

LifeWay Explore the Bible Series for March 6: The beginning of God's call on Jeremiah's life_30705

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The beginning of God's call on Jeremiah's life

Jeremiah 1

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The book of Jeremiah opens with the call of a priest from Anathoth to the daunting task of prophetic ministry. Yet the opening lines of the book remind the reader this word of judgment is more than the simple musings of a priest from the small tribe of Benjamin.

These “words of Jeremiah” (v. 1) are the result of the “word of the Lord” (v. 2) coming to him—during the reign of Josiah and again during the reign of Jehoiakim and down through the reign of Zedekiah (vv. 2-3). Repeatedly such phrases as “the word of the Lord that came to Jeremiah ...” (14:1), “the word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord ...” (7:1; 11:1; 18:1; 21:1;

25:1), and “the word of the Lord came to me ...” (2:1; 13:3; 16:1; 18:5; 24:4) dot the landscape of the book of Jeremiah, reiterating the source of his prophetic message, and more significantly, adding force to his prophetic message. The words of this priest-turned-prophet must be heard as a word from the Lord.

The closing words of verse 3 remind the reader of what is at stake in the message of Jeremiah—“exile.” In essence, the book begins with exile looming on the horizon and actually concludes in 52:27-30 by describing the exile itself.



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The book and the preaching of Jeremiah move slowly toward this seemingly inevitable end for the nation of Judah. Thus, the book of Jeremiah actually is about more than just a prophet named Jeremiah. These subtle announcements of exile reorient the reader's thinking. The book of Jeremiah is about exile—it is about the people of God being carried off to a foreign land, and it is about a prophet named Jeremiah who struggles to announce this hard word of judgment to “the whole land” (v 18).

The call of Jeremiah (1:4-10)

Beginning in verse 5, the call of Jeremiah is bathed in divine initiative. God announces, “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” (v. 5). While some prophets apparently functioned in their prophetic role for a short time (Amos), Jeremiah appears different. God announces the life of Jeremiah and the calling of Jeremiah have been intricately woven together “before you were born” (v. 5).

The calling also announces Jeremiah has been “set apart” or “consecrated” for the prophetic task. The Hebrew word for “set apart” often is related to the priestly sphere in Israelite theology and conveys the notion of holiness. In some sense, God announces to Jeremiah he has “set apart” his prophet to go to a people who were originally to be “set apart” or “holy” themselves—yet they have failed tragically.

The failure of the nation to remain “consecrated” to God stands in stark contrast to the priest-turned-prophet set apart for this task. The juxtaposition of a nation no longer consecrated to God and a prophet set apart from the beginning only heightens the conflict and tension between “the whole land” and Jeremiah.

Upon hearing the words of God in verse 5, Jeremiah laments in verse 6. The words of divine initiative in verse 5 lead to a pained response by Jeremiah in verse 6. Jeremiah cries out, “Ah, Sovereign Lord” (v. 6). The first word in the verse, “Ah,” is the Hebrew word, *‘ahach*—a term often used in laments or complaints to God (Jeremiah 4:10; 32:17; Ezekiel 9:8; 11:13). In essence, Jeremiah responds viscerally, groaning at this divine appointment to the prophetic task. Jeremiah knows the enormity of the task, and he appears fully aware of the weight of the prophetic mantle.

In an attempt to dissuade God, Jeremiah reminds God of his inability to speak, as well as his relatively young age (v. 6). Yet just as God remedied a similar complaint issued by Moses at his calling, so too does God remedy

this claim by Jeremiah. Jeremiah assumed the prophetic mantle was predicated upon ability, piety and status.

God redirects Jeremiah and announces the prophetic mantle is worn only by those willing to “go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you” (v. 7). A true prophet then, according to God's definition, is the willing servant—one willing to be the mouthpiece of God. As evidence of this, Jeremiah explains that God reached out, touched his mouth and announced, “I have put my words in your mouth” (v. 9). The assertion earlier in the chapter (vv. 1-3) that Jeremiah has received a word from the Lord is not only verified, but in some sense enacted in these verses.

Like many of the other prophets, Jeremiah experiences a vision. Typically in the Old Testament, when a prophet was called, there would be a sign to confirm that calling. These visions actually operate on two levels in the book of Jeremiah. In one sense, they serve as a sign from God, both validating and confirming God's call upon Jeremiah. The almond branch (Hebrew, *shaqed*) appears to Jeremiah as such a sign.

But somewhat unique to the call of Jeremiah, the sign performs an added function when God announces that he is “watching (Hebrew, *shoqed*) to see that my word is fulfilled” (v. 12). The similarity in sound between *shaqed* (“almond branch”) and *shoqed* (“watching”) suggests the almond branch also serves as symbolic reminder of the certainty of God's word. Thus, not only has God placed his word in the mouth of the Jeremiah, God has ensured the certainty of his word and its fulfillment. Together, this vision, along with the vision of the boiling pot, points us forward to the rest of the book.

The remainder of the book is about a prophet in whom the word of the Lord has been placed—and is about the faithfulness of a God who is watching over the fulfillment of his word.

Discussion questions

- ◆ What has God called you to do?

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