

Before I Formed You

Jeremiah 1

90 minutes • Win, Build, Send inductive format

SESSION OVERVIEW

Discovery Aim. Through inductive study of Jeremiah 1, participants discover that God's call rests on His initiative, not human adequacy: He knows, consecrates, and appoints before birth. They find for themselves that Paul and John the Baptist are described in language echoing Jeremiah's prophetic call, and they identify the six verbs of Jeremiah 1:10 that set the agenda for the whole book, ending not in ruin but in hope: to build and to plant.

Catholic Touchstone. The Church reads Jeremiah 1:5 as one of Scripture's clearest windows into both the dignity of human life from conception and the nature of vocation as God's free initiative (CCC 2270; CCC 1). Grace precedes; freedom responds.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

- **The man and the moment.** Jeremiah, son of Hilkiah, of the priests at Anathoth in Benjamin, ministered from roughly 627 BC (the thirteenth year of King Josiah) past the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC, and finally into exile in Egypt. He served under the last five kings of Judah: Josiah, Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, and Zedekiah. He watched the last good king die, a reform collapse, and the city of God burn. Roughly forty years of preaching with almost no visible success.
- **A priest's son called to be a prophet.** Anathoth was a priestly town about three miles northeast of Jerusalem. Keep this in your pocket: the man who will one day stand in the Temple gate and confront the priesthood comes from priestly blood himself.
- **Anathoth's history.** Solomon banished the priest Abiathar to Anathoth (1 Kings 2:26-27), ending Eli's priestly line at the royal court. Many scholars think Jeremiah descends from this sidelined line. The text of Jeremiah never says so outright, so hold it as a suggestive background, not a certainty. If true, God reached for His prophet from a family the establishment had pushed to the margins.
- **The almond wordplay.** In 1:11-12 the vision runs on a Hebrew pun: *shāqēd* (almond) sounds like *shōqēd* (watching). The almond is the first tree to blossom, waking while winter still holds the land. God's word is the watcher tree: it wakes first, and it will not fail to bloom.
- **How the book came to be.** The book itself shows us its own production: chapter 36 describes Baruch writing at Jeremiah's dictation. The ancient Greek text of Jeremiah is notably shorter and differently ordered than the Hebrew, and scholars debate the details of the book's composition. The Church has not defined those details; what she hands us is the inspired book itself. Be honest with your group about what we know and what we hold loosely.

- **The shape of chapter 1.** Superscription (1:1-3), call and objection (1:4-10), two visions: the almond branch and the boiling pot (1:11-16), commissioning and promise (1:17-19).

OLD TESTAMENT ROOTS AND FULFILLMENT

Roots. Jeremiah's call deliberately echoes Moses. Moses objects, "Who am I?" and "I am not eloquent" (Exodus 3:11; 4:10); God answers, "I will be with you" and "I will be with your mouth" (Exodus 3:12; 4:12). Compare Isaiah's cleansed lips (Isaiah 6:5-8) and the boy Samuel hearing his name in the night (1 Samuel 3:1-10). Above all, hold Deuteronomy 18:18 in mind: "I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brethren; and I will put my words in his mouth." When God touches Jeremiah's mouth and says "I have put my words in your mouth" (1:9), the text is announcing: here is a prophet in the mold of Moses.

Fulfillment. Deuteronomy's promised prophet finds His full stop in Christ (Acts 3:22). John the Baptist is filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb (Luke 1:15), sharing the same pattern of divine initiative before birth. Paul narrates his own call in language that closely echoes the prophetic call pattern of Jeremiah 1:5 and Isaiah 49:1: "he who had set me apart before I was born" (Galatians 1:15). And file this away where the group cannot see it: when Jesus asks "Who do men say that the Son of man is?", the crowds answer "Jeremiah or one of the prophets" (Matthew 16:14). Jeremiah is the only writing prophet they name. That is Thread 2, and it stays face down until late in the study.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

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St. Jerome · *Prologue to his Commentary on Jeremiah*

St. Jerome, who translated and commented on Jeremiah, remarked that the prophet's style seems plainer and more rustic than Isaiah's or Hosea's, yet he is their equal in the weight of his meaning. The same God speaks through the humble style as through the lofty one. For your group: God's power is not diminished by the ordinariness of His instrument, and neither is yours.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Gregory the Great · *Pastoral Rule, Book I, ch. 7*

St. Gregory contrasts Isaiah, who volunteers ("Here am I! Send me"), with Jeremiah, who resists ("I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth"). He teaches that both responses can flow from love: one from zeal to serve, the other from a humility that fears the office. Neither man trusted himself; both obeyed. Reluctance, offered honestly to God, can be the raw material of a vocation.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. John Paul II · *Evangelium Vitae 44*

Reflecting on Jeremiah 1:5, St. John Paul II taught that the life of every human being belongs to God's loving plan from its very beginning. God's gaze rests on the child in the womb not as a

potential person but as a person already known and loved, whose life is sacred because it is enfolded from conception in the Creator's personal care.

CATECHISM CONNECTION

- **CCC 2270** ; quotes Jeremiah 1:5 directly: human life must be respected and protected absolutely from the moment of conception, for God knows and consecrates before birth.
- **CCC 1** ; God, in a plan of sheer goodness, freely created man to share His own blessed life, and at every time and place He calls man to seek Him and to know Him.
- **CCC 2001** ; the preparation of man for grace is already a work of grace; God's free initiative always comes first. Background for the steelman chain; keep it in the leader guide.
- **CCC 600** ; to God all moments of time are present; His eternal plan of predestination includes each person's free response to His grace. Background for the steelman chain; keep it in the leader guide.
- **CCC 64** ; LEADER ONLY. Do not read this paragraph aloud or reference it tonight. It names the destination of Thread 1, and the group must arrive there on their own.

THREAD WATCH

THREAD WATCH • LEADER ONLY • NEVER APPEARS IN PARTICIPANT MATERIALS

Thread 1; Build and Plant (MASTER THREAD). Six verbs in 1:10: pluck up, break down, destroy, overthrow, and then: build, plant. Four verbs of demolition, two of hope, and hope gets the last word. These exact verbs return at the hinge of the book, immediately before its greatest promise. Tonight participants seal a written guess (Take-Home 1); the seals are opened in Session 8. Never hint at Jeremiah 31 or the words "new covenant." If someone already knows the famous passage, quietly ask them to sit on it.

Thread 2; The Prophet Like Jeremiah. Known before birth. Sent to his own. Opposed by his own. Promised "they shall not prevail." Track every point of contact with Christ as the study proceeds, and say nothing. The thread resolves in Session 11, when the group reads Matthew 16:14 for themselves.

Thread 3; The Watched Word. "I have put my words in your mouth" (1:9); "I am watching over my word to perform it" (1:12). The indestructibility of God's word returns at the Temple sermon (Session 3) and above all at the burned and rewritten scroll (Session 10).

SESSION GOALS

1. Participants can retell the setting: who Jeremiah is, when he ministered, and what is about to happen to Judah.
2. Participants discover from the text that God's knowing, consecrating, and appointing all precede Jeremiah's birth (1:5), and they find the echoes in Galatians 1:15 and Luke 1:15 themselves.

3. Participants hear the Reformed reading of Jeremiah 1:5 at full strength and can articulate the Catholic response: grace is first, but first is not instead.
4. Participants identify the six verbs of 1:10, notice their order, and seal a written guess about where the book is going.
5. Participants leave with one concrete practice of answering God's call this week.

TIME NOTE (90 MINUTES)

Opening prayer and Win: 15 minutes. Build: 55 minutes. Send and Live It This Week: 15 minutes. Closing prayer, memory verse, and sealing the guess: 5 minutes.

If you are running long: cut Question 9 (the Anathoth background) first, and compress the second vision (1:13-16) into a one-sentence leader summary: the boiling pot from the north foreshadows the invader, commonly understood as Babylon, and it is coming. Never cut the steelman chain, and never skip the sealing of the guess. The guess is the engine of the whole study.

Before I Formed You

Jeremiah 1

OPENING PRAYER

Leader prays, slowly:

"Father, before we were formed, You knew us. Before we chose You, You chose us. As we open the book of Jeremiah tonight, give us ears to hear a word that is older than we are and more faithful than we will ever be. Speak, Lord. Your servants are listening. Through Christ our Lord. Amen." (Opening Prayer)

WIN • OPENING QUESTIONS (15 MIN)

W1. Tell us about a time someone saw something in you: a talent, a role, a future, before you could see it in yourself. What did that feel like?

W2. In your experience, what is the difference between being qualified for something and being called to it?

Leader note: *do not resolve W2. Let the distinction hang in the air; the whole session answers it.*

BUILD • INDUCTIVE STUDY (55 MIN)

READ JEREMIAH 1:1-3 ALOUD.

1. Before God says a single word, what does the text want us to know? List every concrete detail: who, whose son, what town, which kings. Why might a book of prophecy begin with a datebook instead of a doctrine?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Jeremiah is the son of Hilkiah, of the priests at Anathoth in Benjamin; the word of the LORD comes in the thirteenth year of Josiah and continues through Jehoiakim and Zedekiah until the captivity of Jerusalem (1:1-3).

The book anchors revelation in history. God speaks into real years, real politics, a real small town. Biblical faith is not a philosophy floating above time; it is God acting in datable events. This is why the Creed can say "suffered under Pontius Pilate" in the same breath as "rose again": our faith has a date and an address.

READ JEREMIAH 1:4-5 ALOUD, TWICE.

2. Find the three verbs God applies to Jeremiah before his birth. What is the sequence, and what has Jeremiah contributed at each step?

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Knew, consecrated, appointed (1:5). And Jeremiah has contributed exactly nothing; he does not yet exist. In a call context like this one, God's "knowing" signifies far more than bare foreknowledge; it is fittingly read as personal, covenantal regard. The call does not begin with Jeremiah's talent, his résumé, or even his consent. It begins in the mind of God.

3. "Consecrated" is temple language. What kinds of things get consecrated? So what is God saying when He consecrates a person, in the womb?

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

You consecrate altars, vessels, priests: things set apart for God's exclusive use. God is declaring that a human life can be set apart the way sacred space is: claimed for His purposes before anyone else can lay claim to it. There is no moment of Jeremiah's life that lies outside God's loving claim and providential care.

DIG DEEPER · THE CHURCH AT THE WOMB

The Catechism quotes this very verse when it teaches that human life must be respected and protected absolutely from the moment of conception (CCC 2270). The Church's defense of unborn life is not a modern political posture bolted onto the faith; it grows straight out of texts like Jeremiah 1:5 and out of a God who knows persons before the world can measure them.

4. Live discovery. Someone in the New Testament describes his own calling in almost exactly these words. It is in Galatians 1. Take two minutes and find it.

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Galatians 1:15-16: "he who had set me apart before I was born, and had called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles." Paul reads his own life through Jeremiah 1:5. The persecutor on the Damascus road discovers that the story did not start on the Damascus road; God had been writing it since before he was born.

5. Live discovery. One more. An angel says something like this about a baby not yet born, in Luke 1. Find it.

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Luke 1:13-17: John the Baptist "will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb." The last and greatest of the prophets stands in the same pattern of divine initiative: filled with the Holy

Spirit from the womb, before merit, before choice. Notice what your group has just done: they found the pattern themselves, running from Jeremiah through Paul to John. God's calls have a signature.

Steelman: Does Jeremiah 1:5 Teach Calvinist Election?

BUILD THE CASE AT FULL STRENGTH: PRESENT THIS AS PERSUASIVELY AS A THOUGHTFUL REFORMED FRIEND WOULD

The case: "Jeremiah 1:5 and Galatians 1:15 say exactly what Reformed theology says: God chooses unconditionally, before birth, before any merit, before any response. Jeremiah objects, and God does not negotiate; He overrides. 'To all to whom I send you you shall go' (1:7). This is sovereign, effective grace. The Catholic insistence on free cooperation quietly smuggles human merit back into what Scripture presents as God's work alone. Doesn't this text prove unconditional election?" Let the case land. Do not rush to rescue anyone.

6. Now press on the text. Look closely at 1:5; what exactly is Jeremiah appointed to? Is anything at all said here about his salvation?

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

He is appointed "a prophet to the nations." That is an office, a mission. The verse is election to service, not a decree about his eternal destiny. Check Galatians 1:15 again: Paul is set apart "in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles." Same shape: chosen for mission. Scripture certainly teaches God's initiative; whether these texts teach an unconditional decree of individual salvation is precisely what they do not say.

7. Does Jeremiah's will disappear? Read 1:6-8 again. Does God coerce him, or command and accompany him?

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Jeremiah objects freely (1:6), and God answers not by erasing him but by promising presence: "Be not afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you" (1:8). Later in this book Jeremiah will argue with God, lament, even accuse Him, and remain His prophet. The relationship is real on both sides.

Where we agree with our Reformed friend, say it out loud: grace comes first. The Church has taught since the Second Council of Orange that even the beginning of faith is God's gift; the preparation of man for grace is already grace (CCC 2001). But God's eternal plan "includes in it each person's free response to his grace" (cf. CCC 600). Grace is first. First, not instead. God's call precedes our freedom in order to awaken it, not to replace it.

READ JEREMIAH 1:9-10 ALOUD.

8. Count the verbs in verse 10 and sort them into two piles. What is the ratio? What is the order? And what does the order tell you about where this book is headed?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Six verbs: pluck up, break down, destroy, overthrow, and then: build, plant. Four verbs of demolition, two of construction; demolition first, hope last. This is the table of contents for the entire book. Jeremiah's message will be overwhelmingly hard, but the last word of his call is not ruin. It is planting. Do not resolve this further tonight; the sealed guess (below) depends on it.

9. (*Cut first if short on time.*) Background: Solomon banished the priest Abiathar to Anathoth (1 Kings 2:26-27), and many scholars think Jeremiah comes from that sidelined priestly line. The text does not say so outright, but if it is true, what would it tell you about the kind of instrument God reaches for?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Hold it loosely, since Scripture does not state it. Still, the resonance is suggestive: a priest's son from a family exiled from power three centuries earlier, called to confront the establishment that exiled them. God delights to call from the margins: David the youngest of eight, a circle of Galilean fishermen for apostles. Being overlooked by men has never once disqualified anyone with God.

READ JEREMIAH 1:11-12 ALOUD.

10. The almond vision runs on a Hebrew pun: *shāqēd* (almond) sounds like *shōqēd* (watching). The almond is the first tree to blossom; it wakes while winter still holds the land. What is God claiming about His word?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

"I am watching over my word to perform it" (1:12). God's word is the almond branch: it wakes first, blooms before the evidence, and will not fail. Everything God speaks in this book, every warning and every promise, is under His personal watch. Nothing He says will fall to the ground. Keep your eye on this claim; the book is going to test it severely.

READ JEREMIAH 1:13-19 ALOUD. (IF SHORT ON TIME, SUMMARIZE 13-16 IN ONE SENTENCE: THE BOILING POT FROM THE NORTH FORESHADOWS THE INVADER, COMMONLY UNDERSTOOD AS BABYLON, AND IT IS COMING.)

11. Verses 17-19 are God's personal promise to Jeremiah. What exactly does God promise him; and, just as important, what does He not promise?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

God promises to make him a fortified city, an iron pillar, bronze walls; "they will fight against you; but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, says the LORD, to deliver you" (1:18-19). Notice what is missing: no promise of escape from the fight, no promise of success in his lifetime, no

promise of comfort. The promise is presence and final deliverance, not exemption. Sit in that for a moment. It is the shape of every real vocation.

SEND • CLOSING QUESTIONS (15 MIN)

S1. Where in your life right now do you suspect God knew and appointed something before you were ready to see it?

S2. Jeremiah said, “I am only a youth.” What is your version of that sentence, and what would change this week if God’s answer to you is the same one He gave Jeremiah: “I am with you”?

LIVE IT THIS WEEK

- Pray Jeremiah 1:5 back to God once each day, placing your own name inside it: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you.” Let it be the first thing you say to Him in the morning.
- Name one responsibility you have been dodging with your own version of “I am only a youth.” Take one concrete step toward it before we meet again.
- If you do not know the date of your Baptism, find it this week. That was your consecration day. Write it somewhere you will see it.

SEALING THE GUESS

LEADER INSTRUCTIONS: DO THIS BEFORE ANYONE LEAVES

Hand each participant Take-Home Sheet 1 at the door. Point them to the box marked My Guess. Have them write their answer tonight, before leaving if possible: fold the sheet’s guess panel, seal or staple it, put their name on the outside, and return it to you. You will keep the sealed guesses and open them together later in the study. Do not explain why. The mystery is the point.

CLOSING PRAYER

“Lord, You knew Jeremiah before You formed him, and You knew each of us. You consecrated him before his birth, and You consecrated us in the waters of Baptism. Give us the honesty to say “I am only a youth,” and the faith to hear You answer, “I am with you.” We place this week in Your hands. Watch over Your word in us, and perform it. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.”
(Closing Prayer)

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.” (Jeremiah 1:5, RSV2CE)

Every Passage in This Session

Jeremiah 1

Primary Text

- Jeremiah 1:1-3; superscription: the man, the town, the kings (Q1)
- Jeremiah 1:4-5; knew, consecrated, appointed before birth (Q2-Q3, memory verse)
- Jeremiah 1:6-8; “I am only a youth”; “I am with you” (steelman Q7)
- Jeremiah 1:9-10; words in the mouth; the six verbs (Q8, sealed guess)
- Jeremiah 1:11-12; the almond branch; the watched word (Q10)
- Jeremiah 1:13-16; the boiling pot from the north (Q11, compressible)
- Jeremiah 1:17-19; fortified city; “they shall not prevail” (Q11)

Old Testament Roots

- Exodus 3:11-12; 4:10-12; Moses’ objections and God’s “I will be with you”
- Deuteronomy 18:18; the prophet like Moses; “my words in his mouth”
- 1 Samuel 3:1-10; the boy Samuel (optional comparison)
- Isaiah 6:5-8; cleansed lips; “Here am I! Send me”
- 1 Kings 2:26-27; Abiathar banished to Anathoth (Q9, cuttable)

New Testament Fulfillment

- Galatians 1:15-16; live discovery, Q4
- Luke 1:13-17; live discovery, Q5
- Acts 3:22; the prophet like Moses is Christ (leader background)
- Matthew 16:13-14; LEADER ONLY: Thread 2; do not reveal

Catechism

- CCC 2270; life from conception (quotes Jeremiah 1:5)
- CCC 1; God freely creates and calls every person
- CCC 2001; preparation for grace is already grace (steelman, leader only)
- CCC 600; God’s plan includes each free response (steelman, leader only)
- CCC 64; LEADER ONLY until Session 8