

OH, BOY
Jeremiah 1:4-10

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When did you grow up?

I'm not asking for the year. At what age did you become an adult? Today, they're saying 25 is the new 18. The traditional markers of adulthood have moved later and later: getting a job, moving away from parents, getting married, having kids. Experts in these things talk about it as "extended adolescence" or "emerging adulthood." The truth is the line between child and adult has always been a moving target.ⁱ

Early Roman law set the "age of majority" at the age individuals would presumably have attained the intellectual capacities required for full citizenship and becoming parents—age fifteen for males. Before any parents of teenagers walk out, Roman law also placed males under the temporary guardianship of men known as "curators." A Curator's approval was required to validate young males' formal acts or contracts until they reached 25 years of age, full maturity.

Throughout other parts of Europe, it was the ability to participate in warfare that determined legal maturity. Between the ninth and eleventh centuries, that was *fifteen* for males. It wasn't until the Middle Ages that warfare changed, requiring heavy armor and the strength to ride mounted calvary, that 21 became the age of knighthood, and, soon, the assumed age of adulthood. That was the age marker that made its way from the British Empire to the American colonies.ⁱⁱ

When war changed again, conscripting eighteen-year-olds into service, the legal voting age followed decades later to eighteen. So, when is a person an adult?

Wisdom teeth arrive between 17 and 21. The final bone in the body to mature—the collarbone—does so between 21 and 35. When do we grow up?

I don't know how old you had to be in Jeremiah's world to be "old enough," but he thought he did. When God came calling for a man to speak, Jeremiah said "Oh, boy." Or "child?" Some translations use "youth." It's hard to say exactly. It's the same word that the Bible uses for Moses as an infant and Samuel as a little boy. It's likely Jeremiah's mid or late teenage years, only approaching maturity.

Regardless of his age, we meet this young prophet-to-be as the word of the Lord comes to him. In this word from God, we learn, with Jeremiah, several truths about our lives.

I. You were created with purpose.

It's the first thing Jeremiah learns in this interruption of the Word. It is the origin of his calling. God's claim on Jeremiah's life starts well before the words found in Jeremiah chapter 1.

We might be confused into thinking that Jeremiah's call begins here. So, it says in verse 2, that he was a prophet "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. 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."

But when Lord speaks, when the Word "happens" to Jeremiah, we discover that Jeremiah's encounter with the Word, his discovery of God's divine purpose in creation, is given in three powerful verbs that speak to God's claim on Jeremiah's life: *I knew you, I consecrated you, I appointed you.*

a. "I knew you..."

The first thing that Jeremiah is told is that the calling of God on his life precedes even his birth. As Christopher Wright points out, "His participation in a divine purpose was being shaped in the mind of God before Jeremiah was being shaped in his mother's womb."ⁱⁱⁱ Before he was known by any other, he was known by God. He stands alongside John the Baptist as the only biblical figure whose prenatal ordination is announced so deliberately. Yet the same can be said of you also. Your life has been formed with by an intentional, creative, purposeful act of God.

This prophetic book begins by situating Jeremiah within the history of ancient Israel. We're told where he stands relative to the Kings of his day, but it is not his connection to Josiah nor Jehoiakim that will determine his place in history. It is Jehovah whose reign will bring meaning to Jeremiah's life.

Isaiah says God "has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand," that with the "breadth of his hand marked off the heavens." It was God who "held the dust of the earth in a basket," and it was God who "weighed the mountains on the scales and the hills in a balance." This God of all creation comes to Jeremiah – and to you – in a word that is so powerful he can feel it: "It was me whose hands created the you that you know and before I even fashioned you out of nothing... *I knew you.*"

b. "I consecrated you..."

God also says Jeremiah has been consecrated. This is the same word that is used again and again to talk about Israel as having been "set apart" by God himself as a holy people (2:3). To be consecrated is to be devoted as sacred, separated from the common things for a purpose determined by God. God had marked out Jeremiah for this purpose.

One of the costs of being confronted in life by the Word of God is the distance it can demand. This divine act of setting apart has consequences for Jeremiah. It will filter his daily life. It will cause tension with family. It will disorient his community. Future kings, fellow priests, and other prophets would be confronted by this sanctifying work of God.

Prophet is a lonely occupation. As the latest Disney hit reminds us, “We don’t talk about Bruno.” The gift of a prophet is rarely welcomed in our midst. The set-apart reality of your Christian calling is bound to demand a distance from some things as well.

c. “I appointed you...”

God also declares that Jeremiah has been appointed. Literally, “prophet to the nations I have given you [to be].” Wright says, “It is not so much that God gives a job to Jeremiah, but that God gives Jeremiah to the job.”^{iv} Bruggeman says, “the message requires the messenger.” His very existence was for the sake of carrying out this job.^v

Jeremiah’s call, and yours, is not a sudden reaction or a heavenly response to an unforeseen crisis. Your life was made for a purpose, made to be wrapped up into the divine plan of God. Paul says it was lying hidden for the ages, but “His intent was that now, through the church, [it] should be made known” (Eph. 3:10).

Before anything in the world laid claim on his life, Jeremiah’s life was claimed by God. Jeremiah becomes one of the many biblical figures who embody the calling of the one out of the many when the many do not get the job done. When the masses reject their identity and their task, God is always at work calling out a few to rescue and restore. It’s the story of Abraham and Israel, David and Jeremiah.

With such an emphatic declaration about the purpose for which he’s been created, how could Jeremiah object? Verse 6, that’s how.

Stephen Graham notes that, “It is at this point where we join Jeremiah in preparing our alibi. We establish the bases for our unworthiness.”^{vi} He continues:

Almost a century after Isaiah, Jeremiah found himself in a village not in a city. He could have easily voiced this protest, “I am not strategically placed for this high calling.” “Who am I for this cosmopolitan age?” He could have reasoned that the people aren’t ready for such a bold advance. He could have asked, “Who am I to affect such change in this day? I’m hardly old enough to consider taking on this responsibility.” It is not surprising that Jeremiah plays the age card (1:6). He obviously could complain that he just didn’t know how.

We dismiss ourselves in this same fashion, and the church through the years has followed this same course. The words spill out of our mouths with great ease, “Now is not the time; I am too young or too old, too uncertain, too unsure, too timid, too

fearful, too reserved!" There is not a time when speaking a word on God's behalf is premature, and yet, Jeremiah was certain, "Oh, boy, I cannot speak. I am only a child." (Graham, 2016)

Author Frank McCourt had a stint teaching English at a tough, blue collar high school in Staten Island. He discovered that each time he gave a writing assignment, students would predictably fail to complete the assignment. The day the paper was due, students would not show up empty handed, though they would bring a note explaining their reason for not completing the assignment. After a while, McCourt became so entertained by the notes, he started saving them in a desk drawer.

He held onto the notes because they were always so well written. In fact, they were better than any other writing his students did. In his book, *Teacher Man*, he writes, "If [their parents] could read the excuse notes, they would discover that their kids are capable of the finest American prose: clear, dramatic, persuasive and especially imaginative."

McCourt reflects, "Isn't it remarkable how they resist any writing assignment in class or at home? They whine and say they're busy and it's hard putting two hundred words together on any subject. Why? I have a drawer full of excuse notes that could be turned into an anthology of Great American Excuses."

Our ingenuity in avoiding the assignment of God knows no bounds. If we spent as much creative energy considering the work of His kingdom as we do on our own, we might discover that we have all the gifts we need to do the work that we've been assigned. The church, confronted with hearing and speaking the word of God, often wants to put off or avoid fulfilling their present-day assignment. We may know the words, but we can't imagine knowing the tune. "We are just not ready to share a word from God to the world." Case dismissed.

So we ought to listen carefully to the Lord's response to Jeremiah. God dismisses Jeremiah's point as true, but irrelevant. What a relief that is to us. God's grace isn't based on our talent or worthiness. Your role in the kingdom of God is not dependent on your proficiency or prestige.

What mattered was not Jeremiah's confidence, but God's command. So, God says in verse 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."**

II. You have something to say.

a. "You shall go"

It would be a temptation to read this text and submit it to the realm of ancient prophets, or traveling preachers, or modern missionaries. But this call points us not somewhere else, but right here where God has placed us.

As we follow Christ, we should be encouraged to know that we have been created with divine intention. We are made to serve the kingdom and the King's agenda. We were created for certain places, times, and events. God knew, long before we did, the kind of mess the world would be in when we got here. For that reason, He has created us in a certain way, gifted us with particular attributes and characteristics in order to serve His kingdom and our world with the greatest effectiveness.

Paul, preaching in Athens, said that God, "marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us."

You are where you are, with purpose. God has done this so that when the people in your life reach for God, they will have something to hold on to. When they look up from their darkness in search of the light, they will see the life you live. When they listen for a word from God, it will be your voice that is speaking words that are true.

You were made with purpose. You are where you are with divine intent. And you have something to say.

b. "You shall speak"

Generations of believers have found in God's word to Jeremiah something true of all servants. There was, of course, a unique context for the events set in motion here, but the Bible repeats these same affirmations about the calling of all God's people. We are not all called to be Jeremiah Prophets, but we are all called. Paul would write to the city centers all over the known world to the "saints" – the holy ones, the ones set apart and appointed by God to join in the work of calling the nations to the truth of God.^{vii}

You have something to say that far exceeds your words. Your life stands this day and each day in witness to your own encounter with the Word of God. More than where you are from or what you are called or under which reign you've received the word, what matters about you is that you were created to "let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly." By the way that you live your life, the choices you make, and the priorities you hold, the Word of God will be proclaimed to a world in desperate search for the truth.

You have something to say.

We aren't told that Jeremiah is now afraid, but we can imagine. We can imagine because we know how hard it is. God knows, too. So he utters the most frequent command in all of scripture: *Do not be afraid*. To that most frequent command, He adds His most precious promise: *I am with you*.^{viii}

It was God's presence that had set Moses apart and that gave Joshua courage, and it will be that same presence that will reassure this scared son of a village priest. You and I, also, recall

the Emmanuel, the God who came to be with us, renewing again the promise for us and for the rest of history, for those who carry forward this witness to the nations. Though the world may not understand it or accept it or receive, you were made with purpose to be, in Christ, who God made you to be.

Jeremiah would need every word of comfort he could get. In the later years of his ministry, he would be disavowed by his family, arrested, beaten and imprisoned, threatened more than once with death, cheated by a relative, and would be forced into hiding.

The Bible is insistent that God has a purpose for calling each one of us to Himself, and there is a matching sense in which each of us needs to seek the outworking of that calling in daily life and work. We have all been apprehended, to bear a word of witness to the living Christ. Like all humanity, Jeremiah had been created, consecrated, and called to be a glimpse of the glory of God in the world where he had influence.

Jeremiah says, “Oh, I am but a boy.” God says, “No, you will be the man.”

To a distraught and distracted church, God says, “You will be my people.” We’d better grow up sooner rather than later.

ⁱ John G Cottone, “Why 25 Could Be the New 18: Adolescence should extend into the mid-20s” *Psychology Today* (19 July 2021)

ⁱⁱ Vivian E. Hamilton, “Adulthood in Law and Culture,” *Faculty Publications*. 1824. (2016)
<https://scholarship.law.wm.edu/facpubs/1824>

ⁱⁱⁱ Christopher J.H. Wright, *The Message of Jeremiah* (IVP Academic, 2014) 49.

^{iv} Wright, 50.

^v Walter Bruggeman, *A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile and Homecoming* (Eerdmans, 1998).

^{vi} Stephen D. Graham, “Jeremiah 1:4-10,” *The Truett Pulpit*, 2016. (Accessed online).

^{vii} Wright, 50.

^{viii} Ibid.