**The Book of Jeremiah: *To Tear Down, To Build Up***

**Sunday July 18, 2021**

**“God’s word: in the fire but not consumed” (Jeremiah 36)**

Jeremiah chapter 36 has all the excitement of a Hollywood thriller. It has shrewd maneuvering, a subversive communique, a villainous king, and some narrow escapes. At the center of this tale is a scroll that contained a message from God for the people of Judah. This message was carefully written down and read out to several people. Some who heard it took it seriously, but others ignored it and even tried to suppress it. At we walk through the various scenes of this chapter we’ll observe many important implications, but the most crucial one concerns our response to God’s word. Are we listening to God and responding appropriately? Or are we ignoring God’s challenge for our lives? Are we trying to muzzle his message?

The events of this chapter occurred during the fourth year of the reign of Jehoiakim, king of Judah (36:1). This would have been around 605-604 B.C. The action begins with the scroll. Faithful to the end, God took one more step to communicate with his wayward people. He instructed Jeremiah to write down all the prophecies he’d spoken thus far on a scroll and have them read to the people (36:2). His intent was to give them another opportunity to respond to the message, turn from their sin and be forgiven (36:3). So, this whole exercise of recording Jeremiah’s words had a clear purpose – to challenge God’s people to change the course of their lives and return to God. *God’s communication with us is purposeful.* When God speaks, he wants to do a work in our lives and in our world, but we must respond! This is the most important lesson of this chapter.

Jeremiah followed God’s instructions and he asked a man named Baruch to assist him in this task. Baruch was well educated and a professional scribe, so his job was to write down the words as Jeremiah dictated them. So, he got out a lot of parchment and his quill and began the long and careful process of copying down the prophet’s words. The contents of the scroll were a summary of Jeremiah’s preaching from the past *23 years*, from the time he began to prophesy until the present (25:1-3; 36:1). Take a moment to think about this. Jeremiah had been preaching for 23 years with no positive results. No wonder he was very discouraged. Yet he continued to serve God faithfully and so the production of the scroll began (36:4).

When the scroll was completed, Jeremiah had one more favor to ask of Baruch. The prophet had become public enemy number one in Judah because of his preaching. Earlier in the reign of Jehoiakim, the prophet preached in the Temple courts and the religious officials strongly suggested that he be put to death (26:8-9). But the government officials intervened and argued that he should not be put to death (26:16). In the end, Jeremiah did not get sent to death row (26:24). However, it appears that there were some restrictions placed upon him. In his conversation with Baruch, he states that he’d been blacklisted from entering the Temple (36:5). Since Jeremiah was unable to go and read the scroll to the people, Baruch is asked to become the messenger (36:6). The prophet specified that the scroll be read during a time of nationwide fasting. During times of emergency, the nation would be called to fast and pray. The people would gather at the Temple to confess their sin and ask for God’s help. Perhaps during this time of national soul-searching, the people would be receptive to message of the scroll, pray to God and turn from their bad lives (36:7). Once again, a key idea in the chapter is repeated – God’s word is intended to have an impact in our lives, but it is necessary for us to take action in light of the message.

In December 504 B.C., nine months after the scroll-writing project began, a fast day was called for the nation (36:9). This day of prayer and fasting was prompted by a significant geopolitical event in the world. The Babylonian armies were closing in, having conquered the city of Ashkelon in nearby Philistia. So, Baruch did what Jeremiah had asked of him. Since his family had connections to the government (51:59), he was able to use the meeting room of a government official nearby the Temple gates (36:10). As the people were streaming into the Temple from Jerusalem and all of Judah, Baruch read the words of Jeremiah from the scroll and there was an immediate outcome. Micaiah, the son of a high-ranking government official, went straight to the palace, interrupted a high-level cabinet meeting, and told the government officials all about the message that he had heard (36:11-13). Clearly, Micaiah took the scroll’s message very seriously and felt that the key leaders of the land needed to hear it as well.

In response, these government officials summoned Baruch to come and read the scroll to them and he went willingly and without fear (36:14-15). While Jeremiah is a key figure in this story, Baruch is important as well. At great personal cost, he chose to work alongside of Jeremiah as a scribe and a messenger of the prophet’s bold message. This was a politically dangerous move that would eventually place him on the king’s hit list. Baruch is part of the company of scribes, who first wrote down the biblical texts through which God continues to speak. The Bible that we hold in our hands today is the work of countless scribes who devoted their time and talents to the important task of writing and copying. We owe Baruch and many other scribes our gratitude for their dedication.

The message of the scroll continued to have a ripple effect throughout the nation. These men in the halls of power recognized the seriousness of Jeremiah’s oracles and they responded appropriately. When they heard the warnings of impending disaster, they were greatly alarmed, but determined to take action (36:16). They decided to inform the king since he was the leader of the nation and appointed to respond to a crisis like this (36:16). But before doing this, they ascertained the authenticity of the scroll’s contents by asking about its origins (36:17-18). When they determined that scroll contained Jeremiah’s words, they moved ahead with their plans. But they also recognized that the scroll’s message would be offensive to the king. They also knew that the king had an inclination for eliminating anyone who voiced a subversive opinion against the ruling establishment. He had brazenly executed Uriah, a prophet who had a similar message to Jeremiah’s (26:20-23). What would stop him from getting rid of Jeremiah and Baruch after hearing the words of the scroll? So, the officials instructed Baruch to go into hiding along with Jeremiah (36:19). Clearly, these high-ranking officials were sympathetic to Jeremiah’s message since they took action to protect both the prophet and the scribe. Anticipating a hostile response from the king, they did not want him to succeed in silencing the message and eliminating the messengers. Only after ensuring their safety, did they inform the king about the scroll.

Finally, the scroll made its way to the court of the king. This time, Jehudi, a royal official, had the task of reading its words to the assembled audience (36:21). The king’s reaction to scroll’s message is shocking. Ancient Hebrew scrolls had their text written in parallel columns, so as the reading proceeded the scroll was unrolled. After Jehudi had read a few columns, the king himself sliced off that section with a knife and threw it into the fireplace (36:23). He gave no hint that he was listening to the message. Instead, he demonstrated his utter contempt for it by cutting it up and burning it. He shut out God’s word and refused to let it touch his life. There is a clever play on words within the passage that contrasts the king’s appalling response to a suitable one. Instead of “*cutting*” or tearing his clothing as a sign of repentance, the king “*cut*” the scroll in a total disregard of its message (36:24). Assuming that he has eliminated the message, the king took steps to eliminate the messengers, so he ordered his court officials to arrest Baruch and Jeremiah (36:26). But the Lord thwarted the king’s plans by hiding his two courageous messengers.

Jehoiakim the king reckoned that the entire affair was over. The scroll was in ashes and its message was suppressed. Yet this was only temporary for God instructed Jeremiah and Baruch to re-write the scroll (36:28, 32). God’s word had been in the fire, but it was not consumed. Furthermore, the king’s actions would have dire consequences. God, through the prophet, issued a direct message to king, announcing his crime and his punishment. The king had burned the scroll and rejected its message, so his royal dynasty would end, his corpse would suffer indignity, his household would be punished, and disaster would come upon the entire land (36:30-31). If only he had listened and responded to the word in a genuine way.

These words from Benedict of Nursia (480-547 A.D.) provide a good summary and a fitting response to this passage from Jeremiah. He wrote: “The Lord himself in the gospel teaches us the same when he says: I shall liken anyone who hears my words and carries them out in deed to one who is wise enough to build on a rock; then the floods came and the winds blew and struck that house, but it did not fall because it was built on a rock. It is in the light of that teaching that the Lord waits for us every day to see if we will respond by our deeds, as we should, to his holy guidance. For that very reason also, so that we may mend our evil ways, the days of our mortal lives are allowed us as a sort of truce for improvement. So St Paul says: Do you not know that God is patient with us so as to lead us to repentance? The Lord himself says in his gentle care for us: I do not want the death of a sinner; let all sinners rather turn away from sin and live” (<https://commonprayer.net/yesterday>).