

The Word which cannot be destroyed

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[0 : 0 0] turn with me in your Bibles to our reading for this morning, which you'll find in the prophet Jeremiah. In our church Bibles, I think if you have one of those, it's page 664, but we're in Jeremiah chapter 36. And you'll see just how relevant is the psalmist's prayer that we sang earlier, asking God to keep him from presumption and from ignoring or disdainning the word of the Lord. This is a chapter all about the power of God's word and the hardened hearts of men. Jeremiah 36 and verse 1. In the fourth year of Jehoiakim, the son of Josiah, king of Judah, this word came to Jeremiah from the Lord. Take a scroll and write on it all the words that I have spoken to you against Israel and Judah and all the nations from the day I spoke to you from the days of Josiah until today. It may be that the house of Judah will hear all the disaster that I intend to do to them, so that everyone may turn from his evil way, and that I may forgive their iniquity and their sin. Then Jeremiah called Baruch the son of Nariah, and Baruch wrote on a scroll at the dictation of Jeremiah all the words of the Lord that he had spoken to him. And Jeremiah ordered Baruch, saying, I am banned from going to the house of the Lord, so you are to go. And on a day of fasting and the hearing of all the people in the Lord's house, you shall read the words of the Lord from the scroll that you have written at my dictation.

You shall read them also in the hearing of all the men of Judah who come out of the cities. It may be that their plea for mercy will come before the Lord, and that everyone will turn from his evil way. For great is the anger and wrath that the Lord has pronounced against this people.

And Baruch the son of Nariah did all that Jeremiah the prophet ordered him about reading from the scroll the words of the Lord in the Lord's house. 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, in the hearing of all the people, Baruch read the words of Jeremiah from the scroll in the house of the Lord in the chamber of Gemariah and the son of Shaphan, the secretary, which was in the upper court at the entry of the new gate of the Lord's house. When Micaiah, the son of Gemariah, son of Shaphan, heard all the words of the Lord from the scroll, he went down to the king's house, into the secretary's chamber, and all the officials were sitting there. Elishamah, the secretary, Deliah, the son of Shemaiah, Elnathan, the son of Achbor, Gemariah, the son of Shaphan, Zedekiah, the son of Hananiah, and all the officials. And Micaiah told them all the words that he had heard when Baruch read the scroll in the hearing of the people.

Then all the officials sent Jehudi, the son of Nethaniah, son of Shalamiah, son of Cush, to say to Baruch, Take in your hand the scroll that you read in the hearing of the people, and come.

So Baruch, the son of Neriah, took the scroll in his hand and came to them. And they said to him, Sit down and read it. So Baruch read it to them. When they heard all the words, they turned to one another in fear. And they said to Baruch, We must report all these words to the king.

[4 : 0 1] Then they asked Baruch, Tell us, Please, how did you write all these words? Was it at his dictation? Baruch answered them, He dictated all the words to me while I wrote them with ink on the scroll.

Then the officials said to Baruch, Go and hide, you and Jeremiah. Let no one know where you are. So they went into the court of the king, having put the scroll in the chamber of Elisham and the secretary, and they reported all the words to the king. Then the king sent Jehudi to get the scroll, and he took it from the chamber of Elisham and the secretary. And Jehudi read it to the king and the officials who stood beside the king. It was the ninth month. The king was sitting in the winter house, and there was a fire burning in the firepot before him. As Jehudi read three or four columns, the king would cut them off with a knife and throw them into the fire in the firepot until the entire scroll was consumed in the fire that was in the firepot. Yet neither the king nor any of his servants who heard

all these words was afraid, nor did they tear their garments. Even when Elnathan and Deliah and Gemariah urged the king not to burn the scroll, he would not listen to them.

The king commanded Jeremiel, the king's son, and Saraiah, the son of Azrael, and Shalamiah, the son of Abdiel, to seize Baruch, the secretary, and Jeremiah, the prophet.

But the Lord hid him. Now after the king had burned the scroll with the words that Baruch wrote at Jeremiah's dictation, the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah, take another scroll and write on it all the former words that were in the first scroll, which Jehoiakim, the king of Judah, has 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 cut off it man and beast? Therefore thus says the Lord concerning Jehoiakim, king of Judah, he shall have none to sit on the throne of David, and his dead body shall be cast out to the heat by day and the frost by night. And I will punish him and his offspring and his servants for their iniquity.

[6 : 41] I will bring upon them and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem and upon the people of Judah all the disaster that I have pronounced against them, but they would not hear.

Then Jeremiah took another scroll and gave it to Baruch the scribe, the son of Nerai, who wrote on it at the dictation of Jeremiah all the words of the scroll that Jehoiakim, king of Judah, had burned in the fire.

And many similar words were added to them. Amen. May God bless to us this, his word.

I wonder if you'd have your Bibles open, please, at page 664, Jeremiah chapter 36, which was read for us.

And we'll have a moment of prayer as we ask the Lord's help as we come to his word. God our Father, how we praise you that in times past your gracious Holy Spirit inspired people to write your very words.

[8 : 12] And that that same spirit now comes to help us in our understanding to open our eyes and to lead us to the living word, Christ Jesus, the great subject of that word.

In his name we pray as we ask that we may understand that our hearts may burn, our eyes may be opened. We ask this for the glory of Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. This book that we hold in our hands we very often take for granted, don't we?

It's so easily and readily available. There never was a time when there are more translations, more helps to understand it, more attractively produced versions of it, And yet, there is still abysmal ignorance of this word in our nation, in our society, and indeed in the churches themselves.

It's a very exciting and long story of how this word came to us in our own languages and to other people in their languages. It's a story punctuated by persecution, by hardship, by exciting dramas.

[9 : 29] And all the way through it, there is this desire of people to bring to us the word of God in our own language. So we need to thank God, not just for those who wrote the Scripture sacred page, but for those who have all the generations translated, copied, expounded this word, and brought it to us.

Now, one of these people was the great reformer, William Tyndale, who was responsible for one of the earliest, earlier translations into our own language. His translation works were not popular, not popular among those who wish to keep people in ignorance and therefore to keep them under control.

The one occasion, Tyndale said to a rather pompous scholar who totally opposed his work, he said these words, If God spares my life, before many years I will cause the boy who pushes the plow to know more about Scripture than you.

And that to me is at the very heart of the desire to bring the word of God to people in language they can understand. And that's what's at the very heart of this chapter, Jeremiah 36.

This is one of the glimpses, we don't have many, but one of the glimpses in Scripture of how the word actually came to us. This is an exciting, dramatic story in itself, and it tells us something about how this book of Jeremiah came to us.

[11 : 04] There's one or two other such passages. Luke, for example, at the beginning of his Gospel, if you read verses 1 to 4 of Luke, Luke tells us that he listened to people, he read what they had said, and under the guidance of the Spirit compiled his Gospel.

This is another such glimpse. It's not just about the book of Jeremiah, and it's not just about 6th century BC Jerusalem. This is a picture of the fortunes of the word which cannot be destroyed. And that's our subject for this morning, the word which cannot be destroyed. There's a vicious and deliberate attempt to destroy it here, but it cannot be destroyed.

Now these chapters here, which we've been looking at and will return to later on in the summer, these chapters show us something of the historical situation in Jerusalem.

Jerusalem is about to be destroyed by the Babylonians. And chapters 34 onwards are showing us a glimpse of what conditions were like, both for Jeremiah and for the other citizens of Jerusalem.

[12:15] They're not chronological. They are set in the reigns of the last two kings of Judah, Jehoiakim here and then Zedekiah. And this story actually goes back a bit further than the passages we looked at two weeks ago.

This is some 20 years before Jerusalem falls, and King Jehoiakim is on the throne. But what this chapter shows us is that this was the day when the future of Judah was destroyed by the king of Judah himself.

When he defied the word, when he tried to destroy the word, and when he confirmed that kind of disobedience that was going to bring the exile.

So this is what we're looking at today. And remember, well, of course you don't remember what I said, so let me remind you. In these later chapters of Jeremiah, we've got the poetry in chapters 30 to 33, the glorious poetry of what the new creation is going to be like.

The new heavens and the new earth, when God will reign and everything will be peace and prosperity and righteousness. Now in these chapters, 34 onwards, and this chapter 36, and other chapters we'll look at later, this is the prose, if you like.

[13:38] This is what it was like for Jeremiah and for others to bring the word of God to his own day. A word which also speaks to our day. So let's look at the chapter as it develops.

In many ways, it's a very straightforward story, but it's dominated by the word of God, the word which cannot be destroyed. So first of all, verses 1 to 8, the word given and written.

Now both of these are terribly important, given and written. In this word, verse 1, came to Jeremiah from the Lord.

Probably what's written in the scroll is initially chapters 1 to 25, the earlier prophecies which had come from the reign of Josiah and earlier kings.

So it's given by God. Not Jeremiah, go away and write an essay, go away and make up your own ideas. This word came to Jeremiah from the Lord.

[14:37] But without the written word, future generations have no real access to what God is saying. If we didn't have the written word, then what we would depend on is tradition passed down through the centuries, kind of rolling body of tradition, gathering more and more legends, more and more accretions to it.

We need a written word from the Lord. So the word is given and the word is written. And this is a practical word. Verse 3, it may be that the house of Judah will hear all the disasters I intend to do to them, that everyone may turn from his evil way, that I may forgive their iniquity and their sin.

Now that is a specific word to that generation. But it's also a general word. Isaiah the prophet in chapter 55 of his book uses almost exactly the same words and applies it to all generations.

Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous one his thoughts. Let him return to the Lord that he may have compassion on him and to our God and he will abundantly pardon.

You see, without the living spirit. Now the spirit is not mentioned in this chapter. But without the living spirit, it remains an ancient book.

[16:00] And many people are only interested in it as an ancient book. People who taught me theology in Edinburgh were interested in the Bible. They certainly knew it.

They knew the ancient languages. They knew the ancient background. They knew the history. But they did not accept that this was a living word of God for the present. They were essentially interested in ancient languages, ancient history.

But that's not what this word is for. This word is for every generation. Now we, of course, need to understand the text.

We need to work hard at it. Understand the languages. Understand the background. But understand them so that the message, the eternal message of what Paul calls repentance towards God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul's message is identical to Jeremiah's right through the Bible. Now the situation is that Jeremiah is, verse 5, banned from going to the house of the Lord.

[17:00] Almost certainly because he had preached the temple sermon back in chapter 7 and repeated it in chapter 26, where he warned people, the temple has become an idolatrous shrine.

God is going to judge it. It no longer honors God. And what do they do? They say, oh, you're not coming to the temple again. We don't want to hear that. So, you see, even before Jeremiah writes his words, there's an attempt to prevent his spoken words.

So, Jeremiah calls his scribe Baruch. We'll come to him in a moment. Now you see what's happening. And the word is given and the word is written down.

Now, the written word, it does not mean that Jeremiah sat down on winter evenings and the Lord dictated words to him, which he then put down as if he were a dictograph.

No, we don't know how the Spirit spoke to the Bible writers. There is nowhere in Scripture that tells us how actually people received the word.

[18:02] But what did happen is that the Spirit so superintended the process that what we have here is not just the words of Jeremiah, but the words of the Lord.

I think that's terribly important. We don't know anything about the technique. We don't know anything about the method. But we do know that the result is that we have the words of Jeremiah, but more importantly, the words of the Lord himself.

What we hold in our hands is the word of God as well as the word of humans. The word is from God. But the second thing is God uses people to bring that word.

This is the human aspect of which we have here. Because God, the word does not drop down from heaven. The word comes through human beings.

First of all, to Jeremiah. We don't know how Jeremiah received the word. And then Baruch, his secretary, writes it down. That's where the dictation comes in, when Baruch, the secretary, writes it down.

[19:02] That's common in Scripture. You didn't know, did you, that Tertius wrote the letter to the Romans? Read chapter 16, I, Tertius, who wrote this letter. Obviously, the letter is from Paul, but Paul is helped by his secretary, Tertius, who writes down the words of the letters to the Romans.

So, here, Jeremiah speaks the words to his scribe, Baruch, his friend and his scribe. And something like that probably happened in many of the cases.

We don't know. For one thing, we don't even know who all the human authors were. We don't know who wrote the letter to the Hebrews. We don't know who wrote the book of Job. Many, many books, we don't know who the human authors were.

But God uses human beings. You see, it is a word of mercy. Maybe verse 7, that the plea from mercy will come before the Lord.

It's also a word of judgment. So, this word, coming from God, written down, and so that people in later centuries can read it, people in later centuries can hear the word of the living God.

[20:13] And notice, this is not to be taken for granted. Verse 7, it may be that their plea for mercy will come before the Lord. You can't take God for granted.

So, that's the first thing then. First thing which we thank God is that he has given us his word. He's given us his word through human agencies. And what we hold in our hands is both his word and the word of human beings.

Not perfect human beings, fallible human beings like us. What we have from their hands through the power of the Spirit is inerrant. But what they themselves were not.

They themselves had faults like us. There's a human element in Scripture as well as a divine element. So, that's the first thing. The second thing in verses 9 to 19 is the word heard.

It's not enough simply to write words down in a book. They need to be heard. And, as I say, there's never been a day when there's been so many attractively produced Bibles, so many translations which help us and helps to understand.

[21:22] But the word needs to be heard. And so, in verse 9, In the fifth year of Jehoiach came the son of Josiah. All people who came from the cities of Judah to Jerusalem proclaimed a fast before the Lord.

Verse 10, In the hearing of all the people, Baruch read the words of Jeremiah from the scroll. Now, the hearing of the word. This is a very public occasion.

This word is not private. It is public truth. Be declared in public places. Just as in the book of Proverbs, wisdom calls out in the market squares.

Wisdom calls out in police at people's houses. Wisdom calls out wherever people are. And so with this word. Now, this public reading here is, indeed the whole chapter, is a rerun of an earlier situation, which you can read about in 2 Kings 22.

At the beginning of the, well, early in the reign of the great reforming King Josiah, in whose reign the ministry of Jeremiah began, the book of the law, that is to say the book of Moses, the Pentateuch, especially the book of Deuteronomy, was discovered, where it had been lying under a great deal of rubble and lumber in the temple for many generations.

[22 : 44] This fueled his great, this fueled the great reformation. And the names mentioned here in verses 11 and following are either the early generation or their sons who had been involved in that great reformation.

They had discovered the scroll. They had read it to Josiah. In every generation, there are faithful people who listen to the word and who obey it. And this fueled that last great reformation in Judah before the exile.

And here there is a fast before the Lord. Now, of course, it's always much easier to engage in public acts of piety than it is to actually listen, to be challenged by and obey the word of God.

See, sometimes the word of God is treated superstitiously. In a church which I served in at one time, the church officer would solemnly carry in the pulpit Bible, place it in the pulpit, and people would stand.

And I, from my very, almost my very first Sunday that I thought, there's something not quite right about this. This is superstition. More so, since some of them thought they were standing for me, which is even worse.

[24 : 02] But I asked me, why do you stand when the Bible is brought in? I said, oh, because we respect the Bible so much. I said, well, why is it then, when the Bible comes to be read, you sit with pew Bibles in front of you and don't open them, if you really respect the word of God?

That was just a superstitious ritual, carrying it in a book. It was a kind of superstitious attitude towards a book. It was not trembling at the word of God.

But, see, the effect of the word of God is not shown by being carried solemnly in and placed on a lectern or a pulpit.

The effect of the word of God is how deeply does it affect the hearts and lives of people. So this reading takes place. There is a great show of piety, but there's nothing as a result of this.

And then there is a second reading, verses 15 to 19, which is rather different. This second reading, as I say, is this group of men who had been involved in the earlier great reformation of Josiah, people who had been loyal to the great king, who had listened to his words.

[25 : 19] And it's interesting. When the verse 16, when they heard all the words, they turned one to another in fear. There's a very different reaction.

They did what Isaiah says. It says, the person whom the Lord respects does, they trembled at the word. They realized that this word was radical.

This word was challenging. This word needed a response. That doesn't mean they responded mindlessly. Verse 17, they asked Baruch, tell us, please, how did you write all these words?

Are these the genuine words of Jeremiah? Minded of the people, the Bereans in the book of Acts, who searched the Scriptures daily to find out of what Paul was saying was true.

You see, there needs to be a private searching of Scripture as well as a public proclamation. And this is what's happening here. They recognized whose word it was.

[26 : 26] Now, I think it's very interesting. Jeremiah is coming at a stage in Scripture when the Bible is beginning to grow. Of course, Jeremiah didn't have the whole Bible as we did.

The interesting thing is, when in Josiah's reign, the words that were discovered were the words of Moses, the authoritative words of Moses, the standard by which every subsequent writer is going to be judged.

You see what's happening here. The words of Jeremiah are now taking their place along with the words of Moses as the authoritative word of God. And so this continues as the whole canon of Scripture comes together.

And in the book of Daniel, at the end of the exile, Daniel says, I read in the books and discovered that the exile was coming to an end. And what book did he read?

He read the book of Jeremiah, which he regards as authoritative. So, these men tremble at the word. They inquire about it. They realize the king must be told.

[27 : 28] But they're also concerned about Jeremiah and Baruch's safety. Verse 19. Then the official said to Baruch, go and hide you in Jeremiah and let no one know where you are.

Obviously, they knew they weren't going to get from Jehoiakim, the kind of response they earlier got from Josiah. The word heard. And when the word is heard, there are two ways we can treat.

You can treat it as the crowd did. Kind of great show of piety and no difference at all. Or we can treat it the way these officials, these godly men treated it.

Tremble at it. Inquire diligently into it. And care for those who are bringing it. Then thirdly, verses 20 to 26. The word rejected by King Jehoiakim.

Verse 22. Verse 23 is a very chilling verse. As Yehudi read three or four columns, the king would cut them off with a knife and throw them into the fire.

[28 : 32] That is terrifying and chilling. Jehoiakim was no Josiah. In fact, he was a nasty piece of work. In chapter 24, you read about him.

Jeremiah condemns him for building his house by unrighteousness and injustice, for living in extravagant luxury, glorying in dishonest gain, and shedding innocent blood.

This was the kind of man who was confronted by the word of God. Quite unlike Zedekiah. Zedekiah disregarded the word of God because he was essentially a weak and vacillating man.

This man is utterly, totally defiant. This is the man to whom these words were going to be read. And notice that verse 24.

Yet neither the king nor any of his servants who heard all these words was afraid, nor did they tear their garments. These were not men who trembled at the word of God.

[29 : 31] These were men who despised and totally rejected it. Now what's happening here? First of all, Jehoiakim is a superstitious man. He doesn't tremble at the word of God.

He doesn't obey it. But he is superstitious. He thinks if he destroys the pages and the words written them, he will destroy the word itself.

And that's often been the way down through the centuries. People thought if we burn Bibles, if we suppress the book, then the word will die. You see, once again, this is ignoring the living spirit.

If every Bible were to be burned, the living spirit is active and the living spirit will still bring the word. Destroying the printed page will not remove the power of the word.

These are kind of superstitions. The actual words on the page. Now, of course, it's not the words on the page. As Paul says in Galatians, the letter kills. There is a way of reading the Bible that brings death rather than life.

[30 : 36] A way that simply reads the words, tries to understand them, is complacent about them. The letter kills. It is the spirit, says Paul, who brings life.

Superstitiously getting rid of the actual pages. And also trying to destroy the messenger. Verse 26. The king commanded Jeremiel and Saraiah to seize Baruch the secretary and Jeremiah the prophet.

Destroy the actual words on the page. Destroy the messengers. All through history, this has been the reaction of those who reject the word of God.

Get rid of the word of God. Not necessarily burn it, but as in Josiah's time, keep it in the lumber room underneath all kinds of rubbish. And then get rid of the messengers.

Silence the messengers. Burn the books. Silence the messengers. But that will not prevent the kingdom of God coming. And that's the final part of the chapter.

[31 : 42] We've seen the word given and written. The word heard. The word rejected. And now in 27 to 32, the word preserved.

The knife and the fire could not touch the author. That is the point. They may destroy the words on the page, but they cannot destroy the living word of the author.

Notice verse 27. This has been so common in the book. But see how dramatic it is here. The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah. Isn't that the word that's been burned?

Isn't that the word that's been destroyed? No, of course not. The Lord's word cannot be destroyed. And that word is, first of all, the word of judgment.

Verse 30. Therefore, thus says the Lord, concern Jehoiakim of Judah, he shall have none to sit on the throne of David. And his dead body shall be cast out to the heat by day and the frost by night.

[32 : 41] It's not at all clear what actually happened to this king. Probably what did happen is when he died, his body was simply left unburied. A great, great humiliation, a great disgrace for somebody who had sat on the throne.

But then remember what I said, the kind of man he was back in chapter 24. A tyrant, a bully, and people simply were glad to get rid of him. The word which Jehoiakim burned came back to reject him and would judge him.

He shall have none to sit on. His son did not succeed him. And Zedekiah who succeeded him was his brother, actually. That doesn't mean the Davidic line was destroyed, as we'll see when we get to the end of the book, if we ever do.

But my intention to, although Dick Lucas once said to me, it would take me all my life. So if I get to the book, it don't mean if that's me coming to the end of my life.

That's another story. Anyway, the judgment will come. But also, the word continues to grow.

[33 : 52] Verse 32 took another scroll. He wrote the words that had already been destroyed. And many similar words were added to them. Now, in the first instance, that is the rest of the book of Jeremiah.

Which, presumably, Baruch collected the various sayings, put them together, and brought the book out. Similar thing probably happened with Isaiah.

Isaiah, at one point, says, seal this scroll and give it to the disciples. That sort of thing. You know, there's a striking parallel here to Acts chapter 12.

In Acts chapter 12, Herod has murdered James the apostle and tried to murder Peter. But that chapter also sees Herod's death. And in Acts chapter 12, after Herod's death, the word grew and multiplied.

Herod, once again, tried to suppress the gospel, tried to kill the messengers, tried to get rid of the word. The word grew and multiplied. And multiplied, indeed, bringing life to hundreds, thousands, millions across the world and throughout the centuries.

[35 : 05] And the Holy Spirit works, giving this complete canon that we have in our hands. Peter, in his second letter, speaks about the word, which is a light shining in a dark place.

It's the word of the prophets, the Old Testament, the word of the apostles, the New Testament. You see, this book that we hold in our hands, even as this were burned, the living spirit uses this book to bring us to the living word.

Now, many people will say, often heard it said, you've probably heard it said, our authority is not scripture, but Christ. But the point is, how do we know Christ apart from scripture?

Without scripture, the remembered Christ will soon become the forgotten Christ, whom we create in our own image, on whom we project our own fantasies.

The point is, the reason we love this book, ultimately, it's not worship of a book. It's not a paper book, as some people have rather rudely said.

[36 : 13] This word, fully, faithfully, leads us to the living word, Christ Jesus. It will never deceive us about him. It will never mislead us.

It will never lead us astray. The reason we love the Bible is because we love the Lord, to whom this book points. The whole Bible is the gospel.

The whole Bible points to Christ. I'll just do things as we finish. This chapter contains a warning. Don't defy this word and try to destroy it.

Because this word, which we destroy and defy, will judge us on the last day. That's a great encouragement, isn't it? Also, nothing can prevent this word doing its work.

Nothing can prevent it doing its work because the living spirit, who inspired it, still uses it to bring people to Christ, to bring conversion in the world and growth in the church.

[37 : 15] The word cannot be destroyed. Amen. Let's pray. God, our Father, how we praise you that in your wisdom you have given to us this written word, fully, faithfully pointing us to the living word, Christ Jesus.

And you have sent down the spirit from heaven so that we do not simply see letters on a page, but we are led through the written word to the living word himself.

Help us to have confidence in this word. Help us to believe in it. And help us to rejoice as we see the word increasing and multiplying.

In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.