

**A VERY UNUSUAL MINISTRY****JEREMIAH 1:1-10, 12:1-5**

Has anyone here today ever seen an oasis? I've never seen an oasis up close and personal. This picture is of an oasis in Libya in the Saharan Desert. An oasis is an isolated area of vegetation in a desert surrounding a spring or some other kind of water source like a pond or a small lake. Places like this were of critical importance for trade and transportation routes in desert areas. Caravans intentionally traveled via oases so that supplies of water and food could be replenished. I'm starting a new message series today entitled "Oases: Life-Giving Streams in Jeremiah's Desert." You might think, "Strange... I didn't know Jeremiah had anything to do with deserts." Well, he doesn't literally and neither does the book in the Bible by his name. So, let me explain.

Last year I was reading through the book of Jeremiah as part of my own personal devotional time with the Lord. I have to be honest with you – it's a tough read. Reading through Jeremiah was like walking through a very long spiritual desert. Did you know Jeremiah is the second longest book in the Bible? Yes, second only to the Psalms. And the majority of it is pretty negative, joyless and discouraging. God was very unhappy with His people – the people of Israel. But, then, all of a sudden and without warning, I'd come across a very positive, joyful, or encouraging passage. It was almost like coming across an oasis in a desert – a place of life, renewal, and hope – right in the midst of endless spiritual sand and rock. Then, it was back to the desert for a while until I came across another oasis. I began to see a pattern: desert, oasis, desert, oasis, desert, oasis. Interesting....

So, I decided to put together a series of messages on seven spiritual oases I found as I trekked through the desert of Jeremiah's prophecy. These are Scripture passages when, after you read them, you feel like you've just had a long, thirst quenching drink of cold water after being incredibly hot and thirsty. Now, don't get me wrong. All of the book of Jeremiah is God's Word and, for that reason alone, all of it should be read, understood, and reflected upon. In fact, you'll never fully understand or appreciate the spiritual oases in Jeremiah until you've walked through the deserts. So, by all means, read the entire book of Jeremiah. Let God speak to you both in and through its deserts as well as in and through its oases. But for these messages, we're going to focus primarily on seven spiritual oases and not as much on the desert around them.

Knowing a little about Jeremiah's day and age is essential. He lived and ministered in what was probably the most tumultuous time in Israel's history. He lived about six hundred years before Jesus was born. The Babylonian Empire had become the dominant power in the region and God's people had to pay heavy financial taxes to the Babylonian emperor just to keep a semblance of political independence. Several kings tried to break free of Babylonian control to no avail. About forty years into Jeremiah's ministry, the Babylonians decided they'd had enough of these frequent rebellions. They laid siege to Jerusalem, eventually broke through the walls of the city, completely destroyed the temple built by Solomon, and deported the majority of the people off to Babylon. That began a 70 year exile of God's people from the land of Palestine.

But even worse than the volatile political situation was the spiritual darkness of those years. God's people worshiped just about anyone and anything other than the one, true God. But, they'd also adopted the belief that God would never allow Jerusalem to be taken by its enemies or the temple built by King Solomon to ever be destroyed. They came to the conclusion they could live their lives any way they pleased, because God would never permit His city and His temple to suffer the humiliation of a foreign invasion. They couldn't have been more wrong. Even today, God could care less about cities, or temples, or even church buildings built in His honor. What He's after are people who love, know, honor, and obey Him. That's what matters to God the most.

God gave Jeremiah a very difficult assignment. Tell the people they were dead wrong. Tell them their hope was misplaced and their sense of security false. Tell the people God's judgement was coming and it couldn't be avoided. Tell them God was going to use the hated, evil Babylonians to punish God's people for their sins. Tell them it was useless to resist the Babylonian army. Tell them the best option was to surrender to the Babylonians. Now, when most of the people heard Jeremiah's message, they considered him a traitor. Imagine for a moment that God called you to be a prophet to the United States. And here's the message He gave you for your fellow Americans: "Surrender to ISIS. ISIS is God's instrument of divine judgment on the sins of America. Don't defend yourselves. Don't send any troops. Surrender for your own good." How do you think such a message would be received? Is it possible many would consider your words to be unpatriotic at best and traitorous at worst? That's exactly how most of God's people felt about Jeremiah and his message.

But here's the irony. Jeremiah was, in fact, the greatest patriot. No one loved his country more than he did. Nothing upset him more than the tragedy of seeing his nation fall so short from the destiny God had for it. He told the people even though their nation as a political entity was doomed, God was by no means finished with them as His people. But the leaders and the people hated Jeremiah with a passion. As a result, he lived a lonely, hard life full of conflict. On several occasions, he was very close to being put to death. He spent time in prison. He felt like an outcast among his own people. He was hated, mocked, and persecuted as a traitor and an enemy. Today, I want us to focus on Jeremiah himself. Yes, he's been called "the weeping prophet" and for good reason. His prophecy is drenched with tears. Nevertheless, Jeremiah himself was a kind of oasis in the midst of a mostly barren and desert-like spirituality practiced by most of God's people at that time. Jeremiah had a relationship with God that was impressive and inspiring. How so? Well, first of all...

## **HE RESPONDED TO GOD'S CHALLENGE.**

Please find Jeremiah 12:1-5 and let's read it. What's going on here? Jeremiah was complaining to the Lord. Sinful, godless people were prospering. He didn't understand why God allowed this to happen. It seemed unjust and unfair. Have you ever felt like Jeremiah? "Lord, here I am trying really hard to serve You and do Your will to the best of my ability. Can't You get rid of this problem and that obstacle in my life? Look at that dope over there, Lord! He never prays. Never reads his Bible. Never goes to church.

God is just a curse word to him. He takes advantage of other people. But it looks like his life is going just fine!” Have you ever had thoughts like that? Jeremiah certainly did and he told God all about them.

God’s answer began in v. 5. “If racing against mere men makes you tired, how will you race against horses? If you stumble and fall on open ground, what will you do in the thickets near the Jordan?” (Jer. 12:5 NLT) What’s that about? Let me offer a paraphrase. It’s as if God says, “Jeremiah, life is hard and sometimes I give my servants difficult assignments. Get used to it. You like to ask me questions. How about I ask you a question? Are you going to quit and give up when it gets tough? Are you going to retreat when you discover what I ask you to do is difficult? Are you going to live casually or courageously? Jeremiah, I’m calling you to live at your best and do something difficult I’ve called you to do. I’ve called you to a life of purpose far beyond what you think yourself capable of living. I’ve promised you all the strength you need to fulfill your assignment. But now you want to throw in the towel – just when you start to feel how difficult it’s going to be? Jeremiah, the real race of life is letting Me be in charge, trusting Me with your life, and being willing to do what I ask you to do. It’s like being in a foot race with horses rather than just other human beings. If you trip and stumble when everything is safe and comfy, what are you going to do when you face something really upsetting – some difficult thicket of circumstances – in your life?”

What a challenge! God sometimes calls us to difficult assignments in life, too. How do we respond? I think most of us who grew up in in American or Western Christianity tend to think God never calls us to do something unpleasant. We like to believe that God’s will for us is always happy, positive, and fulfilling. If it’s hard or unpleasant, we dismiss it as contrary to God’s plan and purpose for our lives. But, what if God calls you to endure cancer or some other life-threatening disease? What if God calls you to stay in a less than ideal marriage? What if God allows you face ridicule and rejection at work or at school because you follow Jesus? What if God wants you to forgive someone who hurt you very deeply? What if God wants you to extend yourself in love to a lost person in your life who is, frankly, a difficult person to be around? What did Jeremiah learn that we, also, need to learn about difficult assignments in life? God is in charge and we’re not. God is in charge of everything past, present, and future. God has a good and eternal outcome for every difficult assignment that He doesn’t always reveal to us. We have the privilege of being His faithful servants – to help accomplish any assignment He gives us whether it’s easy or difficult. We’re called to live courageously rather than casually. Why? Because, like Jeremiah, God has already given you the resources to fulfill every assignment He gives – even the very difficult ones. Jeremiah’s life and how he lived it tells us he accepted God’s challenge. Impressive. Inspiring. Something else -

### **HE RECOGNIZED HE WAS GOD’S CHOICE.**

Let’s read how that happened. Sometimes we’re tempted to think of God as this object out there about whom we have all these questions. People can be curious about God. But the truth is that long before you ever got interested in God, He was already very interested in you. Before it ever occurred to you that God might be important, God had

already singled you out as important to Him. So, what's my point? God has already provided a meaning and purpose to your life. You don't have to go out and search all over the place to find it. God already knows you. He made you, and He made the world you live in. Your identity wasn't formed when you began to understand yourself. You already had an identity in the mind of God before you were ever born.

Some years ago now, famous actor, Kirk Douglas picked up a hitchhiker who got startled speechless when he realized who was driving the vehicle he just got into. He wasn't ready to believe that someone as famous as Kirk Douglas had stopped to pick him up. The hitchhiker blurted out, "Do you know who you are?" Good question! Do you know who you are? One of the great tasks of life is to discover the person God created you to be. The Bible says, "Even before he made the world, God loved us and chose us in Christ to be holy and without fault in his eyes. God decided in advance to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ. This is what he wanted to do, and it gave him great pleasure." (Eph. 1:4-5 NLT)

Now abortion isn't my subject today, but may I ask a question just in passing? If you believe a woman has the right to end the life of the baby inside her and God doesn't have an opinion about it, what do you do with Jeremiah 1:5? There God says to Jeremiah, "I knew you before I formed you in your mother's womb. Before you were born I set you apart..." (NLT) What's the implication of that verse? Jeremiah was created for a purpose. You're created for a purpose, too. You're not an accident. You're not here just to take up space on the planet. The Bible makes it clear God has a mission. What's God's mission? God wants to give the gift of a restored, meaningful, and eternal relationship to every human being through His Son, Jesus. God tells Jeremiah that before he was born, God had already chosen him to be a part of this mission in this world. Is such a thing true of just a few people like Jeremiah? No! God has already called and chosen you as well. No one is called by God to go through life merely as a spectator. It's God's will that you become a participant in His mission. Each of us is presented the same choice that was presented to Jeremiah. So, here's the question: Are you going to be a spectator or a participant?

Perhaps this happened to you when you were a kid. A game just developed among the kids living in the neighborhood like sandlot baseball or football. Sides were chosen. Usually there was one unfortunate kid who got chosen last. Maybe she was the youngest, or perhaps he just didn't have an athletic bone in his body. The humiliation got worse if the team captains started to argue over who had to take the last person left. Now, he or she wasn't just the team member with the least ability, but someone who was a liability to the team. He or she wasn't just a zero on the usefulness scale; but instead a minus. Ouch!

Have you ever felt like that about your life? Have you ever felt when it comes to being useful to God and His mission in the world, you're a zero if not a minus? I say to you on the authority of God's Word today, you can never be a zero or a minus to God. God says you will always have a place in His mission if you're willing to step up and participate in it. Just like Jeremiah, He's set you apart. He's called you. He's chosen

you. When? Like Jeremiah, before you were born God chose you to belong, to know, and to love Him. Like Jeremiah, God called you to become a channel of His love to others. When Jeremiah got a hold of that truth, nothing could defeat him. Yes, he faced many difficulties. But he didn't give up on God. And when you get a hold of that same truth – that you've been chosen by God – nothing will defeat you either.

When the Spanish explorer, Hernando Cortes, and his crew landed in the new world they encountered rampant disease, miserable weather, and natives who didn't want them to be there. Needless to say most of them wanted to get back on their ships and return to Spain. In any case, Cortes made a drastic decision. He burned all of his ships! Now there was no turning back – only going forward. There come those times in life when you have to burn your ships and move into a new place with God. Jeremiah lived like that. He recognized God had chosen him. Impressive. Inspiring. There's yet another reason I find Jeremiah to be both inspiring and impressive. Quite simply,...

### **HE OBEYED GOD'S CALL.**

God also said this to Jeremiah, "... appointed you as my prophet to the nations." (Jer. 1:5 NLT) Long before Jeremiah was even conceived in his mother's womb, God had put both a general and a specific call on his life. Let me ask you a question. Are pastors, missionaries, and other people who end up in Christian ministry of some kind the only ones who receive a call from God? Here's what the Bible says, "For God knew his people in advance, and he chose them to become like his Son.... And having chosen them, he called them to come to him. And having called them, he gave them right standing with himself. And having given them right standing, he gave them his glory." (Rom. 8:29-30 NLT)

Every follower of Jesus is called. But called to what? Every follower, like Jeremiah, has a general call and a specific call on his or her life. By a general call, I mean that every follower of Jesus has been called into a restored, meaningful, and eternal relationship with God by placing his or her faith in Jesus. Every child of God is called to become more like Jesus every day in terms of personal character – his or her attitudes and actions. Every child of God is called to reach out to lost people intentionally by seeking opportunities to point them to Jesus in some way. That's the general call of God. But, in addition, each of us have a specific call on our lives, too. This call refers to the ways in which God wants to utilize your unique personality, talents, and life circumstances to further His mission. None of us have the same calling as Jeremiah. I'm relieved; aren't you? Nevertheless, each of us is specifically called. Are you married? God calls you to be His person in that specific marriage. Are you a parent? God calls you to lead your specific kids into a relationship with Him. Do you work? God calls you to be an example for Him in your specific job and to those specific people with whom you interact in your place of employment so that through you some of them can be influenced toward Jesus. Do you live in a neighborhood? God calls you to be a channel of Jesus' love at your specific address to your specific neighbors.

Just a few weeks ago we held a spiritual gifts seminar at our church. We were reminded that the moment the Holy Spirit entered your life, you were given certain specific spiritual abilities that are to be used for His glory in a local church. Your gift might be teaching, or music, or encouragement, or wisdom, or the ability to organize. Most spiritual gifts need to be developed and we're given the choice to put them to use or not. Here's the point. You were never called to be a spectator in the work of God's Kingdom. You're called to be a participant. And, no, I'm not just talking about coming to the worship service or sitting in a Sunday School classroom. Obeying God's call always means more than just turning up for church here on Sundays. It means discovering how God has gifted you and then actually using that gift in His service somewhere. There are many ministries in this church today that need you. Answer God's call! Don't be just a spectator. Instead, get busy being a participant.

It's a little scary to discover you've been called by God. Jeremiah definitely felt that way. He thought he was far too young and inexperienced. He felt very inadequate. Do you remember what he said to God? "O Sovereign LORD, I said, 'I can't speak for you! I'm too young!'" (Jer. 1:6 NLT) When you feel inadequate, the excuses just start to pile up, don't they? "Lord, I'm just too young; I'm too old; I'm too busy; I don't have enough time; I don't have enough training; I'm retired; I don't have enough self-confidence. I'm only this. I'm only that." How did God respond to Jeremiah's excuses? "Don't say, 'I'm too young,' for you must go wherever I send you and say whatever I tell you. And don't be afraid of the people, for I will be with you and will protect you. I, the LORD, have spoken!" (Jer. 1:7-8 NLT) The fact of the matter is that you and I will always be inadequate. But the greater truth is that you and I always have the Holy Spirit living within us. He makes us more than adequate. Remember when God calls you, He specifically equips and enables you to do whatever He's called you to do.

Pastor and author, Bill Hybels, tells a story from his childhood. He learned to sail his dad's sailboat out on Lake Michigan. His dad would often say to him, "Bill, go ahead and take the boat out, but take a friend with you." A 42 foot boat on a body of water the size of Lake Michigan is a big responsibility. But young Bill enjoyed the challenge. Grabbing a friend from school, he'd sail out past the breakwater, hoist the sails, and head out to open water. But as soon as he'd see any cloud formation coming their way or feel the wind getting significantly stronger, he'd head back for shore immediately. His friend was fun to have along, but he wouldn't be of much help in a storm. On other occasions, however, Bill and his dad would go out together. When he was sailing with his dad, Bill would actually seek out heavy weather. He loved the action and feeling of strong winds and huge waves. But then his dad had sailed across the Atlantic Ocean. His dad had survived five days of sailing through a hurricane. Bill's dad was a veteran and Bill was confident that together they'd be able to handle anything Lake Michigan threw at them. Everything changed when Bill's dad was on board the boat. And everything changes when God is in your life. It's no longer just about you and your abilities. It's about the Lord and what He can do in and through your life – if you're willing to be used. Jeremiah was willing to be used by and for God – even when it was hard and even when it was difficult. He responded to God's challenge. He realized he was God's choice. He obeyed God's call. May you and I do the same!