

# Followers of the Way

## Call, commission, confrontation, and confidence

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### Jeremiah 1:4-19

This is the first in a short sermon series on the theme of being ready. Over the next few weeks, we will look at how to be ready ourselves, and how to tell others about being ready. Today we kick off by looking at call, commission, confrontation, and confidence.

Before we get into this, we need to ask, get ready for what? Well, in the broadest sense, we are to be ready for the coming again of Jesus the Messiah. A day is coming soon when “his feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem” (Zechariah 14:4) and He will enter this city a second time, from where He will rule and reign for a thousand years, and we with Him. It could be tomorrow, it could be next week, it could still be years away, but there is a sense of imminence and urgency that should cause us to want to make sure we are ready for the arrival of the bridegroom with oil for our lamps (Matthew 25:1-13), and have conducted ourselves in such a way that the Lord will say, “Because you have been trustworthy in a very small matter, take charge of ten cities.” (Luke 19:17).

There is something else, though. We are in a dire state in this nation, and a reckoning is long overdue. We are about to experience the best of times, and the worst of times. Economic collapse, global crisis, and political turmoil will make the last few years seem like a walk in the park. That is the bad news. The good news is that God has not given up on us, and it is precisely in and through this storm that He will bring in a great harvest to His everlasting Kingdom. He wants to use His people – the Church, the Body of Christ – to help gather this harvest, disciple the new believers, and be His instrument for charting a new course for our country.

Some people wonder why this has not happened before, and why we seem to have been on a steep downward path for so long. To which we might reasonably respond with the question, why would God bring His great harvest into such a worldly Church? This worldliness in the Church needs to change, so God feels free to act. Now is the time for the true Church to arise, to be what God would have us be. The coming days are not for *reformation*, but of *restoration* – to see the Church restored to its original beauty, purity, holiness, and power. And this can only happen if there is a move in the lives of the individual believers who make up this Body. This is the aspect of our readiness I am going to talk about.

Dictionary definitions disclose three overlapping elements to being ready: part relates to **positioning**, since it involves being quickly available, at hand and within reach; part relates to **mental or spiritual attitude**, since it involves being willing, suitable, and disposed to take on the job we are asked to do; and part relates to **getting ourselves in proper shape**, since it involves being fit for use or action, in a state of preparedness. We need to address each of these elements, doing so in a way that is:

**Realistic** – about who and what we are, what we have done and failed to do, the truth of situations we face, and all the rest of it. Followers of Jesus are not deniers of reality, but the exact opposite. We recognise the spiritual dimension our present-day culture tries to avoid, knowing “our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against ... spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” (Ephesians 6:12). Above all, we have confidence that “nothing is impossible for God.” (Luke 1:37).

**Eager** – eagerness means being motivated by ardent desire. The Bible describes the Bereans receiving the Gospel message “with great eagerness” (Acts 17:11), and the Corinthians’ “eagerness to help” (2 Corinthians 9:2). When King Asa of Judah enacted religious reforms, the people “sought God eagerly” (2 Chronicles 15:15), and Jesus told His twelve disciples, “I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer.” (Luke 22:15). Eagerness should be a characteristic of God’s people.

**Alert** – alertness and watchfulness go hand in hand. Being vigilant and on guard is key to avoiding the enemy’s traps and snares. The Bible tells us to “guard [our] heart” (Proverbs 4:23) and “guard [our] steps” (Ecclesiastes 5:1), and asks for God to “set a guard over [our] mouth” (Proverbs 141:3) – so that our thoughts, emotions, actions, and words will all be kept in God’s way. Jesus says, “Be on guard! Be alert!” (Mark 13:33). Paul advised, “be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints” (Ephesians 6:18), while Peter cautioned, “Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith” (1 Peter 5:8). This is no time to drop our guard.

**Directed** – so we do not waste our days away wandering aimlessly in the wilderness, but follow God’s direction for our lives. This world is full of distractions, and distraction is the enemy of direction. Peter has good and practical advice: “make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (2 Peter 1:5-8). Knowledge of the LORD should cause us to be productive by acting according to His Word, His ways, His character, and His purposes.

**Yearning** – to yearn is to feel intensely, especially with longing, tenderness, compassion, grief, pain, or distress. We are to have the same heart of tenderness and compassion Jesus has, to burn with desire to see our suffering people set free, healed, and brought to everlasting life. God is not unfeeling, and neither should His children be. The Bible speaks

often of Jesus' compassion (Matthew 9:36, 14:14, 15:32, 20:34, Mark 1:41, 6:34, 8:2, Luke 15:20), and God says, "Is not Ephraim my dear son, the child in whom I delight? Though I often speak against him, I still remember him. My heart yearns for him; I have great compassion for him" (Jeremiah 31:20). People of yearning and compassion are called for in the days ahead.

All this gives us a framework for getting to grips with what being ready might involve. Scripture records many times when God tells people to be ready or get ready: to receive the Law on Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:11, 34:2), to set the Levites apart for priestly service (Numbers 8:11), to cross the Jordan into the Promised Land (Joshua 1:2), to witness Babylon's attack on Egypt (Jeremiah 46:14), to gather for war (Ezekiel 38:7), to see the coming of the Son of Man (Matthew 24:44, Luke 12:35, Luke 12:40), to serve the saints (2 Corinthians 9:3), to do whatever is good (Titus 3:1), to rejoice and be glad at the wedding of the Lamb (Revelation 19:7). And, as we heard in our Bible reading, God told the prophet Jeremiah, "Get yourself ready!" (Jeremiah 1:17).

### **Call**

Jeremiah was called to declare God's prophetic word to the people of Judah at a time when that nation faced impending calamity, and did not know it. Trapped between the rising power of Babylon and the waning strength of Egypt, political leaders, priests, and ordinary folk alike preferred to avert their eyes from the painful reality of their economic, military, and spiritual weakness. And when the man of God spoke, they sought to kill the messenger rather than heed what he said. As in our own time and place, illusion was more comforting than reality: they trusted in morally corrupt leaders whom God had rejected (Jeremiah 2:37), in "fortified cities" (Jeremiah 5:17) and foreign alliances (Jeremiah 9:4, 38:22), in "deceptive words" (Jeremiah 7:4, 7:8) and "lies" (Jeremiah 28:15), in the outward forms of a bankrupt religiosity, epitomised by the temple in Jerusalem (Jeremiah 7:14, 48:13), in their own deeds and riches (Jeremiah 48:7, 49:4), in false prophets (Jeremiah 28:15) and false gods (Jeremiah 13:25). But God says, "Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who depends on flesh for his strength and whose heart turns away from the LORD." (Jeremiah 17:5). Correspondingly, "blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose confidence is in him." (Jeremiah 17:7).

We will come back to confidence in a moment. For now, note the similarities between their situation and ours. This was how things stood when God told Jeremiah, "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, before you were born I set you apart" (Jeremiah 1:5). Jeremiah was an extraordinary man, characterised by incredible courage and faithfulness, and He was mightily used by God. But as Jesus' brother James observed of the prophet Elijah, he "was a man just like us." (James 5:17). What God said to Jeremiah is a truth that applies to everyone, for we can all echo David's words to God: "you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well." (Psalm 139:13-14). Now, we may or may not be people the LORD has "appointed ... as a prophet to the nations" (Jeremiah 1:5), yet we all most assuredly have a call on our lives.

Jeremiah's response to God's call was to say, "Ah, Sovereign LORD ... I do not know how to speak; I am only a child." (Jeremiah 1:6). On one level, that is only natural, and indeed, when he first became king, Solomon said, "I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties." (1 Kings 3:7). But if we find ourselves in a similar place, it is good to remember God's response to Jeremiah: "the LORD said to me, 'Do not say, 'I am only a child.' You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you'" (Jeremiah 1:7-8).

Being ready is not about being perfect, or having all the capabilities we might think necessary for the job, since God's all-sufficiency can make good our insufficiency. But it does require a willingness to heed God's call and respond to it.

### **Commission**

Jeremiah heeded God's call, and received a daunting commission. Precisely for that reason, God gave him a degree of anointing to match: "the LORD reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, 'Now, I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant.'" (Jeremiah 1:9-10). God will never leave us floundering. If He asks us to do something, He will provide all we need to complete that task. He always finishes what He starts, and we can be confident that "he who began a good work in [us] will carry it on to completion" (Philippians 1:6).

This does not mean we will necessarily know every step of the process from the start, since God is the only one who can "[declare] the end from the beginning" (Isaiah 46:10). Neither does it mean that we will necessarily have at the outset everything we might think necessary to see the job through. God is very efficient in His use of resources – think of it as a kind of heavenly just-in-time delivery system! – and he tends to supply resources incrementally. This is part and parcel of the walk of faith. We may not always find it comfortable, but we are told to familiarise ourselves with God's ways, and this is one of them. Being ready involves understanding this, and positioning ourselves accordingly. If God says go, we should go, not wait until we think we are ready. It is His assessment of our readiness that matters, not ours.

By the way, note how God encouraged Jeremiah to try out the spiritual gifts he had been given, and to practice the prophetic before he went to speak to the nation. Twice God asked Jeremiah, "What do you see?" (Jeremiah 1:11, 1:13). On each occasion, the LORD provided an explanation to elaborate on what Jeremiah saw (Jeremiah 1:12, 1:14-16), so the prophet could start to understand the way God was using the symbolism of the images He presented to the prophet's mind. This is a valuable lesson for us, a reminder that spiritual gifts need to be used, and we get better with practice. In the way of things, we will sometimes get it wrong, for we only see in part, but we should not let this put us off.

Jeremiah's experience is also a reminder that, if we have responded to God's call and received His commission, but feel we are not yet walking fully in this calling, this might not necessarily be a bad thing. It could be – if we are being disobedient, or the enemy is

putting obstacles in our way. But it might equally be the case that God is making sure we complete our training before letting us loose. If we are in doubt about which it might be, we should ask Him.

### **Confrontation**

If we honour God's call on our lives, and step out in the commissioning He has made available, we will face confrontation. This is another fact of the Christian life, and we just have to take it on the chin. God told Jeremiah straight: "the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests and the people of the land ... will fight against you" (Jeremiah 1:18-19). In other words, almost everyone would be against him, and not passively, but actively contending against him. In fact, only one man seems to have stood with Jeremiah, and that was his faithful scribe Baruch (Jeremiah 32:12 and twenty-four other references). Plotted against (Jeremiah 11:18-23), twice beaten and falsely imprisoned (Jeremiah 20:1-2, 37:14-21), threatened with death (Jeremiah 26:1-9), thrown into a muddy cistern (Jeremiah 38:6-10), compelled against his will to go to Egypt (Jeremiah 43:6-7), and according to tradition later martyred, the prophet underwent torment we can scarcely imagine.

Yet there is always a "but" with God! He prepares a table before us in the presence of our enemies (Psalm 23:5), and "even though [we] walk through the valley of the shadow of death, [we need] fear no evil" (Psalm 23:4). To do what God requires us to do, we need to believe it. This is where confidence comes in.

### **Confidence**

God gave Jeremiah similar assurances to those given to Joshua and many others in the Bible: "Do not be afraid" (Jeremiah 1:8), and "Do not be terrified" (Jeremiah 1:17). These assurances were backed up with extraordinary promises: "I am with you and will rescue you" (Jeremiah 1:8), and "Today I have made you a fortified city, an iron pillar and a bronze wall to stand against the whole land – against ... kings ... officials ... priests and ... people" (Jeremiah 1:18).

These assurances and promises have been recorded in the Scriptures, so are available to the people of God in our own day. The question is whether we choose to believe them. Jeremiah trusted God, and did as He asked him to do. Will we do the same?

### **Conclusion**

It is time to get ready, to prepare prophetically, practically, and spiritually for what is rapidly coming down the track. If there is still any trace of Egypt in our hearts, now is the time to seek God's help in making sure we get rid of it once and for all. If we are to take territory for God, we need to be ready for life on the other side of the Jordan – walking in renewed covenant relationship with Him (Joshua 5:2-8), living off the fruit of the land (Joshua 5:11-12) rather than relying on the divine provision of manna, and geared up to contend with the enemy. For too long the giants among us have boasted like Goliath, "This day I defy the ranks of Israel!" (1 Samuel 17:10) but God says, "Who is like me and who can challenge me?" (Jeremiah 49:16, 50:44). We bear His name, carry His authority, and

are equipped with His weapons of spiritual warfare. We have no reason to hang back or be afraid. It is time to start taking the battle to the giants in the land.

Brothers and sisters, be of good heart and good cheer. In this landscape we are entering, the bad will be very bad, but the good will be very good. As “Joshua told Israel as they prepared to enter Canaan, ‘Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the LORD will do amazing things among you.’” (Joshua 3:5). Get ready and, like when Jesus walked this earth first time around, “Everyone [will be] amazed and [give] praise to God. They [will be] filled with awe and [say], ‘We have seen remarkable things today.’” (Luke 5:26).

All glory to his holy name. Amen.