

Introduction



CREATED FOR A PURPOSE

Why am I here? Does my life have meaning and purpose?

These are questions all of us face, whether we are eighteen or eighty-five. And they are not new questions. Thousands of years ago, a young son of a faithful priest in Israel pondered the meaning of his life. He wasn't merely on a quest for self-discovery, but was responding to God's call to the difficult life of a prophet.

God's response not only provided an answer to this future prophet, but it helps us as we consider what it means to live on mission for God in the twenty-first century. God reminded Jeremiah that before he was born, he was known by the Creator of the heavens and earth. This reality is true for every human being. No person happened by accident. The Almighty has crafted each person with great care from the very beginning of his or her life, and every life is valuable to Him.

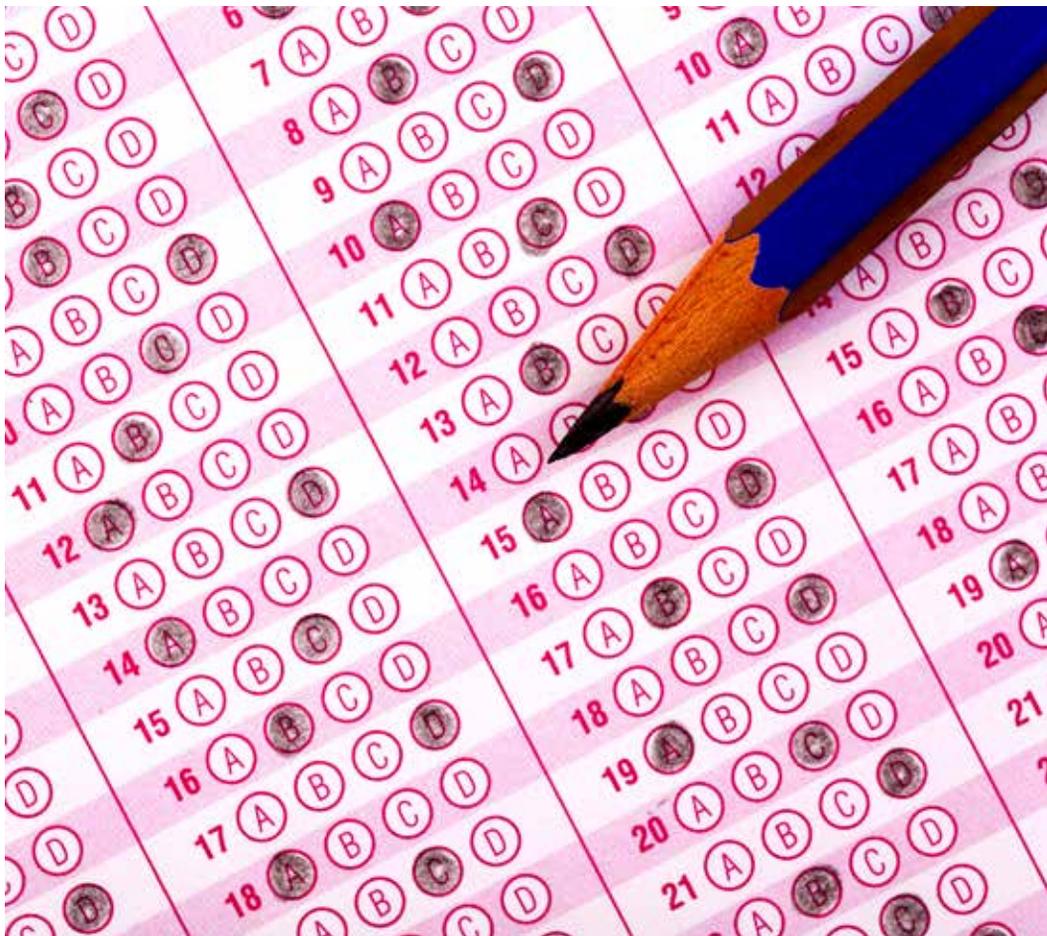
God didn't simply know Jeremiah; He called him and He equipped him for the life ahead. So it is with you and me: God not only calls us, He equips us and sustains us for life on mission with Him.

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SPECIAL FOCUS

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QUESTION 1:

What would a personality test reveal about you?

THE POINT

God values each of us and created us for a purpose.

THE PASSAGE

Jeremiah 1:4-10

THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

It seems everyone is interested in self-discovery. Personality tests are incredibly popular. It's not uncommon to see friends list their numbers ... or animals ... or sets of identifiers in their social media profiles. Some use them to attempt to explain or justify their behavior. Used correctly, some personality tests can help people see their blind spots and learn how to understand and live with others who have a unique set of gifts or emotions.

The Bible, on the other hand, offers no personality test; far better, Scripture shows us that God knows every human being before he or she is born, God formed us in the womb, and we all have a unique purpose. Jeremiah the prophet had no personality tests in the sixth century BC, but questions of identity plagued him as he grappled with God's unique call on his life. God's words to this weeping prophet can help us understand who we are as God's children. Our self-discovery comes from knowing who made us, who knows us, and who calls us into His mission.

Jeremiah 1:4-5

4 The word of the LORD came to me:

5 I chose you before I formed you in the womb; I set you apart before you were born. I appointed you a prophet to the nations.

KEY WORD: Formed (v. 5)—The word means “created,” much like a potter would form a vase or bowl on the potter’s wheel from clay.

Jeremiah was the son of a faithful priest during one of the most tumultuous times in the history of God’s people. Living in the Southern Kingdom of Judah after the kingdom had divided, Jeremiah faced a difficult, lifelong mission that few of us would agree to do. God wanted him to speak hard and difficult truths to a people who didn’t want to listen.

God wanted Jeremiah to know that his life, his calling, and the time in which he was born were no accident. None of us will be faced with what Jeremiah was facing, but quite often God also calls us to difficult tasks. We need to know that this is not simply fate or some random event. God’s desire to use us in this time and place is a part of His specific purpose and plan from the beginning of time.

Notice how God affirmed Jeremiah: “I chose you before I formed you in the womb; I set you apart before you were born.” This tells us important truths about who God is and who we are.

1. **God exists outside of time.** He didn’t have a beginning. He wasn’t created. He is infinitely bigger than we are. Before we were born, He knew us and knew who we would be. He’s also the one who formed us. There are no “self-made” people, only people created and designed by a loving Designer.
2. **God values life.** Today our culture has shifting definitions of what it means to be human. People debate the issue of the earliest stages of an individual person and the sanctity

of human life. But God has made it clear in His Word that human life begins at conception—and He values that life. Life is always valuable to God, even when life is in the earliest embryonic stages. Even when life is fragile and dependent on someone else, that human being is known and valued by God.

Listen to the way God assigned personhood and value to the unborn Jeremiah in verse 5:

- ▶ “I chose you.”
- ▶ “I formed you.”
- ▶ “I set you apart before you were born.”
- ▶ “I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”

God’s use of personal pronouns to describe Jeremiah before he was born tells us that Jeremiah didn’t have to take his first breath before he became a human. He was a human and had life when he was first conceived. Even at the earliest stages of life, Jeremiah was a full human being who, according to Genesis 1:26-27, bore the image of God. The word used here to explain that God “formed” Jeremiah in the womb is the same language that described God’s creative work when He “formed the man out of the dust from the ground” (Gen. 2:7). David used similar language about his own birth: “For it was you who created my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. ... My bones were not hidden from you when I was made in secret, when I was formed in the depths of the earth” (Ps. 139:13,15).

God works the same way today. Our Creator forms every human being with precision. Every human being has full value from the earliest stages of life. This truth has widespread implications for how we see ourselves and how we see the world. First it reminds us that we are not our own, but were created by a loving Creator. Second, it should inform the way we see others.

QUESTION 2:

How do you respond to the truth that God knows you personally?

Jeremiah 1:6-8

6 But I protested, “Oh no, Lord God! Look, I don’t know how to speak since I am only a youth.”

7 Then the LORD said to me: Do not say, “I am only a youth,” for you will go to everyone I send you to and speak whatever I tell you.

8 Do not be afraid of anyone, for I will be with you to rescue you. This is the LORD’s declaration.

KEY WORD: Youth (v. 6)—The term has a broad range of meaning, including those who are too young to understand the meaning and purpose of life—children or teenagers.

We have a God who forms us and knows us before we were born, but he didn’t just leave us there. He chose Jeremiah and set him apart for a purpose. But for the young prophet, the call of God just seemed too difficult. Echoing the reservations Moses had about serving (Ex. 4:10), Jeremiah claimed he could not possibly be the person for the job because he was not an eloquent speaker and was just too young.

- ▶ **The excuse of deficiencies.** Even at his young age, Jeremiah knew his own deficiencies. Jeremiah didn’t approach God with the typical cockiness of youth. He wasn’t blind to his weaknesses. It is good to admit our limitations because God can use a person who humbles himself in this way. God works through those who know they are not talented or gifted enough apart from Him. As Paul would later declare, God calls people who are neither wise, powerful, nor noble (1 Cor. 1:26).

Such a humble recognition of our weakness is quite different from self-loathing. Sure, Jeremiah would be called to a task far greater than he could pull off in his own strength, but he needed encouragement from the truth that it was God Himself who formed him—with both his strengths and weaknesses.

The same God who formed Jeremiah would empower him and equip him for the task ahead. God didn't make a mistake in placing Jeremiah in that time and place with the gifts and skills he had, and God doesn't make a mistake with you or me in the unique and difficult callings he sets before us. When we feel unworthy, ill-equipped, or out of place, we can lean into the truth God spoke to a young prophet in the sixth century BC: I chose you, I formed you, and I set you apart.

- ▶ **The excuse of age and inexperience.** Jeremiah's second rebuttal to God's call was his age and inexperience. Clearly, it wouldn't be wise to put children or "a new convert" (1 Tim. 3:6) in a place of authority, and yet God refused to let Jeremiah use his age as an excuse to opt out of his appointed mission. The Hebrew word for *youth* could be broadly used, but its general use was to refer to a young man (in contrast to a senior man or an elder). Many scholars believe Jeremiah was a teenager, not yet twenty, at this time. How could a prophet so young move a nation? Only because God said, "I will be with you."

Similarly, we can take comfort and be encouraged that God will be with us through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. God promises His presence to every believer, regardless of age or season in life. Just as Jeremiah was not to let his age keep him from surrendering to his Creator, so adults today shouldn't wait until they are older to surrender their lives to Jesus. Being used by God knows no age restrictions, young or old. The way of a disciple is to listen to the voice of God and step into His mission, regardless of age or experience. Age is not an issue, for the God who knows us and forms us will be with us. He will be with us as we live out His purpose for our lives.

QUESTION 3:

What are some excuses we use for not doing God's will in our lives?

Jeremiah 1:9-10

9 Then the LORD reached out his hand, touched my mouth, and told me: I have now filled your mouth with my words.

10 See, I have appointed you today over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and demolish, to build and plant.

God told Jeremiah, “I have now filled your mouth with my words.” The call of God would not be simply about the young prophet’s self-discovery. This wasn’t about following his heart or pursuing his dreams. Jeremiah had received a clear and unmistakable mission of God to preach judgment and salvation to God’s people. Notice the two things God said in His call to Jeremiah:

- 1. I have filled you.** To be *filled* is to be empowered by God. For Jeremiah, God specifically filled Jeremiah’s mouth with His words. What Jeremiah would preach to the people of God would not be his words, but God’s divine declarations. The Lord put words in Jeremiah’s mouth. So when the people of God rejected Jeremiah, they were ultimately rejecting God Himself.
- 2. I have appointed you.** To be *appointed* is to be selected. Of all the people in the world at that time, only one—Jeremiah—was a candidate for this difficult mission of God. He had been hand-selected by God for a special task.

As twenty-first century readers, we have the entire Bible at our disposal; therefore, we know that when Jeremiah declared that the “Righteous Branch” would be raised up, one whose name “will be called: The LORD Is Our Righteousness” (Jer. 23:5-6), he was prophesying about Jesus, whose life, death, and resurrection created a new and distinct people made up of every tribe, nation, and tongue. The church today is “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets” like Jeremiah (Eph. 2:20). We live in an age

of the Holy Spirit who is present in the church. So we can't apply what God said to Jeremiah in quite the same way that God applied it to Jeremiah.

And yet, we can take comfort in knowing that the same God who equipped a young, obscure prophet to speak hard truths to Judah is the same God who fills us with His power to do what He calls us to do today. The Holy Spirit is our Comforter, giving us power to live boldly on mission for God in the world, empowering us to live out our unique callings and spread the good news of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ to the ends of the earth.

QUESTION 4:

When has God given you what you needed to carry out His purpose?

We don't prophesy in the same way as Jeremiah, but in another sense, we are still part of God's mission "to uproot and tear down, to destroy and demolish, to build and plant." God's new kingdom has dawned in Christ, a kingdom that is renewing and rebuilding what sin has corrupted and destroyed. This is what we are doing every time we use our gifts to bring hope and life to the brokenness of the world.

That work of destroying and building, demolishing and planting won't be fully finished until Jesus returns, but until then we have the promise that God has formed us in His image, knew us before we were born, empowers us in our weaknesses, and is the same as He was in Jeremiah's day. And in many ways, though we are not prophets, we speak words that are not our own. In our own roles—with our strengths and weaknesses—we preach Christ. God puts His words in our mouths, just as he filled Jeremiah's mouth with His words.

Perhaps you feel out of place or ill-equipped. Perhaps you are wondering how God could possibly use you at your age or with your physical limitations. Take heart in knowing that if you are

in Christ, God knows your name. He knew you before you were born. And your weaknesses and limitations are a perfect match for His power.

QUESTION 5:

How do we make ourselves available for God to use us?

ENGAGE

I am only ...

When it comes to promoting the sanctity of life from conception to death, or making a difference in a world that doesn't value every life, what might senior adults be tempted to say about themselves? Fill in the blanks.

I am only _____

and I am not _____ enough.

How might God respond to those excuses?

LIVE IT OUT

Regardless of any weakness or limitation, you are valued by God and created for a purpose. How will you live out that purpose?

- ▶ **Seek.** Pray and seek God’s face. Ask Him to show you the ways He can use you for His kingdom.
- ▶ **Surrender.** Put your “yes” on the table and trust God to empower us for His service. Step out in obedience, trusting the power of the Holy Spirit, and carry out God’s calling on your life.
- ▶ **Support.** Support and encourage people who are forgotten or overlooked by others. Find practical ways to help those whom the culture deems helpless because God values them and has a purpose for them.

