

Lecture 1 “Jeremiah’s Call and Commission”

Jeremiah 1:1-4:31

May I ask, How many of you have studied the book of Jeremiah before? Few books in the Old Testament are more challenging than this one. Why? Not only is it the longest book in the Old Testament, but it is not written in chronological order and it has a huge cast of characters.

It’s tempting as we get started in the book of Jeremiah to think of it as a jigsaw puzzle with pieces that have to be re-assembled in proper order before we get a clear picture of great man. More appropriately, perhaps, is to look at the book of Jeremiah as a scrapbook of undated memories and snapshots recalling great moments in a splendid life.

As to the cast of characters, forty years is a long career on the public stage. There is more than one person with the name Zephaniah or Zedekiah . . . just as there was more than one John or Mary in the New Testament. Little by little we’ll get acquainted with them.

Last week I gave you an overview of your Bible to help you see where the prophets “fit into” the scheme of God’s Word. The lesson Scriptures for Jeremiah have been grouped together in a general way to help us see the message Jeremiah had for each of the five kings he ministered to.

This lesson begins with the call and commission of Jeremiah. We’re not into this book but five verses when we have that powerful

Scripture of our memory verse, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet of the nations.” What a magnificent thought! God has a plan for your life! We would like to think that this means we should be healthy, wealthy and beautiful. There is plenty of “health and wealth” preaching out there today that would like to convince you of that. But in truth, God’s plan may be ordinary every day living of your faith in testimony to His grace – modeling Jesus to your friends and neighbors and community. It may be rearing a godly family; caring for the aged or disabled; or, it may be sacrifice and suffering.

One thing we can be sure of . . . it’s His plan, and more than likely it will have surprises. When we get to heaven, we won’t be asking “Why?” . . . we’ll just be looking into His face and saying, “Oh!”

Jeremiah was perhaps twenty years old when God’s call came to him in the 13th year of Josiah’s reign. A young king and a young prophet – both responsive to God. A good reminder to us that young people can have an intense desire and commitment to the Lord at an early age. We always need to be ready to recognize and encourage that.

Of course, Jeremiah had the same kind of doubts Moses had – I’m not a speaker. Why me, Lord?

I can think of four reasons Jeremiah might have been reluctant.

1) The task was demanding 2) The times were difficult 3) The servant was doubtful and 4) The assignment was dangerous.

The task was demanding . . . As a priest he could work to preserve the past, but the prophet labored to change the present, to change hearts. There was some security and income in the priesthood, no such guarantee as a prophet. Jeremiah wasn't ignorant of how prophets of the past had labored to bring about reform. It was a challenging call.

The times were difficult . . . Idolatry was rampant. Later we'll read that Jeremiah says there was a god on every corner. True Josiah was instituting change and restoring the temple worship, but the mindset of the people was rebellion instead of obedience, surface reform instead of repentance, politics instead of principles. He preached for 40 years without success before Jerusalem would finally fall at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar and the people taken away into captivity.

Think of this on personal terms . . . what is the most difficult thing you face in trying to effect change in someone you love or even your community? It's usually getting someone to listen to what you have to say. They may listen courteously for awhile, but soon the walls go up, the excuses begin "why we can't" and, is often the case, you're either tuned out or turned out, especially if you're taking a stand for the Lord.

Jeremiah, the servant was doubtful . . . When it comes to serving the Lord, there's a sense in which nobody is adequate. It's one thing for us to know our own weaknesses, but quite something else for us to say that our weaknesses prevent God from getting anything done.

God gave the young Jeremiah three wonderful assurances.

First, (1) His electing grace – God knew Jeremiah in the womb. He was called and sanctified before he was ever born – ordained to be a prophet. A prophet is a foreteller of things to come, but he is also a forthteller, exposing the sins of the people and called them back into a covenant relationship before God.

Second, (2) Jeremiah had God's protective presence. But did you notice the condition? He had to go where God sent him and speak what God told him to speak.

Third, (3) he had the power of God's Word. By the Word of God the universe was created. His Word also carries out His purposes on earth. Jeremiah had those three promises.

Of course, Jeremiah might have been reluctant because this was a dangerous assignment. Ever stand toe-to-toe to confront someone? Think of being in the face of the king – someone with the power of life and death. But then again, think of having to answer to the King of Kings who has the power of eternal life and eternal death.

Throughout the Scriptures there are three strands of truth woven together: past sin – the nation has disobeyed and forsaken their God; present responsibility – repent or face judgment; and future hope – the Lord will come one day and establish His glorious kingdom. All people typically want to hear is the glorious future message, but Jeremiah would be faithful to deliver the whole truth . . . and nothing but.

In the Holy Land the almond tree blossoms in January and gives the first indication that spring is coming. This sign to Jeremiah was to confirm that God's Word will be fulfilled. The boiling pot was a sign of God's wrath coming. First the Jews would turn to Egypt for help and then to Assyria, but that would be futile because both of them would fall to Babylon just as Jerusalem would in years to come. The signs of the city, the pillar and the wall confirmed to Jeremiah that he would stand protected by God.

Signs are interesting things. Don't we all wish at times that God would give us a visible sign of some kind? I think often times He still does. These last few months have been times of extreme anxiety for me. As you know, Insight for Living has moved to Texas and my job is scheduled to be over in December. There have been other health, financial and personal issues that have been a challenge for me personally. But God gave me a sign in the form of a sign on the front of a Friends church over on Birch street – It says, "Maybe God is asking you for a sign?" That brought me up short. Maybe God wants a sign from me that I will trust Him no matter what the future holds. I just need to "keep on keeping on" – my sign of faith to the Lord.

Jeremiah was one of the most unpopular prophets in Jewish history. Measured by human standards, his ministry was a failure. He stood alone, was out of step with the philosophies and values of his time,

and he lived that kind of life for forty years. In the final chapter of his book *Walden*, Henry David Thoreau writes: “If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears another drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away.”

Chapters 2 through 29 are a litany of lawlessness...defection from that “first love” – the Lord God Himself. You know, defection doesn’t occur suddenly. Most often it begins in a time of blessing. How quickly we turn from seeking God’s help when we feel self-assured. “I can do this myself, no need to bother Him.” Little by little SELF becomes the God. And it flourishes under loose leadership. The leaders and priests of Judah were no model of reliance on the true God.

Are leaders today calling for repentance? Are they reminding you of sin’s consequences and inviting you back into fellowship with the living Lord? Are they themselves standing tall and firm as models of integrity, humility, dependence on God? It’s always easy to tell people what they want to hear – feel good messages – go with the flow of society. The leaders of Jeremiah’s day were doing it . . . and it’s being done today. We don’t have to be like the world to attract the world, we have to offer a difference . . . a place of acceptance and forgiveness that will make life meaningful and assure eternal rewards.

When defection is taking place it usually involves two sins: forsaking the true God and finding empty substitutes. Jeremiah 2:11 “My people have exchanged their glory for worthless idols.” Vs. 13, they have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water. Of course, the pattern of defection provides its own consequences. Vs. 17 “Have you not brought this on yourselves by forsaking the Lord your God?”

They could wash all they wanted to with soap and water and go to the temple, but vs. 22 “the stain of your guilt is still before Me.” It was an inward problem. Isn’t this relevant for us today? Live a sinful life all week and go to church on Sunday, clean and pressed and looking good. Like one old preacher said, “ You sow your seeds of sin all week and go to church on Sunday and pray for a crop failure.”

It’s a heart problem, people. A broken and contrite heart is what the Lord wants . . . not your money, not your good works, not what you do to promote yourself and your image. Defection doesn’t stop until we learn how to blush again (3:3). To be appalled at sin. To repent from the heart and return to that first love.

Think of the ten ways God described the people’s sin: an unfaithful wife, broken cisterns, backslidden, a stubborn animal, a fruitless vine, a soiled body, an animal in heat, a thief caught in the act, incorrigible children, prisoners of war. All vivid pictures . . . vivid descriptions. Theirs was the sin, yet they blamed God.

What's more, they had the example of their countrymen to the North – Israel who was taken from the land by conquering Assyria. Warning after warning had been given to them by God's prophets (remember all those we read in Isaiah?). Yet their stubborn refusal to repent or listen cost them forfeiture of ten tribes of Israel being disbursed into another culture, lost until a future time, the millennial reign of Christ. Oh, the high cost of pride!!

But Chapter 3:12, "I will not be angry forever. Only acknowledge your guilt – you have rebelled against the Lord your God." Jeremiah shared God's heart and also had the promise of hope: a new covenant, Israel and Judah gathered together at the Throne of the Lord in Jerusalem to honor Him and a regathering into the land that had been promised to the forefathers as an inheritance. That's what God wanted to do for the people.

3:22 "Return, faithless people; I will cure you of backsliding." Isn't that an encouraging verse? How like us to think that we have to be the ones to clean up our act before we can come back to the Lord. We never sing it any more, but there is so much truth in the lyrics to the old hymn . . . Just as I am, without one plea, But that Thy blood was shed for me, And that Thou bid'st me come to Thee, O Lamb of God, I come! I come!

We come – He cleans, strengthens, empowers, refreshes, motivates us anew. Connected to the vine the branches flourish.

The power of the Holy Spirit convicts our hearts of sin – He’s the brake to stop backsliding. But first we have to let Him have control of the car.

Is there ever a time when God’s had it . . . when His people have gone too far? We study the Scriptures and know that the answer is, “Yes.” Jeremiah announced that judgment would come from the North and we know that is a prediction of Babylon. The false prophets were saying, It will never happen here. God wouldn’t do that. Peace. After all we have the temple and the ark of the covenant.

But God said, “your own conduct and actions have brought this on yourself.” When it comes to push and shove, believe me, God can shove a lot harder than we can. We call Jeremiah the “weeping prophet” because he sees and feels the pain that defection and disobedience will bring. No other Old Testament prophet revealed his brokenheartedness and sorrow as did Jeremiah. When ministering publicly, he was bold before men; in private, he was brokenhearted before God.

So, what lessons can we take home with us this week? I think there are four:

1) **God chooses and uses unlikely people for unbelievable tasks.**

Perhaps God wants to do something very special through you.

Are you full of excuses or are you looking for opportunities?

There are a myriad of tasks to be done in this church and in this Bible Study. It just takes an open mind and a yielded heart.

2) **Ignore God's Word and serious consequences are inevitable.**

You are here because you want to know what God's Word has to say. I commend you and encourage you. He is monumentally patient and will even let you go your own way for a while, but He's a loving parent and will not neglect discipline. I was not raised in a household where you said, "No" to Dad or Mom. We don't say, "No" to God without consequences.

3) **Be careful you're getting the whole counsel of God – love and discipline.** There are lots of ways to hear about God these days – the pulpit, TV, small groups. God is Love is wonderful truth. But you're smart enough to know that there is always two sides . . . "Good News" and "Bad News." If we never hear about Hell, Heaven's glory is diminished. The joy of our faith is that the "Bad News" of judgment for sin is really "Good News." The Judge is also our Advocate. Jesus Christ has paid the price for our sin.

Lastly,

4) **Success is not always the reward of faithfulness.** Jeremiah's labors saw little fruit in his lifetime. Maybe you feel like you're not making much of an impact in your Christian life. But you were called to plant seeds . . . others may reap the harvest.

Success? That's a human measurement. Perseverance is the goal.

Well, we're off to a good start. Please don't be frustrated by a tiny space to write. Use another sheet if you need to, but remember, we're reading to get "the big picture." Enjoy your week.

Were there any questions?