

Jeremiah 1:1–11, 17–19 (NIV2011)

The words of Jeremiah son of Hilkiah, one of the priests at Anathoth in the territory of Benjamin. ² The word of the LORD came to him in the thirteenth year of the reign of Josiah son of Amon king of Judah, ³ and through the reign of Jehoiakim son of Josiah king of Judah, down to the fifth month of the eleventh year of Zedekiah son of Josiah king of Judah, when the people of Jerusalem went into exile.

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

⁵ “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.”

⁶ “Alas, Sovereign LORD,” I said, “I do not know how to speak; I am too young.”

⁷ But the LORD said to me, “Do not say, ‘I am too young.’ You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. ⁸ Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you,” declares the LORD.

⁹ Then the LORD reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, “I have put my words in your mouth. ¹⁰ See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant.”

¹¹ The word of the LORD came to me: “What do you see, Jeremiah?”

[Jeremiah then sees a boiling pot being tipped over. The kingdoms of the north will soon spill over all of Judah, destroying all in their path. Jeremiah is going to have to confront the rulers of Judah, tell them what they don’t want to hear. He must tell God’s people that they are about to reap what their abandonment of God has sown.]

¹⁷ “Get yourself ready! Stand up and say to them whatever I command you. Do not be terrified by them, or I will terrify you before them. ¹⁸ Today I have made you a fortified city, an iron pillar and a bronze wall to stand 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 will not overcome you, for I am with you and will rescue you,” declares the LORD.

*What’s your purpose in life? Jeremiah is not only given a purpose by God,
he becomes that purpose.*

What am I here for? Does my life have meaning, real purpose? These are questions we all ask ourselves from time to time. Sadly, many people never seem to find any sense of purpose at all. They drift through life, being blown from one place to another like so much tumbleweed. Jeremiah had his load of problems in life, but lack of purpose was not among them.

In the coming weeks, we’ll be taking a look at the Old Testament book that bears Jeremiah’s name. In terms of words and verses Jeremiah is the longest book in the Bible¹ and one of the most complex and confusing. Robert Carroll writes:

The book of Jeremiah is long, complex, and difficult. To the modern reader it appears to be a repetitive mess, a mixture of prose and poetry, in no particular order, but containing traces of attempts to collate and give some order to parts of the material. . . . The reader who is not confused by reading the book of Jeremiah has not understood it!²

¹This is true for Christian Bibles, in which Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles are split into two books. The Hebrew Bible preserves those three books in their original form – three long books, all longer than Jeremiah, all too long to fit on a single scroll.

²Quoted in Terence Fretheim’s Smith and Helwys commentary *Jeremiah*, p. 1.

Formed for a purpose

Jeremiah was from a priestly family, but one that was on the outs with the temple priests in Jerusalem. Centuries before, one of Jeremiah's ancestors, the priest Abiathar, supported Solomon's brother Adonijah to replace David on the throne of the united Israel. Ever since Jeremiah's family possessed a priestly pedigree but had no real influence.

God came to Jeremiah in about 627 BC (see the textbox below). Jeremiah was still a young man at the time for we know that (1) Jeremiah refers to himself as a "boy" (meaning child or young man) when God calls him to this ministry, and (2) his public ministry lasted at least forty years.

Jeremiah

[If you are unfamiliar with the history of Israel and Judah, you may want to read first the page four textbox.]

Jeremiah's prophetic ministry continued throughout the final decades of the kingdom of Judah's life. We know more about Jeremiah and his life than any of the other writing prophets because he tells us much of his own story in his prophetic messages. Jeremiah was from Anathoth, a small town about two miles north of Jerusalem in the lands of the tribe of Benjamin. He prophesied from about 627BC to beyond the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC. His ministry began during the reign of King Josiah. Josiah's successors, Jehoiakim and Zedekiah, rebelled against Babylonia, to whom Judah was a vassal state. Jeremiah believed that Babylonia was God's instrument of judgment upon Judah and that Judah's kings should accept the 'yoke' of Babylon (Jeremiah 27). He was branded a traitor and was imprisoned. A tribal priest himself, Jeremiah would also preach hard words against the temple establishment. Centuries later, Jesus would invoke the words and actions of Jeremiah in his own confrontation with the temple priests.

During and after the final siege of Jerusalem, Jeremiah would bring words of comfort and hope, promising a day when Israel would be restored and God's covenant would not be written on tablets of stone but upon his people's hearts (Jer. 30-33). After the burning of Jerusalem, Jeremiah went into exile like thousands of other Jews.

Jeremiah was the greatest spiritual personality among God's people during a time of great chaos and decline. Though by temperament he was gentle and compassionate, Jeremiah never softened his warnings about the coming destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of the Jews. He brought them God's call to stay faithful to God and his law, rather than trust in the outward trappings of the temple system. And he brought them words of comfort about the "life-after-death" to come.

But in a way, Jeremiah's prophetic ministry began even before God came to him the first time, for God tells him, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations." Consider that for a second. We were all once barely formed in the womb. Yet even in that fetal state, Jeremiah is chosen by God for a purpose. Set apart. Even though the young man didn't learn about his choosing later, one wonders in what ways God might have strived to shape Jeremiah's growing up so that he would be well-equipped for the ministry that always had been and would always be his life's work.

Could Jeremiah say no to God? It seems the answer is yes. Like Moses, Jeremiah begins with objections but, also like Moses, is reassured that God will be with him in this. Jeremiah is to go where God sends and speak as God tells. He isn't to be afraid, for God is with him and will rescue him from trouble.

Jeremiah's calling isn't simply a career choice or a vocation, but his very essence. God even puts his word into Jeremiah's mouth (v. 9). As Terence Fretheim puts it, "It is not

necessary for Jeremiah to hear what he is to say; the word is transferred into his very being.” From his very beginning, Jeremiah had been shaped to be a certain kind of person, one who is now ready to embark on the work given him by God.

What purpose?

To what purpose has Jeremiah been called? He is to proclaim God’s word to the nations, i.e. *all* the nations, including the non-Israelite nations threatening Jerusalem and the kingdom of Judah. God’s word to these kingdoms is to be of both judgment (pluck up, pull down, destroy, and overthrow) and hope (build and plant). This generally characterizes the prophets of Israel. Judgment and hope. The consequences of sin are quite real and often devastating. But the love and faithfulness and mercy of God is just as real.

In the two brief visions that follow, God shows Jeremiah that God’s word will be evident early and that Judah faces devastation from the north. Why does this lie ahead for Judah? It is because of their idolatry (v. 16). As was often (usually!) the case, the people of God were chasing after other “gods,” fashioning and worshiping idols of one sort or another.

Try to imagine that you are in Jeremiah’s shoes. God has made clear the purpose for which you were always intended, even from before you were born. And God has placed his word in you and reassured you of his protection. Yet, the word you will bring will be hard and tough. Not only do the foreign kings ignore the LORD God Almighty, so do God’s own people, those whom God has rescued time and again. And you are to confront the leaders of Israel with God’s word of condemnation, pronouncing that the time of judgment has come. Jeremiah would even demonstrate this word with great force and drama at times. What manner of man must God have shaped to prepare him for such a vocation?

Not surprisingly, God wraps this up with warnings and encouragement for Jeremiah. The task is daunting, but Jeremiah is to stand strong. God has made him like an impregnable fortress able to withstand the assaults from even the kings of Judah. These opponents will fight but they will not win. Why will Jeremiah prevail? Because the LORD is with him.

Later readers of Jeremiah would read these words of encouragement and see in them the anticipation of all that lies. R. E. Clements explains:

This clearly is not intended as simply sound advice and an assurance to Jeremiah concerning the expected nature of his career but was also a considered preface to the book. Jeremiah, beleaguered and threatened by his own people, was to stand like a city surrounded by its attackers. Against him would be ranged virtually the entire leadership of his nation: “the kings of Judah, its princes, its priests, and the people of the land” (v. 18). They would fight against Jeremiah when they discovered that his words sounded a strident note of opposition to their own positions and policies. It would be Jeremiah’s words that would prevail, however, not theirs! When ruin and disaster struck, as the book’s readers knew only too well was to be the story that would unfold, it would be Jeremiah’s words that could bring light and understanding. When events revealed the foolishness of the plausible, yet complacent, attitudes displayed by the nation’s leaders—kings, princes, priests, and even prophets—then Jeremiah’s words alone would retain their credibility as God’s revealed truth to the nation. The tragedy would be in discovering how few had listened to such a prophet, how grievous and painful the sufferings he had had to bear for no other reason than that he had possessed the courage to tell the truth as God had revealed it to him!³

³ Clements, R. E. (1988). *Jeremiah*. Interpretation, a Bible commentary for teaching and preaching (22). Atlanta: J. Knox Press.

The Tragedy of Israel and Judah

After the death of King Solomon in about 930BC, the united kingdom of Israel split in two; Israel in the north and Judah in the south. Their stories in the subsequent centuries were largely of tragedy and decline. Bad king followed bad king as the people drifted further and further from God. Elijah and Elisha were both prophets to the northern kingdom of Israel, whose ministries were devoted to confrontation with those who would chase after false gods, which included, sadly, nearly all of God's people.

In 722BC, the northern kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrians. Why? Why would this happen to Israel? We could leave God out of our explanation entirely, noting that Assyria was powerful and simply could not be stopped from their aggression. But this is not the biblical understanding.

For the prophet Amos, Israel was no better and no worse than their neighbors and that was precisely the problem. From Amos 3: "Hear this word that the Lord has spoken against you [Israel] . . . You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for your iniquities." Simply put, God expected more from his people. He held them to a higher standard, the standard of the covenant he had made with them. For Israel to be accused of oppressing the poor, as Amos accused them, was no small matter. In failing to care for the needy while resting in the luxuries of their own prosperity, Israel revealed the depth of their sin and the abandonment of their special relationship with Yahweh, their Lord and God.

Such abandonment could lead only one place – to their destruction. Israel had forgotten that they were to care for the widow because God had cared for them. They had forgotten that they were to "let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:24).

After the destruction of Israel, King Hezekiah of Judah led a rebellion against the Assyrians but had limited success. Though, with God's help (2 Kings 19:35-36), Jerusalem stayed independent of the Assyrians, Hezekiah lost control of Philistine territory on the coast.

Hezekiah was succeeded by his son, Manasseh, who reigned for fifty-five years but returned to pagan ways. Altars to Baal were rebuilt. Even the practice of human sacrifice returned to Jerusalem (2 Kings 21:1-17). Manasseh chose the course of staying a loyal vassal of the Assyrians as did his son, Amon, who also embraced the pagan ways. However, in about 630BC, at the age of eight, Amon's son, Josiah, took the throne. Josiah would get a rare, good report card from God (2 Kings 22:2).

The word of the LORD first came to Jeremiah in the thirteenth year of Josiah's reign, when the young king was still only twenty-one.

When Josiah was 26 years old, the high priest Hilkiah found the books of the Law (2 Kings 22). Josiah wept for Judah's abandonment of God (after all, the books had to be found!) and convened the Jews for the reading of the Law. Josiah swept out all the pagan practices (as best he could) and reinstated the observance of the Passover. However, at the age of forty-one, he was killed in battle and succeeded by kings who did evil in God's sight.

Josiah's reign saw the rapid decline of the Assyrian empire and the rise of the Babylonians, who sought to control fully the nation of Judah. In 588BC, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, tired of half-way measures with Judah, ordered the siege and sacking of Jerusalem. In 587, the city fell. Solomon's temple was burned to the ground. The Ark of the Covenant was lost forever. Presumably, it was carried to the city of Babylon where it was melted down. Thousands of inhabitants of Jerusalem were exiled to Babylonia. Only the poorest classes in Jerusalem were left in the city.

Like the kingdom of Israel, the kingdom of Judah and the city of Jerusalem were dead.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Do you have aims, purposes, for your own life? What are they? What aims might God have for you? How do you think that your family and friends would describe your aims in life – as they see them? Many Christians turn to the Great Commission to look for purpose. Certainly, the making of disciples is central our lives as Christians and it is the stated mission of the UMC. But what do you think that it really means? Is it truly sufficient to describe the purposes of your own life? How might it change our aims in life if we understand that the making of disciples entails doing all we can do to build God’s kingdom in this life, in this world?

2. Rick Warren’s book, *The Purpose Driven Life*, is still a big seller and the questions it raises about our purpose in life and our purpose in Christ will always be relevant. Consider this phrase from Martin Buber, an important 20th-century theologian: “Worldly power and holy purpose”. You might reflect upon and discuss your own understandings of our “holy purpose” as disciples of Jesus Christ. How might this purpose shape our lives as individuals and as a community of God’s people? What ought to be the purpose of St. Andrew? How are we to use our “worldly power” to shape our “holy purpose”? What are the dangers in our exercise of worldly power? How can we guard against these dangers?

3. How do you read the statement that God put his word into Jeremiah’s mouth. What do you think is meant? What effect would it have on Jeremiah? How might this statement be helpful in understanding the work of the prophets and the ways they interacted with God? Ezekiel is given a scroll to eat, presumably with God’s word written on it. Do you take the time to really chew on the words of Scripture? I’m not talking about just reading or even studying, but really gnawing on them, consuming them, and allowing them to nourish you.

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Amos 4:1-3, 18-24 Israel has abandoned God’s way.</p>	<p>Tuesday, Isaiah 6:1-13 The call of Isaiah to be a prophet to the kingdom of Israel.</p>
<p>Wednesday, 2 Kings 21 The reigns of Manasseh and Amon, kings of Judah who did much evil in the sight of the Lord.</p>	<p>Thursday, 2 Kings 22-23 The reign of King Josiah</p>
<p>Friday, Ezekiel 2:8-3:3 God gives a scroll to the prophet to eat. It is the word that Ezekiel is to speak to the people of God.</p>	<p>Weekly Joys and Concerns</p>

