(((PREACHING the WORD)))

JEREMIAH AND LAMENTATIONS

From SORROW to HOPE



PHILIP GRAHAM RYKEN

R. Kent Hughes

JEREMIAH AND LAMENTATIONS

PREACHING THE WORD

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PHILIP GRAHAM RYKEN

R. Kent Hughes
Series Editor



Jeremiah and Lamentations

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VP 26 25 24 23 22 21 20 19 18 17 1 15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 This expositional commentary is dedicated to the Lord Our Righteousness in memory of James Montgomery Boice, who inspired a generation of preachers to teach the Bible.

Let him who has my word speak my word faithfully.

JEREMIAH 23:28

My joy is gone; grief is upon me; my heart is sick within me.

JEREMIAH 8:18

For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.

JEREMIAH 29:11

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A Word to Those Who Preach the Word

There are times when I am preaching that I have especially sensed the pleasure of God. I usually become aware of it through the unnatural silence. The ever-present coughing ceases and the pews stop creaking, bringing an almost physical quiet to the sanctuary—through which my words sail like arrows. I experience a heightened eloquence, so that the cadence and volume of my voice intensify the truth I am preaching.

There is nothing quite like it—the Holy Spirit filling one's sails, the sense of his pleasure, and the awareness that something is happening among one's hearers. This experience is, of course, not unique, for thousands of preachers have similar experiences, even greater ones.

What has happened when this takes place? How do we account for this sense of his smile? The answer for me has come from the ancient rhetorical categories of *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*.

The first reason for his smile is the *logos*—in terms of preaching, God's Word. This means that as we stand before God's people to proclaim his Word, we have done our homework. We have exegeted the passage, mined the significance of its words in their context, and applied sound hermeneutical principles in interpreting the text so that we understand what its words meant to its hearers. And it means that we have labored long until we can express in a sentence what the theme of the text is—so that our outline springs from the text. Then our preparation will be such that as we preach, we will not be preaching our own thoughts about God's Word, but God's actual Word, his *logos*. This is fundamental to pleasing him in preaching.

The second element in knowing God's smile in preaching is *ethos*—what you are as a person. There is a danger endemic to preaching, which is having your hands and heart cauterized by holy things. Phillips Brooks illustrated it by the analogy of a train conductor who comes to believe that he has been to the places he announces because of his long and loud heralding of them. And that is why Brooks insisted that preaching must be "The bringing of truth through personality." Though we can never *perfectly* embody the truth we preach, we must be subject to it, long for it, and make it as much a part of our ethos as possible. As the Puritan William Ames said, "Next to the Scriptures, nothing makes a sermon more to pierce, than when it comes out of the inward

affection of the heart without any affectation." When a preacher's *ethos* backs up his *logos*, there will be the pleasure of God.

Last, there is *pathos*—personal passion and conviction. David Hume, the Scottish philosopher and skeptic, was once challenged as he was seen going to hear George Whitefield preach: "I thought you do not believe in the gospel." Hume replied, "I don't, but he *does*." Just so! When a preacher believes what he preaches, there will be passion. And this belief and requisite passion will know the smile of God.

The pleasure of God is a matter of *logos* (the Word), *ethos* (what you are), and *pathos* (your passion). As you *preach the Word* may you experience his smile—the Holy Spirit in your sails!

R. Kent Hughes Wheaton, Illinois

Preface

What can be gained from reading and studying Jeremiah? After spending several weeks listening to daily readings from this Old Testament prophet, the writer Kathleen Norris concluded that the point of listening to him is "coming unglued":

The prophet, after all, is witness to a time in which his world, the society surrounding the temple in Jerusalem, meets a violent end, and Israel is taken captive to Babylon. Hearing Jeremiah's words every morning, I soon felt challenged to reflect on the upheavals in our own society, and in my life. A prophet's task is to reveal the fault lines hidden beneath the comfortable surface of the worlds we invent for ourselves, the national myths as well as the little lies and delusions of control and security that get us through the day. And Jeremiah does this better than anyone.

Norris is right: Better than anyone else, Jeremiah reveals the spiritual fractures beneath the comfortable surface of daily life. This was true in the prophet's own time, as he watched his society suffer the devastating consequences of life without God. It was true in the 1960s as well, when Francis Schaeffer boldly identified Jeremiah as a prophet for post-Christian times. "Jeremiah," he wrote, "provides us with an extended study of an era like our own, where men have turned away from God and society has become post-Christian." It is still true today as Western civilization accelerates towards the godless abyss.

This commentary began as a long series of sermons straight through Jeremiah. During the year and a half we studied the book at the Tenth Presbyterian Church in center-city Philadelphia, we were often amazed at its relevance for life in these postmodern times. The barbaric relativism Jeremiah witnessed in ancient Israel has come to America. As one parishioner said, "Sometimes I feel like Jeremiah has a job where I work."

Because of his ongoing relevance for spiritual life, Jeremiah is a wonderful prophet to study. This commentary was written to help Christians read, understand, and teach the books of Jeremiah and Lamentations. It has several distinctives. First, it shows some of the connections between the ministry of Jeremiah and the saving work of Jesus Christ. Some commentaries give too little attention to the presence of Christ in the Old Testament; this one tries to present the gospel according to Jeremiah.

Second, the present volume explains the implications of Jeremiah and Lamentations for practical Christianity. It is an expositional commentary, which means (among other things) that it applies biblical truth to daily life. I have tried not only to explain what Jeremiah meant but also to illustrate what he means for the contemporary Christian. Strictly speaking, the commentary is not exegetical, and pastors looking for in-depth grammatical analysis of Jeremiah and Lamentations will undoubtedly wish to consult more technical works.

A third distinctive of this commentary is that it views Jeremiah and Lamentations as literary unities. Some contemporary scholars approach Jeremiah's books as hopeless jumbles of prophecy that they must cut and paste back into the proper order. Such cutting and pasting is unnecessary because the organization of Jeremiah and Lamentations is not merely chronological, it is also topical. It is important to understand from the outset that this is by design rather than by accident. Although there are enough historical clues to provide dates for most of Jeremiah's material, the prophet's own concerns were more theological than historical.

Finally, it should be noted that some of the material in this volume has appeared in print before, in a much shorter book called *Courage to Stand: Jeremiah's Battle Plan for Pagan Times.*³



1

A Prophet to the Nations

JEREMIAH 1:1-10



THE RABBIS CALLED HIM "The Weeping Prophet." They said he began wailing the moment he was born. When Michelangelo painted him on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, he presented him in a posture of despair. He looks like a man who has wept so long he has no tears left to shed. His face is turned to one side, like a man who has been battered by many blows. His shoulders are hunched forward, weighed down by the sins of Judah. His eyes also are cast down, as if he can no longer bear to see God's people suffer. His hand covers his mouth. Perhaps he has nothing left to say.

His name was Jeremiah. His story begins like this:

The words of Jeremiah, the son of Hilkiah, one of the priests who were in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, to whom the word of the LORD came in the days of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah, in the thirteenth year of his reign. It came also in the days of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah, and until the end of the eleventh year of Zedekiah, the son of Josiah, king of Judah, until the captivity of Jerusalem in the fifth month. (1:1–3)

This introduction tells us a great deal about Jeremiah. He was a preacher's son, for his father Hilkiah was a priest. He was born in the village of Anathoth, close enough to Jerusalem to see the city walls, but at the edge of the wilderness, where the land slopes down to the Dead Sea. He labored as God's prophet for forty years or more, from 627 BC to some time after 586 BC. Four decades is a long time to be a weeping prophet.

Jeremiah lived when little Israel was tossed around by three great superpowers: Assyria to the north, Egypt to the south, and Babylon to the east. He served—and suffered—through the administrations of three kings: Josiah the reformer, Jehoiakim the despot, and Zedekiah the puppet. He was a prophet during the cold November winds of Judah's life as a nation, right up to the time God's people were deported to Babylon. Jeremiah himself was exiled to Egypt, where he died.

A Divine Call

Jeremiah's sufferings began with a divine call:

Now the word of the LORD came to me, saying,

"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." (vv. 4, 5)

God did wonderful things for Jeremiah before he was even born. He knew him. He formed him. He set him apart and appointed him as a prophet to the nations. He did all this long before Jeremiah drew his first breath or shed his first tear.

The call of Jeremiah is rich in its doctrinal and practical content. Among its important teachings are the following:

- 1. God is the Lord of life. God formed Jeremiah in the womb. Jeremiah had biological parents, of course, but God himself fashioned him and knit him together in his mother's womb. Telling children who ask where babies come from that they come from God is good theology. And it is not bad science either. The Lord of life uses the natural processes he designed to plant human life in the womb.
- 2. A fetus is a person. A person is a human being, created in the image of God, living in relationship to God. This verse testifies that the personal relationship between God and his child takes place in the womb, or even earlier.

Birth is not our beginning. Not even conception is our real beginning. In some ineffable way, God has a personal knowledge of the individual that *precedes* conception. "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you." This is the strong, intimate, Hebrew word for "know" that is also used to describe sexual intimacy between husband and wife.

"I knew you." What a beautiful thing for God to say to his children! "I loved you and cared for you in eternity past. I made a personal commitment to you even before you were born." And what a beautiful thing for parents to say to their children: "God knows you, God loves you, and God has entered into a personal relationship with you." This verse holds special comfort for mothers who have had miscarriages. It gives hope to parents who have lost children in

infancy, and even for women who aborted their own babies. God knew your child, and he knows your child.

3. We do not choose God before God chooses us. If you want to know who you are, you have to know whose you are. For the Christian, the answer to that question is that you belong to Jesus Christ.

When did Jeremiah start belonging to God? When did God choose him? The prophet was set apart before he was born. While Jeremiah was being carried around in his mother's womb, God was making preparations for his salvation and his ministry. To set something apart is to sanctify it or to dedicate it to holy service. Long before Jeremiah was born, God chose him and consecrated him for ministry.

Given the intimacy of God's knowledge of Jeremiah, it is appropriate for Jeremiah to address him with the title "Lord God" (v. 6). God is sovereign. He not only forms his people in the womb, he sets them apart for salvation from all eternity.

God's choice is not unique to Jeremiah; it is true for every believer. This is known as the doctrine of divine election. "You did not choose me," Jesus said to his disciples, "but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit" (John 15:16a). "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him" (Ephesians 1:3–4). This promise is for the whole church. Therefore, it is for the comfort of every Christian. God not only knows you, he chose you, and he did so long before you were ever conceived.

Eugene Peterson offers these practical conclusions about God's choice of Jeremiah:

My identity does not begin when I begin to understand myself. There is something previous to what I think about myself, and it is what God thinks of me. That means that everything I think and feel is by nature a response, and the one to whom I respond is God. I never speak the first word. I never make the first move.

Jeremiah's life didn't start with Jeremiah. Jeremiah's salvation didn't start with Jeremiah. Jeremiah's truth didn't start with Jeremiah. He entered the world in which the essential parts of his existence were already ancient history. So do we.1

4. Every Christian has a calling. There is a general call, of course, to believe in Jesus Christ. But everyone who believes in Christ also has a special calling to a particular sphere of obedience and ministry. Jeremiah was not just set apart for salvation, he was set apart for vocation. God had work for him to do. The prophet had a mission to accomplish and a message to deliver to his generation.

Jeremiah's unique appointment was to be a prophet to the nations. God intended his ministry to be international in scope. Part of Jeremiah's job was to promise God's grace to the nations, proclaiming, "All nations shall gather to . . . the presence of the LORD in Jerusalem" (3:17).

But to be a prophet to the nations also includes announcing God's *judgment*. By the time he reached the end of his ministry, Jeremiah had pronounced a divine sentence of judgment upon every nation from Ammon to Babylon. Just as all nations receive God's sovereign grace, all nations are subject to God's severe justice.

Jeremiah's calling is not for everyone. The first chapter of Jeremiah is mainly about his call for his times, not your call for your times. But you do have a call. God not only knows you and chose you, he has a plan for your life. As F. B. Meyer so eloquently puts it, "From the foot of the cross, where we are cradled in our second birth, to the brink of the river, where we lay down our armor, there is a path which he has prepared for us to walk in."²

Perhaps you are still trying to figure out what God's plan is for you. Many Christians long to know what God is calling them to do. If you are not sure, there are at least two things you ought to do.

The first is to do everything you already know God wants you to do. You cannot expect to be ready for God's call, or even to recognize God's call, unless you are obeying what God has already revealed to you. This includes the obvious things, such as spending time in prayer and Bible study, serving the people with whom you live, remaining active in the worship of the church, and being God's witness in the world.

Second, ask God to reveal his will for your life. If you ask, he has promised to answer. "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him" (James 1:5).

A Dubious Candidate

Jeremiah knew what God wanted him to do. Yet even after he received his divine call, he was still a dubious candidate: "Ah, Lord God," he said, "I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth" (v. 6).

Jeremiah had two main objections to becoming a prophet: his lack of eloquence and his lack of experience. To paraphrase: "Ahhh, wait a second, Lord, about this whole prophet-to-the-nations thing . . . It doesn't sound like

that great an idea. Prophecy is not one of my spiritual gifts. As you know, I am getting a C in rhetoric at the synagogue. Besides, I am just a teenager."

Was Jeremiah being modest or faithless? Was it right for him to object to God's call or not?

A good way to answer those questions is to compare Jeremiah with some other prophets. Later the Lord reaches out his hand and touches Jeremiah's mouth (v. 9). This reminds us of Isaiah's experience when he saw "The Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple" (Isaiah 6:1).

Isaiah had one or two doubts about his calling too, but his doubts were different. Isaiah's main problem was that he had a guilty conscience: "And I said: 'Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" (v. 5). Isaiah did not doubt his ability, he doubted his integrity. When the seraph flew from the altar to touch Isaiah's lips with a live coal, he said: "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for" (v. 7).

Isaiah's experience was somewhat different from Jeremiah's. When God touched Jeremiah's lips, it was not to take away his sins, it was to give him God's words.

What about the call of Moses? Was Jeremiah's call like the call of Moses? Jeremiah's objection sounds very much like the objection Moses made when God called him: "Oh, my Lord, I am not eloquent, either in the past or since you have spoken to your servant, but I am slow of speech and of tongue" (Exodus 4:10). Unlike Isaiah, Moses doubted his competence rather than his righteousness.

This was precisely Jeremiah's objection. He was not sure what to say or how to say it. He may have even been concerned about his foreign language skills, since God was calling him to an international ministry. Perhaps his grasp of Akkadian and Ugaritic was deficient. In any case, Jeremiah had his doubts about whether he could do the job.

Jeremiah's doubts find an echo in J. R. R. Tolkien's novel *The Fellowship* of the Ring. A hobbit named Frodo has been chosen to make a long and dangerous quest to destroy the one ring of power, a quest he himself would not wish to choose. "I am not made for perilous quests," cried Frodo. "I wish I had never seen the Ring! Why did it come to me? Why was I chosen?"

The answer Frodo is given is similar to the one God's prophets often receive: "Such questions cannot be answered. . . . You may be sure that it was not for any merit that others do not possess; not for power or wisdom, at any rate. But you have been chosen and you must therefore use such strength and heart and wits as you have."³

When God gives his servants a clear calling, he does not accept any excuses. "Then the LORD said to him [Moses], 'Who has made man's mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the LORD? Now therefore go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak" (Exodus 4:11, 12).

God said much the same thing to Jeremiah. To put it plainly, he said, "Don't give me that stuff!" "Do not say, 'I am only a child.' You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you'" (1:7). "Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth. And the LORD said to me, 'Behold, I have put my words in your mouth'" (v. 9).

God did not disqualify Jeremiah on the basis of his youth and inexperience. In fact, he treated him the same way he treated Moses. He did not deny the basis for the prophet's objection. He did not argue with Jeremiah about his speaking credentials or quibble with him about his age. Jeremiah may have had reasonable doubts. But God exposed his false humility for what it really was: a lack of faith.

Jeremiah had forgotten that God is not limited by human weakness. God himself possesses everything Jeremiah needs to answer his call. In fact, enabling weak tools to do strong jobs is God's standard operating procedure. His entire work force is comprised of dubious candidates. When God calls someone to do a job, he gives him or her all the gifts needed to get the job done. With God's calling comes God's gifting.

This does not mean that your gifts and abilities do not matter when you are trying to figure out what God wants you to do with your life. They do matter. If you do not know what God is calling you to do, take an honest look at the gifts he has given you. If necessary, ask others to help you figure out what your gifts are.

But once you know what God has called you to do, trust him to equip you to do it. God equipped Jeremiah to be an international prophet in some amazing ways. He was a polymath, a great scholar, a man of prodigious learning. He was able to converse in the fields of politics, economics, comparative religion, geography, theology, botany, zoology, anthropology, military strategy, architecture, industry, agriculture, fine arts, and poetry.⁴

If God has actually called you to do a particular job, then he will do for you what he did for Jeremiah: He will give you everything you need to do that job. If you think you know what the Lord wants you to do with your life, get busy, trusting him to give you the grace to answer his call.

A Dangerous Commission

Once God had issued his divine call and dealt with his dubious candidate, he gave him a dangerous commission: "For to all to whom I send you, you shall go, and whatever I command you, you shall speak. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you" (vv. 7, 8).

Frankly, that sounds a little ominous! God does not spell things out, but it is easy to tell that Jeremiah's job will be dangerous. Telling someone "Do not be afraid" is the kind of advice that tends to have the opposite effect than the one intended. The more people tell you not to be afraid, the more you start to wonder what you ought to be afraid of! It is like the king who sent one of his knights off to rescue his fair princess. Just as the knight rode away from the castle, and just as the drawbridge was closing behind him, the king yelled down from the ramparts, "Don't be afraid of the dragon!" "Dragon? What dragon? You didn't say anything about dragons!"

God's promise to rescue Jeremiah is also a bit worrisome. Rescued from what? The promise suggests that the prophet will fall into grave danger. God does not promise that Jeremiah has nothing to fear or that he will not need to be rescued. But he does command him not to be afraid, and he does promise to rescue him.

The reason Jeremiah did not need to be afraid was that he had the promise of God's presence. The Lord gave him the same promise he made to Moses, to Joshua, and to all his children: "I am with you."

Once there was a man who understood the danger of the prophet's commission and the comfort of God's presence. He was an evangelist God used to bring renewal to the Colombian church during the 1980s and 1990s. Since he was an enemy of the drug cartels, his life was in constant danger, until he was finally gunned down by assassins. Yet shortly before he died, he said, "I know that I am absolutely immortal until I have finished the work that God intends for me to do." God's servants are indeed immortal until they have completed their service.

Not only did Jeremiah have God's presence at his side, he also had God's words on his lips: "Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth. And the LORD said to me, 'Behold, I have put my words in your mouth'" (v. 9). This is another connection between Jeremiah and Moses. God promised that he would raise up a prophet for his people like Moses: "I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him" (Deuteronomy 18:18).

Whenever Jeremiah spoke in God's name, God was the one doing the talking. Who wrote the book of Jeremiah? From one point of view, it contains the words of Jeremiah, as the Scripture says: "The words of Jeremiah, the son of Hilkiah" (1:1). From another point of view, however, these are the words of God himself: "To [him] the word of the Lord came" (v. 2).

The Bible is never embarrassed to speak this way. There is a meaningful sense in which the words of Jeremiah are recorded in the pages of the Old Testament. The book of Jeremiah gives us a glimpse of the personality and experiences of the man, Jeremiah. But at the same time the Holy Spirit is the One who breathed out the words of the book of Jeremiah. "For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21). The book of Jeremiah is God's words and Jeremiah's words. When we read them, we do not just see God through Jeremiah's lens; God speaks to us directly.

The reason Jeremiah has authority "over nations and over kingdoms" (1:10) is that he is not speaking on his own behalf. God is sovereign over the nations, and he rules them by his Word. When prophets speak in his name they are mightier than kings. When preachers preach according to God's Word they are mightier than presidents.

Once when I was interviewed by a pastoral search committee, I was asked if I was easily intimidated. (The church was frequented by scholars and other learned individuals.) "Would you feel comfortable preaching to so-and-so?" I was asked. Before taking time to think about my answer, I blurted out, "Yes, I'd preach to the Queen of England."

I think it was a good answer. God rules the nations of this world by his Word. Those who have been appointed to preach that Word have a spiritual authority over the nations. The Lord instructed Jeremiah to be a bold prophet, not because of his preaching ability or because of his age and experience, but because he was called to speak God's own words.

A Depressing Conclusion

It was not always easy for Jeremiah to speak God's words. His commission was not only dangerous, it was often depressing. We have already been given a clue that the book of Jeremiah does not have a happy ending. It ends with the people of Jerusalem being sent into exile. Thus the book of Jeremiah is a tragedy rather than a comedy. It is about the unraveling of a nation. It is the sad story of the decline of God's people from faith to idolatry to exile.

It is this decline that makes Jeremiah a prophet for post-Christian times. He lived in a time very much like our own, when people no longer think God matters for daily life. Public life is increasingly dominated by pagan ideas and rituals. Some people still meet their religious obligations, but they do so out of duty rather than devotion.

The spiritual problems we face at the dawn of the twenty-first century were the same problems that Jeremiah found depressing twenty-five hundred years ago. The discouragement of his ministry is evident from the verbs God uses to describe it: "See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant" (v. 10). The prophet's job description includes six tasks, and four of them are negative. Two to one, his words to the nations will be words of judgment.

"To pluck up" is to dig up nations by the roots and turn them under. It is a word that Jeremiah uses more than all the other Biblical writers combined, often to describe the uprooting of idols (e.g. 12:14–17). "To break down" is to tear down a standing structure, like knocking down a city wall or toppling a tower. "To destroy" is another word for knocking things down. "To overthrow" is to demolish, to bring to complete ruin.

Once the Lord plucks up, breaks down, destroys, and overthrows a nation, there is not much left. There is a great deal of that kind of judgment in the rest of Jeremiah's book. This verse is not only Jeremiah's job description, it is also a helpful plot-summary of his book. He lives in such evil days that judgment will outnumber grace two to one.

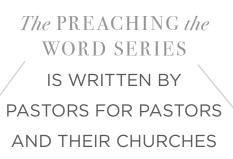
But grace will have the last word. When the cities of evil have been torn down and plowed under, God will start afresh. He will begin a new work. He will "build," and he will "plant." He will bring renewal out of demolition.

This is God's plan for the kingdoms of this world (cf. 18:7–10). He is the one who is in charge of the beginnings and endings of history. He is the one who uproots some nations and plants others. He is the one who tears down some kingdoms and rebuilds others.

This is also God's plan for salvation in Jesus Christ. Jesus said, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (John 2:19). The temple of Jesus' body was uprooted and torn down from the cross. It was destroyed and overthrown to the grave. But God built and planted resurrection life into the body of Jesus Christ.

Now God builds and plants that same resurrection power into the life of every believer. First the Holy Spirit uproots and tears down sin in your heart, and then he plants faith and builds obedience into your life. Like Jeremiah, you were a dubious candidate at the beginning. Yet God has known you from all eternity, and he has set you apart for new life in Christ.

If God has done all that for you, will you go wherever he tells you to go and say whatever he wants you to say, even if it turns out to be a dangerous commission?





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