

# Not those who say: Lord... Lord...

Jeremiah 36:1-32, Romans 15:1-6, Luke 4:16-24

(‘Bible Sunday’)

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When we began with our series of sermons about Jeremiah, we saw how the people of God had found the scrolls of the Word of God in the temple. The People of God had lost the Word of God, and when they found some of those old scrolls again, this was a *great event* in the life of the nation. This happened under the rule of the Jewish King Josiah, around the year 620 before Christ.

Today we have read how the eldest son of Josiah, that is King Jehoiakim, *destroyed* the word of God. The nation had gone full circle in a short period of 15 years. From *obeying* his Word to *burning* it.

We can learn much from these histories, even though all this happened 2,600 years ago. Romans 15:4 tells us:

Whatever was written in the former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and the encouragement of Scriptures we might have hope.

Nowadays, if we are not interested in the Bible, we can, for instance, sell it to a secondhand bookshop for a few pounds. The Bible I have here was once owned by an American gentleman - called Paul. I bought it for a few dollars in HalfPrice Books, a second-hand bookshop in Dallas, Texas, in the USA. Like so many people around us, this Paul obviously had no interest in a Bible, so he sold it.

## 1 God sent his word as an offer of his love

Jeremiah had seen *great love* in Israel for the Word of God – *and* he had seen how the people became less and less interested, and even *rejected* what God had to say to them.

In the fourth year of King Jehoiakim, Jeremiah was told by the Lord God to take a scroll, and write on it *all* the words God had spoke to Jeremiah throughout his *whole* career. Words regarding Judah, Israel and all the surrounding nations.

*Jeremiah* must sometimes have felt like giving up. He was very unpopular with his message. Why bother to tell the people? Why bother to evangelize? They will not listen anyway! But *God* does not easily give up on people. He, *once again*, offers the nation his forgiveness, his love, and healing. This is what the Lord our God said to Jeremiah:

Perhaps when the people of Judah hear about every disaster I plan to inflict on them, each of them will turn from his wicked way; then I will forgive their wickedness and their sin.

Any hardness, any direct attack on the unacceptable lifestyles of people in the Word of God, is *never* because God wants to condemn; it is because he wants to *avoid* condemnation, by changing the hearts of people – so for our *own benefit*.

Even though Jeremiah saw the hardness of heart of his own nation, and he had to even live in hiding because the King wanted to do away with him, he did not lose all hope. Again and again he gave the Word of God to the people – hoping that *light* might enter into their hearts.

That Jeremiah maintained hope that a real change was possible was not so strange. Yes, things *had* gradually become very bad. People did no longer honor and obey the Lord God. But at the *beginning* of his career, he *had* witnessed a great revival of faith, and love, and hope. Fifteen years earlier, when it seemed that all people had left God, the nation had returned to God.

Jeremiah began his ministry under King Josiah, at the time when the Word of God was rediscovered in the temple. When King Josiah heard this Word read to him, he *tore his robes*, as a sign of great mourning. Josiah cried out:

Great is the LORD’s anger that burns against us because our fathers have not obeyed the words of this book; they have not acted in accordance with all that is written there concerning us.

And God answered Josiah:

“Regarding the words which you have heard, because your heart was tender and you humbled yourself before the LORD when you heard what I spoke against this place and against its inhabitants that they should become a desolation and a curse, and you have *torn your clothes and wept before Me*, I truly have heard you,” declares the LORD.

Josiah converted; he became a follower of God and allowed the Bible to be formative for his personal life and for public life. The first thing he did was that he had all these Words of God read to the people in the temple. All the clergy and the people gathered and King

Josiah and the nation renewed their covenant with God, and the life of the nation changed remarkably.

The Word of God has this strange power to change people and nations... If that scares you, I suggest you keep your Bible *on the bookshelf*. But if you have an interest in God speaking to you, because he wants to offer you his love, and forgiveness, then *open it, use it, read it, embrace it, live it*. Listen to it in church – and act upon it.

## 2 People heard the Word

After 15 years, that revival in Jerusalem had become memory only. Today the people had too many problems; Babylon wanted to destroy the nation and rule over their land. No longer did they trust in God, they preferred to look for political solutions only. Can't the Western world help us? Let us ask the United Nations! We must be strong! We must resist! United we stand!

But God wanted to give them, *again*, another chance, even though they had forgotten to obey him. So Jeremiah dictated the Word of God to his secretary, Baruch, who wrote every word on the scroll.

Jeremiah himself could not go to the temple to read the words to the people; he was on the wanted-list of *Amn el-Dawla*, the State Security of king Jehoiakim; he was seen as a threat to the unity and the stability of the nation.

So Baruch instead went to the temple, to read all the Words of God to the people. Just like what happened in the time of Josiah. The Word of God was read in the temple, and all the priests, and officials, and the people could hear it.

But this time? We see no response by the people. They shrugged their shoulders. No interest.

Well, some people *did* show an interest. The officials in the temple were seriously worried about the content of the word of God. We read that they 'looked at each other in fear'. But they did not respond by changing their life. The message bothered them, but they did not take the action that was needed. What was needed? To listen, to believe, *and to do*. To hear *and to change*. To obey God *in all our ways*.

Is this not the danger we face in church as well? Week after week we hear the Word, and mentally we say: yes Lord, yes Lord... but in the meantime do we allow the message of the Gospel of our Lord to shape our own life?

Our Lord Jesus Christ said to his disciples that the house of our life *will certainly* be blown away by storms if we only listen, but not *implement*. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is about the grace of God for sinners. But it is always accompanied by a change of life in those who love their Lord.

It seems the officials in the temple *liked* Jeremiah and Baruch; they advised them to hide. But they did nothing with the *message* of Jeremiah. As trustworthy servants

of their king they only quickly reported Jeremiah's words to the King. Baruch left the scroll with these officials and he left in haste so that the king would not be able to capture him.

## 3 Response of King

The officials then took the scroll to Jehoiakim, and it was read to him The third reading on that day.

Jehoiakim did not show *fear*, and he did *not* tear his robe as his father had done. Instead, he tears the *scroll* into pieces and he burns it. For cutting the scroll into pieces, he used a penknife – a sort of razor – that was commonly used in the production of scrolls. The king used it for its destruction.

You think that is bad? Well yes, of course it is. But maybe this is a *better* response than the response of the people in the temple or of the officials. *They* heard the Word, and they did not respond *at all*.

At least King Jehoiakim took the words of the prophet *seriously*... He *realized* its importance, and said 'no' to it. *Away* with it.

Is this not a much more *honest and serious* response than how *we* often deal with our Bible? We read, we hear, but we do not allow it to impact us. We say with our mouth that we believe this to be the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God, but we neglect it. Is that not worse than what King Jehoiakim did?

God is asking us to *change*, because he wants to heal our lives. And what do we do? We listen and continue as if nothing happened, or we keep the Word of God on the bookshelf. As if God has never spoken.

Jehoiakim listened to the Word and responded by rejecting it; he burned his Bible. The result was, that *Jerusalem* would burn. The Word of God was rejected, and the people perished.

*All* the people perished, *including* the people who had shrugged their shoulders when the words were read to them. They had reacted *very* differently from the people in the time of Josiah. When those people had heard the word of God, they had embraced it as God's Word *for them*, and they had *become followers of our Lord*.

Why was this? Why did those who heard the Word in the time *of Josiah* change their life, and why did the people in the *next* generation, under Jehoiakim, *not convert* to obey God?

Was this maybe because in the time of Josiah, the king himself supported the reading of the Word, and he gave the good example to his nation? Josiah showed to all people that he truly wanted to obey God. *He led* his nation into mourning and conversion.

But *now*, under King Jehoiakim, the king was not even *around* in the temple when the Word of God was read. This is actually *surprising*, as the king *had* called for a nationwide fasting at that time, because of the dangers of takeover by Babylon. But the king, he was at

home, in his royal palace, warming himself at the fireplace. Not with his people in the temple in their time of need.

Religious life in Judah went on and on. Fasting, sacrifices, religious feasts, but *the leaders of the nation did not give the example* of truly serving God. They did not heed the word of God. No wonder their people did not heed the Word either. An important lesson for people in leadership roles in the church today. *Do what you want others to do. Do the Word*, if you want the church to obey the Word of God as well.

As soon as we do hear the Word of God, this places responsibility on us, to personally respond by becoming followers of the Word – of Jesus Christ, the Living Word and the fulfillment of all Scriptures.

And *we are all* in relationships of responsibility, in our work, with our friends, or at home, as parents raising children. If you desire to see *other* people follow Jesus Christ and obey the Word, *be an example yourself first!*

The man, Paul, who sold his Bible to a secondhand bookshop, had actually received it as a gift from his friend, a woman called Meredith. That is written on the front page. Meredith gave him this bible on 25 January 1996. Maybe for his birthday? I can only guess. This is what Meredith wrote in the Bible she gave to Paul:

To someone who has taught me a lot about life and love. May you find great happiness in all that you do. You will always be in my prayer and heart.

Beautiful. So why did Paul sell this Bible to Half-Price Books? Why did he not love the Word of God?

Maybe we learn a lesson from some other words that Meredith wrote on the front page:

This is the greatest gift I could give you.  
It is *part of me that I never showed you...*

Meredith was a friend of Paul, and she never showed him what the Bible meant for her. She read her Bible, but it had no impact on her life with her friends. She did not show the importance of the Word of God in her life – even to this friend Paul. She had the word stored up on a shelf, maybe on a shelf in her mind. But she did not live the Word of God.

No wonder this book did not mean much to Paul. No wonder it ended up in a second hand bookshop.

If you desire your friends to be interested in reading, and listening with their heart, and becoming followers of our Lord Jesus Christ, the only option for you, is that *you first read, and listen and follow*. The Word of God has most impact in the world around us, if we *live* that Word.

## Conclusion

Jehoiakim and the people did not live the Word; instead, they burned it. But it is impossible to destroy the Word of God; after it was burned, Jeremiah dictated the same scroll again. God had throughout the centuries safeguarded the integrity of his Word. Not the paper of the book, but it's content, it's meaning, that is indestructible and eternal

Unlike us. *We are* destructible. Our lives are like grass, like a cloud in the sky. Easy come, easy go. In order for our lives to have the same aspect of indestructibility, eternity built into it, God offers his Word to us, both in the book and in the Son of God, the perfect incarnation of all God has to say.

If we obey that Word, our life gets the same eternal quality. That is both the best for you and I, and for our friends around us. Because if we embrace the Word of God *to let it fully form and shape our lives*, his forgiveness and love and goodness are eternally ours.

+ Amen