

God's Indestructible Word

Jeremiah 36

I hold in my hand a Bible, also known as “the Scriptures” or “the word of God.” My question is, “How should we approach the Bible?” In other words should we read it the way we read the newspaper (for information and opinions)? Should we read it as an owner’s manual (with detailed instruction on how to live your life)? Some people treat the Bible as a talisman - something that brings us good fortune. I’ve mentioned before that in my younger years I had something of a superstitious attitude toward the Bible - not its contents but the book itself (e.g., thinking it should always be on the top of a stack of books).

Today we’re going to study Jeremiah 36. This chapter describes how various people responded to God’s word. By the time we get to the end of the chapter, we’ll see a core perspective about how we should approach the word of God (even those parts that we find difficult or troubling). Next Sunday we’ll wrap up our study of Jeremiah by considering Jeremiah 37 and 38. We’ve appreciated the feedback on this sermon series. Several people told us, in essence, that they had a sense of dread when we started this series because the prophets are so “old testament.” But we’re glad that these sermons have been good for many of you.

God's Indestructible Word (Jeremiah 36)

The first three verses set the context for this chapter. Here we read that God told Jeremiah to write a summary of the prophecies that he had spoken over his first 20 years as a prophet.

1 In the fourth year of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah, this word came to Jeremiah from the Lord, saying, 2 “Take a scroll and write on it all the words which I have spoken to you concerning Israel and concerning Judah, and concerning all the nations, from the day I *first* spoke to you, from the days of Josiah, even to this day.

Notice God’s hope in communicating once again “all the words” He had spoken to Jeremiah:

3 “Perhaps the house of Judah will hear all the calamity which I plan to bring on them, in order that every man will turn from his evil way; then I will forgive their iniquity and their sin.”

We saw back in chapter 18 (verse 11) that God announced that He was “fashioning calamity” against Jerusalem; that calamity involved sending them into exile in Babylon. They wouldn’t listen to Him and worship Him in their own Land, so He would send them to a distant Land where, perhaps, they would “come to their senses” (as in Luke 15:17) and turn back to Him. Jeremiah’s consistent message was, “Don’t resist the Babylonian army when it shows up in Jerusalem. One way or another you *will* be taken into exile. So accept this discipline/judgment from the Lord.” Of course this sounded like treason to the kings and the priests. As we’ll see next week, because of this message about calamity they would do all sorts of nasty things to Jeremiah.

But we also saw in chapter 29 (verse 11) that even though they were living in exile, God's **ultimate** plan for them was for their "welfare and not for calamity to give [them] a future and a hope." In exile they would seek and find God when they searched with all their heart.

Here in chapter 36 God is once again giving the "house of Judah" (those in and around Jerusalem) the offer of turning back to Him in repentance. If they would only turn from their "evil way" then God would "forgive their iniquity and their sin." We've seen over and over that mercy and grace are God's default position; if we simply turn back to Him, He is more gracious than we ever imagined.

The next ten verses (vv. 4-13) describe how Jeremiah dictated to a man named Baruch all the words God had spoken to him. Baruch faithfully wrote the words of God on a scroll. Since Jeremiah was forbidden from going to the temple, he commanded Baruch to wait until the people had gathered at the temple on a day of fasting and go and read the message on the scroll to all the people. His hope was that while the people were fasting and seeking God, they might finally be receptive to God's word to them.

Many months later the day came when the people gathered at the temple from all over Judah and "fasted before the Lord." There Baruch read the scroll to all the people. A man named Micaiah heard the word of God and was moved to go down "to the king's house, into the scribe's chamber" (vv. 11-13) where the top government officials were gathered. When Micaiah reported to them what he had heard, the officials sent for Baruch himself to come and read the scroll to them. We read in verses 14-16:

14 . . . So Baruch the son of Neriah took the scroll in his hand and went to them. 15 They said to him, "Sit down, please, and read it to us." So Baruch read it to them. 16 When they had heard all the words, they turned in fear one to another and said to Baruch, "We will surely report all these words to the king."

These officials took the word of God seriously; appropriately, "they turned in fear one to another" and felt compelled to report these words to the king.

17 And they asked Baruch, saying, "Tell us, please, how did you write all these words? *Was it* at his dictation?" 18 Then Baruch said to them, "He dictated all these words to me, and I wrote them with ink on the book." 19 Then the officials said to Baruch, "Go, hide yourself, you and Jeremiah, and do not let anyone know where you are."

The officials were pretty sure that the king would try to punish Baruch and Jeremiah when he heard what they had announced at the temple. So they told Baruch that he and Jeremiah should hide and not let anyone know their whereabouts.

20 So they went to the king in the court, but they had deposited the scroll in the chamber of Elishama the scribe, and they reported all the words to the king. 21 Then the king sent Jehudi to get the scroll, and he took it out of the chamber of

Elishama the scribe. And Jehudi read it to the king as well as to all the officials who stood beside the king. 22 Now the king was sitting in the winter house in the ninth month, with a *fire* burning in the brazier before him.

In verse 23 we are told how Jehoiakim responded to the word of God:

23 When Jehudi had read three or four columns, *the king* cut it with a scribe's knife and threw *it* into the fire that was in the brazier, until all the scroll was consumed in the fire that was in the brazier.

He was angry with the word from God, so he dealt with it swiftly and decisively. He cut the word of God into pieces and threw it into the fire. He wouldn't have to bother with this troubling message about exile and the Babylonians. Jehoiakim dealt with the word of God by getting rid of it.

Notice the contrast between the reaction of the king and his servants and the (earlier) reaction of the officials (who were afraid when they heard the word of the Lord).

24 Yet the king and all his servants who heard all these words were not afraid, nor did they rend their garments.

Unlike the other officials who heard Baruch reading the scroll, they had no fear of God. They had no sense of dread that the prophecies of Jeremiah would come true; they weren't afraid in the least.

25 Even though Elnathan and Delaiah and Gemariah pleaded with the king not to burn the scroll, he would not listen to them. 26 And the king commanded Jerahmeel the king's son, Seraiah the son of Azriel, and Shelemiah the son of Abdeel to seize Baruch the scribe and Jeremiah the prophet, but the Lord hid them.

As we'll see next week, God didn't always hide Jeremiah when somebody wanted to persecute him. But He did in this instance. If the account ended here, we might think that Jehoiakim had solved the pesky problem of the word of God; even though he couldn't find Jeremiah to punish him, the scroll had been cut into pieces and burned in the fire. But the rest of the chapter makes clear that the "word of God" cannot be destroyed. A scroll or a Bible can be burned, but the word of God is still in tact.

The next paragraph describes how the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah again. Jeremiah dictated to Baruch everything that was on the first scroll and then some. For example, verses 30 and 31 pronounce God's judgment on Jehoiakim; when he died his body would lay exposed on the bare ground, and none of his descendants would sit on his throne. Verse 32 concludes:

32 Then Jeremiah took another scroll and gave it to Baruch the son of Neriah, the scribe, and he wrote on it at the dictation of Jeremiah all the words of the book which Jehoiakim king of Judah had burned in the fire; and many similar words were added to them.

At the end of the chapter (and figuratively at the end of the day), God's word had NOT been destroyed. The nation would be taken into exile so that she might come to her senses and turn back to God. The simple truth illustrated in this chapter is that ***the word of God can be rejected (or mocked or ignored) but it cannot be destroyed.*** Even though Jehoiakim burned the scroll, its message (the word of God) was still true.

In a few minutes we'll talk about how this principle should shape the way we approach the Scriptures. We'll need to think clearly and carefully about this. But first I'd like to see ***two texts that reinforce this perspective*** - one in the OT and one in the NT.

Isaiah 40:6-8 Beginning in chapter 40 of Isaiah, God declares to the people that He would restore them from exile. There would come a day when her sin had been removed and when God's discipline had been endured (v. 2). In that context we read:

6 A voice says, "Call out."
Then he answered, "What shall I call out?"
All flesh is grass, and all its loveliness is like the flower of the field.
7 The grass withers, the flower fades,
When the breath of the Lord blows upon it;
Surely the people are grass.
8 The grass withers, the flower fades,
But the word of our God stands forever.

Whereas people are like the grass which withers and fades, God's word is permanent. Years and decades and centuries later, God's word is as true as the day it was spoken or written. "The word of our God stands forever." For Isaiah's audience this was supposed to fill them with confidence that God would indeed deliver them from exile and restore them to the Land. Because the word of God stands forever, they can have absolute confidence in what God says - no matter how they felt and no matter the circumstances.

Matthew 5:17-18 In the NT, we find this in Matthew 5:

17 "Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill. 18 "For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished.

Here Jesus claims that He didn't come to abolish "the Law and the Prophets" (the Old Testament); He came to fulfill it. Jesus' birth, life, death, and resurrection were the fullest and final expression of everything taught and described in the OT: the sacrificial system, the feasts, the code of holiness described in the Law, etc. Furthermore, every single word of the Hebrew Scriptures will fulfill its intended purpose. Like we saw in Jeremiah 36, you can reject or mock or ignore God's word, but you cannot stop it from accomplishing what God desires.

In our time remaining, let's talk about our response to what we've seen so far. If God's Word really is indestructible, how should we respond? If everything God speaks reflects reality (the way things really are), how should we respond to Him and His Word? Using biblical terminology, we should respond with "the fear of the Lord."

Our Response: "the Fear of the Lord" (*Psalm 112:1, Proverbs 1:7, Jeremiah 5:22-24, Malachi 4:1-3, etc.*). We're not talking about being terrified of God when we speak of the fear of the Lord. We're talking about an appropriate fear in light of who He is. In *Renovation of the Heart*, Dallas Willard gives some helpful clarification on how foundational the fear of the Lord.

Fear is the anticipation of harm. The intelligent person recognizes that his or her well-being lies in being in harmony with God and what God is doing in the "kingdom." God is not mean, but he is dangerous. It is the same with other great forces he has placed in reality. Electricity and nuclear power, for example, are not mean, but they are dangerous. One who does not, in a certain sense, "worry" about God simply isn't smart.

(Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, p. 51)

When you climb up on a ladder, you're not very smart if you don't "fear" gravity. In the same way we're not wise if we don't have "the fear of the Lord." God is the **last** person with whom you want to be at odds. Dozens of passages in the OT talk about the fear of the Lord. Proverbs 1:7 is representative:

7 The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge;
Fools despise wisdom and instruction.

If you want knowledge (here synonymous with wisdom), you **begin** with the fear of the Lord. If you fear God, you come before Him and say, "God, I want to align my life with Yours. I am not sovereign; You are sovereign. I am not wise; You are wise. I am not good; You are good. I don't define morality; You define morality." If we fear God, we adopt a stance of humility and teachability before God. The reasons for fearing God have multiplied for those of us who live after the death and resurrection of Jesus. Honestly, how should we respond to a God whose love for us is so fierce that He sent His one and only Son to die on the cross for our sins?

Jehoiakim didn't fear God (see 36:24). He despised the "wisdom and instruction" spoken through Jeremiah, so he cut up the scroll and threw it into the fire. As we saw, that was a very foolish thing to do. It just wasn't smart to rage against God and His word.

I'm making a pretty basic point here. If God's Word (i.e., Scripture) communicates reality - the way things actually are - we would be foolish NOT to cultivate the fear of the Lord by humbly receiving His word. I realize that if you're not a follower of Christ or if you haven't come to the place where you accept that the Scriptures are the authoritative Word of God, it might seem like we're getting the cart before the horse. I get that. But I would encourage you to be open to the possibility that the Scripture really is the "Word

of God” and therefore something to pay attention to. I talked with someone this week who mentioned that before coming to Christ he didn’t believe the Bible, but when he started reading it, he became convinced. That was my experience: the Bible is self-authenticating.

I want to close by giving you an example of how we might approach a specific Scripture with the perspective we’ve been talking about this morning. I could have chosen virtually any passage of Scripture, but I’ve chosen Galatians 6:7-8 because it expresses some thoughts that are similar to Jeremiah 36 and because it’s the type of Scripture that we might want to ignore (because it confronts us so directly).

7 Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. 8 For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life.

As Jeremiah 36 illustrates, we can reject or ignore a Scripture like this one, but we cannot nullify it. What Paul writes in this Scripture is true; it describes reality. Namely, our action have consequences. We mock God when we think that we can indulge “the flesh” without Him noticing or caring. As Paul writes, God is not mocked. Whether we realize it or not, “whatever we sow, that we will also reap.” If we sow to the flesh (if we indulge the flesh through anger, sensuality, greed, jealousy, pride, etc.), the crop that will eventually spring up (in our thinking, our behavior, our relationships) will be “corruption.” But - and here’s the vision for our lives that Paul puts forth - if we sow to the Spirit (if we invite and allow the Spirit to teach us and guide us and empower us), the crop that will spring up (in our thinking, our behavior, and our relationships) will be life - the type of life that has an eternal quality. This Scripture teaches that our actions have consequences.

If we approach this Scripture with the fear of the Lord, we’ll ask things like, “God, are there ways that I have mocked You by the things that I’ve thought, said, or done? Have I been so arrogant to think that I can indulge the flesh without consequence? God, is the turmoil and strife I’ve experienced in my life simply the result of sowing to the flesh?” If we have a healthy fear of God, we’ll sit and listen to what He might point out in our lives. When the Spirit convicts us of ways we’ve sown to the flesh, we aren’t condemned (there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus); we are moved to repentance. We seek to discern what it would look like to live differently.

If we have the fear of the Lord, we’ll also ponder, “God, by faith I believe that if I sow to the Spirit I will reap life. [You may not understand exactly how that happens, but by faith you believe it.] God, give me the will and the grace to ‘sow to the Spirit’ so that I might experience life?” You sow to the Spirit by saturating your mind with His word; you allow His truth to form and shape your thinking and your feelings. You sow to the Spirit by doing good works (that’s what the following verses describe), confident that sooner or later you’ll experience a harvest of life.

My encouragement to you is to approach God’s word this week in humility and in the fear of the Lord.