

Called to be a Prophet – Jeremiah 1

Today we are talking about Jeremiah the prophet. As a way of introduction, I am going to give some background information of the life and times of Jeremiah. Jeremiah was born around 647 BC and lived through the last seven kings of the Judean kingdom. His ministry which started around 626/627 would extend through the last 5 kings and into the exile. Some of the world leaders during this time were Nabopolassar of Neo-Babylon, Neco of Egypt, and of course King Nebuchadnezzar. When Jeremiah was a child two evil kings reigned, Manasseh and Amon. However, after the long evil reign in Judah, a good reforming king came on the scene, King Josiah. It was during this king's reign that Jeremiah was called by God to be his prophet. Now, something very significant happened during the reign of Josiah. Let's read about it in 2 Kings 22:3-13.

In the eighteenth year of King Josiah, the king sent Shaphan the son of Azaliah, son of Meshullam, the secretary, to the house of the LORD, saying, ⁴ "Go up to Hilkiah the high priest, that he may count the money that has been brought into the house of the LORD, which the keepers of the threshold have collected from the people. ⁵ And let it be given into the hand of the workmen who have the oversight of the house of the LORD, and let them give it to the workmen who are at the house of the LORD, repairing the house ⁶ (that is, to the carpenters, and to the builders, and to the masons), and let them use it for buying timber and quarried stone to repair the house. ⁷ But no accounting shall be asked from them for the money that is delivered into their hand, for they deal honestly."

⁸ And Hilkiah the high priest said to Shaphan the secretary, "I have found the Book of the Law in the house of the LORD." And Hilkiah gave the book to Shaphan, and he read it. ⁹ And Shaphan the secretary came to the king, and reported to the king, "Your servants have emptied out the money that was found in the house and have delivered it into the hand of the workmen who have the oversight of the house of the LORD." ¹⁰ Then Shaphan the secretary told the king, "Hilkiah the priest has given me a book." And Shaphan read it before the king.

¹¹ When the king heard the words of the Book of the Law, he tore his clothes. ¹² And the king commanded Hilkiah the priest, and Ahikam the son of Shaphan, and Achbor the son of Micaiah, and Shaphan the secretary, and Asaiah the king's servant, saying, ¹³ "Go, inquire of the LORD for me, and for the people, and for all Judah, concerning the words of this book that has been found. For great is the wrath of the LORD that is kindled

against us, because our fathers have not obeyed the words of this book, to do according to all that is written concerning us.”

So, here we have the king restoring the temple and what happens – the high priest finds the Book of the Law. This is very significant. And who was the high priest? He was Hilkiah, who was the father of Jeremiah. Now, before we get into the main text for today, which is Jeremiah’s call and commission from God, there are a few details we should know. Jeremiah was born into a priestly family. And if God had not called him to be a prophet, he would have likely become a priest. But at a young age, God called Jeremiah to be his prophet and spokesman – his mouthpiece. And if we were to look at the book of Jeremiah as a whole, the main message and theme of the book is warning God’s people of coming judgment, a call to repentance and future restoration. God’s judgment would come in Jeremiah’s lifetime, so it was an imminent warning of judgment. It was like the sign post that tells you if you keep going the same direction you are heading, you are going to crash or go over a cliff. The prophet was warning them, and calling the people and kings to repentance. And certainly this is a common theme among the prophets. A really important element to remember as we discuss Jeremiah chapter 1 is that Jeremiah’s call is divine. He received God’s words directly, and in essence, God’s words were Jeremiah’s words because they were coming directly from God. This is a distinction we are going to make to understand the difference between someone who is marked by God to deliver his word and someone who isn’t. Let’s read Jeremiah 1:1-10

The words of Jeremiah, the son of Hilkiah, one of the priests who were in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, ² to whom the word of the LORD came in the days of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah, in the thirteenth year of his reign. ³ It came also in the days of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah, and until the end of the eleventh year of Zedekiah, the son of Josiah, king of Judah, until the captivity of Jerusalem in the fifth month.

⁴ Now the word of the LORD came to me, saying,

⁵ “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”

⁶ Then I said, “Ah, Lord GOD! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth.” ⁷ But the LORD said to me,

“Do not say, ‘I am only a youth’; for to all to whom I send you, you shall go,

and whatever I command you, you shall speak.

⁸ Do not be afraid of them,
for I am with you to deliver you,
declares the LORD.”

⁹ Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth. And the LORD said to me,

“Behold, I have put my words in your mouth.

¹⁰ See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms,
to pluck up and to break down,
to destroy and to overthrow,
to build and to plant.”

Now, the first thing that jumps out at us from the text is that God appointed Jeremiah to be a prophet to the nations. And when did this appointment occur – before he was even born. So, did Jeremiah get to choose, did he say, “Hey, I want to be a prophet.” No! God chose him and appointed him before he was born. When we are chosen by God to be his mouthpiece, it is a unique call – it is not like anything else. And we just read, there is no way around it. The text says, “Whatever I command you, you shall speak.” It is a command. This is not a touchy, feely, group session where we share our feelings. It is not a negotiation. It is more like, “I have chosen you to speak for me, and you will do what I tell you.” That may not be popular with modern sensitivities, but that is what the text says. It is a divine call, and God is the authority. Our relationship with God is not like any other relationship. He is in charge, he is sovereign, and he decides what we will do, period. Again, that may not be popular, but it is the truth.

Now, I want to stop here for a moment because I actually believe the divine call from God is very serious. When we listen to people, no matter what we call them, pastor, evangelist, teacher, etc., we often forget that to speak for God, you must have a divine call. It is not for just anyone who knows how to communicate. It is a divine call by God – God chooses people to speak for him. Dr. Warren Wiersbe in his commentary on Jeremiah notes, “Priests didn’t preach to the crowds very much but ministered primarily to individuals with various ritual needs. Prophets, on the other hand, addressed whole nations, and usually the people they addressed didn’t want to hear the message. Priests belonged to a special tribe and therefore had authority and respect, but a prophet could come from any tribe and had to prove his divine call.” The reason I am pointing this out is because even today there is still a lot of discussion about degrees and training for ministry, and certainly we need those things to some degree. However, are those things actually Biblical? Sometimes God uses formal training and sometimes he doesn’t. In the biography of Charles Spurgeon by Arnold Dallimore, he tells the story of when Spurgeon was called at 19 to pastor New Park Street Baptist Church – the church

wanted to ordain Spurgeon because he had not been ordained. This is what Dallimore writes, "Spurgeon told them he did not believe this was a scriptural practice and that he did not need it to validate his ministry. The blessing of God, he declared, was the divine seal upon his holding of the office. Man could add nothing to it." I also want to point out that when Spurgeon started his ministerial training school, the tuition and board was free, and all materials, such as books and even clothes were provided. In addition, Spurgeon's school had no examinations, no graduation or degrees. But what did it have – it had Spurgeon who maintained close relationships with his students. So, what am I saying? A divine call has nothing to do with school or seminary training. Either someone is called or they are not. It has nothing to do with how educated they are and certainly nothing to do with social class or wealth. A divine call is very serious and we would do well to stay out of the way and let God have his way. Man-centered programs do not produce godly preachers – God can train someone in the wilderness. Again, we would do well to consider if someone actually has been called by God, and to listen to what they have to say. We certainly use discernment because just as there are true prophets, there are false ones, but listening to a man of God filled with the Spirit and God's fiery words on his lips is a blessing from heaven.

In Spurgeon's autobiography he writes, "A man who has really within him the inspiration of the Holy Ghost calling him to preach, cannot help it – he must preach. As fire within his bones, so will that influence be, until it blazes forth. Friends may check him, foes criticize him, despisers sneer at him, the man is indomitable; he must preach if he has the call of Heaven." (Spurgeon, Arnold Dallimore, p. 30)

Now, before we leave this point, I want to point to another man of God who like Spurgeon did not receive formal ministry training. There is an article by Dr. Philip Eveson, titled *Martyn Lloyd-Jones and Theological Education*. In case you are not aware of who Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones was let me give you a brief summary. He was trained as a medical doctor and became the chief assistant to Sir Thomas Horder, the king of England's clinical physician. In his twenties he felt the call of God to ministry and left a prominent career to pursue pastoral work. His first pastorate was at a Presbyterian church in Port Talbot in South Wales. In 1943 he became the lead minister at Westminster Chapel in London. Lloyd-Jones became very influential and many of his sermons have been turned into books. I own several of them, including, *Preaching and Preachers*. Now in the article I referenced the author notes that many early preachers received no theological college training. They were self-taught so to speak being well studied and filled with the Holy Spirit. Dr. Eveson states that Dr. Lloyd-Jones did not believe that an educational institution could produce a godly preacher. Lloyd-Jones did not believe training preachers should in any way be tied to a university system. Eveson writes, "There were preachers raised up by God at that time who had no university

training and yet some of them were exceptionally powerful preachers. But they were called exhorters or lay-preachers rather than simply preachers or gospel ministers because 'they had not received the customary training' and thus they were not allowed to be ordained." Basically what the author is trying to convey is that being called by God is in a different dimension, the spiritual realm. This means that degrees and the examination process does not make a pastor or preacher. Only God can make a minister. Theological education is not wrong in and of itself, but we should never use theological degrees as a yardstick for ministry, that is very dangerous and it is not Biblical.

Now, moving back to the text, we know that Jeremiah was appointed to be a prophet. There was no committee meeting, no interview process, God chose Jeremiah and commanded him to be his mouthpiece.

The next section in Jeremiah chapter 1 is Jeremiah's response. Jeremiah says, "I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth." But God corrects him and commands him to speak. The next part of the text, which is verses 9-10, are extremely important in the chapter. This is what it says:

Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth. And the LORD said to me,

"Behold, I have put my words in your mouth.
See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms,
to pluck up and to break down,
to destroy and to overthrow,
to build and to plant."

The first thing we notice is that God is equipping Jeremiah. The prophet thinks he cannot speak, but what does God do? He gives him the ability to not just speak, but to speak the very words of God. The Anchor Yale Bible translation reads, "And Yahweh extended his hand and hit upon my mouth." Now, obviously this is a visionary experience. We remember when Isaiah is called in Isaiah 6 that an angel brings a burning coal from the altar and touches the prophet's mouth. Clearly in both Jeremiah's and Isaiah's case they are seeing a vision. And there is another connection between Isaiah and Jeremiah. Jeremiah was born roughly 50 years after Isaiah was in Jerusalem. The Hebrew word used in the text for hit is *naga* (naw-gah), which means to touch, reach or strike. Jack Lundbom suggests the Hebrew likely means something more than just touching, like a stroke across the mouth. (*Jeremiah 1-20: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Yale Bible, vol 21A, p. 234) Either way, God was putting his words in Jeremiah's mouth so he would be a faithful conduit of his word.

Now, when we get verse 10, we notice the text tells us exactly what Jeremiah was called to do - to pluck up and break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant. So, what does that tell us? First of all, there are six tasks, four are negative and two are positive. In a ratio of 2:1, Jeremiah's words, which are God's words, will be words of judgment. The prophet is warning the nation to repent. And I am reminded of Deuteronomy 28. In Deuteronomy 28 the text tells us there are blessings for obedience and judgment for disobedience.

"And if you faithfully obey the voice of the LORD your God, being careful to do all his commandments that I command you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth. ² And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the voice of the LORD your God. ³ Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the field. ⁴ Blessed shall be the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground and the fruit of your cattle, the increase of your herds and the young of your flock. ⁵ Blessed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl. ⁶ Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out. Deut 28:1-6

"But if you will not obey the voice of the LORD your God or be careful to do all his commandments and his statutes that I command you today, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you. ¹⁶ Cursed shall you be in the city, and cursed shall you be in the field. ¹⁷ Cursed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl. ¹⁸ Cursed shall be the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground, the increase of your herds and the young of your flock. ¹⁹ Cursed shall you be when you come in, and cursed shall you be when you go out. (vs. 15-19)

Now, I have not read all of it, but you get the idea. Jeremiah is like the last prophet God is sending before his people go into exile. It is the last call for repentance before judgment comes. By the way, God responds to repentance. And we should also remember that Jeremiah is also called to build and to plant. There will be words of mercy and restoration. Jeremiah is coming on the scene of the nation at a very dark and rebellious time, and he has a very difficult task. And he will do it faithfully. We should remember it is God who uproots; he is the one who topples nations and leaders in his sovereignty. But his ultimate goal is always restoration. He tears down what needs to be torn down, and then he rebuilds in righteousness.

Now, in this chapter starting in verse 11 there is a transition. We have the commission of Jeremiah. So, what does it mean to be commissioned? Well, in a general sense it means to be sent. In the New Testament in Acts, Paul describes a commission he received from the chief priests. Acts 26:12 states, ""In this connection I journeyed to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests." The Greek word there is "epitrope" and it

means permission or full power. This means Paul went to Damascus in the full power and authority of the chief priests. In the Hellenistic or Greek world, a commission was a command from a king or government official. Here we have the same meaning, except the command or commission is from God! In other words, the call and commissioning from God is not optional – it is a command from the highest authority. Like an ambassador, Jeremiah is being sent by God and is given full power and authority to speak for Yahweh. The main point I want to make here is that there is a difference between calling and commission. Jack Lundbom in his book, *Writing Up Jeremiah*, notes, “Jeremiah received his call in 627, accepts it in 622 when the temple scroll is found, is commissioned sometime later, and then begins his ministry.” (pg. 146) Lundbom is of the opinion that when Jeremiah received his call he was very young, a boy, and it took a few years for him to accept the call, then there is a span of time before his commission. Some scholars have noted that in Jeremiah 15, there appears to be a second call. Whether that is the case or not, what is clear is there is a two-step process – the original call and later a commission or sending out. Let’s read the second half of Jeremiah 1 (vs. 11-19).

¹¹ And the word of the LORD came to me, saying, “Jeremiah, what do you see?” And I said, “I see an almond branch.” ¹² Then the LORD said to me, “You have seen well, for I am watching over my word to perform it.”

¹³ The word of the LORD came to me a second time, saying, “What do you see?” And I said, “I see a boiling pot, facing away from the north.” ¹⁴ Then the LORD said to me, “Out of the north disaster shall be let loose upon all the inhabitants of the land. ¹⁵ For behold, I am calling all the tribes of the kingdoms of the north, declares the LORD, and they shall come, and every one shall set his throne at the entrance of the gates of Jerusalem, against all its walls all around and against all the cities of Judah. ¹⁶ And I will declare my judgments against them, for all their evil in forsaking me. They have made offerings to other gods and worshiped the works of their own hands. ¹⁷ But you, dress yourself for work; arise, and say to them everything that I command you. Do not be dismayed by them, lest I dismay you before them. ¹⁸ And I, behold, I make you this day a fortified city, an iron pillar, and bronze walls, 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 they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, declares the LORD, to deliver you.”

Now, starting in verses 11-12, Jeremiah sees an almond branch. You may not realize this but in Anathoth where Jeremiah was born, there is an abundance of almond trees. In Jeremiah’s day, in January, the city would be filled with almond trees with white blossoms. What does the almond tree represent? It represents the first signs of spring.

God is actually using a play on words. The Hebrew words for watching and almond are very similar (shoqued and shaqued). The two words are actually different forms of the same word, waking or watching. So, what is God communicating? He is not asleep; he is awake and watching over his word to perform it. Remember the covenant in Deuteronomy 28, God is about to bring to pass the words he has already spoken. All God's words will be fulfilled. Because of the people's gross rebellion, first judgment will come, and later there will be restoration.

Now, in verse 13, the word comes to Jeremiah a second time, and this time Jeremiah sees a boiling pot. The Hebrew does not literally mean boiling pot, but blown pot, like a pot over a fire being fanned by the wind. Clearly this image refers to judgment coming from the north. This of course is a reference to Babylon. In verse 15, the text tells us that the kings will come and set up their thrones in the entrance of the gates of Jerusalem. The book of Jeremiah does not just warn, it also records the fall of Jerusalem.

In the ninth year of Zedekiah king of Judah, in the tenth month, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon and all his army came against Jerusalem and besieged it. ² In the eleventh year of Zedekiah, in the fourth month, on the ninth day of the month, a breach was made in the city. ³ Then all the officials of the king of Babylon came and sat in the middle gate: Nergal-sar-ezer of Samgar, Nebu-sar-sekim the Rab-saris, Nergal-sar-ezer the Rab-mag, with all the rest of the officers of the king of Babylon. ⁴ When Zedekiah king of Judah and all the soldiers saw them, they fled, going out of the city at night by way of the king's garden through the gate between the two walls; and they went toward the Arabah. ⁵ But the army of the Chaldeans pursued them and overtook Zedekiah in the plains of Jericho. And when they had taken him, they brought him up to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, at Riblah, in the land of Hamath; and he passed sentence on him. Jeremiah 39:1-5

So, Jeremiah was sent to warn the people, to call them to repentance, to prophesy judgment was coming, but we should remember the message from Jeremiah 18.

If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, ⁸ and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it. ⁹ And if at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, ¹⁰ and if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will relent of the good that I had intended to do to it. ¹¹ Now, therefore, say to the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: 'Thus says the LORD, Behold, I am shaping disaster against you and devising a plan against you. Return, every one from his evil way, and amend your ways and your deeds.' (vs. 7-11)

This means that as a nation, if we repent, God will relent and restore us. If we don't judgment will continue. I am not in charge of the nation's future, God is. But what I can tell you is we are a nation plagued with sin and iniquity. God's people need to intercede, we need to repent. And as evidenced in the Bible we can repent corporately, meaning we can call out sin and repent of it for the nation – we can ask God to forgive our leaders, we can intercede. However, the result is up to God. Only God decides the destiny of nations. And here is an unpopular truth – the Church is not pure, not by any means. And while we definitely have governmental and business leaders who need to fall down on their faces before a holy God in repentance, the Church needs to focus on purity and Church leaders need to repent as well. The Bride of Christ is not pure right now, but it can be – it starts with repentance. Verse 16 tells us, "They have made offerings to other gods and worshipped the works of their own hands." The worship of man and man-made things is an abomination in God's sight and God will have his way, one way or the other. We can do things His way or His way. He is in charge, not us.

Now, before finishing the chapter I want to point something out. We are all called by God – God gives each of us gifts and a purpose. Each of us, if we belong to Christ, gets a mission in this life. But everyone is not chosen by God to speak his truth corporately. Everyone cannot teach or preach his word, only those God has ordained to do that. In the same way, everyone is not a banker, lawyer or policeman. Each of us are called to do different things. But the call to be God's prophet is unique. It is not for everyone, in fact, there are many speaking corporately for God who should not be. You can know this by what they say and the fruit of their lives. But also, just like in the Old Testament, there are false prophets and false priests. We need to discern the true from the false. A formal degree does not make a man of God – God's call and commission, which is a command, is what establishes a man of God. God calls, God commissions. Our job as leaders in the Church is just to confirm what God has already done. But even when the Church does not do that, those who are called and commissioned carry God's authority, and they will speak because God has spoken. You cannot stop what God had done or is doing.

Now, I am going to be very honest with you about this generation of leaders. Amos 2:11-12 describes them. Here is what the text says, "And I raised up some of your sons for prophets, and some of your young men for Nazirites. Is it not indeed so, O people of Israel?" declares the LORD. "But you made the Nazirites drink wine, and commanded the prophets, saying, 'You shall not prophesy.' There is a consequence for such iniquity – we are experiencing it in our nation today. But make no mistake, the prophets will speak. So, how does God wrap up chapter one?

But you, dress yourself for work; arise, and say to them everything that I command you. Do not be dismayed by them, lest I dismay you before them. ¹⁸ And I, behold, I

make you this day a fortified city, an iron pillar, and bronze walls, 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 they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, declares the LORD, to deliver you.” (vs. 17-19)

And what does God do for Jeremiah? He makes him like iron and bronze. God is giving Jeremiah strength because the people and the leaders were going to fight him. But God says he will deliver Jeremiah and give him powerful words. In Jeremiah 5:14 it states, “Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of hosts:
“Because you have spoken this word,
behold, I am making my words in your mouth a fire,
and this people wood, and the fire shall consume them.

The call of God is not an easy thing – it is not all rainbows and flowers. It is a very serious calling. In closing, I am going to briefly share my own calling and commission.

When I was 15 years old, God called me to preach after reading I Timothy 3. I made a public profession of this call on my life at my local church. After this I did some teaching with youth and when I was seventeen I spoke to about 200 people at a new year’s lock-in. When I was 18, I met with the pastor and asked if they would ordain me for ministry.

In my mid-30s, God again came to me and renewed his call on my life. I started developing sermons and teachings and wrote all of it down. This renewal lasted several years, and right around my 40th birthday, I experienced a vision where I saw Jesus riding a horse and heading toward a dark city. In the vision he was inviting me to come with him. While my spiritual life had been changing quite a bit a little at a time, after this vision, things really changed.

Because of the call on my life, I continued to develop and produce teachings and sermons. Some of this content was focused on the nation and national issues. As God continued to direct me I wrote a book warning leaders to repent. I am still encouraged when I read God’s word and know he can restore all that has been lost. It is my hope that someday leaders will listen to God’s instruction for blessing and hope. Until that day comes, I wait in anticipation for revival, reformation, and ultimately Christ’s second coming to set everything right.

My mission and calling from God is national in focus because just as God loves us as individuals, he also cares about nations. My primary gifting from God manifests in teaching and preaching, and my vision and lifetime goal is to reform our nation.

As far as my vision for vocational ministry, my goal is to reform hearts by preaching and teaching God's word. However, God has also called me to pray for the nation. So, prayer will always be a vital part of my life and wherever I am in ministry, and there will be an extensive focus upon prayer. In addition, I desire to set up a school of ministry to train leaders for the next generation of the church. This comes from 2 Chronicles 17 when King Jehoshaphat sent out leaders to teach in all the cities of Judah. One of the things this passage teaches is that teaching God's word brings peace. So, my goal under the guidance of the Holy Spirit is to preach, teach, pray, train and send out leaders to purify and reform our nation as God wills it.

Now you can see there from my own calling and commission, I was called at a young age, but later there was a second call or renewal and then a commission from God. If God has called you to be his mouthpiece you will know it, and it is a heavy calling. Do not say what people want, say what God tells you to say. It is very serious, and there are spiritual consequences. Do not listen to the world, speak God's words. The culture may have said, "Do not prophesy," but God says, "Speak." The prophets will not be silent because God isn't silent.

Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth. And the LORD said to me,

"Behold, I have put my words in your mouth.

¹⁰ See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms,
to pluck up and to break down,
to destroy and to overthrow,
to build and to plant." Jeremiah 1:9-10

Has God called and commissioned you? Then speak his words at his command, even if it is a mouth full of fire.