

LESSON ONE
*Commissioned
to Deliver God's
Message*

FOCAL TEXT

Jeremiah 1

BACKGROUND

Jeremiah 1

MAIN IDEA

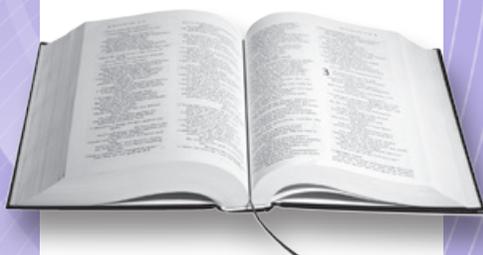
God called and commissioned Jeremiah to do a difficult task, promising to deliver him in spite of all opposition.

QUESTION TO EXPLORE

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

TEACHING AIM

To lead adults to summarize God's call to Jeremiah and to testify of their experiences with God's call



BIBLE COMMENTS

Understanding the Context

Jeremiah likely was born during the end of the reign of Manasseh, one of the worst kings in Judah's history (reigned 647–642 B.C.). Jeremiah's ministry began during the reign of King Josiah, in 626 B.C. (see Jeremiah 1:2). He witnessed the demise of Judah at the hands of the Babylonians in 587 B.C.

Jeremiah was a man of great courage. He preached against the evil of the day and against corrupt religion. His was the unenviable position of declaring that the national threat coming from Babylon was God's judgment. Consider how one might view such a person today.

As with all the prophets, the concept of "the word of the LORD" was crucial (Jer. 1:2). The "word" was their message and their burden. So compelling was the "word" that it was impossible to keep silent. But, that "word" resulted in considerable hardship for Jeremiah.

Still, silence was not an option because the "word" came from the Lord. I recall one of my professors commenting on the *call to preach* and saying that if there were anything else we could do, we should do it. The implication was that the nature of this vocation truly requires a call from God.

We see this in Jeremiah's call. No doubt, he did not welcome the conflict, abuse, torment, and hatred of his fellow citizens. But he had no choice. Did he feel that the destiny of a nation rested with him and his message from God? Unless the people heard, believed, and obeyed God's "word" that Jeremiah spoke, the nation would be lost.

In many ways, we have a similar calling. A great responsibility rests on us. In Jeremiah, we see the example we can follow.¹

Interpreting the Scriptures

Difficult Days (1:1–3)

Hilkiah was a priest in Anathoth. Jeremiah was of a priestly lineage; however, we do not know whether he ever served as a priest. He was highly critical of the priests.

Jeremiah's prophetic ministry spanned four decades. These verses introduce the book and Jeremiah's ministry. A recurring theme is "the word of the LORD" (1:2). The "word" Jeremiah spoke came from God.

Jeremiah's message was often harsh. It was always direct. But clarity was necessary in view of the imminent danger the people faced in their spiritual rebellion.

God has typically done his work and spread his message through people. Jeremiah was God's called servant to deliver the message. He did so against fierce opposition in obedience to God's divine call.

A Reluctant Prophet (1:4–10)

1:4. "Now the word of the Lord came to me." It is a serious error for pastors, Bible study leaders, or anyone else to mistake their own words for "the word of the LORD." Likely, we do not experience the same type of revelation that came to Jeremiah. However, we do have the Bible. With the Bible, and with the guidance of God's Spirit, we then can interpret and help people apply God's word to their lives. However, interpretation and proclamation require great humility.

1:4–5. Four strong verbs appear in these verses. Each carries a compelling, contemporary message.

God "knew" Jeremiah before he was conceived. God "formed" him in the womb. God knows us, and the assumption in this verse is that God loved us before we were born.

God "consecrated" Jeremiah. Consecration has to do with a unique purpose and with holiness. Holiness in a person or an object comes from one's relationship to God. God sets an individual apart for his service.

God "appointed" Jeremiah as "a prophet to the nations." While Jeremiah did not physically travel throughout the world, his words

reverberated in nations far away from Jerusalem. Those words continue to speak today.

1:6. With God's strong actions in verse 5, there was a corresponding response from Jeremiah. In some ways, Jeremiah's reaction was appropriate as he considered reasons God should not call him. His reaction was not an excuse. It was a legitimate concern at his perceived inadequacy for such a huge task. This was reminiscent of Moses' response to God's call.² Jeremiah's reaction may be similar to some of our feelings as well.

Why would God call an individual for such a task? In the same way, to say that one is called to a Christian vocation would seem unreasonable were it not for the deep-seated conviction that such a vocation requires the call of God. A crucial question for every church I have served as pastor has been, *Has God called you to this work?*

1:7–8. God offered assurance to his reluctant prophet by pointing out that the call was to God's mission. Here is another reminder for the ages. Jeremiah's mission was not his own. It belonged to God. God gave the direction, and God would give the words. Proverbs 3:5–6 expresses this well.

God's second assurance to Jeremiah was, "Do not be afraid of them." The people of God find help, hope, and courage in these words. Three times in Joshua 1:1–10, God said to Joshua, "Be strong and courageous" (Joshua 1:6, 7, 9). Jeremiah's task was as daunting as Joshua's. Knowing the promise of God to those men encourages us as well.

The source of Jeremiah's courage was the presence of the Lord. For the believer, the corollary to "Do not be afraid," will always be, *For I (the Lord) am with you.*

God did not send the prophet on mission alone. God would go with him. To Christians, Jesus said, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20).

1:9–10. In a sense these verses summarize the first eight verses. In a symbolic gesture the prophet said that God touched his mouth. God put his words in the mouth of the prophet whom he had appointed.

Then the Lord described the power of that divine word. It could destroy and tear down. Such awesome power would reveal itself in the Babylonian conquest of Judah.

That word would also have power to build and to plant. To hear, to believe, and to obey God's word in repentance and in faith would result in new life for the people and for the nation.

Although Jeremiah might have been a reluctant prophet, Jeremiah's obedience to the call of God did impact the nations.

A Hard Message (1:11–17)

1:11–12. The people of that day sometimes referred to the almond tree as the *wake or awakening tree*. It was the first to bloom in spring. Like the dogwood in Missouri, it signaled the advent of spring. For us, that is good news.

For Jeremiah and for the people, the news was not good. The people had disobeyed too long. Perhaps they somehow believed God had forgotten or would overlook their sin. But, God saw Judah's sin. He did not forget. He still knows.

God watches over his "word to perform it." It will have its desired effect, positive and negative. God also watches over his faithful servant as that servant engages in the conflict.

1:13. It would not have been unusual in that day to see a pot of some kind over an open fire, boiling water. My maternal grandparents lived deep in the Missouri Ozarks. Grandma frequently used a kettle over an open fire to boil water. That boiling water served a variety of purposes.

In Jeremiah's account, the pot was tilted precariously to the south, toward Judah. It is not difficult to see the disaster this represented.

1:14. Who was the enemy who would come from the north? Jeremiah did not here identify it. Since Assyrian power had waned, the people might have paid little attention to his prophecy.

Even though geographically Babylon was east of Judah, because of terrain their route of conquest might have taken a circuitous route so they invaded from the north. Ultimately, Babylon was the enemy Judah should have feared.

1:15–17. Whomever the physical enemy Jeremiah envisioned, God made it clear to Jeremiah, who in turn told the people, that God himself was initiating this judgment.

The destruction Babylon would bring was a judgment on a sinful people. In verse 16 Jeremiah made clear both God's act and God's reasons for the judgment.

This message was a difficult message to deliver. No one would want this responsibility.

The Promise of God (1:18–19)

In verse 17 God exhorted Jeremiah to have courage. In verse 18 God promised Jeremiah that he would give him strength. Jeremiah would need it because he would have to go "against the whole land." It would have been an overwhelming assignment. As verse 18 indicates, the people would not welcome Jeremiah's message. They would actively oppose it.

Christians sometimes feel we face similar obstacles. However, we too can know the confidence and the assurance that God gave to Jeremiah. Whatever God gives us to do, we can know, ". . . they will not overcome you, for I am with you to deliver you," declares the LORD."

Focusing on the Meaning

Jeremiah is a crucial book for both Old and New Testament study. It is also a difficult book to read and to study. As I wrote this, several in our church were nearing the end of praying through Jeremiah. Meditating on this book gives one the opportunity to consider deeply the spiritual situations Jeremiah foreshadowed in the first chapter.

Unfaithfulness then, and now, on the part of God's people is a cause for alarm. God had been patient. The people had seen an example of God's judgment on Israel. Still they strayed from God.

The message God gave to Jeremiah was direct and severe. Judgment was coming, and God's prophet had to deliver that message. The only hope for the people was to repent.

Is a people ever too far gone for redemption? God is patient and loving. He continued to send prophets to the people. He still sends

messengers with the good news. He is a compassionate God who wants people to be saved.

Then and now, God called people to serve him. That service was not easy, but the servant can expect God's grace, strength, and help. Jeremiah faced obstacles that caused him great suffering. Still, he was faithful, and so must we be. Jeremiah trusted the Lord. So should we.

One further question arises in this study of Jeremiah. Is serving God worth the cost? God is present with his people. Ultimately, God will not allow evil to overcome his servants. Jeremiah must have wondered why he must continue to take God's message to such rebellious people. He sometimes wanted to run away. But, he was faithful. For Jeremiah, and for us, the call and the leading of God are important. Success in the kingdom of God is in one's faithfulness. Jeremiah is an example for us of such faithfulness.

TEACHING PLANS

Teaching Plan—Varied Learning Activities

Preparation: Before the class session, enlist someone from your class to help you with an impromptu drama. The person will interrupt the lesson with a pretend phone call. Instruct the person to secretly dial your cell phone shortly after the lesson begins. Practice the phone call to make sure it works.

Connect with Life

1. Begin by giving a brief, general introduction to the Book of Jeremiah using information in the *Study Guide*. While you are talking, the class member you have enlisted will secretly dial your cell phone so that it rings out loud in class. Act surprised. Check your phone, and say to your class, *Oh, this call is really important. I've GOT to take it.* Pretend to listen to the other person on the phone and make brief statements like, *Yes, really? I've got it. Hey, can you call me back after Bible study? Thanks. Bye.* Hang up and then proceed to say: *I'm so sorry for that interruption.* (Pause.) Say: *Imagine that*

was God calling and God had something for me to do. I couldn't miss that phone call!

2. Say: *When God has something for us to do, God probably isn't going to call on the phone. It might be nice if God did! Ask: Think back to the time when you gave your life to Jesus. How did God get your attention and let you know he was calling you?* (Instruct the class to share answers with the person next to them.) (Possible responses: a sermon; a Bible passage; kept you awake at night; God used a friend or a complete stranger.)
3. Say: *This lesson's Bible study is about responding to God's call. Our example is a young man in the Bible named Jeremiah. Ask: What did you think when I took that phone call earlier?* (Encourage feedback.)

Guide Bible Study

4. Call for someone to read aloud Jeremiah 1:1–3. Using comments from the *Study Guide*, finish introducing the Book of Jeremiah (previously started in step 1).
5. State: *As we look at Jeremiah's unique experience, imagine being Jeremiah. Try to put yourself in his shoes.* Enlist someone to read verses 4–5. Ask: *Do you think Jeremiah felt more honored or more afraid?* (Discuss.) Have a volunteer read verse 6. Ask: *What was Jeremiah's response?* (Fear because of his young age. What will people say or think? They won't listen.)
6. Say: *Let's see how God worked in order to equip and help Jeremiah.* Assign the following verses to individuals or pairs so that everyone has an assignment: Verses 7–8; Verses 9–10; Verses 11–12; Verses 13–15; Verse 16; Verse 17–19. Assignment: Discover and describe from your assigned verse or verses how God worked to equip and help Jeremiah. (Allow time for discovery.) Call for reports. (Answers will vary. Affirm each individual while discussing their answers). List answers on the board as they are named, such as these: God gave specific instructions; God promised protection; God strengthened with his touch; God told Jeremiah what to say; God commissioned Jeremiah; God gave visual illustrations of what

he was going to do; God revealed himself to Jeremiah; God encouraged Jeremiah for the task; God reminded Jeremiah that he was only the messenger; God expected obedience from Jeremiah.

Encourage Application

7. Take a hand survey with these questions: *How many have a land-line home phone? How many have only a cell phone? Ask: What calls do you take, and what calls do you let go to voice mail? Why?*
8. Ask: *What if God wanted our class to start a new ministry? How do you think God would let us know? Would God call on a phone? (Discuss.) How do you think we would go about starting this new ministry? (Option: Share the ministry idea in the small article, "God's Call to You," in the Study Guide.)* Lead the group to discuss these questions: *Is there a need in our community or church you have heard about? Ministries are about meeting needs. How could God use us to meet this need? Every ministry must have a leader, someone who has the vision and will see it through to the end.*

Teaching Plan—Lecture and Questions

Connect with Life

1. Give these instructions: *With your neighbor, briefly share how you came to choose the profession or job you are or were in. (Allow two or three people to respond to this question to the whole group.)*
2. Ask: *What if God came and told you he had a different job for you to do? How do you think you would react or respond? (Encourage response.)*
3. Say: *This lesson's Bible study is about hearing and responding to God's call. We look at the example of a young man named Jeremiah.*

Guide Bible Study

4. Post the headings from the *Study Guide* on a markerboard. Refer to heading one, "Assigned to God's People (1:1–3)." Enlist someone to read Jeremiah 1:1–3. Using *Study Guide* information, briefly introduce the setting for Jeremiah's prophecy. State that while these are Jeremiah's words, they are more importantly "the word of the LORD" given to Jeremiah.
5. Refer to the second heading, "Appointed for God's Purpose" (1:4–10). Have a volunteer read verses 4–5. State: *God called Jeremiah and let him know he had a special task for Jeremiah to do. This task was the very reason God created Jeremiah. What we imagined earlier (steps 1–2) is exactly what happened to Jeremiah. God has also chosen to use us in this world.* The *Study Guide* says, "Before you were ever born, God had a perfect purpose and plan for your life." Ask: *How would you explain this concept or calling to a teenager or a new believer in Christ?* (Encourage responses. Answers may be slow in coming since this is a hard question. Wait or rephrase the question in order to gain response.)
6. Point out that verse 6 shows Jeremiah's initial response. Read verse 6. State: *We don't know Jeremiah's exact age, but we do know that Jeremiah initially hesitated in responding to God's call. We can all probably relate to Jeremiah's hesitation. Let's see the Lord's response.* Have a volunteer read verses 7–10. Ask: *What was God's response?* As answers are given, briefly discuss each answer. (Possible answers: *I won't take no for an answer; you must obey me; don't be afraid, for I will be with you; I will protect you; the Lord touched Jeremiah's mouth and gave him words to say; God gave Jeremiah a job to do.*)
7. Refer to heading three, "Affirmed by God's Presence (1:11–19)." State: *When God calls us to do something, God will be with us and equip us for the task or opportunity. Let's see how God did that for Jeremiah.* Have a volunteer read verses 11–12. Briefly explain from the *Study Guide* how the almond tree was proof that God was watching over both the nation of Israel and over Jeremiah. Enlist a volunteer to read verses 13–14 (and optionally verses 15–16). State: *God showed Jeremiah what he (God) was about to do. God made sure Jeremiah understood. Similarly, when God calls us to action,*

God is going to be with us, instruct us, and make sure we understand what he wants us to do.

8. Read verses 17–19 (energetically and forcefully, trying to convey the feelings behind these words). Say: *It's almost like God was the coach and Jeremiah the player. God wanted to motivate and encourage Jeremiah for the task.*

Encourage Application

9. Ask: *How would we explain to a teenager how God leads or calls a person to a career or occupation?* Invite discussion. Ask: *How does God call us to get involved in ministry?* (Teacher should be prepared to share his or her calling to teach.)

NOTES

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations in lessons 1–4 are from the New American Standard Bible (1995 edition).
2. See Exodus 3:11, 13; 4:1, 10, 13.