

## FACING THE FACES

### JEREMIAH 1:4-9

Once a team of paramedics were being interviewed on a talk show. They were posed the question, “What was your most unusual and challenging 911 call?”

One of the EMTs began to describe a night when they were summoned to a local church. A frantic usher had phoned in the emergency. During the sermon a man had passed out in the pew. He appeared dead...

*The usher couldn't find a pulse... there was no breathing... the man made no movement...*

But the talk show host was a bit puzzled.

She'd asked the paramedics to recount their most challenging call - something unique. The church incident seemed commonplace. She pressed them, “But what made this particular emergency so unusual?”

The EMT replied, “Well, we carried out four church members before we found the one who was really dead.” Giving new meaning to the term, “*dead church.*”

*Dead churches are made up of dead Christians.*

Folks become content to pack a pew... or occupy a chair. They take up space, without gaining any ground.

In the early 70s the state of Florida launched a safe driving campaign. Every year on vacation we saw the signs on the interstates and license plates, “Arrive Alive.” Well, that's not only how I want to get to Florida, it's how I want to get to heaven - I want to *arrive alive!*

I want to be active for God – alive in Christ.

The last thing I want to be is *a spiritual stiff*.

Let me ask you, spiritually speaking *do you have a pulse - does your heart beat for God?* Is the breath and influence of the Holy Spirit evident in your life?

Are you moving forward, or simply sitting still?

One night a little boy fell out of bed with a giant *thud!* His mom asked him why he'd taken such a tumble.

The little guy answered, *"It was because I stayed too close to the 'getting in place.'"* And this is the problem with countless Christians. There's no progress - they never grow in their faith - or apply what they learn - they don't dare step up and serve in a meaningful way.

A Gallup Poll revealed that of all church members only 10% are actively involved in some kind of personal ministry. Worse, the same poll revealed a whopping 50% had no interest in even getting involved.

Far too many Christians have gotten the notion that faith is for someone else. They're staying put. They've chosen to camp out near *"the getting in place."*

On November 5, 2011, a University of Tennessee freshman named Derrick Brodus was getting ready to watch the Volunteer's football game on television.

He'd just gotten comfortable on the couch when his cell phone buzzed. Imagine Derrick's surprise when told he was needed at the stadium. It was less than an hour to kick-off. Coach Dooley had dispatched a police escort to pick him up and shuttle him to the stadium.

Both of Tennessee's kickers had injured themselves. The back-up kicker had gone down in warm-ups. The Volunteers needed a place kicker. Early that fall, Derrick tried out for the football team, but had been cut.

Now he was being called to spring into action.

And Derrick Brodus made the most of his amazing opportunity. He kicked all three extra points he attempted, and made a 21 yard field goal at the end of the first half. Derrick led Tennessee to a 24-0 victory.

Back in the locker room, after the game, the whole team gave Derrick a round of applause. Coach Dooley awarded him the game ball. Derrick had started the evening lying on the couch eating a bag of potato chips. His night ended in the most improbable way.

Here's a guy who literally answered a call! *He got off the couch and into the game*, and won a victory.

This is what I pray happens to you. God wants each of us to get off our spiritual couch, and into the game.

As believers in Jesus we're not just called to *sit* in heavenly places. We're also called to *serve* in earthly spaces. God wants us to have an impact on others.

He wants us to actively spread His love and truth.

In fact, I'm convinced that God has a specific plan and purpose for each person here today. He wants to use you in a unique way. It's time to get into the game.

Over the next few weeks we'll be discussing new opportunities to serve at CC. We're looking to retool some of our ministries. We hope you'll answer the call.

This summer could be the time for you to take a step of faith... **get off the couch, and into the game!**

Which brings us to our text. Jeremiah 1:4-9 recounts God's appointing of the prophet Jeremiah. The prophet remembers: **God's call, His recoil, then God's recall.**

Jeremiah writes in verse 4, "Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; before you were born I sanctified you; I ordained you a prophet to the nations."

Then said I: "Ah, Lord GOD! Behold, I cannot speak, for I am a youth."

But the LORD said to me: "Do not say, 'I am a youth,' for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and whatever I command you, you shall speak. Do not be afraid of their faces, for I am with you to deliver you," says the LORD. Then the LORD put forth His hand and touched my mouth, and the LORD said to me: "Behold, I have put My words in your mouth."

Notice first, **God's call** on Jeremiah's life.

God ordained him to be *a prophet*, but read verse 1, and you'll discover that Jeremiah was already *a priest*.

The Hebrew priesthood was not the result of a specific call from God. *Pedigree* made you a *priest*.

Only the sons of Levi were qualified to be priests. You could say, a priest you had to sport *Levi genes*.

But being a prophet was a different matter.

When we think of a prophet we envision someone who foretells the future, but the Hebrew prophet's main task was not so much *foretelling*, but *forth telling*.

The prophets were God's spokesmen. They *proclaimed God's truth*, as much as *they predicted the future*. Think of a prophet as **God's press secretary**. He revealed God's will, and stood strong for God's truth.

And Jeremiah was both *a priest* and *a prophet*.

He was *expected* to be a priest, but *elected* to be a prophet... *born* a priest, but *appointed* a prophet.

Do you realize that as a believer in Jesus you too are called to tasks that are both **expected** and **elected**...

There are lots of things God *expects* from us simply because we're His kids... *gratitude, a giving spirit, prayer, worship, witness, faith, purity*. These are the *one-size-fits-all parts* of the Christian life. When we're born again, God's Spirit puts these desires in our heart.

But there are also activities that God *calls* us to adopt. God has a specific, personalize, *customized calling* for each of us. He **expects** us to act like a child of God, but He **elects** us to serve Him in specific ways.

We're all called to walk with Jesus, and love each other, but beyond that we each have a unique ministry.

*I'm called to be a pastor...* Maybe you're called to teach a Bible study, or Sunday School, or usher, or lead worship, or keep the nursery, or count the offering.

Maybe God has called you to use your business to glorify Him - or to do kind deeds for your neighbors - or work with youth – or be involved in overseas missions.

There are tasks *all Christians* should do, but I believe there's a specific task God wants *you* to do.

Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12 picks up this theme. Paul compares the church with the human body. We're one body, but made up of many parts.

Say, you're the spleen. Someone else is a kidney. Another person is a liver. Perhaps you're the appendix, or gall bladder, or tonsils - *in which case you need to get busy. Who knows how much time you have left?*

Paul's point though, is that we all have a specific purpose and function that God has called us to do.

In Romans and 1 Corinthians the critical factors that determine our calling from God are our spiritual gifts.

But here in Jeremiah other issues factored into the equation. God tells him in verse 4, **"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; before you were born I sanctified you; I ordained you a prophet to the nations."**

Notice the implications - before Jeremiah was born God was setting the stage for what He wanted this man to do. He was conceived with a purpose in mind.

From the womb God had *a plan for this man*.

And I believe this is the case with each of us. God wires us from the womb to do special tasks for Him.

As a father of four kids I've concluded that God throws away the mold after making each child. None of my four are exactly alike. They all have diverse tastes, likes, and personalities - strengths and weaknesses.

I believe we're all born with a God-given trajectory.

And this predetermined wiring - this God-ordained arch - plays a role in the ministry to which He calls us.

I've heard it put this way... Discover your **SHAPE!**

The word "**shape**" is an acrostic that outlines how God *shapes us* for ministry. God combines how we're wired - our **s**piritual gifts, our **h**eat and passions, our **a**bilities, our **p**ersonality, our life **e**xperiences...

Put it all together and it determines our "**shape.**" And our **shape** helps us find our place of service...

First, "**S**" stands for **spiritual gifts**. And this should be at the head of the list. It only makes sense that our ministry and God's enablings go hand in hand.

What God calls us to do, He equips us to do.

His calling will employ the supernatural capacities He's given to us by His Spirit. Expect a pastor to receive a *gift of teaching*.. Other gifts like *mercy, giving, exhortation, administration* will shape your ministry.

"**H**" stands for **heart**. Under the New Covenant God gives to each of us a new heart and new desires.

God often guides us by putting a burning desire deep within our heart for a particular purpose and passion.



It's been said, "The place God calls you is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." He matches a desire with a great need.

**"A"** is **ability**. I can tell you right now God hasn't called me to be a auto mechanic. *I know the difference between a wrench and a screwdriver, but just barely.*

Pastor Sandy under the hood would only bring *agony to customers*. He certainly wouldn't bring *glory to God*.

Ability, or lack of it, can help us zero in on God's will.

*On the other hand, I've often felt that sometime in the future God might have a singing ministry for me...*

**"P"** stands for **personality**. Jeremiah is the classic example. Often he's called the weeping prophet. He was a tender, and sensitive, and compassionate man.

He was exactly the type of person God needed to see the nation of Judah through it's darkest hours.

God doesn't always match a personality with a calling, but when He does the results can be powerful.

And finally, **"E"** stands for **experiences**. Do a background check on the Apostle Paul... he had a Jewish education, and lived within a Gentile culture.

His life experiences were the perfect blend for a man God would call to take the Gospel to the Gentile world.

So here's the question... **"What's your shape?"**



Our text teaches us that *God's plan was on the go, even while Jeremiah was in utero*. Even in the womb God had wired him a predetermined way. He had molded, and fashioned Jeremiah for his future ministry.

And I'm sure God has done the same in your life. Before birth He matched *a person with a purpose*.

And he continues to shape you through your life experiences, and the talents He's given you, and your spiritual gifts, and even the passion He puts in you.

God called Jeremiah to be a prophet to the nations, and God is calling you to a specific task - a role – a ministry – that'll make you effective for Him.

Here in chapter 1, *God calls...* but **Jeremiah recoils** at God's call. Notice what he says in verse 6, **"Ah, Lord GOD! Behold, I cannot speak, for I am a youth."**

When we read of him mentioning his youth we assume Jeremiah was 11, 12 years old – *probably not*.

The Hebrew word translated **"youth"** doesn't speak of a child per se, but of a maturing young man - perhaps he was as old as 20, or maybe even in his late 20s.

Realize, age was a crucial factor in Hebrew culture.

A priest didn't begin his ministry until he was 30 years old. Perhaps this is why Jesus waited until He reached His 30s before he began His ministry. The Hebrews equated age with wisdom - thus, they looked down their noses at a man if he was younger than 30.

I use to have this problem. When I was younger man people refused to take me seriously... For some mysterious reason, over the last few years, this is no longer an issue. *I guess folks are more tolerant today.*

We use to have a very sweet lady who attended our church. Mrs. Aleman was from Cuba. And when I turned 30 she was so happy. Sonia told me, “Pastor, pastor, I’m so glad we no longer have a young pastor.”

I wasn’t as happy about it as she was - but like the Jews, she assumed anyone under 30 was still a kid.

It reminds me of the elderly lady with a severe tooth ache. She was in pain, and her regular dentist was out of town. There was no way she could delay treatment until he returned. She was referred to another dentist.

But when she saw the substitute dentist she panicked. He was young enough to be her grandson.

The baby-faced fellow looked like a teenager. Was he even old enough to have graduated from college?

As she assessed the situation the dentist went to work. He numbed her gums, and was preparing to drill.

That’s when the frightened lady blurts out, “Sonny, you’re so young! How long have you been a dentist?”

Of course, the dentist was offended. He ignored the question until he started drilling. That’s when he winked at her, and said softly... “*You mean counting today?*”

It's interesting what Paul wrote to a young Timothy. 1 Timothy 4:12, "Let no one despise your youth, but be an example to the believers in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity." Timothy wasn't to get offended by prejudicial attitudes toward his age - he was to go on with his ministry - be a godly example.

This is how God responds to Jeremiah, "Do not say, 'I am a youth,' for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and whatever I command you, you shall speak."

Understand, in the spiritual realm age doesn't always equate to wisdom. An old man can be a fool. Whereas, God can give a young man wisdom beyond his years.

If Jeremiah walks with God - goes where He's told to go - speaks what He hears - age won't be a factor.

Baseball great Satchel Paige, who pitched in the big leagues until he was 48, ask folks the question, "How old would you think you are if you didn't know how old you really are? I know 20 year-olds with 90 year-old minds and 90 year-olds with 20 year-old-minds."

I've heard said, "Age is nothing but mind over matter. If you don't mind, then it don't matter."

History is full of examples that prove God can use men of any age... *Alexander the Great* conquered the world at age 23... *Charles Spurgeon* was preaching to packed crowds in the city of London at age 19...

*Pastor Sandy* started CCSM at age 22...

If you're a teenager, or college student - you don't have to wait until you're a fossil to serve the Lord.

I never speak of our youth group as the church of tomorrow. *It's the church of today!* Even as a young person prepares himself for the future - he can have an impact for Jesus today! The time to serve God is now!

But realize, the real reason Jeremiah *recoils from God's call* had nothing to do with his young age. His youth was merely an excuse. *The reason for his recoil was fear.* He balks at God's call because he's afraid.

Jeremiah fears stepping out into the unknown. It's easier to sit on the sidelines than it is to join the game.

It's interesting, but I find few examples in Scripture where a man responds to God's call at the first communiqué'... I hear even fewer examples today.

Here's the usual pattern - God *calls* me to do a task, I *recoil* because of a fear - then God *recalls* me in a way that confronts my fear and forces me to trust Him.

As the old saying goes, "*Faith is not the absence of fear, but the willingness to trust God in spite of our fear.*" In short, "*Faith is fear that has said its prayers.*"

Jeremiah's phobia was a fear of people - so when **God recalls**, He deals with the real issue, "**Do not be afraid of their faces, for I am with you to deliver you.**"

Jeremiah was a sensitive, impressionable person who cared about what people thought of him. As a result he was ruled and swayed by people's opinions.

*What about you?*

The problem with some people is they don't care at all about what other people think of them. Such a person usually makes a lousy witness for Jesus.

On the other hand, you can obsess so much about people's opinions it causes you to betray the truth, and compromise your values. You want to be liked at all costs. That weakness also makes for a poor witness.

If you're easily intimidated by the opinions of other people, then like Jeremiah, you understand the power of a facial expression. *It takes courage to face a face.*

As a pastor I am well aware of the impact of people's facial expressions. As I speak to you, you're speaking to me – your face, your posture provides me feedback.

They don't call it “body language” for nothing!

Clinched teeth tells me you're getting angry.

A wrinkled brow tells me I'm not getting through.

Heavy eyelids inform me you that either you stayed up late last night - you're on some kind of medication - or I'm as boring as a drive through South Georgia.

Piercing stares make me think you're offended.

Blank looks probably mean you're confused.

Hysterical pointing causes me to check my zipper.

Pleasant smiles let me know you're enjoying my talk. *But whatever you're saying, your face speaks to me!*

Do you care too much about what other folks think?

Have you ever been intimidated by a disapproving scowl... or a mocking smirk... or an ignoring shrug?

God says to Jeremiah, “Do not be afraid of their faces.” We all have to face our fears, even when our fear is a face. I learned this early in my ministry.

I’ll never forget the lady with the cold, icy stare. She came to CC one Sunday morning. If *looks could kill* I was machine gunned down in a gangland slaying. In all my years I’ve never received such negative vibes.

I just knew this woman hated me and my message.

How surprised I was when the person who brought her called me later to tell me she got saved that morning. After the service she prayed to receive Jesus. I was shocked. But I learned an important lesson - you can’t be afraid of their faces. You can’t be intimidated.

And this is what Jeremiah had to learn. His youth was just an excuse for his fears... Let me ask, what’s your excuse for not answering God’s call on your life?

*What reason have you given God for your recoil?*

*I’m too old... I don’t have time... I might fail... I don’t know enough Scripture... I’m waiting until my kids to get older... Once my job settles down... When my health improves... When I settle into my new home...*

*I’m just one person...* Hey, don’t ever say you’re just one person! I like the old African proverb, “If you think you’re too small or too few to make a difference, then spend the night in an enclosed room with a mosquito.”

That’ll show you what *the small* and *the few* can do!

None of the reasons I’ve listed are any more valid than being *too young*. They’re just excuses, just like Jeremiah’s... excuses that won’t fly in the face of God.

Speaking of excuses... “Abraham was old, Jacob was insecure, Leah was unattractive, Joseph was abused, Moses stuttered, Gideon was poor, Samson was co-dependent, Rahab was immoral, David had an affair and various family problems, Elijah was suicidal...

Jonah was reluctant, Naomi was a widow, John the Baptist was eccentric, Peter was impulsive, Martha worried a lot, Zacchaeus was unpopular, Thomas was a doubter, Paul had poor health, Timothy was timid...”

But they all had one commonality. God used them for His glory. He’ll use anyone who stops making excuses.

I read a funny poem, written from the eyes of little girl at dinnertime. She’s been told by a determined mother that she’s going to sit there until she eats her peas...

“Oh, Mama, please! Don’t make me eat these stone-cold peas! They’ve grown eyes and they’re looking at me! I love to eat berries, oranges, broccoli with cheese. Apples, pears that hang on trees – corn on the cob is really a treat; but peas on a plate are no fun to eat!

I’ve grown attached to these peas, we’ve both been here so long. Would setting them free be so terribly wrong? Just look at them now - so green and so lowly, do you want them to just sit here and wrinkle up slowly.

If you listen carefully you hear their pleas, ‘Peas, oh peas, let us be frees!’ So, Mama, things will be just fine if you don’t make me eat all these friends of mine.”

I’m sure from the little girl’s vantage point her argument made sense, but I’ll bet mom didn’t buy it.



And if we could hear what our excuses sound like in the ears of Almighty God - from the perspective of eternity - they would sound just as silly. *What's the real reason for your recoil? Is there a fear you should face?*

In Matthew 25 Jesus tells us of a master who had three servants. He gave the first servant five talents (a sum of money). The second servant received two talents. And the third servant was given a single talent.

The first two servants invested their money wisely, and doubled their talents. But rather than investing his money, the third servant buried it in the ground.

It was a critical mistake. He wasted his opportunity, and made his master angry. He stayed too near *the getting in place*, and ended up taking an awful fall.

In Matthew 25:25 the servant explains his reasoning, “I was afraid, and went and hid your talent in the ground.” Again, why did he do it? “I was afraid.”

Oh, the destructive power of fear. Our fears are so often the robber of *what could've been* - of *what should've been* - had we just learned to walk by faith.

Notice, when God recalls Jeremiah He counters his fear with a promise. The Lord tells him, “Do not be afraid of their faces, for I am with you to deliver you.”

Here's how you face a fear, *even when that fear is a face...* Look past the face, or whatever you fear - and look straight into the face of God. He promises you, “I am with you to deliver you.” *The Almighty is with you!*

God promises you His presence, His peace, His power, His protection. He promises you deliverance.

We look into His face when we believe His promise!

This is also what God promised Joshua at the outset of his ministry. He told General Joshua, “Be strong and of good courage; do not be afraid, nor be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.”

Talk about a *legitimate fear* - Joshua had one - there were giants in the land. But his fears were put to rest by the company he would keep. Our Great Deliverer would be with Him just as He would be with Jeremiah.

It reminds me of the fellow who had an interesting password for his cell phone. It was a Latin phrase, “Pro Nobis.” One day, a friend asked him what it meant...

Immediately this grown man teared up. He was moved emotionally. He said, “It means ‘For Us.’ My life was transformed when I learned that God is *for us*. And I now use it as a password so I’ll never forget its truth.”

In the words of Romans 8:31, “What shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?”

God doesn’t tell Jeremiah to ignore what people think, or to even negate their concerns. Rather, God challenges Jeremiah to look past those concerns - past opinions - past even the ministry to which He is called - *and realize God is for him!*  
**And God is for you too!**

In verse 9, the Lord not only speaks to His future prophet, He touches him, “Then the LORD put forth His hand and touched my mouth, and the LORD said to me: “Behold, I have put My words in your mouth.”

Jeremiah will go on to be the prophet God called him to be. His ministry will span the reigns of five Jewish kings. It will last over four decades. But notice here, *every work of God begins with a touch from God!*

After Jeremiah embraces *God's call* wholeheartedly he receives *God's touch*. And that's always the case...

God is faithful to equip the person He calls. So many of our fears don't factor in what God will do in our lives after we move past those fears, look into His face, and embrace the ministry He has appointed for us to do.

As soon as we say "*Yes*" to His calling - God is faithful to *touch us* with His power, and wisdom, and love - and everything else we need to fulfill that call.

*Our inadequacies evaporate in His sufficiency.*

Well, what is God calling *you* to do? Don't you think it's time you got off the couch and into the game?

Have you stayed too close to "*the getting in place?*"

God is for us! He's prepared us from our mother's womb. Our life is no accident. He can even redeem wasted years and foolish mistakes for His glory.

God has a plan and purpose for you.

Why be a spectator, and sleep away our opportunities? It's time to face up to the faces - and the issues we fear - and set our gaze on the face of Jesus!

Take heed, and answer God's call today!