

Jeremiah 1 — The Call of Jeremiah

*Originally presented as part of Bob Mendelsohn's 52-part teaching series on Jeremiah in 2021.
References in the video to contemporary events or gatherings reflect the time of the original recording.*

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Introduction

Some will say, “A study of an Older Testament prophet needs to be spicy and exciting.” It’s dusty after all and was written several hundreds of years before Yeshua was born, lived, died and rose again. Therefore, it’s going to be recognized as ancient by most folks. Studying ancient literature sounds like a boring high school class required by the school system and of little interest to us as 21st-century people.

If that’s where you might be in your thinking, then I applaud you for joining us. Your being here is an admission that you want to learn. You want God to speak to you. EXCELLENT! What’s even more significant is that God wants to speak to you. He initiated this prophecy; he called young Jeremiah and he has called you to hear from him, first and foremost. Then, as you learn his ways and submit to his call, you will be equipped to share this with others.

If at the end of each study, and certainly by the end of the entire book, you only have an information library built up and you are not personally changed, then this will have failed. Jeremiah’s warnings will have been wasted. The purpose of studying Scripture is not simply to acquire more information. God wants us to hear him, learn his ways and respond.

Who and Form

As always when we begin a new series, we want to consider the timing, the authorship and the form of the new book we are studying. Jeremiah wrote during a 40-year period or so, just before the captivity of Judah, the southern section of the Promised Land, by the Babylonians in 586 BCE. His oracles are from the decades before that capture. He lists the dates in relation to the kings whose dates we can calculate.

We know Jeremiah is the author. He is the son of a priest named Hilkiah, who lived in Anathoth, just northeast of Jerusalem, about three miles away in the land of Benjamin. In the OED, the word *jeremiad* is a noun that means a long, mournful complaint or lamentation. Other synonyms include diatribe, screed, anger, berating, censure, condemnation, denunciation, harangue, ranting

and sermon. I must say that none of those is inviting. They all sound like activities of a mean-spirited schoolmarm or the noise associated with parental abuse of children.

Let me say, therefore, that none of these is fully descriptive of the prophecies of Jeremiah. For others, he is labelled the “Weeping Prophet,” and perhaps that more characterizes the man whom we will meet and whose sayings will influence us as we study verse by verse through his book. His prophecy is the longest in the Bible and has more hope than you might initially observe—and certainly more than the OED gives in its attribution of his name.

The form is an anthology, which makes sense. A collection of collections. We see markers at various places in the book which show us that a new “chapter” or a new “book” is beginning there. We will see those at chapters 25, 30 and 46. In chapter 36, Baruch is introduced to us as the scribe for Jeremiah, and we note some history there too.

Probably the key text in that chapter is what I would call THE purpose of the book itself. We read in verses 2 and 3: “Take a scroll and write on it all the words which I have spoken to you concerning Israel and concerning Judah, and concerning all the nations, from the day I first spoke to you, from the days of Josiah, even to this day. Perhaps the house of Judah will hear all the calamity which I plan to bring on them, in order that every man will turn from his evil way; then I will forgive their iniquity and their sin.”

That’s the purpose of challenge. That’s the purpose of this book. God wants a clean people to represent him.

History

When was this written? Verse 2 tells us: in the 13th year of Josiah. Josiah came to the throne of Judah in 640 BCE when he was only eight years old. His 31-year reign coincided with enormous changes in the balance of power throughout the ancient Near East. Assyria, which had dominated the region, was weakening. Egypt was reasserting its independence and influence. The Medes and other peoples were applying pressure from the north, while Babylon was increasingly challenging Assyrian power. The great empire that had seemed almost immovable was beginning to come apart.¹

All of this mattered enormously to little Judah. The world scene was messy, and the major powers were vying for international dominance. Israel and Judah were so often pawns in that chess game. During Jeremiah's ministry, political factions within Judah argued over whether their security lay with Egypt, Babylon, independence—or somewhere else entirely. Jeremiah's answer was that Judah's ultimate security wasn't to be found in any of them. The people needed to trust in the living God. I believe God wants us in our day to do the same. The international players have changed, but that challenge hasn't.

Verse by Verse

¹ Peter C. Craigie, Page H. Kelley and Joel F. Drinkard Jr., *Jeremiah 1–25*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 26 (Dallas: Word Books, 1991).

Verse 1: “The words of Jeremiah.” Clearly he is the author. Paul used this method of introduction. Most of the prophets did the same. But look at verse 2. What Jeremiah said, in his words, are THE WORD of the Lord. All his efforts are to help us understand. They are to get us to hear. God’s Word is what Jeremiah wanted us to crave and to obey, no matter the political situation, hence the listing of all the kings in their order. Jehoiakim and Zedekiah are listed as markers of Jeremiah’s tenure. Preaching 40 years with little result—that’s tough going for anyone. Who is Jeremiah anyway?

Verse 4: Before Jeremiah is used publicly, the conversation with the Almighty takes place. I love that God has a dialogue with the man, a young man, perhaps a 20-year-old, and encourages him and calls him. Listen to the verbs: I formed you. I knew you. I consecrated you. I appointed you.

Do you have any doubt that God oversees the selection of his prophets? God has this plan all mapped out and made no uncertain declarations to the young prophet-to-be. I don’t know how people who are not convinced of the predestination by God of such as we can make it or understand these verbs. God is the creator, not a wishful thinker. He is the caller, not only an inviter. He makes us holy and appoints. He is the Lord, not an embarrassed offerer. His plans will prevail. Jeremiah, what is your response?

Verse 6: Jeremiah says “alas” (literally Hebrew *aha*). I don’t know how to do what you want me to do. Fair enough. A man needs to know how to change a tyre before he begins to do so. Or to perform Greek declensions. Or to solve quadratic equations. What is God’s answer to Jeremiah’s self-evaluation?

Three Commandments

Verses 7–8: Considering God’s actions, Jeremiah is given three instructions. I’m sending you. So go. Don’t be reluctant. Get off your seat and walk. A ship doesn’t progress in the marina; it must launch out so that the rudder is of use. Pull up your anchor, young man. Get moving. And in your going, I will be with you.

And in your speaking, I will be with you. I’m commanding you. You get to speak. The miracle is not the speaking. Anyone and everyone have a voice. The miracle is that my words will flow out of you.

A third commandment was then given: Do not be afraid of them. Who is the “them”? The nations around Judah. The Egyptians and the Medes; the Assyrians and the Babylonians and anyone else who popped onto the scene. No matter what the morning news tells you about the global situation, about the problems of governments and peoples and weaknesses in the Jewish realm—do not be afraid.

To seal the deal, in verse 9 God stretches out his hand. Hebrew *shalach*—sent out his hand. Personal. He is involved. It’s the same notion as the right hand of the Lord that does valiantly. The Lord’s right hand is lifted high. The Lord’s right hand has done mighty things for us. This is not a religious response; this is the act of a caring father who personally touches the mouth of the youth. What does that produce?

Verses 9–10 affirm that the words Jeremiah is hearing will be reproduced in the mouth with which he will speak to the nations, to the peoples around him. Jeremiah is being given the keys to the family car. He is being given the house in the suburbs in which to host parties and conduct seminars. He is given all things necessary to conduct his public ministry.

No longer can Jeremiah say, “I’m only a young man. I don’t know how or what to speak.” Now he has God’s Word in his mouth. Like Isaiah, whose lips were cleansed in a similar touch, and Ezekiel’s “eating” of the Word, Jeremiah has a similar acceptance of the role and the Words.

Verse 10: Look at the six verbs. These are the results of Jeremiah’s prophecies. Four of the six are words that tear down. Only two are edifying. I think if this were an episode of *Mission: Impossible*, and I were given the choice of this assignment, I might decline. Sounds like I’m going to be the bearer of bad news twice as often as good news. No one really wants this job, do they?

Two Visions

Now come two visions that help the reader understand the strengthening of young Jeremiah to the tasks just assigned. First the almond tree; second the boiling pot.

Verses 11–12: A quick read leaves us without awareness of this passage. You might know the phrase in verse 12, “God is watching over his word to perform it.” That’s encouraging already. What you don’t get in English is the use of a play on words in Hebrew. *Shakéd* is the Hebrew word for almond. The almond tree blossoms very early in the secular calendar in Israel, in January, and leads us to know that spring is coming soon. The Hebrew word for “watch over” in this same verse is *shokéd*. Obviously, the same consonants, and it reminds us that as the promise of almonds is coming when we see the blossoms, so God’s Word, not yet fulfilled, is surely coming as well.

Nine times in chapter 1 we see the word *davar*, “word,” or a variant of it. It’s God’s Word that matters to Jeremiah and Baruch, who will scribe this later at least twice. If you don’t hear anything else in today’s lesson, hear this: God’s Word is what matters in life. How we should live with our neighbours; how we should behave in society and in our household; how we should get along with God and ourselves in private times—it’s all in the Book.

Verses 13–16: The boiling pot. Specifically, a normal campfire pot is in view, and it tips over due to a wind from the north. The contents spill to the south. The nations and clans from the north could be any number of tribal enemies, including Assyria or even Babylon. When they come and set up encampments, God says, “I will deliver you. I will give you my words. Don’t be dismayed or terrorized.” I’ve got this under control.

Boiling pots are good, but spilled ones are trouble. God says, “Yes, it’s going to spill, but I’ve got this.” Jeremiah is being given responsibility to preach to the nations, and yet the idolatry that is in view is clearly something which God doesn’t like when Israel performs it. The idea of “forsaking” God in verse 16, Hebrew *azav*, is especially hard to hear for us believers. Remember the words of Yeshua on the cross, as he cried, “Eli, Eli, lama azavtani?”—“My God, my God,

why have you forsaken me?” That cry of anguish from the Son of God to his Father is painstaking. The sin of humanity is now laid on God the Son.

I think idolatry is the sin of Judah at this point, and God tells Jeremiah not to be afraid, and to proclaim this truth. Verse 17: Gird up your loins, roll up your sleeves, buckle up, get ready to rumble—the words are going to start NOW. Jeremiah, you are going to hear it from princes, priests and people. Hang in there. This is only chapter 1. You must proclaim truth. There will be consequences.

What Are We Learning? (Key takeaways)

God will call whom he will call and make us into spokesmen for him. He will sanctify us and give us words to speak. The key to knowing what to say is to know the One who gives us the words to speak. Have time with God each day, morning or evening or both (Ecclesiastes 11:6), and learn his ways, learn his words, learn his teachings and share with others who know him as well. That’s why we study together. Take God’s Word on board each day. Share with each other the good things of the Lord.

Conclusion and Invitation

God is calling each of us to know him and to walk with him, today and throughout our days. Have you received Yeshua as your Messiah and Lord? Have you renounced your sin, your idolatry, your forsaking God and given him first place in your life? If not, please do so now. Use your own words, if you want, but yield, surrender, to the Lord of life.

The Lord calls. He knows. He blesses and builds us up.

What’s Next? (Jeremiah 2)

Jeremiah has received his call. Now he must deliver the message. In Jeremiah 2, God asks his people a painful question: What happened to the love you once had for me? Jeremiah uses a remarkable collection of images to describe Israel’s unfaithfulness, but at the heart of the chapter is one terrible exchange: they have forsaken the fountain of living water and chosen broken cisterns that cannot hold water.

In “Jeremiah 2: A Lousy Exchange or Two” we’ll see what happens when people turn away from the God who gives life and put their trust in substitutes that can never satisfy.

Bibliography

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