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Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“JEREMIAH’S SCROLL”
Jeremiah 36:1-32

✎ I am holding the most dangerous book ever written.

No, it is not Marx and Engel’s Communist Manifesto, Darwin’s On the Origin of Species, Hitler’s Mein Kamp, or Mao’s Little Red Book. It is the Holy Bible.

Scripture is the most radical, revolutionary volume in history. What it reveals (directly and by implication) about God, the cosmos, life and death, personal morality, social ethics, economic values, and political principles is more explosive than anything conceived by mere mortals.

Give this book an inch, and it will take everything you have got. Reject it, and you will be left with nothing.

Obeys this book and you will be astounded at what it compels you to feel, think, say, and do. Disobey it, and you will never be free.

Yield to this book, and you will find your life by losing it. Resist it, and you lose your life even though you will appear to have saved it.

Trust this book and some will judge you harshly (in Iran or Saudi Arabia, they might even kill you). Insist on denying it, and you will murder your own soul.

The Almighty uses this book {Jer 1:10} **“to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant nations and kingdoms”** – as well as individuals, families, and communities.

The question is: *Will we embrace this risky book and live, or will we reject it and die?*

❑ Please turn to Jeremiah 36. The action is broken into five scenes.

▶ Scene one consists of verses 1-7.

■ Verse 1: **“In the fourth year of Jehoiakim son of Josiah king of Judah, this word came to Jeremiah from the LORD”**.

🕒 The time is 605 B.C. It is a pivotal year, one that the people of Judah will never forget.

Twenty years ago Babylonia was just another province of Assyria. Now it is poised to claim the title of one and only superpower. All that stands in its way are Assyria and Egypt.

In May or June, Babylon lays siege to Carchemish, the capital of the Assyrian Empire. The Assyrians send a frantic S.O.S. to Egypt, and fight with everything they’ve got. The Egyptian Kingdom, which is desperate to maintain short-term relevance and long-term independence, rushes to Assyria’s aid.

Their efforts are futile. Assyria is forever annihilated. Egypt is still self-governing for a little while longer, but its army is decimated to the last soldier.

Nebuchadnezzar’s victory propels his empire to unchallenged dominance. Now he fixes his hungry gaze on the small, independent countries that line Babylon’s periphery, including Judah. He does not wait long to take a bite. Later in 605 {Dan 1:2} he besieges Jerusalem.

■ Verse 2: **“Take a scroll and write on it all the words I have spoken to you concerning Israel, Judah and all the other nations from the time I began speaking to you in the reign of Josiah till now.”**

It is to include the messages of the {Jer 2:13} spring of living water versus broken cisterns, of the {3:1} **“prostitute with many lovers,”** of the {4:11} **“scorching wind”** that will “uncreate” Judah’s world, of {7:12} Shiloh as a cautionary example, of {18:1-10} the potter and the clay, and many more. Jeremiah has delivered them, but God first spoke the words. Now they are becoming written Scripture.

■ Verse 3: **“Perhaps when the people of Judah hear about every disaster I plan to inflict on them, each of them will turn from his”** or her **“wicked way; then I will forgive their wickedness and their sin.”**

These messages have been grim and painful – but never needlessly so. Every hard word has been spoken in a merciful effort to halt Judah’s self-destruction. YHWH’s goal is that they will return to him and find life.

This is always God’s heart toward us. His stinging rebuke, forceful correction, stern guidance, and holy disquiet are blessings of kindness.

■ Verses 4 and 5: **“So Jeremiah called Baruch son of Neriah, and while Jeremiah dictated all the words the LORD had spoken to him, Baruch wrote them on the scroll. Then Jeremiah told Baruch, “I am restricted; I cannot go to the LORD’s temple.”**

Remember the mob that demanded his death in ch. 26? His life was spared, but he has been banned from the temple ever since. The authorities rightly interpret the word of God as a threat to their power.

■ So in verses 6-7 the prophet instructs Baruch to go to the temple **“on a day of fasting”** and **“read to the people from the scroll”** in hope that they will turn from their sin and be saved.

▶ Scene two consists of verses 8-10.

⌚ There are no regular fast days, so after Baruch writes the scroll he waits until a special one is called **“in the ninth month of the fifth year of Jehoiakim”** (i.e., mid-November to mid-December in 604 B.C.).

Nebuchadnezzar is ambitious: during the 605 invasion he divides his forces between Judah (which is mostly inland) and Philistia (along the Mediterranean). But when the contingent attacking Philistia calls for back-up, the army besieging Jerusalem withdraws to help them.

Judah’s reprieve is only temporary. In December 604 the Babylonians destroy the last Philistine stronghold of Ashkelon. A day of fasting is ordered in Judah and the Israelites stream to the temple to pray for protection. As they do, Baruch reads aloud “from the scroll.”

▶ Scene three consists of verses 11-19.

A politically-connected man brings Baruch **“to the secretary’s room in the...palace.”** (These are not office-workers, they are cabinet officials.) After Baruch reads the scroll to them, they **“[look] at each other in fear ... ‘We must report all these words to the king. ...how did you come to write all this? Did Jeremiah dictate it?’”**

“‘Yes,’ Baruch [replies], ‘he dictated all these words to me, and I wrote them in ink on the scroll.’”

“The officials [tell] Baruch, ‘You and Jeremiah, go and hide. Don’t let anyone know where you are.’”

This Scripture speaks theological judgment on Judah's false beliefs about YHWH and the temple, ethical judgment on Judah's immoralities and injustices, and political judgment on Judah's internal and foreign policies. It is dangerous to the current regime; hence it is dangerous to all who are associated with it.

► Scene four consists of verses 20-26.

It is the coldest season of the year. King Jehoiakim is in his winter apartment, and a firepot is burning in front of him.

When Jehoiakim is told about the scroll, he demands to have it. Jehudi retrieves it and reads it aloud. **"Whenever [he has] read three or four columns"** the king interrupts him and, in the 7th c. B.C. version of document shredding, cuts off the dangerous words **"and [throws] them into the firepot."**

At some risk to their own safety, members of the cabinet urge the king not to burn the scroll; but he refuses not listen. He and his entourage show **"no fear, nor [do] they tear their clothes."**

The word translated **"tear"** in verse 24 is the same word translated **"cut"** in verse 23. The king brazenly cuts the scroll, but will not cut his garments. Contrast this with his father's response: when the Book of the Law was found and read to Josiah, **"he tore his robes,"** wept and sought a word from the LORD (Deuteronomy 22).

Finally the scroll is gone. In order to seal his apparent victory, Jehoiakim commands the arrest of Baruch and Jeremiah.

"But the LORD [has] hidden them" and they cannot be found. Once again, he fulfills the promise he made to Jeremiah {Jer 1:19}: **"They will fight against you but will not overcome you, for I am with you and will rescue you."** Likewise, the guarantee he has given to Baruch {Jer 45:5}: **"I will bring disaster on all people, but wherever you go I will let you escape with your life."**

Jehoiakim cannot be all that distressed. He has won, hasn't he?! He is more dangerous than this dangerous book, is he not?! But he is mistaken.

► Scene five consists of verses 27-32.

The LORD speaks to Jeremiah again: **"Take another scroll and write on it all the words that were on the first scroll, which Jehoiakim...burned up."** He is also to announce devastating judgment on the nation, the royal house, and especially the king. After he dies his corpse **"will be thrown out and exposed to the heat [of the] day,"** just as he threw the Scriptures into the fire.

The penalty fits the offense. When the king burned the scroll, it was not just an impulsive rejection of that scroll: it was a decisive attempt to eliminate the sovereign word and will of God as revealed in, and accomplished by, his holy Scripture.

Remember, {Ro 6:23} **"the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is ...life."** His rebuke, correction, stern guidance, and holy disquiet are gifts

of mercy intended to draw us into real, life-giving relationship with him. By adamantly refusing to listen, repent, and return to the LORD, Jehoiakim has sealed his own fate. He has chosen death instead of life, damnation instead of deliverance.

So Jeremiah takes another scroll, and as he dictates Baruch writes on it all the words of the scroll Jehoiakim burned. "**And many similar words [are] added to them.**"

This scroll narrative is loaded with momentous implications. Let me identify three.

✎ 1) Scripture is not neutral. Its original formation, and its ongoing production, reading and proclamation constitute a serious threat to the private and public status quo. It speaks -- either directly or indirectly, but always with God's authority -- to every significant issue.

✎ 2) Scripture demands a response. Since Scripture is not neutral toward us, we cannot be neutral toward Scripture. It is not merely a book of information about God's will; it is also God's primary means of accomplishing his will in the world.

And so our response to Scripture correlates directly to our response to God. It is impossible to love him and hate his Scripture. It is impossible to receive him and to reject his Scripture. After all, "**All Scripture is God-breathed**" (2 Timothy 3:16).

And so our response to it decides our future. His word is life. To deny it to the end is to choose death.

✎ 3) Bibles can be suppressed, confiscated and shredded by the millions, but Holy Scripture cannot be destroyed. {Is 40:6b, 8}

**All [humans] are like grass,
and all their glory is like the flowers
of the field....**

**The grass withers and the flowers fall,
but the word of our God stands
forever."**

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