

Under Duress

The Life and Times of Jeremiah

Only a Youth—September 13

Jeremiah 1:1-19. Despite his inadequacies and fear, Jeremiah was chosen and strengthened by God to be his spokesperson in a time of distress, as are we!

Under Duress

As we move into the fall of 2020, we are not as hard pressed as Americans in the Great Depression, or in the Dust Bowl, or during the First and Second World Wars. We are not suffering like the persecuted church around the world.

But we *are* under duress.

We are under duress in all the *normal* ways: as single or married or parents or children or students or workers or whatever our lot in life.

Above and beyond this, we are coping with *unusual* pressures. We are in the midst of an unrelenting pandemic. In addition to masks and social distancing and frequent hand washing, we are now recalibrating our weekdays around changed (and changing) school and university schedules. In this election season, families, friends, *and churches* are being pulled apart by bitter political rhetoric. As a nation, we are reeling from the repercussions of our racial history. We ache for people threatened and displaced by nearly 100 wildfires in the west.

We are under greater duress *now* than most of us have encountered in our lifetime. It is *real*, and it is *hard* . . . which is why the message series for the next seven weeks is titled: "*Under Duress, the Life and Times of Jeremiah.*"

Through his entire life, the prophet Jeremiah lived and preached in a distressed nation, amid widespread idolatry and immorality, and encountered violent opposition to his message. From Jeremiah, we can learn how to live with authentic faith at times like this, when we are under duress.

The Times of Jeremiah

To understand the turbulent time in which Jeremiah lived, we must retrace Israel's history all the way back to the time of David, 300 years earlier.

In David's time there was no great empire on the world scene. Working within the "power vacuum" that resulted, David, the warrior king, was able to establish a large kingdom which he passed on to his son, Solomon, the wise king, who amassed great wealth for the nation.

Immediately after Solomon's death, however, internal conflict split the country into two smaller nations, Israel and Judah.

For the next 200 years they lived side by side, sometimes fighting, sometimes at peace, occasionally invaded and humiliated, but always, because of the power vacuum, able to maintain their independence.

Then, about 100 years before Jeremiah began his ministry, the situation changed. The nation of Assyria—located in what is now northern Iraq—began to assert military power. The Assyrian army advanced toward Israel and Judah, conquering all the kingdoms along the way.

In desperation, Israel and Judah weighed the political alternatives. Israel chose to resist, and when the dust settled, no longer existed as a nation.

Judah decided to submit and, though the nation escaped the harsh fate of Israel, sacrificed her independence in the bargain. The proud nation was humiliated and discontented.

Responding to this discontent, Judah's King Hezekiah bent his efforts toward independence. Assyria moved to crush the rebellion, destroyed much of the country, forced Hezekiah to surrender, and imposed ruinous taxes on the people.

When Hezekiah died, Manasseh, his son and successor, reversed the national policy (2 Kings 21). He chose to placate the mighty Assyrians.

While this seemed to be the most prudent alternative politically, it had disastrous results religiously.

In the first place, conquered nations at the time had to give at least nominal recognition to the gods of the ruling nation; and, in the second place, Manasseh was overly zealous in his compliance. He restored and encouraged pagan worship throughout the country. People loyal to God were horrified.

Manasseh died, and after a season of political intrigue and murder, his eight-year-old grandson, Josiah, was placed on the throne

Josiah is remembered, above all else, for his sweeping religious reform. In the 12th year of his reign, Josiah repudiated the Assyrian gods and instituted a new policy of religious reform. By this time Assyria's awesome power had eroded; the empire couldn't respond to this unstated declaration of independence; and at long last, Judah was free!

Just as the nation was caught up in the fervor of independence and reform, Jeremiah experienced his call to be a prophet. From the start, he was appalled at the flagrant paganism and immorality which continued in spite of official policy, and he was haunted by a premonition of disaster.

The Book of Jeremiah

To give more background: among the 27 books in the OT, the book of Jeremiah is one of 18 prophetic books—the collected prophecies of the “major” and “minor” prophets. This is not like the major and minor leagues in baseball, where the majors are better and the minors not-as-good. It simply refers to the size of the books. The prophetic books of the four major prophets—Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel—are larger than the other OT prophets.

The book of Jeremiah is a jumbled collection of the prophet's sermons and prayers, with some narrative thrown in. It is not always clear who Jeremiah is speaking to, what problems he is talking about, or which national and international events are prompting his messages.

For this series, I have selected seven passages from the 52 chapters, arranged them in chronological order, and, message by message, will do my best to place them in their historical context.

I hope in this way we can *imagine* ourselves in Jeremiah's situation, *picture* the scenes as he describes them, *soak up* the mood of his prophecies, *feel* his feelings with him, and *learn* from this very "human" prophet, how to serve God well in a troubled time.

Jeremiah

Jeremiah was a PK—a priest's kid—born into a home where the history, laws, and stories of Israel were known and recited. As a child, Jeremiah learned about God, about the great things he had done, and about the covenant, with its promises and demands, that God had made with his people. Jeremiah was familiar with the words of the earlier prophets and was especially impressed with Hosea. By the time of his call, Jeremiah had the *finest theological education* available at the time.

Jeremiah was also an "outsider" who inherited the *hostility* of the religious establishment. Long before he was born, one of his ancestors, an important priest at the time of David, had gotten into a dispute with another influential priest—and lost. As a result, *this ancestor* was banished, along with his family, to the small town of Anathoth in the rugged hills north of Jerusalem. From that time on Jeremiah's family, though they were still priests, was permanently excluded from service in the temple in Jerusalem.

In addition, Jeremiah's temperament did not fit the stereotypical "job profile" of a bold, blunt, strong, resilient prophet. He was reflective, sensitive, emotional, and compassionate. As a youth, he may have spent hours reflecting on the high expectations of God's covenant and the deplorable failure of his people to meet them. It is easy to imagine this sensitive young man horrified by scenes of pagan immorality and perverted worship.

Because of his family's banishment to Anathoth, Jeremiah was likely able to diagnose the condition of his nation more accurately than priests within the "establishment." He realized that his country was sitting in the midst of an international powder keg and, weakened by the people's sinful behavior, would be unable to protect herself from the explosion that was sure to come.

This is Jeremiah, the person: reflective, sensitive, compassionate, capable of intense feelings. This is Jeremiah, the young man, who in his own opinion was too tender, too emotional, too inexperienced to be a prophet. this is Jeremiah . . . the one who God called.

If you have your Bible or Bible app, turn with me to Jeremiah 1, starting with verse 1.

Jeremiah 1:1-12, 17-19

The words of Jeremiah son of Hilkiah, one of the priests at Anathoth [the town of banished priests] in the territory of Benjamin. The word of the Lord came to him in the thirteenth year of the reign of Josiah son of Amon king of Judah [one year after the king's religious reform], 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 [a span of around 60 years].

[verse 4] The word of the Lord came to me, saying,

"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."

"Alas, Sovereign Lord," I said, "I do not know how to speak; I am too young." [In fact, Jeremiah was young, probably in his late teens.]

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. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you," declares the Lord.

Then [in response to Jeremiah's objection about speaking] the Lord reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, "I have put my words

in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant.”

Jeremiah objected to the call of God.

I am only a youth. I don't have the words to speak.

And the Lord replied: You are *not* too young. I will *tell* you what to say.

Then he answers an objection that Jeremiah didn't even admit:

“Do not be afraid. . .”

With an honest assessment of himself, Jeremiah felt *inadequate*.

How many times have you and I

set aside a *prompting* or *request* or *calling* from God

with the same phrase, “I am only . . .”

and then we finish the sentence with our own perceived inadequacies, whether real and imagined.

God's response to *our* inadequacies, whatever they are, is the same as his words to Jeremiah:

“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
before you were born I set you apart;
I appointed you as . . .

And then God completes the sentence

with whatever the *unique, personal* assignment he has for us. . .

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. (Eph 2:10)

The good news in this message is that

our combination of *adequacies* and *inadequacies* are **by God's design**.

They are *exactly right* for his *sovereign purpose to be fulfilled in our life*.

Whenever we question or resist some prompting or assignment from God, he says to us:

Do not be afraid . . . for I am with you.

As we will see in the life of Jeremiah,

God didn't change Jeremiah's temperament.

Jeremiah continued to be tender, sensitive, emotional, and vulnerable.

Nor did God minimize the opposition that Jeremiah would face. Picking up the passage in verse 17, God said to Jeremiah:

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. They will fight against you but will not overcome you, for I am with you and will rescue you."

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. They will fight against you but will not overcome you, for I am with you and will rescue you,"

God knew that the words he would give Jeremiah would enrage people, so God developed new traits of character in the prophet. In all the chaotic years of his ministry, Jeremiah became *invincible*. He was in internal agony many times, but he *never swerved* from his calling. He was mocked and persecuted, but he *never deviated* from his message. He was under immense pressure to compromise, to hide, to quit, but he never did. Jeremiah became "a fortified city, an iron pillar, a bronze wall" who was able to stand up against kings, officials, priests, and people because God was with him and rescued him.

In his book on Jeremiah, titled *Run with the Horses*, Eugene Peterson writes (page 50):

God does not choose us because we are *qualified*, he chooses us *in order to qualify us* for what *he* wants us to be and do.

In 1 John 3:2, we read:

Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him . . .

Jesus

Jeremiah's life foreshadowed what Jesus would experience, many years later.

The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him (John 1:9-13)

Despite widespread rejection, Jesus came to earth for this purpose:

Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

We are sons and daughters of God today
because Jeremiah paved the way by his prophecies, *under great duress*;
and because Jesus completed his mission, *under far greater duress*.

People today will meet Jesus through you and me.

By God's design, our combination of adequacies *and inadequacies*
are exactly right for his sovereign purpose to be fulfilled in our life.
As we listen for his calls,
allow him to refine our character,
and rely on his strength,
we will be ready to speak and act for Jesus,
even in times like this, when we, too, are under duress.