This is Dr. Gary Yates in his instruction on the book of Jeremiah. This is Session #7, Jeremiah Chapter 1: The Call of Jeremiah.

Review

Our current session is going to focus on Jeremiah chapter 1 and the calling of Jeremiah as a prophet. We'll also be looking at ways that Jeremiah 1, as the opening chapter of the book of Jeremiah, is also an introduction to message of the book as a whole.

We've taken some time in our earlier sessions to get the big picture, sort of the playing ground of Jeremiah. We've taken time to look at Jeremiah in light of the message and the theology of the prophets. We took some time to look at the historical background. First of all, what was Jeremiah's perspective on the international scene and things that were happening with regard to Babylon? We also looked at Jeremiah’s interaction in the domestic scene with the five last kings of Judah and how God is bringing about the collapse and the fall of the house of David because of its unfaithfulness. In our last two sessions, we looked more at Jeremiah as a book and thought about the composition of the book--the way that it was written and the way it was put together. Then in our last section, we talked about the arrangement of the book of Jeremiah and how the book is arranged according to three sections. We have the words of judgment in chapters 1-25; we have the stories of Judah's rejection of the word of God in 26-45, and then we have the oracles against the nation in 46-51.

Jeremiah 1

In Jeremiah chapter 1, we have the beginning point, not just of the book, but of Jeremiah's ministry because we have the story of Jeremiah's calling. In chapter one verse one, we have this statement: “The words of Jeremiah, the son of
Hilkiah, one of the priests who were in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin.” As we look at just that brief biographical statement, an identifying summary about Jeremiah's life, I'm reminded of the fact that God calls a specific individual and God calls a human being, who in many ways was just like us, the weaknesses, the passions of an individual. God is going to call this individual, Jeremiah, to maybe one of the most difficult ministries that anyone has ever encountered.

Jeremiah’s Personal Background

Just some quick things about Jeremiah as an individual that I think is important for us to remember. First, Jeremiah is from the town of Anathoth; it's mentioned in verse 1. Anathoth was a small village about 3 miles northeast of Jerusalem. Joshua 21:8 tells us that it was one of the 48 cities that was given to the Levites. Second, it also tells us in verse one that Jeremiah was the son of Hilkiah and Hilkiah was a priest. That meant that Jeremiah was from a priestly family. Maybe as a young man as he was thinking about and mapping out the plans for his life, he was thinking about serving the Lord in the capacity of the priest in the way his father had. But Numbers 4:3 seems to indicate that a priest began serving at the age of 30, and so Jeremiah never had the opportunity to do that; God had some other plans in mind for him. The third thing that we see in the calling of Jeremiah as an individual is he's going to say in verse 6, when God calls him, "Ah, Lord God, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth." Jeremiah was called to be a prophet at a very young age. We don't know exactly what age Jeremiah was, but he began his ministry in 626 BC, in the thirteenth year of Josiah. His ministry is going to extend until about 580. Jeremiah has a ministry of almost 50 years. So we can imagine that he's very young at the time of his calling. He says "I'm but a youth. I don't know how to speak."

Now when Jeremiah says "I am but a youth," he uses the word *na’ar*, and that word has a wide range of meaning and usage. It can refer to a child that's an infant, or it can refer to someone who is an older boy. In Genesis chapter 22, it's the word that's used for Isaac when God commands Abraham to sacrifice him. We
know that Isaac is at least old enough to help his father carry the implements for the sacrifice as they're going up to the mountain. But the word *na`ar* can also refer to a young man who is old enough to marry, or someone who is a servant or someone who is old enough to go into war. We don't know exactly the age that Jeremiah is as he says this, but whatever age he is, Jeremiah believes that he's too young to do what God has called him to do. "I am but a child, Lord. I don't know how to speak."

Jeremiah and His Family

Another thing about the calling of Jeremiah, related to his personal life, is that part of God's calling on Jeremiah's life meant that the Lord would ask him not to marry or to have children. And so, in Jeremiah 16:1-4, here's another aspect of the calling of Jeremiah. It says there, "The word of the Lord came to me: You shall not take a wife, nor shall you have sons or daughters in this place. For thus says the Lord concerning the sons and the daughters who are born in this place and concerning the mothers who bore them and the fathers who fathered them in this land: They shall die of deadly diseases."

So, the Lord, and this is probably conveyed at a later time in Jeremiah's ministry, did not allow Jeremiah to marry or have children. Jeremiah's family life was going to become a sign to the people of Israel that they were going to be deprived of family. We're reminded of the fact that the Lord often uses the family situations or the children of prophets to convey a message to the people of Israel. The prophet Isaiah had a son named Shear-jashub that gave a message of hope to Israel, but he also had a son named Maher-shalal-hash-baz that talked about judgment that was going to come. The names of his sons conveyed a sign to the people of Israel. The prophet Hosea was commanded to marry a woman who was going to be unfaithful to him and they would give birth to children that were reflective of that broken relationship and the names of those children also conveyed something. The prophet Ezekiel was told that his wife was going to die
when the city of Jerusalem was captured by the Babylonians and he was not allowed to grieve or mourn as a message to the people. So, I think we see one of the most difficult components of the prophet's ministry is that often their families were involved in the message that God wanted to convey to the people. And so Jeremiah, can you imagine this, with all of the struggles, with all of the things he's going to go through, he never had the encouragement or the blessing of knowing family.

I think about my own wife, and my three children, they are the greatest blessing that I've ever had in life, the greatest thing that God has allowed me to enjoy, outside of my own salvation, is my family. At times in ministry as a pastor, the only thing that kept my sanity was being able to talk to my wife and the encouragement that she gave to me. I know that when I was going through my doctorate, the only thing that helped me to finish my dissertation was my wife and her insistent encouragement. Jeremiah's deprived of all that, and that's part of the calling that God places on his life.

Something else we know about the personal life of Jeremiah was that he was assisted in his call by his scribe, Baruch. Later on in the book, Baruch is going to play a significant role. He had a part in the composition of the book of Jeremiah. He's mentioned in chapters 32, 36, 43, and 45. So we'll come to know him a bit better. He’s part of Jeremiah's ministry.

Then, finally, the last thing that we know about Jeremiah is that Jeremiah died as a refugee in Egypt, as best we can tell. His ministry seems to conclude there. One Jewish tradition about the prophet Jeremiah said that he was stoned to death and in light of the confrontational message that Jeremiah preached to the people that are in Egypt at the end of the book, we can imagine that that's a very strong possibility.

Jeremiah goes through incredible hardship, persecution, opposition, and I think it's important for us just to remember that at the very beginning of this book:
God calls a man; God calls an individual. The Lord is going to work through that individual and God still continues to call individuals. With all of our failures, with our unique giftings, we can't compare ourselves to others because God makes us unique. God calls unique individuals, and Jeremiah is one of those.

**Divine Compulsion and Commission**

One of the reasons that I've come to love studying this book is that I've come to deeply respect and admire Jeremiah for the courage that he had to preach God's word and to tell the people what God wanted them to hear, no matter what it cost to him as an individual.

Now as we get into the actual record of Jeremiah's call and the passage there--I won't read the entire text--but there's a couple of things that I think emerge from the call itself. As we read God calling Jeremiah to this commission, we’re reminded of the urgency and the divine compulsion that is on Jeremiah’s life to preach the word of God. The first thing that the Lord is going to say to Jeremiah, in verses 4 and 5 are this, it says, “The word of the Lord came to me saying, ‘before I formed you in the womb, I knew you. And before you were born, I consecrated you. I appointed you a prophet to the nations.’” One of things we definitely understand about the call of prophets in the Old Testament and even in the New, as God calls the apostles there as well, is that the calling of a prophet is an act of God’s sovereignty. God has determined the role that Jeremiah will have before he’s ever born. The sense that God has his hand on the life of a spokesperson before they’re born actually comes out in Paul’s life as well in Galatians. The Lord has called him from the womb to be an apostle and to fulfill the role that he has given to him. Paul is walking down the road one day and sees a light from heaven that slams him into the ground and God says, “you are going to become my spokesmen, my missionary.” In a sense that is exactly what happens to Jeremiah. This is not by Jeremiah’s design. Jeremiah does not open the book saying, “I became a prophet because I always wanted to be one.” Jeremiah does not take an aptitude test or a spiritual gifts inventory and determine “I think being
a prophet is really what works for me.” God in his sovereignty steps into his life and says, “you’re going to be spokesmen.” This might not have been the plan Jeremiah had for his life. He was from a priestly family, but God has other plans for his life.

I think as we look at the prophets in general we understand that God has the right to interrupt their plans. Ezekiel, also from a priestly family, is called to be a prophet in his 30th year. At the time when Ezekiel thought “I am going to be a priest servant.” He’s in exile in Babylon. He’s no longer at the temple and God calls him instead to be a prophet to the exiles that are in Babylon. Amos, was a wealthy land owner in Judah, and Amos says, “I am not the prophet or I was not a prophet, I was not the son of a prophet; it wasn’t part of the family occupation. But God called me to be a prophet” and God actually calls him to leave his home in Judea and go north to the land of Israel.

God has the right to rearrange the plans of his servants. Moses is tending sheep out in desert and has been doing that for 40 years. It looks like God has put him on the shelf. God intervenes. God appears to Gideon in the middle of the night. “You’re going to be the deliverer of the people of Israel.” Gideon is absolutely surprised by this. The call of God on an individual is an act of sovereignty. As we look at the call of a prophet in the Old Testament it is a calling where an individual does not really have a choice to accept or to reject. God is going to call this person, God is going to accomplish his purposes and they cannot say, “No thank you, God. This is not really convenient for me right now.” “No thanks God, I have other plans for my life.” When God calls, the prophet responds. Jonah is a reminder that a prophet, even if he tries to resist, and tries to get away or tries to run, God is going to chase him down and ultimately accomplish his sovereign purposes. Elijah tries to retire from prophetic ministry. He says, “Lord. It is enough and I am ready to die.” Out of fear for his life, he runs from Jezebel, but as he’s running, God takes him and brings him back to Mt. Sinai, Mt. Horeb and re-commissions him to fulfill his prophetic ministry.
Now as Jeremiah is talking about that in the sense of divine calling on his life, the compulsion, “this is something God has placed on me, there is an urgent message I have to preach. I don’t have a choice about this.” Jeremiah will speak about this divine, compelling urge that he has to preach God’s word and this is what he says in chapter 20, verse 9, “If I say I will not mention him, or speak anymore in his name.” And at times that was what Jeremiah felt like doing because he was experiencing all kinds of opposition and the message he was preaching. Jeremiah says, “If I try to stop, if I am not going to speak in God’s name.” He says, “There is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with holding it in and I cannot.” So there is this divine sense that God has called me to do this. I have a responsibility and urging to preach the gospel. I can’t get away from this calling that God has placed on my life. Paul is going to manifest later on the same sense of divine compulsion, “Woe is me if I don’t preach the gospel.”

In our first video session, we talked about the prophet as God’s watchmen and God has assigned them to stand on the wall and warn the people of the approaching judgment and the enemy that’s coming. As God explains to Ezekiel what it means to be a watchmen he says, “if you see the danger that is coming to the people and you warn them of that danger, your responsibility has been fulfilled. And if they don’t listen, then their blood is on their own hands. However, if I have commissioned you as God’s servant, if I have sent you as a watchman, if you do not warn the people of the judgment that is coming, then ultimately their blood is going to be on your own hands.”

So, as we’re looking at this calling in chapter one, there is a divine urgency. This is not something that Jeremiah agrees to because this is what he wants to do, God compels him to do this. It’s a fire in his bones, the word of God, is a fire in his mouth, he can’t get away from that, he can’t escape that.

Call Narratives

One of things that I have found interesting, in studying Jeremiah chapter
one, is to take this passage and to lay it beside other called passages that we see in the Old Testament. I’ve done that with Moses, and with Gideon, with Ezekiel, and with Isaiah. The thing that I’ve found is, as I’ve looked at these passages and I’ve read studies that have done the same thing, is that there are four basic elements that appear in practically all of these Old Testament call passages. Let me summarize what these elements are and then we’ll talk about them in Jeremiah chapter one. The first element is that there is always going to be a vision of God or a voice where God directly communicates to this person. It’s not simply an inner-sense. They see a vision, they see something that represents God or they directly hear the voice of God. Moses sees a burning bush. Ezekiel sees perhaps the most amazing vision of God in a chariot moving through the sky. Isaiah sees the Lord lifted up on his throne. There is always a vision of God or a voice of God.

Number two, there is going to be a commission to a specific task. This is where I am sending you; this is what I am calling you to announce. For the prophets, in most cases, it was announcing God’s judgment. For the prophet, Isaiah, “who will go and speak for us?” Isaiah says, “Lord, here I am, send me.” The Lord sends him and says, “I want you to preach on judgment on the people of Judah until houses, and cities are destroyed and I have reduced the nation to nothing more than a tree stump.”

Now the third thing in all of these prophetic calls that is a common feature is that there is usually an objection of unworthiness. “Lord, I am not the man for the job that you have just given me.” We have already seen from Jeremiah that when Jeremiah is called by God that his reaction is and his response is, “Ah, Lord God, I am but a child and I do not know how to speak.” In Moses’ case, in many ways Jeremiah sounds an awful lot like Moses, who says, “Lord, why did you call me? I am not eloquent of tongue. If at all possible, find someone else.” In Moses’ case the objections continue, “Lord, please, don’t.” Finally, God agrees he will send Aaron with Moses, but there is an objection of unworthiness. Gideon says, “Lord, I am not sure you have the right person. I am from the smallest of the clans
and the tribes of Israel. Why would you call me to be a deliverer?” It takes place in
the middle of the night and Gideon wants to fulfill his commission in the middle
of the night and he is afraid. Isaiah, when he sees the Lord and hears the voice that
is saying, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty.” Isaiah is reminded of his
own unholiness and he says “Lord again, do you have the right person? I’m not
sure that you do. I am a man of unclean lips and I live in the midst of the people of
unclean lips.” Ezekiel does not give an expression of unworthiness, but when he
sees the vision of God, he is unable to speak for several days he is just
overwhelmed by the presence.

Now I think at times, there is a misunderstanding of this particular aspect of
the call. Often people are going to explain this as that these men did not have faith
in God that they needed to believe that God was going to use them. I want to
suggest to us that the objection of unworthiness is a good thing. In fact, it is
exactly the way that all of us should respond when God calls us into ministry. I
cannot imagine anyone in the presence of God, who sees either a vision of God or
a voice of God, and they’re given a commission to a specific task, with the
response being: “Lord you have made an excellent use of your draft choices. I am
just the man to do the job.”

The objection of unworthiness is exactly what God would want to hear.
I’ve heard a story of Payton Manning, when he was drafted out of college as a
quarterback, the Indianapolis Colts wanted to make sure that they had the right
man that they were going to draft the right person to be their leader, so they called
him in for an interview. We want to know, what are you like, what’s your
personality? Should we draft you as a quarterback? At the end of interview Payton
Manning said this “I hope you draft me as you first pick. If you do not draft me I
will spend the rest of my career making you wish that you had.” That’s exactly the
kind of response that a football team wants to hear about their quarterback. That’s
not the way we respond when we’re called by God. We recognize our
unworthiness. This carries over to the New Testament as well. Peter says, as Jesus
is calling him to be a fisher of men and he sees a powerful miracle that Jesus does as part of that “Lord, depart from me, I am a sinful man, I don’t deserve to be what you’re calling me to be.” Paul, constantly would dwell on the fact that “I am the chief of sinners.” In one place, reflecting on his own ministry, and talking about the life of being called by God to change peoples’ lives and teach to word of God, and disciple them and evangelize them and be a minister of the gospel. He asks, “who is sufficient for these things?” The answer is, no one is.

But what he comes along to say is our sufficiency comes from God, from the power of his word, from the power of his Spirit, from the power of the new covenant that’s working in the lives of the people that we minister to: that’s where our sufficiency comes from. So I don’t think the objection of unworthiness is a lack of faith. In Moses’ case, where he restates it and he constantly insists to God; that becomes an issue. But the right response to anyone being called to an overwhelming task like what Jeremiah is being called to do the right response is unworthiness.

Going along with that, the Lord is going to meet those objections of unworthiness. The fourth element is that there are going to be promises of God’s protection and enablement. For Jeremiah, that protection and enablement, Jeremiah is going to say “Ah, Lord God, behold I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth.” God is going to give an enablement in verse 9 that directly answers that. The Lord is going to say to Jeremiah “the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth, and the Lord said to me, ‘behold I have put my words in your mouth.’” So if the Lord has put the words in Jeremiah’s mouth, Jeremiah doesn’t have to worry about what to say, because the Lord’s words are going to be the basis of his ministry.

Then in verse 10 the Lord says this to Jeremiah “I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms.” That doesn’t sound like a prophet, it sounds like a king. “I have set you to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.” You’re actually going to do these things. Again it’s not
Jeremiah, it’s the power of Jeremiah’s word but that’s God’s enablement, that’s the empowerment. In verse 18, the Lord is going to say this to Jeremiah, in terms of his enablement and empowerment. “Behold” he says “I make you this day a fortified city, an iron pillar, and bronze walls, against this whole land, against the kings of Judah, its officials, it priests, and the people of the land. They will fight against you but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, declares the Lord to deliver you.” Now if I heard that part of call from God that would have been probably a time to reconsider. But the Lord is telling Jeremiah: “Look, you’re going to encounter great adversity. It’s going to come from the people. It’s going to come from officials. It’s going to come from the kings. It’s going to come from every direction. But I’m going to make you like a fortified city, and ultimately, I am going to deliver you.”

There’s an interesting poetic device in Jeremiah that reminds us of the difficulty that Jeremiah is going to experience in his ministry. In chapter 1 verse 5, the Lord says this to Jeremiah: “before I formed you in the womb, I knew you.” Think about this reference that’s there in verse 5. In Jeremiah chapter 20 verse 18 we have an inclusio the unifies these sections. It says in chapter 20 verse 18 Jeremiah curses the day of his birth and he says “I wish that I had never come out of the womb of my mother.” When you hear the reference the to womb chapter 1 verse 5, you need to go to chapter 20 and here Jeremiah said “I wish the that I have never come out of my mothers womb.” It’s a reminder of how difficult the ministry that Jeremiah is going to experience. It’s how difficult that ministry is that God’s calling him to.

Jeremiahs Commission

Now looking at those 4 elements, there’s the vision of God, there’s the voice of God, there’s the commission, there’s the objection, and then there’s the promises of protection and enablement. I’d like us to go back to that second part. The commission to a specific task, and we’re going to look at this in the beginning of verse 9. “The Lord put out his hand, touched my mouth, the Lord said to me,
‘behold I have put my words in your mouth, and I have set you this day over nations and kingdoms.” Specific responsibly to a specific calling of Jeremiah not just to be a prophet to Judah; his ministry is actually going to be one where he is a prophet to the nations.

Now that doesn’t mean that Jeremiah normally is going to go on preaching tours to others countries, but it does mean that he has a message to other nations. Back in verse 5 “I have appointed you as prophet to the nations.” Can you imagine Jeremiah just thinking about the scope of that. Speaking to my own people is one thing, speaking to the nations at large, an even greater thing. The Lord also says in verse 10 “I have set you this day over nations and kingdoms.” Remember these key words that we talked about in the last section “to pluck up and breakdown, to destroy and overthrow.” Those four verbs, pluck up, breakdown, destroy, and overthrow indicates that Jeremiah is a prophet of judgment. Those verbs are going to appear in various places in the book and as you hear them you should be reminded this is what God called Jeremiah to do.

God also calls Jeremiah to build and to plant. Ultimately, after he’s preached this message of judgment, we will also preach a message of salvation. That is the specific commission, that’s the specific task, that God has given to Jeremiah. “You’re my prophet. I’m putting my words in your mouth. You’re a prophet to the nations and a prophet of judgment and salvation.”

Jer 1:10-11: Almond Branch

Now as we go further into chapter one, there are going to be more specifics that the Lord is giving to Jeremiah. I’d like us to look at verse 11 and 12 and part of this commission is going to be expressed to Jeremiah in a visionary way. So here’s what we read in verse 11. “The word of the Lord came to me saying ‘Jeremiah what do you see?’ And Jeremiah said ‘I see an Almond branch.’ Then the Lord said, ‘you have seen well, for I am watching over my word to perform it.’” And as you were reading over the word you might have said,” well, I’m not sure I
understand the connection. What does an almond branch have to do with the specific commission that God is giving to Jeremiah? What we have is a word play in Hebrew. The word almond branch, *shaqed*, is very closely related to the verb “to watch over” which is the word *shoqed*. So in the Hebrew, Jeremiah says, “I see a *shaqed*,” “I see an almond branch,” and the Lord says, “you have seen well, for I am *shoqed*; watching over my word to perform it.” So the almond branch symbolically represents the judgment of God. I’m calling you to announce that. The almond branch was also one of the first trees to bloom in the spring time and so it announced that the time of God’s judgment was ripe. Prophets had come along for generations preaching about God’s judgment but the blooming of the almond tree signified the time of the end, the time of the harvest is coming near. So that was part of Jeremiah’s commission.

Jer 1:13-14: Boiling Pot from the North

There’s another visionary element given to us in verses 13 and 14: “The word of the Lord came to me a second time, and said, ‘what do you see?’ Jeremiah said, ‘I see a boiling pot, facing away from the north.’ Then the Lord said to me, ‘Out of the north disaster shall be set loose upon all the inhabitants of the land. For behold, I am calling all of the tribes of the kingdoms of the north,’ declares the Lord, ‘and they shall come, and everyone shall set his throne at the gates of Jerusalem, against all its walls around and against all the cities of Judah. And I will declare my judgments against them for all their evil in forsaking me.’”

So the other thing that Jeremiah sees, the other visionary element that’s there, is that he sees a scalding burning pot. The scalding liquid of that pot is pouring out from the north. It’s going to pour down on the land of Judah. That represents, ultimately, the Babylonians but they’re not identified at this point. We simply know them as an enemy from the north. They are referred to in that way in Jer 4:6, 6:22, 10:22, 13:20, and 15:12. So part of the specific commission that God was giving to Jeremiah was not just judgment, but judgment in the specific form of armies that would come. They would dominate and they would subjugate the
people of Judah. That’s what the judgment was going to be like.

Call and Commission of Isaiah

So in many ways the call and the commission of Jeremiah as a prophet reminds me very much of the call and commission of Isaiah that’s given back in chapter 6. The Lord says, “Who will go and who will speak for us?” Isaiah says, “Here I am Lord, send me.” The Lord says, "Here is what I want you to preach Isaiah; make the hearts of this people dull and their ears heavy, their eyes blind, lest they see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their hearts and turn and be healed." Isaiah, you’re not even going to preach to save them, you’re going to preach to confirm them in judgment.

Again, the Lord wasn’t causing them to act in this way, that’s simply the way they were going to act. The judgment in the words that the prophet preached would make them more accountable. Isaiah goes on and says, “Well, Lord, how long, O Lord?” Sometimes the end of this passage we leave off when we study the passage of Isaiah. Isaiah says “How long, O Lord, how long will I have to preach this kind of message?” And He said, “Until the cities lay waste without inhabitant, and houses are without people, and the land is a desolate waste and the Lord removes the people far away.” Ultimately he tells Isaiah they are going to be left like the stump of a tree and then there’s going to be a remnant purged even out of that little stump.

So, Isaiah was commissioned in many ways a century before Jeremiah to preach the same kind of message. In Isaiah’s time the Lord brought judgment upon the northern kingdom. He came to the point where he almost destroyed the southern kingdom too. The faith of Hezekiah, in a sense, was the thing that delivered them. Jeremiah is being called in effect to finish the job. Isaiah said, “Lord, I’m a man of unclean lips and I live in the midst of a people with unclean lips” the Lord empowered him by sending an angel with a coal from the heavenly fire and purges his lips so that he can speak. Isaiah prefigures Jeremiah in a sense, that Jeremiah says, “Lord, I don’t know how to speak, I am but a youth” and the
Lord touches his mouth, purges his words and makes it possible for him to deliver the message that God has given to them.

Modern Calls

I’d like to think about a practical question that arises out of this whole idea of the calling of a prophet. Often times when I was counseling people, as a pastor, or maybe talking to a young person about their future. When I’m discussing ministry plans with seminary students, or when there are personal conversations after messages, the question arises: how does God call people today? How can I know that I am called to minister? What does that look like? What is that experience like in our lives today? I’d like us to think about that in light of the experience that Jeremiah had. There is a sense and there is a way, that I believe all believers experience a divine call on their lives. Let me explain what I mean by that. I believe that first of all, we come to faith in Christ because there is a call to salvation and regardless of how we understand the way that the will of God and the will of man work in salvation, however we explain that, whether we are Calvinist or Arminian, we understand that God is the one who initiates salvation. Paul in one place in Galatians says, “I have come to know the Lord” but then he corrects himself and says, “I have come to be known by the Lord and those that the Lord chooses he calls them” and we believe that. That’s how we come to faith. I did not become a Christian because I was smart enough to figure out the gospel. I became a Christian because when I was dead in my trespasses and sin, God called me and brought me to himself. So there’s a call to salvation.

I think beyond that, as we begin to live the Christian life, there is a sense of divine calling in vocation on every Christian. You are not a second class Christian if you have a secular job versus a sacred job in full time Christian ministry; God doesn’t look at things in that way. There are many people that are in vocations outside of professional Christian ministry who are just as much, or maybe even more missionaries than those who are. They can glorify God as much in the place that God has called them as in any Christian ministry or Christian vocation. I
believe that God gifts us, enables us, whether you’re a missionary, an evangelist, a pastor, a doctor, a teacher, or whatever God has called you to do, there’s a sense of divine calling and vocation on every Christian. I also believe that in a special way there is still a calling that God places on people’s lives when he is calling them to be his messengers and to be his spokesmen. Whether it’s a pastor, a missionary, a seminary professor, when God calls us to teach and to minister his Word, there is a special calling that goes along with that.

I think that we have to be careful here because what is often communicated when we talk about the call to ministry, is that we may give the idea that the experiences of Jeremiah, Isaiah, Gideon, Ezekiel, or Moses, are going to be exactly like our callings. I believe that there are aspects of this passage that are not normative even for those that are called into things like pastoral ministry. We have to remember that for Jeremiah and Paul they were being called as prophets and apostles to be instruments of divine revelation. So often there was a visionary element, there was a vocal element, where God would literally speak to them and tell them precisely what God wanted them to do. Paul receives a vision at a time in his ministry where the Lord actually directs him where he wants to go in his missionary travels. I don’t believe that God will necessarily speak to us in that way today. God may, God has the right to work in any way that he chooses to, but that is generally not the normative way God calls people into ministry. But I believe that what we do learn from the prophets is that if God is calling us to preach and to teach God’s word, there’s an overwhelming sense of that divine calling on our lives to where we realize that that is what God has called us to do. We really in a sense can’t be happy doing anything else.

You will know, I believe, that if God has called you into a ministry of preaching and teaching his Word that there’s an urgency in that. That you realize that that’s what God wants you to do and there’s nothing else that you can do in life and be happy. There’s an urgency to preach God’s word. Remember Jeremiah says, chapter twenty, verse nine, “There’s a fire in my bones.”
Paul says, “Woe is me, if I preach not the gospel.” I believe that at least in some way when God calls us to Christian ministry there’s that sense of urgency on our lives. I believe that’s one of the things that in some sense needs to be returned to ministry today. I remember one of my seminary professors telling us, he said, “Too many of you are interested in a career, but what you have forgotten about is that you came to seminary because of a calling.” Ministry is not a career, ministry is a calling.

I think as a pastor one of the things that will give you a sense that God has called you to this place and you’re going to be there to minister through thick and thin is the realization that God has put you there. When we have statistics that say that the average ministerial stay in a church is two years or three years it’s a sense that in many ways too many of us are interested in a career rather than a calling. If Jeremiah had looked at prophetic ministry as a career rather than a calling I’m not sure that he would’ve been able to endure. It was not financially lucrative for him. That sense that God has called you to do this and there’s nothing else in life. This is what you are here for.

There’s nothing greater that the joy of being able to fulfill that calling. I sometimes tell my students about the privilege of ministry. I would rather teach God’s Word than be the president of the United States, because I believe there’s just a joy and a blessing when this is what God has called you to do. This is what gives you joy and meaning in life.

As you get older you begin to realize, “I may have a limited time left in my life, I want to make use of every advantage, every opportunity to preach, to teach, to impact people with God’s word because I believe this is my calling in life.” But to wrap all of this up and to try to help us to understand this, recognizing the uniqueness of how God called Jeremiah or how God commissioned Paul, may, in some ways, take away sometimes the superstitious ideas that we’ve attached to it that I need to hear a voice from God or I need to see a vision from God. Finally, perhaps it can help all of us, whether we’re called to Christian ministry or not, to
have a better understanding of the idea. What does it mean to find the will of God? Or how do I discover the will of God for my life?

I’ve read a couple of books that have helped me with that. One of them, a number of years ago, was Garry Friesen’s book, *Decision Making in the Will of God*, and then Bruce Waltke in a tiny book with a more direct title, *Finding the Will of God: Question of Pagan Notion*. Sometimes we’re reduced this to sort of a magical process and Dr. Frieson talks about many people believe that the will of God is like a dot in the center of a circle. What God wants me to do is spend the rest of my life finding that dot in the center of the circle. What that means is I have to be married to the one person in the world that God has created for me, doing the one job in the one place that God has called me to be and if I mess up any part of that plan there’s the chance that I’m going to be outside of the will of God. The problem with that is that I’m not sure that God reveals those kinds of things.

As I’ve done ministry, I’ve been a pastor in Kansas and Virginia. I never saw a burning map in the sky that said, “You need to go to Virginia or to Kansas.” When God called me to go to the seminary that I’m teaching at now, there was not a voice from heaven that said, “Virginia is the place where you need to be.” God doesn’t necessarily reveal those kinds of details to us, and if we spend our lives trying to find the dot in the center of the circle, in many ways that can end up becoming a very frustrating process.

I think a better way to understand the will of God is more that the will of God is like a box and there are things that God has clearly revealed to us in his word that are inside of that box. There are moral commandments and instructions that God has given me about my marriage. God commands me to be faithful to my wife, living inside the box means being faithful to that. Living outside the box would mean being unfaithful to that marriage. Inside the box, God tells us, it is the will of God that we be thankful for all of the things that come into our lives and that we pray at all times and in all circumstances. That’s living inside the box. If
I’m not praying, if I’m not thankful, then I’m outside the box. What God is asking us to do is not to find the will of God, the will of God has been laid out for us and revealed to us in his word. Our job is to live within the will of God that he’s revealed in Scripture. Live inside the box. Then, as we do that, inside the box, there are going to be all kinds of opportunities, decisions, choices that we can make as we prayerfully seek God’s direction, as we ask God to lead us, to guide us, as we talk to Christians that have other experiences that they can share with us of what God has taught them in life, we begin to discover the plan that God has for our lives. But I’m not looking for a dot in the center of the circle, I’m living within that box, and prayerfully and wisely making the decisions that God allows me to make as I live within his will.

As we do that, I understand, I don’t always make the right decisions, I don’t always make the right choices. Ultimately God in his providence has, even in my life, used the bad decisions I’ve made or maybe the decision that wasn’t the perfect career opportunity, God has blessed them all and used them in ways that I could never imagine.

I believe the way that typically the call will come into your life as you serve the Lord is that as you’re faithful to him and as you’re obedient and you’re doing the things that God has called you to do, the Lord will create opportunities. The Lord will impress upon you a desire to teach his Word, and that will become a passion for you in the same way that was for Jeremiah when he says, “God’s Word was like a fire in my bones, I had to speak it.” And even if God does not lead you into professional Christian ministry, God will begin to take your personality, your gifts, and your abilities and shape your vocational choices. I believe that God has an absolute plan for our lives. I believe that God knew before the foundation of the world that I was going to marry the woman that I married. I believe that God had that one woman planned for me. But I believe that if I’m faithful and obedient to God as I am seeking a partner, God may lead me away from anyone different. My goal is not to find that one person, but to trust that God
will help me to do so. As we look at God’s call on Jeremiah’s life, I believe that God may not speak to us in the same way that he spoke to Jeremiah. But God will lead us and direct us when help us and we make these kinds of choices and decisions.

There are a lot of magical ideas about finding the will of God. Some people take the story of Gideon and Gideon putting out the fleece. If the fleece is wet and the ground is dry or if the ground is dry and the fleece is wet and they will pray for God to do things like that. But rather than looking for God to necessarily speak to us in direct ways or to give us a vision, or to confirm things with some sort of special circumstances, our role is to be obedient to God and then to trust that God will direct and lead our lives as we’re faithful and obedient to him, the same way that he did with Jeremiah.

Jeremiah 1 as Programmatic for the Whole Book

I want to mention just a couple of other things about chapter one in Jeremiah. It’s not only a call passage, but I believe that Jeremiah chapter one is in a sense, a programmatic introduction to the book of Jeremiah as a whole. Now I want you to imagine we have the book of Jeremiah in book form and it’s a tiny portion of our Bible. But imagine a large scroll with fifty-two chapters on it. It’s large, it’s unwielding. You can’t look at chapter one and say, “Oh, I’m going to quickly unroll this and look over it some in chapter thirty-seven.” I believe that one of the things that the prophets, especially the larger prophets, intentionally do is that at the very beginning of the book, they will give us what we could call a “programmatic introduction.” The major themes that are going to be in the book of Jeremiah are going to be revealed to us and enveloped in the first chapter and then unfolded as we look at the rest of the book. Particularly, in Jeremiah, there are themes in chapter one that are going to be developed in the rest of the book.

We are going to be reminded throughout the book that Jeremiah is a prophet to the nations in Jeremiah 25 and Jeremiah 26-41. We are going to be reminded that Jeremiah is going to be a prophet of building up and tearing down.
First there’s going to be judgment and there’s going to salvation. God is going to say in Jeremiah chapter one, “I have put my words in your mouth.” In a sense in the rest of the book, Jeremiah himself becomes the living word of God. It’s not just his words, it’s actually his actions as well. Jeremiah chapter one says that there is going to be an ‘enemy from the north’ and the rest of the book is going to unfold for us that the “enemy from the north” is going to be the Babylonians. God says to Jeremiah, “You’re going to experience opposition from the people, the officials, even the kings themselves. There’s going to be opposition and hardship.” We’re going to see that in the stories where people resist Jeremiah’s message, where they do not listen, and where they’re actually going to put him in prison and inflict all kinds of persecution on him.

Then, finally, in the same way that we have seen, there’s a parallel between Jeremiah and Moses in that both of them say, “Lord, I don’t know how to speak.” We’re going to see that throughout the book of Jeremiah one of the things we’re going to develop as we study the book is that Jeremiah becomes a prophet like Moses. Jeremiah’s experiences in many ways are going to parallel that of Moses. Then as we work through that we’re going to see ultimately are ways that Jeremiah’s ministry goes beyond that of Moses. But all of the themes that the book of Jeremiah as a whole is going to unfold are basically laid out for us in this first chapter. We have the call of the prophet, and we have a programmatic introduction to the message of the book as a whole.