



THE SACRED SCROLL

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 Jeremiah 36:1-32
 25th Message
 John Hanneman
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When I was growing up I was not what some would call a voracious reader, but I did have a strong sense of the power of the written word. In grade school I read every sports biography I could get my hands on, especially biographies of baseball players. In high school I recall reading *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and *The Old Man and the Sea*. I fell in love with Hemingway. I was entranced by the foreboding character of Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*. I lingered in the pages of *Gone With the Wind*, fascinated with Rhett Butler and Scarlett O'Hara. In college my interest turned to poetry. My favorite poets were Tennyson, Yeats, Shelly, and Byron. As I read these masters late into the night, their verses struck chords in my soul, awakening deep yearnings within me.

At twenty-two, I discovered a book that was more powerful than any I had ever read. This book told me about God and about myself. It taught me about life and death, sin and grace, light and darkness, heaven and hell. It spoke to mysteries I longed to understand, and it revealed truth. I had found the sacred scroll, the Bible.

The focus of our study this morning is the Word of God, the most powerful word ever spoken or written. God's spoken word brought the universe into existence; his written word reveals the living Word.

Our text, Jeremiah 36, is another remarkable story in the life of the prophet Jeremiah.

In the fourth year of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah, this word came to Jeremiah from the LORD, saying, "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. 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."

Then Jeremiah called Baruch the son of Neriah, and Baruch wrote on a scroll at the dictation of Jeremiah all the words of the LORD which He had spoken to him. Jeremiah commanded Baruch, saying, "I am restricted; I cannot go into the house of the LORD. So you go and read from the scroll which you have written at my dictation the words of the LORD to the people in the LORD's house on a fast day. And also you shall read them to all the people of Judah who come from their cities. Perhaps their supplication will come before the LORD, and everyone will turn from his evil way, for great is the anger and the wrath that the LORD has pronounced against this people." Baruch the son of Neriah did according to all that Jeremiah the prophet commanded him, reading from the book the words of the LORD in the LORD's house. (Jer 36:1-8, NASB)

This story is set in the year 605 B.C., during the reign of the selfish, perverse king Jehoiakim. Under this man's leadership, life in Judah was unsettled and disordered, socially, politically and religiously. Despite Jeremiah's plea, however, the people of Judah did not turn from their idolatrous ways.

The story opens with God assigning Jeremiah the task of recording God's word on a scroll. Notice this was not Jeremiah's, but God's word (this would have included much of chapters 1-25). Behind the assignment lay the hope that Judah might hear and repent. This is always the purpose of the prophetic Word of God.

So Jeremiah appoints Baruch, the son of Neriah, to be his *amanuensis*. We met this man earlier, in chapter 32, when Jeremiah bought a field in Anathoth. Baruch, a political figure, came from a distinguished family, his grandfather having been governor of Jerusalem. Associating with Jeremiah meant that Baruch was risking his life. Chapters 36-45 are framed with the mention of his name. Frequently this section of text is referred to as Baruch's document.

Our text records three readings of the scroll that was dictated by Jeremiah.

Now in the fifth year of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah, in the ninth month, all the people in Jerusalem and all the people who came from the cities of Judah to Jerusalem proclaimed a fast before the LORD. Then Baruch read from the book the words of Jeremiah in the house of the LORD in the chamber of Gemariah the son of Shaphan the scribe, in the upper court, at the entry of the New Gate of the LORD's house, to all the people. (Jer 36:9-10)

Jeremiah commanded Baruch to take the scroll to the temple and read it. It was a fast day, in the year 604 B.C., and a large crowd had gathered for a holy day. This is an indication that the people of Judah were more responsive to externals than internals. They still went to church, but they did not listen to what was being read.

Baruch reads the scroll in the chamber of Gemariah, the son of Shaphan, near the New Gate, the same gate mentioned in chapter 26, when Jeremiah gave his temple sermon. Jeremiah can no longer speak in public, so he sends Baruch. The particular chamber is associated with a powerful political family. Even though a large crowd is present, it is obvious that God is targeting the leadership of the nation.

Now when Micaiah the son of Gemariah, the son of Shaphan, had heard all the words of the LORD from the book, he went down to the king's house, into the scribe's chamber. And behold, all the officials were sitting there—Elishama the scribe, and Delaiah the son of Shemaiah, and Elnathan the son of Achbor, and

Gemariah the son of Shaphan, and Zedekiah the son of Hananiah, and all the other officials. Micaiah declared to them all the words that he had heard when Baruch read from the book to the people. Then all the officials sent Jehudi the son of Nethaniah, the son of Shelemiah, the son of Cushi, to Baruch, saying, "Take in your hand the scroll from which you have read to the people and come." So Baruch the son of Neriah took the scroll in his hand and went to them. (Jer 36:11-14)

When Micaiah the son of Gemariah hears the Word of the Lord, he takes it seriously. He goes back to the king's house and tells all the officials, one of whom is his father. The officials mentioned here may well have been the very ones who rescued Jeremiah in chapter 26. They listen to Micaiah and, wanting to investigate the matter further, they send for Baruch.

They said to him, "Sit down, please, and read it to us." So Baruch read it to them. 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." And they asked Baruch, saying, "Tell us, please, how did you write all these words? Was it at his dictation?" Then Baruch said to them, "He dictated all these words to me, and I wrote them with ink on the book." Then the officials said to Baruch, "Go, hide yourself, you and Jeremiah, and do not let anyone know where you are." (Jer 36:15-19)

Upon hearing the reading of the scroll, the officials react with fear and a sense of urgency. Immediately they want to report the words to the king. Perhaps the texts read by Baruch voiced their own concerns, and here was a convenient way of expressing those to the king.

The officials validate the document by putting questions to Baruch concerning its origin, authenticity and credibility. Then they instruct Baruch and Jeremiah to hide. Thus they become protectors of the subversive voice. Knowing the king, they are aware of what his reaction will be. They also want to remove any connection between themselves and the "informants," so they cannot be implicated. The king is left only with the scroll.

This story highlights the fact that the Word of God, the Bible, is a powerful force. It is a sacred and holy scroll. Even a reading of the text can dramatically affect people. Repeatedly we hear stories of people coming to Christ simply by reading the Bible. One of the most dramatic conversions in history took place in a garden in Milan in 386 A.D., when Augustine heard a voice saying, "Take it and read. Take it and read." He opened up the Bible and read the first words that met his eyes, a text from Romans 13. Augustine said at that moment, "I had no wish to read more and no need to do so. For in an instant, as I came to the end of the sentence, it was as though the light of confidence flooded into my heart and all the darkness of doubt was dispelled."¹

After we have come to faith, the Scripture continues to have a dramatic effect in our lives. The Word of God transforms us and molds us into Christ-likeness. When we look intently into the word we see the face of God and we are changed.

And not only do we read the word in private, we speak it in public, like Baruch. When we do that, we never know

who might be listening and how they might respond. This is why Paul tells Timothy to "give attention to the public reading of the Scripture, to exhortation and teaching" (1 Tim 4:13). This is why we preach and evangelize. This is why the Gideons place Bibles in hotel rooms. This is why Don Burgess translates the Bible into the Tarahumara language. The Word of God is powerful for salvation. Again, quoting Paul, "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim 3:16-17).

For over a half of century, one of the primary visions of Peninsula Bible Church has been to expound God's word--to let the biblical text speak to people's hearts. The goal of preaching is to illuminate the Word of God and allow people to interact with that word through the Holy Spirit. The most effective preaching occurs when people are drawn to the word, not to the preacher. Sometimes people tell me how much something I said meant to them and how it changed them. But I have to admit that I never said what they insist they heard. It was the Lord who was speaking to them through his word; that is the best thing.

Our commitment to the word of God is the reason why for decades the messages preached at PBCC and PBC Palo Alto have been published and mailed around the world. Over the years we have heard marvelous stories of how the Word of God in these messages has impacted lives. On one occasion when I was teaching in a prison, an inmate told me that he had discovered a PBC printed message jammed into a crack in the wall of his cell. He read the message and came to Christ. When I worked as an engineer years ago, I took these papers to work and put them on the wall outside my cubicle. I chose very practical sermons—texts on marriage, work, and family. I never saw anyone take those messages, but they always disappeared.

Currently my wife is leading a Bible study in the gospel of John with some women from the neighborhood who are interested in spiritual things. They go to church, but they don't know the Bible. All she does is simply read the text, and the questions begin to flow. The sacred scroll is powerful to evoke the fear of the Lord. That is what we see too in the reaction of the officials in our story.

But the sacred scroll is not easy to read. As Eugene Peterson says, "The Bible is a most comforting book; it is also a most discomfiting book."² This is what we find in king Jehoiakim's response to the scroll.

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. 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. Now the king was sitting in the winter house in the ninth month, with a fire burning in the brazier before him. (Jer 36:20-22)

A brazier is a metal container for burning coal or charcoal, either for cooking or heating. My mother told me that when she was a child growing up on the farm, they would heat bricks in the stove and put them at the end of the bed to keep their feet warm on cold winter nights. This is the same idea.

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. Yet the king and all his servants who heard all these words were not afraid, nor did they rend their garments. Even though Elnathan and Delaiah and Gemariah pleaded with the king not to burn the scroll, he would not listen to them. 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. (Jer 36:23-26)

Notice two different contrasts in Jehoiakim's response. The first contrast is with the officials. They hear the words of God and they fear (verse 16); the king hears the same words but does not fear (verse 24).

The second contrast is between Jehoiakim and his father Josiah. Seventeen years earlier, Josiah was presented with a scroll by the state official Shaphan. It was the scroll of Deuteronomy, rediscovered in the temple. Hearing the word, Josiah rent his clothes (2 Kings 22:11). Now, a generation later, the scenario is repeated between the sons. Josiah's son, Jehoiakim, is presented with a scroll by Shaphan's son, Gemariah. His response is completely different. Jehoiakim does not rend his garments. Instead he rends, or cuts (the same word), the pages of the scroll.

Jehoiakim throws out God's word. Rather than the word burning in his heart, he burns the word in the fire. He would yield nothing of himself to the claims of the scroll. He shuts it out and refuses to let it touch his life.

How do we treat the Bible, the sacred scroll, the Word of God? Are we like Josiah or Jehoiakim? Do we take the words to heart or treat them lightly? Do we cut up the Word of God or do we let it cut through our hard hearts? Do we burn the Word of God or do we allow it to burn within us like it did in the hearts of the two men who walked with Jesus on the road to Emmaus?

Listen to these words of Eugene Peterson:

Jehoiakim with his penknife is a parody of all who attempt to use Scripture, who attempt to bring it under control and reduce it to something manageable. Scripture cannot be used. It is God's word calling us to a personal response. The Word of God addresses us, calls us into being. The only appropriate response is a reverent answering. It is always more than we are, always previous to us, always over us. Wanting to maintain control over our lives, to keep the initiative in our own hands, we chop the Word of God into little pieces so that we can control it and maybe even put it to practical use—like warming us on a cold winter day! We reduce Scripture to something impersonal that we can use for our purposes or discard at our pleasure. We dismember its organically developed parts so that it is no longer a complete representation of God's address to us to which we must respond.³

We can talk all we like about ministry, programs, trips and spiritual experiences, but these things by themselves will not transform us. They won't drive us to salvation and repentance. No amount of planning, organizing and fixing will redeem us in the way God wants us to be redeemed. We must sit under the Word of God with conviction. His

word is the most powerful thing on earth, because through it he speaks to us personally.

Then the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah after the king had burned the scroll and the words which Baruch had written at the dictation of Jeremiah, saying, "Take again another scroll and write on it all the former words that were on the first scroll which Jehoiakim the king of Judah burned. And concerning Jehoiakim king of Judah you shall say, 'Thus says the LORD, "You have burned this scroll, saying, 'Why have you written on it that the king of Babylon will certainly come and destroy this land, and will make man and beast to cease from it?"' "Therefore thus says the LORD concerning Jehoiakim king of Judah, "He shall have no one to sit on the throne of David, and his dead body shall be cast out to the heat of the day and the frost of the night. I will also punish him and his descendants and his servants for their iniquity, and I will bring on them and the inhabitants of Jerusalem and the men of Judah all the calamity that I have declared to them—but they did not listen."'" 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. (Jer 36:27-32)

God's response consists of a word for Jehoiakim and a word for Jeremiah. To Jehoiakim, God gives a harsh speech, a word of judgment. He had heard these words before (chapter 22). He will come to a horrible end, disgraced and dishonored. No heir of his will sit on the throne. Ironically, he will be cast out into the frost of the night. The pages of the scroll may have warmed him for a moment, but in the end he will experience the bitter cold.

Then we see a word for Jeremiah. God tells him to take another scroll and write down once again the words that were burned by Jehoiakim. He has to go back and start over.

The epilogue to our story yields four observations.

1. The person who stands against the Word of God will be consumed by its fire.

There will always be people who are antagonistic toward the Word. They appear powerful and persuasive, they will influence many, but in the end the fire they fueled with God's Word will consume them.

2. The person who sits under the Word of God will be refined by its fire.

When we choose to sit under the Word, the flames might get hot and uncomfortable, but this is the refiner's fire. It burns but it does not consume. It purifies but does not destroy. Like the burning bush, we do not go up in flames.

3. Attempts to snuff out the Word of God will only cause it to burn brighter.

There will always be attempts to obliterate the Word of God by skeptics, persecutors, and by the rash use of the scholar's knife. But God's Word can never be eradicated or destroyed. God is not deterred. He is the scroll maker and he will continue making scrolls. In fact, the second scroll dictated by Jeremiah is an expanded version of the first:

“many similar words were added.” The king’s attempt to obliterate the Word of God only caused it to be broadened. God will not leave the king scroll-less, and he will not leave the world without his Word.

4. The person who speaks God’s Word will always be opposed, but is called to persevere.

We will always face opposition and resistance to faith and word and ministry. If you commit to studying and speaking God’s Word, your life will be much more difficult. Jeremiah is proof of that. What hardship and discouragement this man had to endure all his days! But it was this endurance that allowed him to keep going. We have this text because he persevered. He was willing to start over. His computer crashed, he lost his hard drive, but he began again. What an amazing man of God, who endured this for forty years!

Would you have given up? Would the discouragement have been too much for you? Jeremiah had a hard life, but he remained obedient to the direction that God set for him. We too need that kind of perseverance—a “long obedience in the same direction”—when we face the difficulties of life and ministry. I am reminded of this ingredient for manhood in Kipling’s recipe,

If you can bear to hear the truth you’ve spoken
Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,
Or watch the things you gave your life to broken,
And stoop and build ’em up with worn-out tools.

This story from the prophecy of Jeremiah illustrates the primacy of God’s word. Richard Foster writes, “Scripture has primacy over other writings; primacy over church tradition; primacy over individual religious experience; primacy over the individual conscience; primacy over individual revelations, dreams, and visions; primacy over culture. As the Protestant reformers put it, *Sola Scriptura*, the Scripture alone.”⁴

In the book of Revelation there is an arresting encounter between John and an angel:

Then the voice which I heard from heaven, I heard again speaking with me, and saying, “Go, take the book which is open in the hand of the angel who stands on the sea and on the land.” So I went to the angel, telling him to give me the little book. And he said to me, “Take it and eat it; it will make your stomach bitter, but in your mouth it will be sweet as honey.” I took the little book out of the angel’s hand and ate it, and in my mouth it was sweet as honey; and when I had eaten it, my stomach was made bitter.” (Rev 10:8-10)

The Word of God is not always comforting. It makes us uneasy. It keeps us on edge. It is hard to swallow. But it is necessary for the work of salvation. It is what feeds us, corrects us, strengthens and comforts us. It is our guidebook. It keeps us on course. We are called to be people of the sacred scroll. We don’t cut out the parts we don’t like. And we don’t just read it. We eat it. We chew it. We digest it. Jesus said, “Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God” (Matt 4:4).

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1. Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (London: Penguin, 1961), 178.
2. Eugene Peterson, *Eat This Book* (Vancouver, B.C.: Regent College Publishing, 2000), 71.
3. Eugene Peterson, *Run with the Horses* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, Illinois, 1983), 130.
4. Richard Foster, *Streams of Living Water* (San Francisco: Harper, 1998), 222.