

Lesson 1

A Prophet in Perilous Times

Difficult times call for dedicated people.

Jeremiah Overview

“Woe is me for my hurt! my wound is grievous: but I said, Truly this is a grief, and I must bear it” (Jeremiah 10:19).

When a young man showed up at his new job as a painter, he soon realized that the job was going to be challenging. The first day, he had to climb up four stories worth of scaffolding to reach the eaves of the building he was supposed to paint. When he got to the top, he froze. The scaffolding swayed a little and seemed like it could topple at any moment. Everything within him was telling him to climb back down and quit the job. But he stayed. Eventually painting so high in the air became easy.

Near the end of the summer, the young man climbed up the scaffolding once again and noticed a couple of bumblebees flying around the eaves. He then watched them fly into a hive that was nestled under the Spanish tiles that made up the roof. Again, the painter froze. Now he wanted to quit more than ever. He hated flying insects that sting. But, like before, he persevered. He just did the scraping and painting gingerly, with his eyes wide open, and with a clear path to the edge of the scaffolding.

Getting Started

1. Describe a time when you were doing an important task that became difficult.

2. How did you respond to the difficulty?

This lesson introduces Jeremiah by looking at the prophet who wrote the book and the dangerous times he lived in. Jeremiah teaches how believers dedicated to God can keep standing during difficult times.

Searching the Scriptures

About Jeremiah

Even before Jeremiah was born, God appointed him to be His spokesman both to Judah and to the nations (Jeremiah 1:5–10). From early in his life Jeremiah knew clearly the special calling that God had given to him.

Jeremiah's career was very long, probably over forty years. During that time, he spoke God's word to the nation of Judah as it was spinning out of control. He saw his people go into captivity, and he himself went to Egypt, under duress. Through all this time Jeremiah was prohibited from having a wife (16:1–4). His career was as lonely as it was long.

3. Who would have cared if Jeremiah had decided to quit his prophetic ministry?

4. What does that fact reveal about what motivated Jeremiah to keep going?

Compassionate and Courageous

In Jeremiah, we find much detail about the man himself, what he was like, what he felt, the struggles he faced. Jeremiah is a personal book.

5. Read Jeremiah 9:1. What did Jeremiah show about himself by the figures of speech he used in this verse?

6. Why is compassion so essential to staying dedicated to ministry in difficult times?

Jeremiah felt things deeply, so his messages of judgment on Judah brought him a great deal of pain. Jeremiah wept as he prophesied the coming punishment (9:1), for he was sensitive to people and their hurts. His stern message did not make him a rigid, uncaring person, but throughout his long ministry, he felt pain along with people.

Jeremiah was also a man of great courage. As the Lord's prophet, Jeremiah faced countless challenges. His ministry required him to confront the priests, false court prophets, and even the king. Invariably Jeremiah had to reprove them for their sins.

This pressure would have overwhelmed most people. However, Jeremiah showed great courage. Knowing that God had commissioned him and knowing what God wanted him to say, he went straight at the challenge. Along with his tender heart, Jeremiah had a tough hide! He stood for God with great fortitude instead of shrinking away from opposition.

7. Read Jeremiah 1:17–19. What did God tell Jeremiah to do as he prepared for his difficult ministry?

8. What was the source of Jeremiah's courage?

Distressed and Honest

Jeremiah knew personal distress too (Jeremiah 10:19; 11:19). He struggled with his own emotional reactions to the rejection and distress he faced. Standing in the middle between the holy Lord and an unholy nation, Jeremiah faced opposition from without and turmoil from within. He understood that Judah deserved only divine judgment, yet he continued to plead with God for mercy on their behalf. In spite of his prayers for them, the people rejected him. Jeremiah accepted the great pain of this rejection as part of being God's prophet.

9. What will happen to a person's ministry if he or she makes trying to please everyone his or her main goal?

Jeremiah was amazingly honest in expressing what was going on in his life. Repeatedly he uttered his doubts, questions, and pains as he tried to understand what God had brought across his path.

In several prayers—often called Jeremiah's confessions—he gave unvarnished accounts of his anger and frustration (12:1–4). Despite his powerful feelings and unanswered questions, Jeremiah kept living for the Lord and serving Him faithfully.

Despite the pressures he faced, Jeremiah performed his ministry with excellence and proved the validity of his calling. He faithfully declared God's word rather than manufacture his own message.

10. How might Jeremiah have changed God's message to make it more acceptable?

11. Read 2 Timothy 4:1 and 2. What is one of the most important reasons a preacher of God's Word needs to stay faithful to the message of God's Word?

The Nation

Jeremiah's prophetic ministry lasted from 627 BC to about 582 BC. During that time, Judah was fading spiritually, morally, and politically. Jeremiah preached to a nation that was well on its way to defeat and disaster.

Jeremiah's ministry began around the middle of the reign of Josiah, the last of Judah's God-fearing rulers. Narrated in 2 Kings 22:1—23:20, Josiah's reign (640–609 BC) was characterized by his efforts to bring religious reformation to the nation. Spurred on by the discovery of the lost book of the Law during renovation of the temple, Josiah tried to unite Judah and the remaining people of the northern kingdom of Israel in worshipping the Lord according to the law of Moses.

Josiah made a valiant effort to overturn the decades of paganism that had dominated Judah before him. However, in 609 BC at the age of thirty-nine, Josiah was killed when he tried to oppose Pharaoh Necho of Egypt. After his death, Judah proceeded quickly to her final collapse.

Babylon Comes Knocking

In 605 BC, Jehoiakim then became a vassal to the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar (2 Kings 24:1–7). Jehoiakim decided to rebel against Babylon in 601 BC.

Nebuchadnezzar returned to Jerusalem and besieged the city. Jehoiakim died during the siege, and his son Jehoiachin took over the throne in 598 BC. He reigned for only three months until he surrendered to Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar took the king, the soldiers, the wealthy people, and the skilled artisans into captivity; he also plundered the royal treasures and the temple (2 Kings 24:12–16). He left only the poorest people in Jerusalem.

To rule over this ragged remnant, Nebuchadnezzar took a third son of Josiah, Mattaniah, changed his name to Zedekiah, and placed him on the throne as a vassal of Babylon (2 Kings 24:17, 18). Many of Jeremiah's prophecies were given during the eleven-year reign of Zedekiah. Zedekiah provided little spiritual leadership for Judah, and he repeatedly made foolish decisions.

12. How do you explain the fact that Jeremiah's clear warnings along with the examples of the downfall of wicked kings before him didn't cause Zedekiah to seek God?

When Zedekiah rebelled against Babylon in 589, Nebuchadnezzar returned to Jerusalem for a third and final time. After a brutal siege that drove the city into starvation, Nebuchadnezzar breached the walls, burned the city and the temple, and took nearly all of the remaining people into captivity (2 Kings 25:1–21). Zedekiah was captured as he tried to flee the city and, after being blinded, was taken as a prisoner to Babylon.

The royal line of David was finished. Nebuchadnezzar appointed Gedaliah to serve as a governor. After just a few months, Gedaliah was assassinated by Ishmael, a man who belonged to the royal family (2 Kings 25:22–25). The people feared that the Babylonians would return, so they fled to Egypt, taking Jeremiah with them (2 Kings 25:26; Jeremiah 40–44).

It was against this chaotic backdrop that Jeremiah prophesied to Judah. He preached to a nation heading straight toward disaster.

13. Given Jeremiah's fortitude in a distressing time, can anyone ever rightly say that his or her ministry situation is too difficult to bear? Explain.

The Book

The book of Jeremiah is arranged as a collection of what Jeremiah did and said over his long ministry. The reader needs to look at the book as a whole in order to understand Jeremiah's major themes.

14. Read Jeremiah 1:10. What are the two illustrations in this verse?

15. What clues might they give you as to the theme of Jeremiah?

Jeremiah 1:10 summarizes the theme of the book in two sets of contrasts. The Lord called Jeremiah to uproot and to plant, to break down and to build. These contrasts pointed to Jeremiah's responsibility to preach both punishment and hope.

A Message of Sin and Judgment

Like all of the Old Testament prophets, Jeremiah spoke of sin and judgment. He denounced the many sins in Judah, pointing out how repeatedly the nation had fallen short of God's righteous standard. He charged them with turning away from Yahweh, the true God, to idolatry.

Because Judah had sinned, the Lord was going to judge His people. Jeremiah, prophesying the last days of the nation, said that divine judgment was inevitable. He warned of the approach of the enemy, Babylon, from the north. He also spoke of captivity and exile in a foreign land after the destruction of Jerusalem.

The thought of this dreadful disaster to come brought intense grief to Jeremiah. Numerous times he cried out to the Lord on behalf of his people. Although he knew that the people deserved God's judgment, his compassionate heart made it difficult for Jeremiah to accept this reality. He did not merely preach at the nation, but he sorrowed with them.

16. Read Jeremiah 8:18 and 19. When was the last time you felt deeply or even cried for the disobedience of a fellow believer?

17. What effects should God's message of judgment on sin have on believers?

A Message of Blessing and Hope

In addition to preaching sin and judgment, Jeremiah also prophesied of hope. With the prospect of the collapse of the nation and the destruction of the temple, the question arose whether the Lord would abandon His chosen people of Israel. Jeremiah repeatedly reminded them that the Lord would be faithful to His covenant with them. Even though they would go into exile, the Lord had already planned for their return and restoration.

18. Read Jeremiah 29:11. Imagine you were one of the captives reading the message of this verse. How do you think the message would have affected you?

Judah's ultimate hope lay in the Messiah. Using several descriptions such as the shepherd, the branch, and the king, Jeremiah foretold of Christ's glorious future work. He would institute a new covenant in which God's law would be written in the heart. The Messiah would bring true righteousness to the sinful nation, true joy to a people in sorrow, and true hope for those who despaired. The sinful nation would have to endure painful judgment, but after the judgment was finished, God would bring the blessing He had intended for them all along.

19. What effects should God's message of hope have on believers?

Making It Personal

Although Jeremiah spoke specifically to the people of his own day more than 2,500 years ago, what he said is still relevant. You can pray about three principles that you can apply from Jeremiah.

20. Pray about genuine righteousness and commitment of believers.

21. Pray about repentance among God's people.

22. Thank God for our future hope.

23. Write a summary statement about Jeremiah and his ministry that encourages you to remain faithful when ministry gets tough.

24. Memorize Jeremiah 10:19.