had been commissioned to proclaim God’s judgment on Judah and Jerusalem, he would experience opposition from the leaders of Judah. God promised to provide power and endurance to face this opposition through three pictures of endured strength (1:18).

Jeremiah would experience opposition but would not be defeated (1:19). The reason for that was not Jeremiah’s capability; rather, it would be due to the promised presence of God. Jeremiah’s ministry would not be easy. In fact Jeremiah would encounter significant hardship and would boldly bring his complaints to God (Jer. 11:18—12:6; 15:10–21; 17:14–18; 18:18–23; and 20:7–18). These complaints are examined in lesson four.

The presence of God would be Jeremiah’s strength as he faced opposition and persecution. God would rescue him as God promised to do when he called him.

Touching Your Life

God called and commissioned Jeremiah to deliver an important message to Judah. Jeremiah answered that call from God and served God effectively for many years. He was faithful to his appointed assignment in ministry in spite of many difficulties and much opposition. He was faithful to God, and God was faithful to him. God provided strength and empowerment for ministry according to his promise.

God calls and commissions us to serve Jesus by sharing of ourselves with others. Some of the assignments God needs us to fulfill are not easy ones. Jesus promised to be present with us, enabling us to accomplish every task to which he calls us (Matthew 28:19–20).

Whether or not we are faithful in long years of service to God like Jeremiah depends on our willingness to answer God’s call. What a

tragedy it is when God hears a response from one of his children that says, *I am not available to take your call right now*. God's calls are too important to miss.

QUESTIONS

1. Read the account of the spiritual renewal in Judah that King Josiah inspired (2 Kings 22—23). Would you like to see that kind of move of the Spirit of God today? What would you be willing to do to help bring it about?
2. Consult a map of the period of history in which Jeremiah lived. See where Judah was located between the powerful empires. Do you see why the Babylonian army would be approaching from the north?
3. Is it your experience that people are quicker to criticize and judge or more likely to suggest solutions or constructive perspectives? Do you have an appreciation for the fact that God called Jeremiah to declare both judgment and hope?

