

Difficult Assignments

Jeremiah 1

Today we begin a twelve-week sermon series in the book of Jeremiah. We'll look at twelve key passages that represent the major themes in Jeremiah. We begin this morning by considering chapter 1 in which God announces to Jeremiah that He was giving him an assignment, a very difficult assignment. He tells Jeremiah, "You will be a prophet to the nations, you will face intense opposition, but I will be with you to deliver you." This chapter provides a tangible example of how people like you and me should think about the difficult assignments in our lives.

I am using the expression "difficult assignments" very broadly to include any hardship you face - especially those that seem to thwart what God wants to do in your life.

- A Relationship. Thank about the core relationships in your life - you family, your work, your friendships, others in the body of Christ. If you are in a core relationship with someone who tears you down and makes you feel crummy about yourself, you have a difficult assignment.
- A Circumstance. Here I'm thinking about circumstances that are beyond your control. Perhaps you have faced financial stress for a long time; no matter how hard you work it seems like you just can't get ahead. Sometimes the death of a loved one can dull your entire life; things just aren't the same. The reality of that loss makes it hard to trust God and experience joy. Perhaps your work just seems like more than you can handle. Those are difficult assignments.
- Brokenness. Your brokenness is that area of your life that humbles you to the core. Your brokenness might be due to somebody else's sin against you. Or your brokenness might involve your own sin. It's might be a combination of the two. But if you have areas of brokenness in your life that others don't have, you might look around and think that other people have it easy because they don't have to deal with the the things you do. Whether or not that's completely true is debatable. But your brokenness constitutes a difficult assignment.
- Physical/medical Problems. Perhaps you have a medical condition that dominates your life. You have to spend a massive amount of time dealing with things that other people can ignore. Your difficult assignment involves your physical condition.

I suspect that each of us can identify a difficult assignment or two. Jeremiah 1 provides a tangible example of how we should think about the difficult assignments in our lives. The details of our lives will certainly be different than Jeremiah's, but I'm going to argue that we need to think about our difficult assignments in the very same way that Jeremiah did. We need to hear what God said to Jeremiah.

[By the way, some of you found the Bible reading guides we distributed last Fall to be helpful. Some of you mentioned that the reading guides gave you a structure and plan that was helpful. If you're currently looking for a reading plan, you could read 5 chapters in Jeremiah a week. Those chapters would roughly correspond with the sermon series and would give you more context for what you hear on Sundays.]

Jeremiah 1: Jeremiah's Difficult Assignment

The first three verses of Jeremiah 1 anchor Jeremiah's life and ministry historically. You can read about this period of history in 2 Kings 22-25 (or 2 Chronicles 34-36).

1 The words of Jeremiah the son of Hilkiah, of the priests who were in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, 2 to whom the word of the Lord came in the days of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah, in the thirteenth year of his reign. 3 It came also in the days of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah, until the end of the eleventh year of Zedekiah the son of Josiah, king of Judah, until the exile of Jerusalem in the fifth month.

The historical details given in these verses allow us to pinpoint the dates of Jeremiah's ministry rather precisely. He began to prophesy in 626 b.c. when Josiah was king of Judah (the southern kingdom). The northern kingdom of Israel had already gone into exile (722 b.c.). Jeremiah's ministry spanned the reign of the remaining kings of Judah (Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, and Zedekiah). Even after the vast majority of the people were taken into exile in Babylon, Jeremiah continued to communicate God's message. For over 40 years Jeremiah faithfully communicated whatever God told him to say.

The rest of Jeremiah 1 records how God "called" and "commissioned" Jeremiah to this ministry of being a prophet. Notice what God said to Jeremiah in verses 4 and 5:

4 Now the word of the Lord came to me saying,
5 "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
And before you were born I consecrated you;
I have appointed you a prophet to the nations."

Before Jeremiah was born and long before "the word of the Lord" ever came to him, God singled him out. God mentions four things He had done.

First, before Jeremiah even existed, God "knew" him. As you may be aware, in the OT "to know" someone meant more than being acquainted with someone; it often had the connotation of personal commitment. For example, in Amos 3:2 God said to Israel, "You only have I known of all the families of the earth"; God had set His affection on Israel in a unique way. That seems to be the connotation here in Jeremiah 1:5. Before Jeremiah even existed, God was personally committed to him.

Second, (in passing) God said, "I formed you in the womb." Statements like this are found in numerous places in Scripture (Psalm 139:13-14). Throughout Scripture we are told that God is intimately involved in forming a child in its mother's womb. Even though there are "natural processes" that describe how a baby grows in a mother's womb, it is also accurate to say that "God forms us in the womb." God's involvement in this process informs our understanding of the sanctity of human life even before birth (as David Pauls talked about last week).

Third, God told Jeremiah, “Before you were born I consecrated you.” To consecrate is to set apart for God’s purposes. God wasn’t waiting around to see whether Jeremiah would serve Him or another god. Before he was even born God decided that Jeremiah would be on His side.

Before we look at the fourth thing God did in Jeremiah’s life, I want to make a few comments about statements such as these in verse 5 in which God has unilaterally set apart or chosen a person to be His own. As you’re probably aware, statements like this are found throughout Scripture. For example, in Ephesians 1 (in the New Testament) Paul tells the believers in Ephesus that God “chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons. . .” (Ephesians 1:4-5).

When we read such statements our minds often migrate to questions such as, “Did God violate Jeremiah’s will?” and “Didn’t Jeremiah have a choice?” and “What about those who weren’t chosen and set apart by God? That hardly seems fair!” In other words, we often ask questions that the text isn’t answering. When we’re fixated on things a passage *isn’t* teaching, we miss the things a passage *is* teaching. I was in a Bible study at LSU in which we 4 weeks trying to figure out predestination in Ephesians 1. At the end of the four weeks we were more confused than ever because we were asking questions that Ephesians 1 doesn’t answer.

Now (as a pastor and as a believer) I am willing to live with the tension between God’s sovereignty and human responsibility; there are different ways to understand the relationship between the two. What I *don’t* want to do is get so far off topic that I *miss what specific passages are trying to teach*. In Jeremiah 1 I think God wanted Jeremiah to know that he had been known and set apart was so that he would persevere. Since God had initiated the relationship with him, God would sustain the relationship with him. These statements were meant to give Jeremiah encouragement.

I think that this is the intent of most of the passages that speak of God choosing us. Before the crucifixion when His disciples were confused and afraid, Jesus told them, “You did not choose Me, but I chose you, and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit” (John 15:16). That knowledge was meant to give them confidence that Jesus would sustain them in the future. Jeremiah would certainly need that confidence.

Fourth, God told Jeremiah, “I have appointed you a prophet to the nations.” A prophet was someone who delivered messages from God to specific people and circumstances. Prophets weren’t like priests who studied the Scriptures and then taught what they understood. Prophets certainly studied the Scriptures, but they delivered specific messages (even verbatim) that God had given them for specific people and circumstances.

Here God is informing Jeremiah that He had given him *an assignment*. God wasn’t asking Jeremiah to consider the possibility of being a prophet; God didn’t say, “Jeremiah, think about this option and get back with me whenever you decide if this is a

good fit for you or not. . .” No, God is telling Jeremiah, “This is an assignment that I have given you; I have appointed you a prophet to the nations.”

As we read the book of Jeremiah it becomes increasingly clear that God had given Jeremiah an incredibly **difficult** assignment. For starters, Jeremiah’s message wasn’t something that anybody would want to hear. One of the things he would be telling Judah’s kings and priests was that they shouldn’t resist the invading Babylonians because God had irrevocably decided to send them into exile. To fight the Babylonians would be kin to “resisting arrest”; they’d only be bringing more painful consequences into their lives. Because of this message Jeremiah would be considered a traitor. He would therefore be put in stocks in the public square, he would be beaten, he would be thrown into a cistern where he sank down into the mud. Jeremiah’s life has been characterized as being “one long martyrdom” (Feinberg, *EBC: Jeremiah*, p. 358). Because of the hardships he would endure as a prophet, God forbid him from marrying and having children (16:2). Jeremiah was given a difficult assignment.

Most of us can identify difficult assignments in our lives in which we say, “God, this is too much for me to bear.” As I mentioned earlier, some of them are external (other people, circumstances, jobs or school); some of them are internal in the sense that our assignment is to deal with our own sinfulness and dysfunctions and emotional pains. Biblically speaking, everything we experience in our lives is ultimately an assignment from God. That doesn’t mean that God caused those difficulties (e.g., Satan brought about Job’s suffering); but God is sovereign over them (Job said, “Shall I accept good from the hand of God and not evil?”). God doesn’t expect us to figure out exactly who is responsible for our difficult circumstances.

Scholars estimate (based on the historical details given in Jeremiah 1:1-3) that Jeremiah was about 20 years old at this time. His response to God’s statement isn’t surprising:

6 Then I said, “Alas, Lord God!
Behold, I do not know how to speak,
Because I am a youth.”

Some of you here today are 20 years old. . . If God told me when I was 20 years old that I had been appointed as “a prophet to the nations,” I probably would have said what Jeremiah said (and a lot more). What Jeremiah said (“I don’t know how to speak because I am a youth”) was probably accurate. He had little experience and few speaking skills. He looked at the assignment God had just outlined and then he looked at himself and basically told God, “You’ve got the wrong man for the job.”

Several hundred years earlier Moses had a similar response when God told him to go to Pharaoh and tell him, “Let My people go!” Even after God explained in great detail what He would do in delivering the people from slavery in Egypt, Moses said, “I have never been eloquent . . . I am slow of speech and slow of tongue. . .” (Exodus 4:10). So God had heard this type of thing before. There probably aren’t many excuses He hasn’t heard . . . even my lame excuses.

God's reply to Jeremiah is instructive. God doesn't give him a pep talk or a rousing pre-game speech. God basically tells Jeremiah, "My presence trumps every single deficiency you have. This assignment is depending on Me being faithful, not on you being competent."

7 But the Lord said to me,
"Do not say, 'I am a youth,'
Because everywhere I send you, you shall go,
And all that I command you, you shall speak.
8 "Do not be afraid of them,
For I am with you to deliver you," declares the Lord.

Here we have the first hint that Jeremiah would face opposition, even opposition that would tempt him to be afraid. God's promise was simply, "I am with you to deliver you." Jeremiah would not be alone, and Jeremiah would not be abandoned to his enemies. This is a significant promise because there were times when Jeremiah **felt** alone and **felt** abandoned (in chapter 15 Jeremiah basically said, "God, You are like a dried up stream in the desert. . ."). At those times Jeremiah needed to know of God's calling and God's presence.

In verse 9 God gives Jeremiah a very tangible confirmation that He would supply the message that Jeremiah would deliver.

9 Then the Lord stretched out His hand and touched my mouth, and the Lord said to me, "Behold, I have put My words in your mouth.

Both Isaiah (6:6-7) and Ezekiel (2:9-3:3) had similar experiences. The effect of God "touching" Jeremiah's mouth was to assure him that He would personally supply every message Jeremiah would deliver. Jeremiah's mission was ultimately dependent on God, not on himself.

10 "See, I have appointed you this day over the nations and over the kingdoms,
To pluck up and to break down,
To destroy and to overthrow,
To build and to plant."

God wasn't merely a tribal deity, having authority only over Israel. His concern extended to nations and kingdoms. Therefore, He had every right to appointed Jeremiah as a prophet over nations and kingdoms. Jeremiah's message would cut in two directions. Sometimes he would have a prophecy about a nation/kingdom's establishment, and other times about its destruction. Again, this is quite an assignment for a 20-year-old to receive.

In verses 11 through 16 God gives Jeremiah a couple of visions that confirm that He will fulfill every prophecy that Jeremiah announced. Notice what God tells Jeremiah in the last three verses of the chapter.

17 “Now, gird up your loins and arise, and speak to them all which I command you. Do not be dismayed before them, or I will dismay you before them.

Jeremiah’s obedience to this calling wasn’t optional. Jeremiah needed to fear God more than the powerful people who would oppose his messages. And so God warns Jeremiah in this verse. But in the next two verses God also instills confidence in Jeremiah. God first tells Jeremiah that even though he would face opposition from the most powerful, influential people in Judah He would make him strong:

18 “Now behold, I have made you today as a fortified city and as a pillar of iron and as walls of bronze against the whole land, to the kings of Judah, to its princes, to its priests and to the people of the land.

In verse 19 God reassures Jeremiah with this promise:

19 “They will fight against you, but they will not overcome you, for I am with you to deliver you,” declares the Lord.

God never sugar-coated what Jeremiah would endure. Here he tells Jeremiah that Judah’s kings, princes, priests, and people would “war/fight” against him. God’s simple promise to Jeremiah was that he would not be “overcome”; in other words, Jeremiah wouldn’t abandon his calling and his God. Why such confidence? “For I am with you to deliver you,” declares the Lord. God’s presence and God’s deliverance were Jeremiah’s confidence.

Listen to this catalog from chapter 1 of everything God told Jeremiah He **had done** and **would do** in his life:

I knew you
I formed you in the womb
I consecrated you
I have appointed you a prophet to the nations
I send you
I command you
I am with you to deliver you
I have put My words in your mouth
I have appointed you this day over the nations and kingdoms
I am watching over My word to perform it
I have made you a fortified city, as a pillar of iron, as a wall of bronze
I am with you to deliver you

Jeremiah needed to see his difficult assignment in the context of His relationship with God who pursued Him before He was even born and who would be faithful to him until the day he died. Carrying out his God-given assignment depended on God’s faithfulness, not on Jeremiah’s competence.

Was Jeremiah's experience (his "difficult assignment") an exception? Or does God promise us what He promised Jeremiah?

I need to point out that all of the major characters in the Bible had similar difficult assignments that we given to them by God:

- Abraham leaving his home town for Canaan.
- Joseph imprisoned for crimes he didn't commit.
- Moses leading the people into the Promised Land.
- David fighting Goliath, fleeing from Saul, and going to battle
- Joseph marrying Mary even though she was pregnant with a baby not his own.
- Paul assigned to be an apostle to the Gentiles and to suffer for Christ's sake.

The list goes on and on.

And so the question is really, "Does God "know," "consecrate," give "difficult assignments," and promise "I will be with you to deliver you" to all of His children - or just those found in the Bible? This is a vital question because it has implications for how we read and apply the Scriptures. If God's relationship with Jeremiah, Moses, David, Joseph, and Paul is in a whole different category than His relationship with us, then we'll read and apply the Bible one way. But if God's relationship with us is essentially the same as His relationship with them, then we'll read and apply the Bible another way. We will read it personally, anticipating that God will do for us and to us what He did for and to them.

It is my strong conviction that the experiences described in Scripture are given so that we will anticipate and understand how God is working in our lives. The details will certainly be different (I haven't been appointed as a prophet to the nations), but our experience should be similar. Otherwise, the Bible is valuable only as a history book. If you have entered into a relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ, God says to you what He said to Jeremiah.

Specifically, as you face the difficult assignments in your life, God wants you to know that He knew you before He formed you in your mother's womb; He consecrated you; and He has appointed you to live your life for His glory. In the midst of your difficult marriage, your difficult job, your loneliness, your illness or disability: "I will be with you." God is "with us" through the indwelling Holy Spirit; we are never alone in our trials/difficulties. God also says, "I will deliver you." Sometimes God delivers us by removing trials from our lives (God does heal people; God does reconcile people in relationships; God does make grumpy people joyful). But sometimes God tells us what He told Paul in relation to his "thorn in the flesh": "I'm going to leave this difficulty in your life so that you will learn that My power is perfected in your weakness."

And when it comes to our excuses ("God, this isn't fair. God, this is more than I can bear."), God says to us what He said to Jeremiah, "My presence trumps every single deficiency you have. This assignment is depending on Me being faithful, not on you being competent." As we try to live out the difficult assignments we've been given, our responsibility is to cling to God and trust that we'll experience His presence and His deliverance day by day by day.