

The Word of God will Triumph

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[0 : 00] Now we come to our Bible reading and we are continuing the book of Jeremiah, reaching chapter 26. If you're using one of the church Bibles, that's on page 653 and Jeremiah 26, and we'll read the whole chapter.

Remember, we're in this part of Jeremiah where the prophets' life and ministry have become so intertwined that whatever he says is being treated with great contempt, great ridicule, and great opposition.

And so it is here. In the beginning of the reign of Jehoiakim, the son of Josiah, king of Judah, this word came from the Lord. Thus says the Lord, stand in the court of the Lord's house and speak to all the cities of Judah that come to worship in the house of the Lord.

All the words that I command you to speak to them, do not hold back a word. It may be they will listen and everyone turn from his evil way, and that I may relent of the disaster that I intend to do to them because of their evil deeds.

You shall say to them, thus says the Lord, if you do not listen to me to walk in my law that I have set before you and to listen to the words of my servants, the prophets, whom I sent to you urgently, though you have not listened, then I will make this house like Shiloh, and I will make this city a curse for all the nations of the earth, the priests and the prophets.

[1 : 37] And all the people heard Jeremiah speaking these words in the house of the Lord. And when Jeremiah had finished speaking all that the Lord had commanded him to speak to all the people, then the priests and the prophets and all the people laid hold of him, saying, You shall die, I have you prophesied in the name of the Lord, saying, This house shall be like Shiloh, and this city shall be desolate without inhabitant.

And all the people gathered around Jeremiah in the house of the Lord. When the officials of Judah heard these things, they came up from the king's house to the house of the Lord and took their seat in the entry of the new gate of the house of the Lord.

Then the priests and the prophets said to the officials and to all the people, This man deserves the sentence of death because he has prophesied against this city, as you have heard with your own ears.

Then Jeremiah spoke to all the officials and all the people, saying, The Lord sent me to prophesy against this house and this city all the words you have heard.

Now, therefore, mend your ways and your deeds and obey the voice of the Lord your God, and the Lord will relent of the disaster that he has pronounced against you.

[2 : 54] But as for me, behold, I am in your hands. Do with me as seems good and right to you. Only know for certain that if you put me to death, you will bring innocent blood upon yourselves and upon this city and its inhabitants.

For in truth, the Lord sent me to you to speak all these words. Then the officials and all the people said to the priests and the prophets, This man does not deserve the sentence of death because he has spoken to us the name of the Lord our God.

And certain of the elders of the land arose and spoke to all the assembled people, saying, Micah of Moresheth prophesied in the days of Hezekiah king of Judah and to all the people of Judah.

Thus says the Lord of hosts, notation here from Micah, Zion shall be ploughed as a field, Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house a wooded height.

Did Hezekiah king of Judah and all Judah put him to death? Did Hezekiah not fear the Lord and entreat the favor of the Lord? And did not the Lord relent of the disaster he had pronounced against them?

[4 : 07] But we are about to bring great disaster upon ourselves. There was another man who prophesied in the name of the Lord, Uriah the son of Shemaiah from Kiriath-erim.

He prophesied against this city and against this land in words like those of Jeremiah. And when King Jehoiakim with all his warriors and all the officials heard his words, the king sought to put him to death.

But when Uriah heard of it, he was afraid and fled and escaped to Egypt. Then King Jehoiakim sent to Egypt certain men, Elnathan the son of Achbor, and others with them.

And they took Uriah from Egypt and brought him to King Jehoiakim, who struck him down with the sword and dumped his dead body into the burial place of the common people.

But the hand of Ahicham the son of Shaphan was with Jeremiah, so that he was not given over to the people to be put to death. Amen. This is the word of the Lord.

[5 : 18] And it would be good if we could have our Bibles open at Jeremiah 26, please. And before we look at the passage together, let's have a moment of prayer. Amen. God, our Father, how we praise you.

You have given to us this word, this word which will faithfully and fully lead us to yourself. We pray now that your gracious Holy Spirit will take my human words in all their weakness, will use them faithfully to expound the written word, and so lead us to the living word, Christ Jesus, in whose name we pray.

Amen. Many of you may remember the wonderful opening sentence of the Voyage of the Dawn Treader.

There was a boy called Eustace Clarence Stubbs, and he almost deserved it. And that book, among other things, tells us the story of his rehabilitation and his final redemption.

The problem about young Eustace was that he knew everything. No one could tell him anything. No one could tell him anything he had never heard before.

[6 : 39] And he went through life making himself utterly obnoxious in the way that such people always do. But towards the end of the story, as he comes, as he approaches Aslan's country, he meets a man called Ramandu, who is the keeper of Aslan's table at the world's end.

Eustace, still bumptious and too full of himself, decides he will give Ramandu a lesson in astronomy. And he says, a star is simply a huge ball of flaming gas.

Ramandu replies, even in your world, son, that is not what a star is. That's only what it's made of. A wonderful distinction there.

Two views of reality. One that looks at the surface. A star is a ball of flaming gas, of course. But, far more profoundly, far more deeply, it, as we sang from Psalm 19, it displays the power of its creator. I've always felt, when we come to scripture, particularly when we come to a passage like this, with all its difficulties, you might well feel this is one of the simpler passages in Jeremiah, after some we've looked at.

[7 : 53] We need to look, not just at what it's made of, but what it's about. What it's made of, essentially, is a story of the hardships of Jeremiah and this otherwise unknown man, Uriah.

Now, we're not going to ignore that, but if we dwell on this, we are going to miss, it seems to me, the main thrust of this chapter. However, we're going to say things like, it was awfully tough for them, and it's awfully tough for us.

In other words, what's this passage saying to me, which, as you know, is never the place to begin a Bible study. That's where you hope to reach at the end of your Bible study. But if you begin there, of course, you only find what the passage is made of.

And it was all too easy to end up in a hand-wringing session. Things are tough. Things are awful. And end up missing the positive message of this chapter. And indeed, the whole book.

Very simply, the words of Jeremiah, and the words of this other guy, Uriah, whom we haven't heard of before and will not hear of again, though rejected at the time, outlasted the critics.

[9 : 05] Outlasted the persecutors. Outlasted the death of Uriah and the eventual death of Jeremiah. The subject is, in fact, the word of God will triumph.

That's what it seems to me, what this passage is. The word of God will triumph. Remember we read at the beginning, Isaiah 55, My word will not return empty.

It will accomplish the purpose for which I sent it. The word of God will triumph. Now, at a much earlier chapter, Jeremiah had preached a similar sermon.

The great temple sermon in chapter 7, which he looked at many months ago under the heading, Loving the Institution and Hating the Gospel.

He returns to this theme again. This is probably another version of it. Jeremiah, after all, was an itinerant preacher. Itinerant preachers very often preach similar messages, with slight differences.

[10:03] And here, this is probably another version. It's probably not the same sermon, but the time has come to preach that sermon again. Emphasis on continuity with the prophets.

Verse 5, listen to the words of my servants, the prophets, whom I sent you urgently, though you have not listened. And, of course, back to Moses himself, the greatest of all the prophets. But it's also anticipating what happened to Jesus on his first public sermon in the synagogue. Read about it in Luke chapter 4. That sermon begins with great approval.

Oh, this is a marvelous preacher. I would love to hear him. It ended with the same people wanting to throw him over a cliff. You see, this word is always going to provoke disagreement.

Read about Paul's experiences in Acts. The question is, which word is true? Which word will last? Whose words faithfully reflect God's words and therefore will last?

[11:08] Because we can be absolutely certain, if our words are not reflecting God's words, if they're not true to God's word, they will simply perish. They will disappear.

They may be eloquent at the time. They may gain a following. They may be attractive. But unless they are loyal to the word of God, they will not last.

So let's look then at this chapter. The word of God will triumph. In terms of, really, three necessities, verses 1 to 15 seems to me to be the necessity of being faithful to the whole word of God.

I want to emphasize that word, whole. It's an echo of chapter 1, verse 17. Tell them all the words, says the Lord to the young Jeremiah.

Don't hold back a word. That's hugely important. As we've noticed in the last weeks, God is confirming to Jeremiah that he's doing the right thing.

[12:12] He's echoing the words of his initial call. Essentially, they say, nothing's changed, Jeremiah. I keep on preaching this. This is the truth. Now, notice all the words.

Look at verse 2, the end of verse 2. All the words that I command you to speak to them, do not hold back a word. Now, that's not just vain repetition.

It's entirely possible to say things that are true, but which fall short of the whole truth. As we were here this morning, we remembered Andy Gemmel was talking about the false teachers who plagued the community that John was writing to.

Many of the things these people were saying were true. They weren't lies. They were true, but they were not telling the whole truth. And that has so much been the problem throughout the centuries. If you preach to people that God loves you, God cares for you, God has a plan for your life, no one is going to want to throw you over a precipice, are they?

[13:15] On the other hand, no one is going to listen very carefully because these easily become platitudes, don't they? Love is reduced to niceness. You know, almost as if, say, God is love.

It means God's a rather nice person. He wants you to have a good time. He wants you to have fun implicitly denying that he is going to judge the world.

That is the point. And this is where the me-centered Bible interpretation gets it so wrong. Of course none of us like judgment.

Of course we don't. But the point is not whether we like it, not whether it's true. And if we are unwilling to proclaim the whole message, the message that says that God will judge the world in righteousness, then if we're not prepared to say that, either it means, first of all, we don't actually believe it, or that we think being popular is more important than being faithful.

Jeremiah preached the whole word of God. That's what God is saying. God is saying, I said this to you, it's over 20 years, as we saw last week, since the call of Jeremiah.

[14:29] And now the Lord is saying, look, I know they haven't listened, Jeremiah. That does not alter the fact that it's true. Look at history, verses 5 and 6.

Listen to the words of my servants, the prophets, whom I sent to you urgently. Say right back to Moses himself. And then verse 6 gives us a specific example.

If you don't listen, verse 6, I will make this house like Shiloh. Now if you go back to 1 Samuel, you'll find that Shiloh was the ancient place where the Ark of the Covenant was kept.

When the people came into the Promised Land, and long before David had taken the citadel of Jerusalem, Shiloh was the place where the Ark of the Covenant and the Tabernacle were kept.

And 1 Samuel 1 to 4 tells us how it was destroyed by the Philistines because of unbelief. Read that. It's a rather terrifying story because the people of Israel tried to use the Ark as a magic talisman, taking him to battle, and the Philistines simply captured it.

[15 : 38] But at that point, what happened? God raised up Samuel, one of the greatest prophets of all. God, dealing with this situation of unbelief back then, raised up Samuel.

You see what God is saying to Jeremiah and to us. It didn't seem at that time as if God was being very effective. After all, he let the Ark be captured, let the settlement of Shiloh be destroyed.

What on earth? Why on earth did he allow that? The point is he raised up Samuel, and Samuel's words, we learn in 1 Samuel 3, none of them fell to the ground.

Which doesn't mean that everybody believed in Samuel, but it does mean his words were effective. And this inevitably arouses opposition. When you speak all the words, then you're going to get all the people criticizing you.

Verse 8, when Jeremiah had finished speaking all that the Lord had commanded him to speak to all the people, then the priests and the prophets and all the people laid hold of him.

[16 : 40] Notice, the religious establishment attacks him, the priests and the prophets, and also the gullible people going along with the religious establishment.

Do they have an argument? Do they say, no, Jeremiah, you've misinterpreted Moses, you've misinterpreted Samuel? No, what do they say? Why have you prophesied in the name of the Lord, saying this house should be like Shiloh, this city shall be desolate without inhabitant?

In other words, Jeremiah, we don't like what you're saying. Because we don't like what you're saying, we're simply going to dismiss it. We don't believe that God will do this at all.

Now, what does Jeremiah do in verse 13? Therefore, mend your ways and your deeds, and obey the voice of the Lord your God. Jeremiah does not change the message.

Now, in other matters, politicians are forever changing the message or the presentation, because politics isn't an absolute. In politics, there are opinions, there are points of view, and very often political parties have to change.

[17 : 53] But with the gospel, we don't have that option. With the gospel, don't change, Jeremiah. Don't change, not because you're a stubborn old reactionary. Don't change because these are true words.

And because they're true words, they will be fulfilled. Remember, there's two ways in which the word can be fulfilled. One is people responding. That's wonderful.

When the living word wakens the dead hearts of people, when the seed takes root and begins to grow. The other way is just as much a result of the word, and that is when hearts are hardened.

And this is what happens. As Paul says, when you proclaim the gospel, some people will smell the fragrance of Christ. They'll respond to the message.

Other people will smell the stench of death, and they'll hate you for it. Why should we expect, as Andy was saying this morning, why should we expect to be any different for us?

[18 : 54] It's the same message. The message which, as Jeremiah was told at the beginning, will tear down and build up, will uproot and will plant. It is the same message.

Not to be adapted. Now, when I say not to be adapted, I don't mean we preach in the style of the 17th century or anything like that. It's not what I'm meaning at all. What I'm meaning is the basic message cannot be changed.

The basic message, which is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.

Remember what Paul says. Paul does not say the gospel word is accompanied by the power of God.

Paul says the gospel word is the power of God to the salvation of all who believe. So, the necessity of proclaiming the whole word of God.

The unpleasant parts as well as the pleasant parts. The negatives as well as the positives. The judgment as well as the blessing. But secondly, in verses 16 to 19, if the whole word of God is proclaimed, then there is a necessity to respond to that whole word.

[20 : 04] The inevitable follows. If the prophet or the preacher is to speak the whole word of God without fear or favor, then the listeners need to respond without fear or favor.

And these verses are an interesting study in the way that people respond to the word of God.

Notice, first of all, verse 16.

Then the officials. Now, the officials are the civic rulers, clearly, who say this man does not deserve the sentence of death. That does not mean necessarily the officials were godly people, but they were fair-minded, unprejudiced people.

That's so important because they at least recognize that Jeremiah was not a false prophet. Notice what they say. He has spoken to us in the name of Yahweh, our God.

Jeremiah is telling the truth. You're claiming that he's a false prophet. He's not. He's telling the truth. And once again, you can trace that throughout other parts of the scripture.

[21 : 14] Remember Acts 5, where Gamaliel said, if this is of God, then you will not be able to stand against it. Now, Gamaliel did not come to believe the gospel as far as we know, but he was a fair-minded man who said, look, let's see what happens.

If this word comes true, then you're going to look very foolish if you reject it. And similarly throughout Acts, various Roman officials who support Paul and oppose those who want to kill him. You see, it's always religious people who are most fiercely opposed to the word of God. Religion and gospel do not go together.

When you've got religious people who build up a nice little establishment for themselves, they don't like the word of God and they're going to oppose it. And on the other hand, fair-minded people who have no particular axe to grind are going to be unprejudiced.

Not always, but it often happens. And I'm sure we can think of other examples, historical examples, examples in our own time of fair-minded people who are willing to listen without prejudice.

[22 : 32] But the second thing here is a striking historical example of responding to the word of God. In verse 18, there's the quotation from the prophet Micah.

Now, Micah, one of the prophets who is well known, of course, for his prophecy that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, he prophesies about the destruction of Zion, about the destruction of Jerusalem.

And the great performing king, Hezekiah, responded to that message. Now, it's very interesting. Hezekiah came to the throne after the godless reign and idolatrous reign of his father Ahaz, who had turned the people away from the word of God, turned the people away from loyalty to Yahweh. And it's surprising sometimes how Hezekiah, brought up in a home like that, became the kind of man he was. Now, surely here is one of the reasons.

Hezekiah listened to the preaching of Micah. He also, as we know later on, listened to the preaching of the great prophet Isaiah. See, when you come across a turning to the Lord for which there's no obvious reason, no obvious preliminary work, if you dig a little deeper, you'll always find there have been faithful people laboring on, unknown perhaps, unheralded, unsung.

[24 : 04] When the great revival swept through this land and into Europe and parts of America, and God raised up the Wesleys and Whitfield, if you read the dreary history of the 18th century before, that you'll find in unknown places, little-known people faithfully proclaiming the word of God, others praying that God would come and visit his people.

So it's an insight into this. And Hezekiah did see the city saved from the great Assyrian invasion. You see, the problem is that had made others complacent.

As they looked at the world around, they thought Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, is never going to come and destroy the city. After all, God rescued us over a hundred years ago when the Assyrians came.

The point, surely, Jeremiah is making, is, of course, God saved the city because the king repented. The king listened to the words of the prophet. The king humbled himself.

Read 2 Kings 18 and 19. Hezekiah, when he gets the insulting letter from Sennacherib, king of Assyria, he goes into the temple, spreads the letter before the Lord and said, Lord, rescue us.

[25 : 21] Not because we're wonderful. Not because we've done a great job. Hezekiah says, Lord, rescue us so the whole world will know that you, Yahweh, are the only true God.

There's absolutely nothing of this in Jerusalem at this time. They are bragging about themselves. They are listening to the false prophets. And God is going to bring judgment.

Verse 19. Did Hezekiah, king of Judah, and all Judah, put him to death? Did he not fear the Lord and entreat the favor of the Lord? And did not the Lord relent of the disaster he had pronounced? Postpones it. And, but we are about to bring the great disaster upon ourselves. Notice two important things here. First of all, it's God who brings judgment.

But secondly, people bring judgment on themselves. We are about to bring great disaster, great evil upon ourselves.

[26 : 23] It's rather like in Romans 1, where Paul talks about the anger of God revealed from heaven. And the terrible phrase repeated three times, God gave them over.

God gave them over. God gave them over. You see, God is totally consistent. His word does not become stale and unworkable.

Now that, notice what Jeremiah is not saying, dwell in the past. Jeremiah is not saying, oh, let's have a celebration and talk about the great days of Hezekiah.

Jeremiah is saying, look what Hezekiah did and do that. Turn to the Lord. Turn to the Lord now. Don't brag about past deliverances.

Turn to him now. Now that word was fulfilled in blessing for Hezekiah. That word is going to be fulfilled in judgment for us. And then thirdly, the necessity of, I'm not sure how to put this, the necessity of realizing that it is God who controls the way that His word works.

[27 : 31] Verses 20 to 24. Now, this is one of those cryptic little passages. We know nothing of Uriah other than what's mentioned here.

And we don't know how he came to his believing faith and his powerful ministry. There is a mystery. The word always works, but not with the same effect and not always in the same way.

These are dangerous days. His Jehoiakim was a tyrant, a nasty, vicious piece of work. And in chapter 22, Jeremiah talks about his love of luxury, his hatred of people, his indulgence, and his lack of social justice.

In chapter 36, this same man is actually going to tear up the scroll of Jeremiah's prophecy and throw it into the fire. It's the kind of man that he was. But clearly, one thing at least we can see is the word of Jeremiah had almost certainly inspired courage in others.

There was another man, verse 20, who prophesied in the name of the Lord. He prophesied against this city, against this land in words like those of Jeremiah.

[28 : 49] I think the hint there is that he had been inspired by Jeremiah's dauntless stand and so inspired that he decided he was going to proclaim this same message, come what may.

Now, you see, it was tough for both of them. Jeremiah had many, many more years of faithful and tough preaching. Uriah is killed.

It is a mystery here. Once again, go to the book of Acts. Go to Acts chapter 12. Peter is rescued from prison, but James is murdered by Herod.

That's why it is always a mystery. Why is it that some ministries are cut off and others are given a longer period? Why is it that somebody like Jeremiah, now, I'm talking about Jeremiah after Jeremiah's time.

We're reading his words. We're benefiting from his words. We're challenged by his words. We know nothing about the words of Uriah. Why is it? Well, the answer is that we don't know, but the Lord knows.

[30 : 00] Just as in Acts chapter 12, it's very interesting. It's in that chapter that includes both the martyrdom of James and the continuing ministry of Peter ends this way.

The word of God increased and multiplied. So whether it's by the unknown Uriah, we've only heard of through Jeremiah. And if you ask your average Bible reader if they had heard of Uriah, the son of Shemaiah from Kiriath, Uriah, then probably the answer would be no.

Nevertheless, he is hugely important. His name is in the role of honor. He is one of those, the great cloud of witnesses that Hebrews 12 speaks of.

In Uriah's time, in Jeremiah's time, the word will triumph. The word did triumph. Even though nothing more about him. Point is, the Lord knew his work.

And on the day when all our work lies open and bare before the judge of all, Uriah will be given his true place.

[31 : 07] As late William still used to say, the prize giving is upstairs. Let's not be overawed by evangelical celebrities. Let's not judge by worldly terms.

Only the Lord knows what his servants are doing and have done. One day he will reward openly and fully and faithfully.

So the mystery of how God controls his word. And in verse 24, remember I said at the beginning, it's not just a case of poor Uriah, poor Jeremiah.

This is about the word of God. Note in verse 24 is much more than a historical reference. The hand of Ahicham, the son of Shaphan, was with Jeremiah, so he was not given over to the people to be put to death.

One of the officials, obviously, who was standing up for Jeremiah. But this guy is mentioned elsewhere in the scripture. In 2 Kings 22, verse 12.

[32 : 10] When the godly king Josiah launches his great reformation, Ahicham is one of those who is associated with the discovering of the book of the law.

The words of Moses, which are going to fuel that great reformation, become its driving force. In other words, the life-giving word of God is what inspired this man.

He's not just a politician. You might easily imagine here, he's just a politician who, for his own reasons, is supporting Jeremiah. Nothing of the sort. This is a man who is loyal to the word of God. Jehoiakim might burn the scroll later on, as he is to do in chapter 26. Others to destroy and suppress these in different ways. But the word of God will triumph.

So you see, this is an enormously encouraging passage. As I said at the beginning, if all we think about is, oh, how difficult it is, then, of course, we're going to be discouraged.

[33 : 11] And the other thing is, we're going to think it's uniquely difficult for us. It's one of the great problems of human beings, isn't it? We think our situation is uniquely difficult. Remember the words of 1 Peter.

This experience of suffering, he writes to a group of persecuted Christians, is required by your brothers and sisters throughout the world. But when we look at ourselves as servants of the word of God, when we look at ourselves as those who have been committed to the word of God, the living word which is able to make people wise to salvation, the living word that will break down barriers, then we begin to see what this chapter is about and indeed what the book is about.

God will be God and the world will know it. As C.S. Lewis says, in the end, all of us will carry out the purpose of God. It will make all the difference if we serve him as John did or as Judas did.

And that is what this chapter is facing us with. Are we going to serve him as John did? Or are we going to serve him as Judas did?

Amen. Let's pray. Father, we know we are fickle and inconsistent human beings.

[34 : 38] Most of the time we would rather hide or run away. And yet you have given to us the living word, the word which made us wise to salvation, the word which can make others wise to salvation, the word which will one day judge the world, the word which will outlast the created order, and which fully and faithfully presents our Lord Jesus Christ.

And so, Lord, give to us the courage, give to us the wisdom of people like Jeremiah and Uriah, one well known, the other scarcely known at all.

And help us indeed to believe that the word will triumph. We ask this in the name of the living word himself. Amen. Amen.