

# The Prophetic Calling of Jeremiah



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## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Isa. 1:19, Jer. 7:5–7, 1 Kings 2:26, Jer. 1:1–5, Isa. 6:5, Jer. 1:6–19, Matt. 28:20.*

**Memory Text:** “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; before you were born I sanctified you; I ordained you a prophet to the nations” (*Jeremiah 1:5, NKJV*).

**W**e know more about the life of Jeremiah than we do about any other Old Testament prophet. The biographical facts in his book help us understand better his work as a prophet. Jeremiah had such an effect on history that, even at the time of Jesus, he was a revered prophetic figure.

At the same time, the prophet's work, judged by human standards, shows only slight success. Despite decades of fervent warning and pleadings, the people for the most part didn't listen to the messages he gave them from the Lord.

Nevertheless, despite the opposition, Jeremiah could not be bought or sold; he stood as “a fortified city, an iron pillar and a bronze wall” (*Jer. 1:18, NIV*), not in his own strength but in the Lord's.

Jeremiah's lot in life wasn't a happy one in many ways. His calling brought him suffering, woe, rejection, even imprisonment. Worse still was the fact that so many of these troubles came from the very ones whom he was seeking to help, seeking to point in the right direction. Thus, in his own way, Jeremiah prefigured what Jesus Himself would face hundreds of years later in the same land.

\* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, October 3.

## The Prophets

The prophets, according to their calling, were determined protectors of God's law. They stood on the ground of the covenant and the Ten Commandments (*Jer. 11:2–6*). Micah 3:8 gives one summary of the prophets' work, which was "to declare unto Jacob his transgression, and to Israel his sin." And the concept of sin, of course, is meaningless apart from the law (*see Rom. 7:7*).

**What** was the prophets' message to the people? In what ways is that message the same to us today? *Isa. 1:19, Jer. 7:5–7, Ezek. 18:23. (See also Matt. 3:7–11.)*

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God's judgment was not inevitable, but it would come if the people did not turn from their evil ways. Change, however, is not so easy, especially when people get accustomed to doing evil. Who hasn't seen how people get used to the evil that, at one time, had appalled them? The message of the prophets was to let people see just how bad their evil was and what the consequences were of not turning away from it. This message, of course, wasn't the prophets'; it was the Lord's.

The prophets do not mention how God's Word was revealed to them or how they heard it. At times God spoke to them directly; other times the Holy Spirit touched them in dreams or visions or, perhaps, through a "still small voice" (*1 Kings 19:12*). However their messages came to them, the prophets had a mission, not only to transmit God's will to the common people but also, if need be, to deliver it before kings, emperors, and generals.

This task involved great responsibility: if they told the truth, these powerful people could kill them; but if they did not represent the truth, God's judgment could also come upon them. To be a prophet is a heavy calling, and from what we can tell from the Bible, those given that call took it seriously.

We can be glad they did, for their messages have come down to us in the Bible. In that sense, their words still speak, even today. The question now, as in Jeremiah's time, is the same: Will we listen?

**What are the prophets, even after all this time, still telling us? At the core, what is their basic message to God's people?**

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## Jeremiah's Family Background

**Read** 1 Kings 1 and 1 Kings 2:26. What was the background that led to the exile of Abiathar to his home in Anathoth?

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After he strengthened his throne, Solomon, in a conflict with Adonijah over succession, removed Abiathar the priest from his office and sent him into exile back to his hometown, Anathoth, believed to be about three miles northeast of Jerusalem. Hilkiah, Jeremiah's father, was a member of a priestly family that lived at Anathoth. Some have speculated that Jeremiah's family may have descended from Abiathar. Either way, we know from Jeremiah 1:1 that the prophet had an exalted lineage. Thus, we can see here that all through prophetic history the Lord has called all types of people—shepherds, rabbis, fishermen, priests—to the prophetic office.

“A member of the Levitical priesthood, Jeremiah had been trained from childhood for holy service. In those happy years of preparation he little realized that he had been ordained from birth to be ‘a prophet unto the nations;’ and when the divine call came, he was overwhelmed with a sense of his unworthiness. ‘Ah, Lord God!’ he exclaimed, ‘behold, I cannot speak: for I am a child.’ Jeremiah 1:5, 6.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 407.

The priests were to be the moral and spiritual leaders of the nation; they had been given important roles that impacted most every area of the nation's spiritual life. Some had been faithful to that task; others abused and violated it in ways that we can't imagine. As we will soon read in the book of Jeremiah, the prophet had very strong words to speak against these unfaithful priests, who had proved unworthy of the responsibilities and calling that they had been entrusted with.

**What are your spiritual responsibilities, whether at home or in the church or both or anywhere else? If a prophet were to speak to you now about those responsibilities, what might he or she say?**

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## The Prophetic Calling of Jeremiah

**Read** Jeremiah 1:1–5. What does this tell us about Jeremiah’s calling?

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Just like other prophets in the Old Testament (and like Paul in the New; see *Gal. 1:1, Rom. 1:1*), Jeremiah didn’t waffle in regard to who called him. He was very clear in these verses and, in fact, all through the book of Jeremiah, that what he was speaking was “the word of the LORD,” which had come to him. No doubt this fervent conviction is what enabled him to press on ahead despite vehement opposition and toil, suffering, and trials.

Jeremiah’s calling happened in the thirteenth year of the reign of Josiah, dated to about 627 or 626 B.C. We do not know the exact year the prophet was born or the exact age he began his ministry. In his mind, though, as we will see, he deemed himself a child, someone too young for the task given him.

**Read** Jeremiah 1:4, 5. What assurance and comfort should he have gotten from those words?

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God chose Jeremiah to be a prophet before his birth. God set him aside from the moment of his conception for this prophetic role. The words translated “I sanctified you” (*vs. 5, NKJV*) come from a verb that means “to be hallowed,” “to be holy,” and to “sanctify,” among other things. It definitely has a sacred and religious connotation to it, one tied also with the sanctuary service itself. Indeed, the word for “sanctuary” comes from the same root word. The idea contained in it is that something or someone is “set apart for a holy purpose.” This is what God had planned for Jeremiah, even before his birth. These texts don’t teach pre-existence or predestination; they teach, instead, God’s foreknowledge.

**God knows the end from the beginning. What comfort can we draw from this amid the trials that we inevitably face?**

## Reluctant Prophets

Despite the Lord's assurance that Jeremiah had been divinely chosen for this task, the young man was frightened and didn't feel up to it. Perhaps knowing the spiritual state of people at the time, which wasn't good, and knowing what needed to be done, Jeremiah didn't want the job.

**Compare** Jeremiah 1:6 with Isaiah 6:5 and Exodus 4:10–15. What common points do all these incidents have?

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None of those men, for whatever reasons, felt up to the task. Perhaps that was a crucial prerequisite for the job of a prophet: a sense of one's own unworthiness and inability for such a crucial and important task. *A spokesman for the Creator?* No wonder they all shrank from the task, at least at first.

Notice Jeremiah's first response after being called. He immediately talked about his inability to speak well, as did Moses. Isaiah, too, in his response, made mention of his mouth, his lips. In all cases, they knew that, whatever else their calling involved, it would involve speaking and communication. They were going to get messages from God and, as such, would be responsible for proclaiming those messages to others. Unlike today, where they could build a Web site or send a text message, this communication would so often have to be face to face. Imagine having to stand before hostile leaders or unruly people and give them sharp words of rebuke and warning. The reluctance of these soon-to-be prophets is understandable.

**Read Jeremiah 1:7–10. What is God's response to Jeremiah? Why should that response hold some hope and promise for us in whatever we believe we have been called by God to do?**

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## The Almond Branch

The prophet is God’s witness; his job is to speak not for himself but for God alone. Jeremiah wasn’t called to find solutions to the problems of the nation or to become a great personality or charismatic leader whom the people would follow. Jeremiah had the singular mission to transmit the words of God to the people and their leaders. The emphasis here is not on the human or on human potential; it is on God’s sovereignty and power alone. The prophet was to point the people to the Lord, in whom alone was the solution to all their problems. It is, of course, no different for us today.

**What** was Jeremiah’s first vision about? (See Jer. 1:11–19.)

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Most Bible translations translate the Hebrew expression in verse 11 as “the branch of an almond tree.” These translations, however, miss the Hebrew play on words here. The word translated “almond tree” has the same root as the verb “to keep watch,” which appears in verse 12, when the Lord says that He is going to “keep watch” over His word to fulfill it.

One could argue that the central message of the entire book of Jeremiah is found in verses 11 and 12. God’s word will be fulfilled. One day everyone will see events happen just as God said they would. God wants His people to turn away from their sins. He has offered grace and forgiveness, but He does not force anyone to obey and be healed. If His people will not respond to Him, His words of judgment and punishment will certainly be fulfilled as His words against Israel were fulfilled in the book of Jeremiah.

As we can see, too, God’s words here were not just for the people. The Lord was speaking directly to Jeremiah himself, warning him to be prepared for the opposition that he would face. No matter what happened, Jeremiah could have the assurance from God that “I am with you.” He would, as we will see, need it.

Don’t we all?

**Read Matthew 28:20. What assurance can we find for ourselves in these words to us, living in the time that we do?**

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**Further Thought:** Martin Luther wrote about the prophet in the introduction of his commentary to the book of Jeremiah: “Jeremiah was a sad prophet, who lived in a deplorable and difficult period and, what is more, his prophetic service was extremely difficult as he was struggling and fighting with a bad-tempered and stubborn people. Apparently he did not achieve much success because he experienced how his enemies became more and more evil. They tried to kill the prophet several times. They pressed hard against him, whipping him several times. Yet, he would live to see with his own eyes how his country was devastated and his people taken into exile.”

“For forty years Jeremiah was to stand before the nation as a witness for truth and righteousness. In a time of unparalleled apostasy he was to exemplify in life and character the worship of the only true God. During the terrible sieges of Jerusalem he was to be the mouthpiece of Jehovah. He was to predict the downfall of the house of David and the destruction of the beautiful temple built by Solomon. And when imprisoned because of his fearless utterances, he was still to speak plainly against sin in high places. Despised, hated, rejected of men, he was finally to witness the literal fulfillment of his own prophecies of impending doom, and share in the sorrow and woe that should follow the destruction of the fated city.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 408.

### Discussion Question:

**1** One of the saddest things, and yet something that should give us all, today, as Seventh-day Adventists, something to think about, is the fact that God had warned Jeremiah that he would face great opposition *from his own people*. Read Jeremiah 1:17–19 again. Who would be the ones fighting against him? What fearful lesson should we take away from this for ourselves? That is, what is our attitude toward the prophetic word to us, especially when we hear things that we don’t like? How does the Ellen G. White quote above help express the fearful truth that the very ones who should have been revealing the true God to the world were the ones who were, by reviling and attacking His spokesman, fighting against Him? (See also *Eccles. 1:9*.)

## A Most Satisfying Career: Part 1

Harry and Alex\* worked as security guards in Malawi. One night Alex told Harry that he had an idea of how they could earn some extra money.

“What’s that?” Harry asked, interested.

“We could use our rifles in a little side business,” Alex said, lifting his gun. “Rich people have more than they need, and we need more than we get. We could take a little from them so we can have enough for ourselves.”

Harry wasn’t sure; but eventually, he was convinced. The two broke into the home of a wealthy family and stole cash and anything they could carry. A few days later, they robbed more homes. But one night they were caught. Sitting in jail, Harry realized the seriousness of his crimes. The two men were sentenced to eight years of hard labor in separate maximum security prisons.

Harry arrived at the prison determined to escape. His prison shirt was imprinted with the length of his prison term. One day Harry bribed another prisoner to trade shirts.

When he wore his new shirt with a sooner release date, he was assigned to a low-security job in the prison garden. Harry noticed that the armed guard watching them grew sleepy every afternoon. One day when the guard was yawning, Harry dropped his hoe and ran. Other prisoners started running too.

The guards caught all the prisoners except Harry, who had hidden among some large stones. When it was dark, the guards gave up their search and returned to the prison. Harry crawled out and escaped.

Harry found a job; for 18 months, he worked hard and stayed out of trouble. Then one day when he came into the bus station, the police were waiting to take him back to prison. He now had to serve ten years.

When Harry was escorted to his cell, he was surprised to find that his cell mate was Alex, his former partner in crime.

“Hey, I have an idea,” Alex said after Harry settled in.

“What’s your idea?” Harry asked. And suddenly it was just like old times.

The prison walls were made of mud bricks with a thick coating of cement over them. Harry and Alex decided to dig a small tunnel to the outside. It took them only three days to dig through the wall. The two waited until dark then crawled through the hole.

Everything seemed quiet; but as they scrambled up the outside wall, a guard saw them and shouted. The guards chased them, but Harry and Alex had a good head start.

The two stopped a car on the road, made the driver get out, and took the car. They drove to the city and sold the car for parts. But someone became suspicious and told the police. Alex escaped, but Harry was caught. This time he was sent to a small prison where he could be watched more closely. That decision changed his life.

*To be continued in next week’s Inside Story.*

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\* Alex is a pseudonym.

## *The Lesson in Brief*

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► **Key Text:** *Jeremiah 1:1–12*

► **The Student Will:**

**Know:** Review the calling experience of Jeremiah, recognizing that his reluctance to accept God’s call was possibly what qualified him most for the task.

**Feel:** Sense how tenderly God deals with his or her own feelings of inadequacy with regard to the tasks He has set before him or her.

**Do:** Determine to listen more closely to God’s calling in his or her life and resolve to let Him equip him or her to do His will.

► **Learning Outline:**

**I. Know: Jeremiah’s Calling**

**A** Why was God’s call of Jeremiah to be a prophet such a difficult one for the young man to accept?

**B** What are the criteria God uses to choose people to do His bidding, and how are they applied in Jeremiah’s (and other prophets’) calling?

**II. Feel: Feelings of Inadequacy**

**A** How does God deal with Jeremiah’s reluctance to accept the call?

**B** How do we deal with feelings of inadequacy when we feel overwhelmed by the tasks ahead of us?

**III. Do: Listening to God’s Calling**

**A** How can you develop the spiritual discipline of listening to God on a daily basis?

**B** What are the things in your life that keep you from doing what God has called you to do?

► **Summary:** Jeremiah’s initial reaction to God’s calling was not positive, because he knew (a) the difficulties he would encounter and (b) that he, by himself, would not be up to the challenge. However, God worked tenderly with him, calming his fears and empowering him to speak God’s words to the people of Judah.

## *Learning Cycle*

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### ►STEP 1—Motivate

**Spotlight on Scripture:** *Jeremiah 1:4–9*

**Key Concept for Spiritual Growth:** When God calls, we often react like Jeremiah did (i.e., finding “good” excuses to refuse the call). Our call may not be to the prophetic ministry, but there is a work for each of us to do, and we should trust God that He knows what we are, and what we are not able to do. He will enable and equip us to do His bidding.

**Just for Teachers:** This week’s lesson introduces this quarter’s study on the book of Jeremiah, focusing on his calling. The prophets of the Old Testament began their ministry after receiving God’s call. This lesson provides an opportunity for the teacher to discuss how we can overcome feelings of inadequacy when we look at the task that God has set before us. The lesson portrays a God who tenderly works with our fears but also encourages and empowers us to go ahead. It would be important for the class to understand that we all receive God’s call, even if it is “just” the call to start a small Bible study group in our home.

**Opening Parable:** There is a story of a man who was waiting for God’s call to go into the mission field. A friend came to visit and found him sitting in front of the phone. She asked him what he was doing, and he told her that he was waiting for a call to go into the mission field. She was impressed by the importance of this call; at the same time, when she looked out the window she saw an old lady struggling with some heavy bags as she crossed the road. She ran out to help her, and when she returned, her friend was still sitting in front of the phone. As she sat down, she heard a neighbor calling for help; she ran out to see what she could do. The same type of scenario happened two or three more times, with her running out to help people while her friend stared at the phone. Finally the phone rang. He excitedly answered it, but then his face dropped, and he passed the phone to her, saying that the call was for her—she was being called to go to the mission field. Discuss with the class where their mission field is and let them suggest what God could call them to do.

## ►STEP 2—Explore

**Just for Teachers:** Jeremiah has often been called the “weeping prophet,” which related to the message of sorrow that he had to proclaim throughout his prophetic ministry. His ministry took place just before, and during, the beginning of the Babylonian exile. Like Jesus, Jeremiah was a man of sorrows, and his faithfulness to God, as well as his struggles, can be an encouragement to us who live in similar turbulent moments at the end of earth’s history.

### Bible Commentary

Jeremiah 1 is the focus of this week’s study. It can be divided into three major sections that all relate to the prophetic calling of the young man.

#### I. Jeremiah in His Time *(Review Jeremiah 1:1–3 with your class.)*

Verses 1–3 serve as an introduction to the book of Jeremiah, providing the historical background to the prophet’s calling and ministry. It also establishes the prophet’s credentials by listing his priestly genealogy and the way in which God spoke to him: “to whom the word of the LORD came” (*Jer. 1:2, NKJV*). This phrase could literally be translated as “to whom the word of the LORD happened/occurred/succeeded.” It is found repeatedly in the calling experiences of Old Testament prophets (*for example, Jon. 1:1, Mic. 1:1*), and it points to the fact that, when God calls, it is not just an audible phenomenon but a dynamic event that reflects God’s power as Creator, transforming what it touches (*compare Isa. 55:11*). When God speaks, things begin to happen.

**Consider This:** In what ways is God’s Word still “happening” today in our lives? How can we experience the transforming power of His Word?

#### II. Jeremiah’s Call and Visions *(Review Jeremiah 1:4–16 with your class.)*

Three times more the “word of the LORD” occurs in chapter 1 (*vss. 4, 11, 13*), introducing Jeremiah’s call and his two subsequent visions. God’s appointment of Jeremiah as “prophet to the nations” (*vs. 5*) is described in Creation terminology as God’s having “formed” Jeremiah (the same verb as in *Gen. 2:7*) with the plan to call him as a prophet.

Jeremiah’s reluctance to accept God’s call is based on his feelings of inadequacy in regard to his speech and youth. The Hebrew word for

“youth” indicates a young man, possibly somewhere between 18 and 20 years old; but it can also be used to refer to an even younger person (*for example, 1 Sam. 1:24*). To speak at such a young age to kings and leaders must have been daunting to Jeremiah. His reluctance echoes Moses’ concerns when he received his call (*Exodus 3, 4*), demonstrating that it is a reaction that Jeremiah shared with a number of biblical prophets (as well as Ellen G. White). Such a reaction did not disqualify them from the task but, rather, allowed God to show His strength through their weaknesses.

God reacts tenderly to Jeremiah’s reluctance without reprimanding him, providing reassurance of His divine presence and deliverance (*Jer. 1:7, 8*). Then God performs a symbolic act by touching Jeremiah’s mouth with “His hand” (*vs. 9*), which is as much cleansing (*compare Isa. 6:6, 7*) as it is also empowering. He outlines the prophet’s task with six verbs (*Jer. 1:10*), four of which are negative and two positive, reflecting the emphasis of the divine message, not only on judgment but also on the elements of hope and restoration.

Two visions reinforce God’s care for Jeremiah: the almond tree branch and the boiling pot. The word for “almond tree” in Hebrew creates a wordplay on the verb “to watch.” Just as in ancient Israel one would watch for almond blossoms while waiting for spring (*vss. 11, 12*), God was still watching over Jeremiah and Judah. The “boiling pot” (*vss. 13–16*) that is tipping over from the north toward the south alludes to Israel’s enemy, who habitually came from the northern direction. Although Babylon was geographically east of Judah, the Babylonian armies would not cross the desert but traveled along the Euphrates River. From there they crossed over into Syria, moving southward, setting up their thrones in Jerusalem’s gates in order to conquer and execute God’s judgments on Judah for its sins (*vss. 15, 16*).

**Consider This:** How would you have reacted had you been in Jeremiah’s place? Have you ever experienced God’s “watching” over the plans He has for your life?

### III. God’s Promise (*Review Jeremiah 1:17–19 with your class.*)

Jeremiah 1:17 calls Jeremiah to action (literally “gird yourself” as someone who gets ready for serious work or even battle by gathering up long garments). But whom God calls, He also equips. He promises Jeremiah that he will stand firm like a “fortified city” against all people, including kings, princes, and priests (*vs. 18*). Jeremiah would be able to withstand the ridicule and hostility that were sure to come his way, and they certainly did. The final promise is literally an “oracle” of the Lord: “‘For I am with you’ ” (*vs. 19, NKJV*).

**Consider This:** How are the strong metaphors of the fortified city and the iron pillar applicable to our lives? How can we overcome being too sensitive out of fear of being ridiculed for our faith? On the other hand, what danger is there of becoming insensitive to criticism that comes our way?

### ►STEP 3—Apply

**Just for Teachers:** Lead your class in a practical discussion of how Jeremiah's experience can become tangible in our own lives. It is important to realize that, while God might not have called us to the prophetic ministry, we are still called to our own specific ministries. We also might go through the same process of reluctance and feelings of inadequacy as Jeremiah did.

#### Thought/Application Questions:

- ❶ In what ways is it possible to apply Jeremiah's experience to our lives, even though most of us are not called to be prophets?
- ❷ How can I overcome feelings of inadequacy with regard to what God wants me to do?

### ►STEP 4—Create

**Just for Teachers:** Jeremiah 1 is crucial for the understanding of the whole book, and it sums up its message: God watches over His Word as much as He watches over His messenger. Help the class to respond positively when God calls us to whatever ministry He has in mind for us.

#### Individual Activities:

- ❶ Learning how to listen to God is a skill that needs to be developed, especially with regard to the things that we don't necessarily want to hear. Resolve to take time to listen more to God's voice (for example, by spending a quiet moment at the end of prayer).
- ❷ Look for a prayer partner and share with him or her the areas in your life in which you feel inadequate. Then offer up to God what both of you have shared, asking Him to remove your feelings of inadequacy and replace them with His strength.