



Six Themes
Everyone Should Know

Jeremiah

W. Eugene March

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Press

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Six Themes Everyone Should Know series

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Jeremiah, by W. Eugene March

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Introduction to the *Six Themes Everyone Should Know* series

The *Six Themes Everyone Should Know* series focuses on the study of Scripture. Bible study is vital to the lives of churches. Churches need ways of studying Scripture that can fit a variety of contexts and group needs. *Six Themes Everyone Should Know* studies offer a central feature of church adult educational programs. Their flexibility and accessibility make it possible to have short-term studies that introduce biblical books and their main themes.

Six Themes Everyone Should Know consists of six chapters that introduce major biblical themes. At the core of each chapter is an introduction and three major sections. These sections relate to key dimensions of Bible study. These sections ask:

- What does this biblical theme mean?
- What is the meaning of this biblical theme for the life of faith?
- What does this biblical theme mean for the church at this point in history for action?

This format presents a compact and accessible way for people in various educational settings to gain knowledge about major themes in the biblical books; to experience the impact of what Scripture means for Christian devotion to God; and to consider ways Scripture can lead to new directions for the church in action.

Introduction to *Jeremiah*

The noun “jeremiad” refers to a long, mournful complaint or lamentation. A “Jeremiah” is a pessimistic person; “jeremiad” is the way these Jeremiahs carry on. The biblical Jeremiah was seen as a prophet of judgment and doom, hence the etymological association.

It is an awesome responsibility to speak for God. Jeremiah, a spokesman for God, came from a family of priests. His father was Hilkiyah. His ministry lasted some forty years (627–587 BCE). These were grim times. The powerful Babylonian Empire made war on Judah because, according to Jeremiah, the people and even the priests had sinned against God and had broken the covenant. Jeremiah spent his days lambasting the Hebrews for their false worship and social injustice and denouncing the king for his selfishness, materialism, and injustices. When not calling on his people to quit their wicked ways, he was lamenting his own lot; a portion of the Old Testament’s book of Jeremiah is devoted to his “confessions,” a series of lamentations on the hardships endured by a prophet with an unpopular message.

Jeremiah advised surrender in order to save lives and the city of Jerusalem. For this, he was branded a traitor. However, Jeremiah did not only pronounce judgment; he was also a prophet of hope, joy, and salvation for those who believed that God had not forsaken them, even when they went into exile. Jeremiah proclaims that the relationship with God, broken time and again, will be restored. Hope was not a luxury to be enjoyed by a few; it was strength for their survival.

During our own time of turmoil, may the study of Jeremiah bring you comfort and resolve to turn from the despair that crushes the human spirit and turn to the God of the covenant.

Biblical Backgrounds to Jeremiah

Author and Date

“First and foremost Jeremiah was a prophetic preacher rather than a writer, and the preservation of his messages in written form represents a secondary stage in their history. The prophet’s use of Baruch the son of Neriah as a scribe to set down his messages in writing (36:4) strongly suggests that Baruch may have possessed special qualifications as a scribe-secretary.”

“It is not the prophet himself, nor even his close associate Baruch, however, who has been responsible for the shaping of the present book. This has taken place in a circle of interpreters and scribes whose thinking and aims were closely, but not wholly, related to those of the Deuteronomistic school. . . a body of thoughtful and intensely loyal Israelites who strove energetically to promote the true worship of Yahweh and to eradicate traces of the old Canaanite Baal religion in the period between 650 and 550 B.C.”

—R. E. Clements, *Jeremiah*. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1988), 7, 12.

Major Concerns

“[Jeremiah]’s book is commentary upon the most disastrous episodes of Judah’s history to which the Old Testament bears witness, both in their religious and political consequences.”

“At one stroke the year 587 witnessed the removal of the two institutions—the temple and the Davidic kingship—which had stood as symbolic assurances of God’s election of Israel. . . . What had happened demanded a total reappraisal and rethinking of Israel’s self-understanding as the People of God.”

—Clements, *Jeremiah*, 3, 6.

Importance

“Although many of the prophecies necessarily look back upon events belonging to an irreversible past, they did so in a manner designed to promote a deep and certain hope in the future and in the eventual restoration of Israel.”

—Clements, *Jeremiah*, 3.

Jeremiah demonstrates what it can mean to be embraced by God and claimed for special service.

Chapter 1

Jeremiah: A Prophet like Moses

Scripture

Jeremiah 1:4–19 God commissions Jeremiah.

Deuteronomy 18:15–22 A prophet like Moses will come.

Prayer

O awesome God, you have sought us across the centuries, inviting us into relationship with you. You have come to us in the person of prophets, in mighty acts of deliverance, and, finally, in the person of your Son Jesus, our Lord. Still we are often uncertain of your will. Help us now as we study the book of your prophet Jeremiah to gain the insight and perspective we need to live in the way you desire and relish. For Jesus' sake, hear our prayer. Amen.

Introduction

The book of Jeremiah is long, fifty-two chapters long. Jeremiah the prophet was active between the years 609 BCE and 585 BCE, witnessing and interpreting the fall of Judah to the Babylonians, including the exile of large numbers of Judean leaders to Babylon.

While the words and actions of the prophet Jeremiah are the focus of this long book, some other materials have been included because they agree with the theological perspective of Jeremiah or reflect on issues connected with him. The complex literary history

of the book of Jeremiah will not be discussed in detail. Only let it be understood that the book was composed over at least a century and demonstrates theological reflection in its development.

Further, the book of Jeremiah is closely related in theology and literary style to parts of the book of Deuteronomy. Both Jeremiah and Deuteronomy insist that the proper foundation for Israel's relationship with God is the Mosaic covenant. After David had become king, a "royal ideology/theology" developed. Proponents of this perspective insisted that God's connection with Israel was mainly exercised through the Davidic monarch buttressed with a divine promise to David of an everlasting, unconditional covenant (2 Samuel 7; Psalm 89:1-38). Deuteronomy and Jeremiah challenged this understanding. They insisted that any relationship with God must be based on following the stipulations of the Ten Commandments and other parts of the covenant established by God with Moses and Israel at Sinai (Exodus 20:1-21; Deuteronomy 5:1-21), particularly the admonitions against idolatry.

The book of Jeremiah preserves the legacy of Jeremiah, son of Hilkiah, related to the priests of Anathoth, a village about three miles northeast of Jerusalem (Jeremiah 1:1). He was understood to be a "prophet [*nabi*] to the nations'" (1:5), a prophet like Moses (Deuteronomy 18:15). A *nabi*' was one commissioned by God to declare God's word. Such a prophet might say something about the future, but the main task was addressing the present. Biblical prophets *did not make predictions* about the future. They announced God's will for the present! That is how the book of Jeremiah is to be heard and understood.

A Basic Theme: Appointed over Nations and Kingdoms

The book of Jeremiah opens with the commissioning of the prophet (1:4-19). As Moses was given a word and task at the burning bush (Exodus 3:1-4:17), so Jeremiah received a word from God declaring him to be "a prophet to the nations'" (1:5). As Moses resisted God's directive questioning whether he was capable of the assignment (Exodus 3:11), so Jeremiah responded with hesitancy, saying, "I am only a boy'" (1:6). The Hebrew word translated "boy" is used of people of various ages, but seldom of children. It mainly suggests a level of experience. Here "young man" or "apprentice" might be a better translation since Jeremiah and his father were

connected to the priestly circle at Anathoth. Whatever, it is highly unlikely that Jeremiah was a child.

The similarities between the accounts of Moses' and Jeremiah's commissioning continue. Both were assured that God would be with them no matter what they faced (Exodus 3:12; Jeremiah 1:8). And when Moses again tried to avoid the assigned task by citing his lack of speaking ability (Exodus 4:10–13), God reprimanded him and appointed Aaron to speak on Moses' behalf (Exodus 4:14–16). With Jeremiah, at the very beginning, God placed the divine word in his mouth (figuratively speaking, of course) and thereby assured Jeremiah that he was qualified to be a prophet (Jeremiah 1:14–15; see Deuteronomy 18:18).

Being a prophet was not something to covet. Often, Jeremiah faced a scornful, doubting king and people. Much of his task was to alert the nation, Judah, and its leaders, that God was deeply unhappy with them. They were in for a time of destroying, plucking up, and seeing reality as they had known it turned inside out (Jeremiah 1:10). People never like to hear such words; the Judeans of Jeremiah's time were no different. As they rejected God, they also turned Jeremiah away, often violently. But Jeremiah was assured that God would be with him (1:8, 19).

The certainty of coming judgment was Jeremiah's fundamental message. This adverse consequence was the result of widespread idolatry (1:16). Because of this, Jeremiah has been seen as a negative person with no good news to share. While the judgments to come were frightening, there was nonetheless one good note to sound: a time “to build and to plant” was also part of God's word for Jeremiah to declare (1:10). God continued to have an interest in and a commitment to the people to whom Jeremiah was sent.

Yes, Jeremiah was a prophet like Moses. They were each commissioned with a word from God for a particular time. They were sent to confront royal power (Pharaoh in Egypt and a vassal puppet king in Judah). Nations and kingdoms stand under the lordship of God, no matter how powerful they may seem. And Moses and the prophet like Moses, Jeremiah, had a strong word to deliver.

The Life of Faith: Being Embraced by a Loving God

Reading about Jeremiah's induction into God's work is eye opening in several ways. First, from his own point of view, Jeremiah

had nothing to qualify him for any significant role. Second, he was not particularly looking for a special task or opportunity of service. Third, as far as we are told, Jeremiah had no cause for which he had great zeal. He was more or less minding his own business when God burst in and distinctly claimed him.

Jeremiah was like many (most?) folk who today count themselves believers in God. In theory, God is important, but in personal terms God is absent. We do not know what Jeremiah was doing before God embraced him. Was he merely passing the time, hanging out, making do? Many seem to be doing that today. But after God claimed Jeremiah, things changed radically for him. He now had a purpose!

Few individuals are designated “prophets” by God. But God has an interest in each individual. God desires to embrace each one personally and assure each one of God’s ongoing, caring presence. To reflect on Jeremiah’s experience is to be reminded of God’s intention and desire. Yes, there are times when God directs very particular messages through specific persons, like Moses or Jeremiah. But for the most part, God’s purpose is advanced by ordinary folk, people who love God and who respond positively to God’s prophets.

Those who recognize God’s embrace are able to keep moving ahead even when circumstances are grim. They believe God’s assurance of divine presence no matter what. Likewise, they recognize that divine displeasure is a real possibility that must be announced if social circumstances can be changed. So, as with Jeremiah, though not prophets themselves, they can and do take up the prophetic task of confronting others with God’s word. This challenge belongs to all who care about God’s desire for a peaceful and just world.

To understand and believe that one does not trudge through life alone and without any purpose changes one’s outlook in significant ways. You don’t ask that oft-repeated question “Is that all there is?” We do not live in isolation. We are part of a community with the God-given mission to live in the world in such a way that all may recognize the power and intent of God’s embrace.

For a quarter of a century, Jeremiah carried out his assignment. He was generally ignored, though sometimes he was attacked. What sustained him throughout his service was the assurance of

God's presence. That same assurance continues to be extended to any and all who will trust in God's word. Many have claimed such a trust, but their way of life does not reflect such a commitment. Personal joy comes in accepting God's embrace and celebrating each step forward toward God's goal of a just peace for all people.

The Church: Living Out Jeremiah's Call

Jeremiah was "appointed . . . a prophet to the nations" (Jeremiah 1:5c). Today the church is challenged to continue this mission. To do this will require several different strategies, some directed at the church itself and others aimed at the wider society:

A fundamental realignment of the church's priorities needs to be made. The goal is not to expand the church (though that may at times occur). The goal is to engage the "nations." Jeremiah was given authority to reprimand nations and kingdoms. He was instructed to enter the realm of politics. For him, religion had a grave responsibility for society. The social and political structures that humans had created were the targets of Jeremiah's declarations. To the degree that these foster injustice and/or inequality they are to be removed.

The church continues to have such a commission. There is a problem, however, in that many church members claim that religion and politics should be kept separate. Religion, they argue, has only to do with the "spiritual" and nothing to do with economics, justice systems, military operations, and so forth. Such a position has hampered the church for centuries. It contradicts Jeremiah, most of the other prophets, and Jesus himself. The church must give significant attention to this misunderstanding if it is to continue Jeremiah's assignment.

Our society's economic structure that rewards acquisition is in dire need of attention. For many, to gain riches and authority is the whole aim of life. Only by accumulating an overabundance of "things" can security be achieved (it is claimed). Thus, any behavior is justified so long as the goal is personal or national wealth and security. This is sometimes the result of unregulated capitalism.

There is no easy solution to this problem. A good, workable way for the “haves” to share fairly with the “have-nots” has yet to be developed. The church needs to encourage research and practice toward finding solutions. But again, many in the church do not understand this to be the church’s business. Education and a change in priorities are yet necessary.

The recognition that God is sovereign over all kingdoms and nations is often denied directly or indirectly. For some, only the United States, or perhaps Israel, can claim any special relationship with God. But that is not the message of Jeremiah or the other prophets. All nations and peoples belong to God. Many believe that divine judgment should fall on other nations. Jeremiah had a major job to do in convincing the people of Judah that they were just as responsible before God as the people of Assyria or Babylon. For many Christians in the United States, there is a similar denial of responsibility before God. Other nations, not the United States, deserve punishment. Jesus warned us to take care of the log in our own eye before worrying about the speck in the eye of another (Luke 6:41).

For Reflection and Action

1. How have you personally experienced a sense of God’s absence? Of God’s presence?
2. What difference does a sense of purpose add to a person’s life?
3. What are some appropriate ways for the church to engage in political action? Are there inappropriate ways?
4. Read Jeremiah 1 several times, and then read Romans 13:1–10, and compare the texts. How is Jeremiah to be tempered by Romans? How is Romans 13:1–7 to be corrected by Jeremiah? What difference does Romans 13:8–10 make in the discussion?



Group Gatherings

Mark D. Hinds

Jeremiah: A Prophet like Moses

Main Idea

Jeremiah demonstrates what it can mean to be embraced by God and claimed for special service. All believers can find comfort and strength in recognizing how God will in fact sustain and guide them. To receive a sense of purpose is a great gift amid the uncertainties of our present world.

Preparing to Lead

- Read and reflect on chapter 1, “Jeremiah: A Prophet like Moses.”
- Review this plan for the group gathering, and select questions and activities that you will use.
- What other questions, issues, or themes occur to you from your reflection?

Gathering

- Provide name tags and pens as people arrive.
- Provide simple refreshments; ask volunteers to bring refreshments for the next five gatherings.
- Agree on simple ground rules and organization (for example, time to begin and end; location for gatherings; welcoming of all points of view; confidentiality; and so on). Encourage participants to bring their study books and Bibles.

Opening Worship

Prayer (unison)

O awesome God, you have sought us across the centuries, inviting us into relationship with you. You have come to us in the person of prophets, in mighty acts of deliverance, and, finally, in the person

of your Son Jesus, our Lord. Still we are often uncertain of your will. Help us now as we study the book of your prophet Jeremiah to gain the insight and perspective we need to live in the way you desire and relish. For Jesus' sake, hear our prayer. Amen.

Prayerful, Reflective Reading

- Read Deuteronomy 18:15–22 aloud.
- Invite all to reflect for a few minutes in silence.
- After reflection time, invite all to listen for a word or phrase as the passage is read again and to reflect on that word or phrase in silence.
- Read the passage a third time, asking all to offer a silent prayer following the reading.
- Invite volunteers to share the word or phrase that spoke most deeply to them.

Prayer

Loving God, hear our prayers today as we seek to follow you more faithfully:

(spoken prayers may be offered)

Hear us now as we pray together, saying, Our Father . . .

Conversation

- Introduce chapter 1, “Jeremiah: A Prophet like Moses.” Share observations, reflections, and insights.
- Review the Introduction (pp. 1–2). Share these key points:
 - a. Jeremiah the prophet was active between the years 609 BCE and 585 BCE, witnessing and interpreting the fall of Judah to the Babylonians, including the exile of large numbers of Judean leaders to Babylon.
 - b. The book of Jeremiah is closely related to parts of the book of Deuteronomy, which insists that the proper foundation for Israel's relationship with God is the Mosaic covenant.
 - c. Only a few are claimed by God for the work of being a prophet, a *nabi'*. Jeremiah is compared with Moses in terms of the divine call.
 - d. Biblical prophets did not make predictions about the future. They announced God's will for the present! That is how the book of Jeremiah is to be heard and understood.

Challenge the participants to recall and name features of the Mosaic covenant (e.g. God establishes a relationship based on God’s character of steadfast love and justice, and God calls the people to live by the Ten Commandments, prohibiting idolatry).

- Review “A Basic Theme: Appointed over Nations and Kingdoms” (pp. 2–3). Share these key points:
 - a. God called Jeremiah, like Moses, to confront his king and his people in a very harsh way with their idolatry and immorality (i.e., Pharaoh in Egypt and a vassal puppet king in Judah).
 - b. Because of widespread idolatry (1:16), Jeremiah was certain of a coming judgment.
 - c. Even though Jeremiah has been seen as a negative person with no good news to share, a time “to build and to plant” was also part of God’s word for Jeremiah to declare (1:10). Discuss the challenges Jeremiah faced in proclaiming a harsh word from God to the rulers and the people. Ask:

What assurance did Jeremiah have that God would be with him during his ministry (1:8, 19)?

If Jeremiah were alive today, to whom would he address his word from the Lord? Why?

- Review “The Life of Faith: Being Embraced by a Loving God” (pp. 3–4). Discuss the story of Jeremiah’s call to ministry as an account of being embraced by a loving God. Invite the participants to share stories of how God has embraced them.

In what ways do you embrace having been embraced by a loving God?

Have you been claimed for special service? What difference does a sense of purpose add to your life?

What comfort and strength do you find in recognizing that God sustains and guides you? How is God’s presence discernible in your life?

- Review “The Church: Living Out Jeremiah’s Call” (pp. 5–6). Share these key points:
 - a. A fundamental realignment of the church’s priorities needs to be made. The goal is not to expand the church (though that may at times occur). The goal is to engage the “nations.” The church has a very difficult challenge: to show why theology and politics should not be separated.
 - b. Our society’s economic structure that rewards acquisition is in dire need of attention.
 - c. The recognition that God is sovereign over all kingdoms and nations is often denied directly or indirectly.

Discuss the resistance that most have to the notion that faith and religion can legitimately address the political and economic sectors of our society. Brainstorm ways to correct this. Ask:

Jeremiah’s commission was to address the “nations,” not just individuals and certainly not only “spiritual” matters. In what ways does the church accept Jeremiah’s commission today?

What are some appropriate ways for the church to engage in political action? Are there inappropriate ways? What are they?

Are there prophets among us today? Who are they, and how are they addressing the problems of idolatry and social justice?

Conclusion

Read Jeremiah 1:4–19 and Romans 13:1–10. Invite the participants to compare the texts, as suggested in the fourth question in For Reflection and Action (p. 6). Ask them to reflect during the week on how Romans 13:8–10 influences their reading of Jeremiah.

Passing the Peace

The peace of Christ be with you.

And also with you.

Amen.