

Major Prophets: Jeremiah

BIBLE BASICS

Jeremiah's Calling

Jeremiah's prophetic identity is marked above all by a **call to repentance**. From the beginning of his ministry, the Lord made clear that Jeremiah's task would be resisted and painful—but divinely sustained:

“Therefore prepare yourself and arise,
And speak to them all that I command you.
Do not be dismayed before their faces,
Lest I dismay you before them.
For behold, I have made you this day
A fortified city and an iron pillar,
And bronze walls against the whole land—
Against the kings of Judah,
Against its princes,
Against its priests,
And against the people of the land.
They will fight against you,
But they shall not prevail against you.
For I am with you,” says the LORD,
“to deliver you.”
(*Jeremiah 1:17–19, NKJV*)

His calling came around **627 BC**, and his ministry lasted nearly **45 years (627–582 BC)**, spanning the final years before Jerusalem's fall and the early years of exile. Jeremiah was called while still young, and the Lord revealed that his vocation preceded his birth:

“Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying:
“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.”
Then said I: “Ah, Lord GOD!
Behold, I cannot speak, for I am a youth.”
But the LORD said to me:
“Do not say, ‘I am a youth,’
For you shall go to all to whom I send you,
And whatever I command you, you shall speak.
Do not be afraid of their faces,

For I am with you to deliver you,” says the LORD.
Then the LORD put forth His hand and touched my mouth, and the LORD said to me:
“Behold, I have put My words in your mouth.
See, I have this day set you over the nations and over the kingdoms,
To root out and to pull down,
To destroy and to throw down,
To build and to plant.”
(*Jeremiah 1:4–10, NKJV*)

Jeremiah wrote not only the book that bears his name, but also **Lamentations**, a lament over the desolation of Jerusalem and the sorrow of exile. His name is often understood to mean “**Yahweh sends**”—fitting for a prophet sent to call a stubborn people back to God in a time of spiritual confusion and moral collapse.

Jeremiah’s calling also reveals a pattern seen throughout the Scriptures: **God does not wait for human strength before He sends—He sends, and then He supplies what is needed.** The Lord placed His word in Jeremiah’s mouth, so that the prophet’s authority would not rest on personality, eloquence, or status, but on the living command of God.

Jeremiah’s Calling

Jeremiah was born in **Anathoth**, a small village northeast of Jerusalem, within the territory of Benjamin. He was the son of **Hilkiah**, a priest, and thus belonged to a priestly family. Yet, despite his lineage, Jeremiah never served in the Temple as a priest. God had set him apart for a different kind of service—one that would unfold largely outside the sanctuary and often in open conflict with it.

Unlike many other prophets, Jeremiah was not distinguished by dramatic miracles like **Elisha**, nor by lofty poetic grandeur like **Isaiah**, nor by apocalyptic visions such as those granted to **Daniel** and **Ezekiel**. His greatness lay instead in **faithful endurance**. Jeremiah was a servant who continued to speak God’s word even when that word brought rejection, danger, and isolation.

God also constrained Jeremiah’s personal life as part of his prophetic witness. He was commanded to remain unmarried and childless, a painful but powerful sign of the coming devastation upon Judah:

“You shall not take a wife, nor shall you have sons or daughters in this place.”
(*Jeremiah 16:2, NKJV*)

When Jeremiah protested his youth and inability, God answered not by removing the burden, but by supplying divine authority:

“Do not say, ‘I am a youth,’
For you shall go to all to whom I send you,
And whatever I command you, you shall speak.
Do not be afraid of their faces,

For I am with you to deliver you,” says the LORD.
(*Jeremiah 1:7–8, NKJV*)

Then the Lord touched Jeremiah’s mouth:

“Behold, I have put My words in your mouth.”
(*Jeremiah 1:9, NKJV*)

Through this command, Jeremiah’s own life became a living prophecy—embodying the loneliness, loss, and disruption that would soon overtake the nation.

Jeremiah was also called to perform a series of **symbolic actions**—wearing a linen belt, breaking a clay jar, purchasing a field during siege—each action preaching repentance more loudly than words alone. His ministry demonstrates that prophecy is not merely spoken; it is **lived**.

Although gentle by temperament, Jeremiah was firm in obedience. He did not seek confrontation, but he did not retreat from it. His authority came not from charisma or force, but from the fact that **the word of the LORD burned within him**, compelling him to speak even when silence seemed safer.

Call to Serve: Pattern of Service

Jeremiah’s calling mirrors that of many Old Testament figures:

- Isaiah was purified by a burning coal before being sent (Isaiah 6:6–8).
- Moses protested his inadequacy until God promised to be with his mouth (Exodus 3–4).
- Gideon doubted his weakness, yet God assured victory (Judges 6:14–16).
- Saul was chosen despite his insignificance (1 Samuel 9:15–21).
- David was anointed while still shepherding sheep (1 Samuel 16:11–13).

In each case, God does not call the sufficient—He makes sufficient those He calls.

Isaiah: Purified Before Being Sent

The calling of **Isaiah** reveals that God first purifies those He sends:

“Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a live coal which he had taken with the tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth with it, and said:
‘Behold, this has touched your lips;
Your iniquity is taken away,
And your sin purged.’
Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying:
‘Whom shall I send,
And who will go for Us?’
Then I said, ‘Here am I! Send me.’”
(*Isaiah 6:6–8, NKJV*)

As with Jeremiah, Isaiah's mouth is touched—signifying that the prophet does not speak his own words, but God's.

Moses: Weakness Met by Divine Presence

When **Moses** was called, he protested his inadequacy repeatedly:

“But Moses said to God, ‘Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?’”
(*Exodus 3:11, NKJV*)

Later he added:

“O my Lord, I am not eloquent... but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.”
(*Exodus 4:10, NKJV*)

God's answer was decisive:

“Now therefore, go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall say.”
(*Exodus 4:12, NKJV*)

Jeremiah's calling echoes this same promise: **God does not remove weakness; He overcomes it by His presence.**

Gideon: Insignificance Transformed by Commission

When **Gideon** doubted his ability to save Israel, God answered not by denying Gideon's weakness, but by affirming His own presence:

“Surely I will be with you, and you shall defeat the Midianites as one man.”
(*Judges 6:16, NKJV*)

Saul and David: God Chooses the Least

Both **Saul** and **David** were chosen from obscurity, each overwhelmed by the call placed upon them (1 Samuel 9; 16). Their selection reveals a consistent principle: **God's election is rooted in His purpose, not human expectation.**

God:

- Calls before readiness
- Sends before confidence
- Speaks before ability

The servant's authority does not come from skill, status, or acceptance, but from obedience. As with the prophets before him, Jeremiah was made strong **not by removing fear**, but by standing firm despite it.

This pattern prepares us to understand Jeremiah's ministry—not as a career of success, but as a vocation of faithfulness.

The Heart of His Ministry

The heart of Jeremiah's ministry can be summed up in a single word: **return**. More than any other prophet, Jeremiah repeatedly called the people to turn back to God—not merely outwardly, but with the heart. This emphasis is woven throughout his book:

- The word “**return**” and its variations appear **47 times**
- “**Turn**” or “**come back**” appears **13 times**
- “**Forget**” and its variations appear **24 times**

These repetitions are not accidental. They reveal a prophet laboring relentlessly to awaken a spiritually hardened people who had forgotten both God's covenant and His mercy.

Jeremiah's call to repentance was not cold or detached. He did not speak as a judge standing above the people, but as a shepherd wounded by their refusal to listen. His preaching flowed from **love**, not condemnation.

“O my soul, my soul!
I am pained in my very heart!
My heart makes a noise in me;
I cannot hold my peace.”
(*Jeremiah 4:19, NKJV*)

This verse reveals Jeremiah's inner life. He carried the suffering of the people within himself. Their sin grieved him; their coming destruction tormented him. Like a watchman who sees disaster approaching, he cried out not because he enjoyed warning, but because silence would be unbearable.

Jeremiah's love for the people is comparable to the apostolic heart later expressed by St. Paul:

“Who is weak, and I am not weak?
Who is made to stumble, and I do not burn with indignation?”
(*2 Corinthians 11:29, NKJV*)

Despite repeated rejection, mockery, and hostility, Jeremiah did not abandon his mission. Instead, he found comfort, strength, and joy in God Himself—specifically in **God's word**:

“Your words were found, and I ate them,
And Your word was to me the joy and rejoicing of my heart;
For I am called by Your name,
O LORD God of hosts.”
(*Jeremiah 15:16, NKJV*)

Here Jeremiah describes God’s word not as a burden, but as nourishment. Even when the message brought suffering, the source of the message brought life. This verse reveals the secret of Jeremiah’s endurance: **he fed on the word he proclaimed**.

Jeremiah’s ministry teaches us that repentance is not merely a message to be delivered, but a relationship to be restored. God’s repeated call to “return” reveals not impatience, but patience—an aching divine desire for reconciliation rather than destruction.

Opposition, Suffering, and Exile

Jeremiah’s faithfulness did not lead to acceptance; it led to **opposition**. From the beginning of his ministry, the Lord warned him that resistance would come from every level of society—kings, priests, false prophets, and ordinary people alike. This warning was fulfilled repeatedly throughout his life.

Jeremiah was mocked, imprisoned, beaten, accused of treason, and threatened with death. His own townspeople in **Anathoth** plotted against him. Religious leaders rejected him because his message exposed their hypocrisy. Kings resented him because he spoke judgment rather than reassurance.

“Then the LORD made it known to me, and I knew;
Then You showed me their doings.
But I was like a docile lamb brought to the slaughter;
And I did not know that they had devised schemes against me.”
(Jeremiah 11:18–19, NKJV)

Despite this suffering, Jeremiah never presented himself as a victim. Instead, he brought his pain honestly before God. His laments reveal that true faith does not silence grief—it offers it to the Lord.

At one point, Jeremiah was imprisoned in a muddy cistern and left to die (Jeremiah 38). At another, King Jehoiakim burned the scroll of Jeremiah’s prophecies, symbolically rejecting God’s word (Jeremiah 36). Yet after each humiliation, the Lord sustained His prophet and reaffirmed his mission.

When Jerusalem finally fell to Babylon in 586 BC, Jeremiah remained among the poor who were left behind in Judah. Later, against his will, he was taken to **Egypt** by a fearful remnant seeking refuge from Babylonian reprisals. Even there, Jeremiah continued to speak God’s word.

This forced exile underscores a painful truth of Jeremiah’s life: **the prophet who warned against misplaced trust in Egypt was himself carried there against his desire**. His life thus became a final enacted prophecy of Israel’s stubbornness and God’s patience.

Jeremiah in the New Testament

Jeremiah’s prophetic stature was such that, during Christ’s earthly ministry, some people believed Jesus might be Jeremiah returned:

“Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”
(*Matthew 16:14, NKJV*)

This association likely arose because both Jeremiah and Christ spoke of Jerusalem’s coming judgment, called for repentance, and suffered rejection at the hands of their own people. Both wept over the city they loved.

Jeremiah’s life teaches us that faithfulness is not measured by visible success, but by obedience. He stood alone often, misunderstood frequently, and suffered deeply—but **he never stopped speaking the truth entrusted to him.**

Jeremiah and the Exile: Three Prophets, One Crisis.

The Babylonian Exile was the most devastating event in Israel’s national history. The destruction of Jerusalem, the burning of the Temple, and the deportation of the people raised urgent questions: *Had God abandoned His people? Had the covenant failed?* In response to this crisis, God raised up **three prophets**, each called to a different audience, yet united in a single divine purpose.

Jeremiah — Prophet to Judah Before and During the Exile

Jeremiah prophesied **before and during** the exile, primarily to those who remained in **Judah and Jerusalem**. His role was to warn, to call to repentance, and to explain that the coming destruction was not accidental, but the result of covenant unfaithfulness. Even after Jerusalem fell, Jeremiah continued to speak God’s word to the remnant left in the land.

Jeremiah’s message emphasized:

- The **inevitability of judgment**
- The **justice and mercy of God**
- The promise of a **future restoration** beyond exile

He taught that exile was not the end of Israel’s story, but a severe mercy meant to heal a hardened people.

Ezekiel — Prophet to the Exiles in Babylon

Ezekiel prophesied **during the exile**, specifically to the Jewish captives living in **Babylon**. Unlike Jeremiah, Ezekiel ministered far from Jerusalem, among a people tempted to despair and spiritual numbness.

Through vivid visions and symbolic actions, Ezekiel revealed:

- God’s glory was **not confined to the Temple**
- God was present **even in exile**
- Israel would be **restored, renewed, and given a new heart**

“I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you;
I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.”
(Ezekiel 36:26, NKJV)

Ezekiel’s ministry helped the exiles understand that punishment was not abandonment, and that God was still shaping their future.

Daniel — Prophet in the Royal Court of Babylon

Daniel prophesied during the exile as well, but unlike Ezekiel, he lived **within the royal palace** of Babylon. His ministry took place in the political and cultural center of the empire.

Daniel revealed that:

- God rules over **kings and empires**
- Earthly kingdoms rise and fall, but **God’s kingdom is eternal**
- Faithfulness is possible even within hostile systems

Daniel’s visions of successive world empires and the everlasting kingdom of God assured the people that history itself remains under divine authority.

One Crisis, One Message

Though Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel ministered in different locations and contexts, their message was unified:

- **God is just** — sin has consequences
- **God is present** — even in exile
- **God is faithful** — restoration will come

Together, these prophets reveal that exile was not the death of the covenant, but its purification. God was stripping away false security so that His people might learn to trust Him alone.

Jeremiah and the New Covenant

At the very heart of Jeremiah’s prophecy stands one of the most profound promises in all of Scripture: **the promise of a New Covenant**. Spoken in the darkest moment of Israel’s history—on the eve of exile—this promise reveals that judgment would not have the final word. Restoration would come, not merely through political return, but through **inner transformation**.

The Promise of a New Covenant

“Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah—
not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt,
My covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them, says the LORD.

But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD:

I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts;
and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.

No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the LORD.

For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.”

(Jeremiah 31:31–34, NKJV)

This passage marks a turning point in biblical theology. The failure of the old covenant was not in the Law itself, but in the **human heart**. Therefore, the solution would not be a new command, but a **new heart**.

Key Features of the New Covenant

1. **Internal Transformation**

The Law would no longer be written on stone tablets, but **engraved on the heart**. Obedience would flow from inner renewal rather than external compulsion.

2. **Restored Relationship**

“I will be their God, and they shall be My people” echoes the covenant formula, now fulfilled in a deeper and more personal way.

3. **Universal Knowledge of God**

Knowing God would no longer be mediated only through institutions; it would become a lived reality shared by all, from the least to the greatest.

4. **Complete Forgiveness**

God declares that sins will be forgiven and remembered no more—an astonishing promise spoken before the Cross.

Fulfillment in the New Testament

The New Testament explicitly identifies Jeremiah’s prophecy as fulfilled in Christ:

“Because finding fault with them, He says: ‘Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah...’”
(Hebrews 8:8–12, NKJV)

“This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the LORD: I will put My laws into their hearts, and in their minds I will write them... Their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more.”
(Hebrews 10:16–17, NKJV)

St. Paul explains that this covenant is enacted not by the letter, but by the Spirit:

“Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God, who also made us sufficient as ministers of the new

covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.”
(2 Corinthians 3:5–6, NKJV)

Jeremiah’s New Covenant prophecy reveals that exile and suffering were not signs of divine failure, but preparation for something greater. The covenant would no longer depend on human consistency, but on **God’s mercy**.

This promise reaches its fulfillment in:

- **Christ’s Incarnation** — God dwelling with His people
- **The Cross** — forgiveness of sins
- **The Holy Spirit** — the Law written on the heart

Jeremiah, often called the prophet of tears, thus becomes the prophet of hope. His message assures us that God does not discard His people when they fail; He renews them from within.

Jeremiah’s Prophetic Fulfillments

Jeremiah’s influence does not end with the Old Testament. His words, images, and theology are woven deeply into the New Testament, where the early Church recognized him as a prophet whose message reached its full meaning in Christ. Both Scripture and the Church Fathers consistently return to Jeremiah to explain **suffering, covenant, repentance, and hope**.

Rachel Weeping for Her Children

The Gospel of Matthew applies Jeremiah’s prophecy directly to the massacre of the infants in Bethlehem:

“Then was fulfilled what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet, saying:
‘A voice was heard in Ramah,
Lamentation, weeping, and great mourning,
Rachel weeping for her children,
Refusing to be comforted,
Because they are no more.’ ”
(Matthew 2:17–18, NKJV)

Originally spoken in the context of exile (Jeremiah 31:15), this lament expressed Israel’s grief over lost children. Matthew reveals its deeper fulfillment: sorrow surrounds the birth of the Messiah, yet this sorrow will be transformed into salvation. The same chapter in Jeremiah that contains mourning also contains the promise of the **New Covenant**, showing that grief and hope are inseparable in God’s redemptive plan.

The Betrayal of Christ

St. Matthew also connects Jeremiah to the betrayal of Judas:

“Then was fulfilled what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet, saying,
‘And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the value of Him who was priced, whom they of
the children of Israel priced,
and gave them for the potter’s field, as the LORD directed me.’ ”

(Matthew 27:9–10, NKJV)

Here Jeremiah’s prophetic imagery—silver, rejection, and judgment—finds its ultimate fulfillment in Christ, who is rejected by His own people yet becomes the means of their redemption.

Living Water and Trinitarian Theology

Jeremiah declares:

“For My people have committed two evils:
They have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters,
And hewn themselves cisterns—broken cisterns that can hold no water.”

(Jeremiah 2:13, NKJV)

The Fathers saw this as a key Christological and Trinitarian text.

- **St. Athanasius** used this verse against the Arians, arguing that if the Father is the “fountain of living waters” and the Son is Life, then the Son cannot be a created being. Otherwise, the Father would be a dry fountain—an impossibility.
- **Sts. Justin Martyr and Irenaeus** contrasted Christians, who drink from the living fountain, with those who reject Christ and rely on broken cisterns.

This verse thus became central in defending the eternal divinity of Christ.

Jeremiah on Human Desire and Moral Transformation

“They were like well-fed lusty stallions;
Every one neighed after his neighbor’s wife.”

(Jeremiah 5:8, NKJV)

The Fathers interpreted this verse morally and ascetically:

- **St. Irenaeus** taught that without God, humanity degenerates into animal-like behavior.
- **St. Clement of Alexandria** contrasted lustful stallions with disciplined colts, symbolizing Christian freedom under restraint.
- **St. Basil the Great** emphasized that unchecked desire degrades the soul, while contentment restores human dignity.

Jeremiah thus becomes a prophetic witness to the transformation of desire—a theme fulfilled in Christian ascetic life.

Intercession and Divine Mercy

God tells Jeremiah:

“Therefore do not pray for this people,
Nor lift up a cry or prayer for them,
Nor make intercession to Me;
For I will not hear you.”
(*Jeremiah 7:16, NKJV*)

Yet Jeremiah continues to intercede. **St. Ambrose** remarks that Jeremiah’s persistent prayer softened God’s judgment, teaching that intercession remains powerful even when judgment seems fixed. This insight shaped the Church’s understanding of **the prayers of the saints**.

Lamentations and the Christian Life

The Book of Lamentations, traditionally attributed to Jeremiah, became central to Christian worship and theology.

“It is good for a man to bear
The yoke in his youth...
For the Lord will not cast off forever.”
(*Lamentations 3:27–31, NKJV*)

- **St. Gregory of Nyssa** used Lamentations in funeral orations.
- **Origen** taught that suffering trains the soul in hope.
- **St. John Chrysostom** emphasized that trials refine even the righteous.
- **St. Jerome** saw in Lamentations a prophecy of Christian asceticism.
- **St. Augustine and St. Athanasius** taught that tribulations perfect patience rather than signify rejection.

Lamentations 3 is sung in its entirety during the **12th Hour of Good Friday**, uniting the suffering of Christ with the suffering of the faithful.

Conclusion: Jeremiah’s Enduring Message

Jeremiah’s life and writings reveal a God who:

- Rebukes without abandoning
- Judges without destroying
- Calls without coercing
- Heals through suffering

His message can be summarized in seven divine movements:

Reproach – Encouragement – Rebuke – Guidance – Clarification – Prophecy – Living Example

Jeremiah teaches us that:

- God calls the humble, not the confident
- Faithfulness matters more than success
- Scripture must be lived, not merely spoken
- Tears and hope can coexist

Above all, Jeremiah warns us not to become **broken cisterns**—appearing religious yet empty of living water. Instead, we are called to drink deeply from Christ, the true Fountain of Life, and to remain faithful even when the cost is high.



Review Questions

1. What does the name Jeremiah mean? [His name means “Yahweh Throws” or sends because he was sent to bring his own people back to God.]
2. How long was Jeremiah’s ministry? [It lasted for nearly 45 years (627-582 B.C.).]
3. What was God’s plan for Jeremiah? [God constrained him to remain single and to engage in a number of symbolic actions to exhibit the call to repentance.]
4. What was the goal of his ministry? [The goal of his ministry was clear, repentance of people and returning to the bosom of God.]
5. What did the Gospel of St. Matthew quote from Jeremiah? [it is said that the betrayal of Judas was foretold by the Prophet Jeremiah as indicated in Matthew 27:9-10]
6. What are the books in the Bible written by Jeremiah? [the book of prophecies and Lamentation]
7. Was Jeremiah faithful? [Jeremiah was faithful in delivering the message.]
8. What are the seven elements summarized from his book? [seven elements: Reproach, Encouragement, Rebuke, Guidance, Clarifying facts, Prophecies, Illustrative examples]
9. How did Jeremiah refer to Christ as the living water? [“For My people have committed two evils: They have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, And hewn themselves cisterns—broken cisterns that can hold no water.” - Jeremiah 2:12-13]
10. How did Jeremiah show his love to whom he serves? [“O my soul, my soul! I am pained in my very heart! My heart makes a noise in me; I cannot hold my peace.” (Jeremiah 4:19)]