

Jeremiah: Shaped by the Potter's Hand

Kenwood Baptist Church Fall Sermon Series

Pastor David Palmer

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TEXT: Jeremiah 36:1-32



Good morning, Beloved. How does the Bible actually come about? What's the process? Why does it matter so much to Christian faith? This morning we see a clear example of how the Scripture, the Bible, actually comes about. We also see the consequence of its production, and that consequence is monumental and glorious for us. Christianity is a text-based faith. I don't know about you, but I'm used to getting text messages. I've sent a few. You may have. But there is one text message that is in a totally different category from all the others. It is this message that we received this morning from Jeremiah 36 that becomes in-texted before us.

This morning, there is one object that I want you to bring into focus as we walk through this stunning passage together. That object is the scroll. The word "scroll" in Hebrew is also the same word for a book, and it is the book, the scroll, that in many ways is the main character in our passage.

It is the first word in Jeremiah 36:2. Jeremiah is told by God:

"Take a scroll and write on it all the words that I have spoken to you ..."

Note that the Lord speaks to Jeremiah, but then he tells Jeremiah to take the words that God has spoken and to write them down in a scroll. These are the words that God has spoken,

prophesying through Jeremiah to Israel, Judah, and the surrounding nations, from the day that God called Jeremiah until now; they summarize over twenty years of ministry.

Jeremiah responds to God's word by calling Baruch, his trusted friend. We met Baruch last week in the act of purchasing a field. Baruch was the scribe. In Jeremiah 36:4, we read:

"Then Jeremiah called Baruch the son of Neriah, and Baruch wrote on a scroll at the dictation of Jeremiah all the Words of the Lord that He had spoken to him."

Jeremiah called his friend and Baruch wrote on the scroll, at the dictation of Jeremiah, the *ESV* says, *"all the words that the Lord had spoken to Jeremiah."*

The Hebrew text is so vivid here. I want you to hear it. It says that Baruch wrote in a scroll "from the mouth of Jeremiah all the words that God spoke to Jeremiah." When we wonder, "How does the Bible come about?" this is it. This is it in one verse. God speaks, a prophet hears, those words are spoken and then written down. God speaks His will, His word. He uses human agents. He uses people who communicate in normal human speech.

The Bible can be read like any other book can be read. The personalities of the authors of Scripture, the human authors, are not obliterated. They are retained and preserved. Yet once those words are written down, they are then copied by others. That is how the Book that we know as the Bible comes about. From Jeremiah's mouth through Baruch's pen to a scroll. In Jeremiah, the vocabulary of the Word of God, the Words of God, is so prevalent it makes divine speech and the giving of God's word into book form a crucial element in the story. The Word of the Lord in many ways *is* the main character in the unfolding narrative.

Jeremiah tells Baruch to write it down, and then tells him in Jeremiah 36:6 to go and to give a public reading of the Scripture:

"... you are to go, and on a day of fasting in 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."

A public reading! God's Word is not hidden. This is a great difference with Christianity from other world religions: That God's Word is written down and God intends for you to hear and understand His Word. He wants His Word to be read publicly. That is why we do that. He wants His Word to be translated into languages that you know. And He wants His Word accessible. So Jeremiah tells Baruch, in Jeremiah 36:5:

"I am banned from going to the House of the Lord ..."

so you go take the scroll and read God's Word publicly to everyone. The Lord says there may be a chance that people will repent. And in one of the breathtaking, command-fulfillment patterns in Old Testament narrative, we read that Baruch did all that Jeremiah had commanded him.

This is the heartbeat of the life of a disciple. Jesus tells you to do something, and what do you do? You just do it. That's it! Jesus tells you, "Don't do that." What do you do? You don't do that! Jesus tells you, "Go buy that field." You just buy that field. Jesus says, "Go share My Word with that person." You just do that. He says, "Go, pray for them." It's so simple, isn't it? That's not complicated. But it is profound. So Baruch does it.

When we get to Jeremiah 36:9, we realize that it has taken Baruch nine months to write out Jeremiah's preaching ministry. He is writing in a book, in a scroll, twenty years of preaching. What we think of as Jeremiah 1-25 is probably contained in this scroll. It takes him nine months of patient obedience, in a very hidden way, and then the scroll is ready.

So Baruch goes, in the ninth month, at this time of festival gathering, when the people come from different cities of Judah. We read in Jeremiah 36:10:

"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 the son of Shaphan the secretary, which was in the upper court, at the entry of the New Gate of the Lord's House."

There's the scroll. He reads it in the House of the Lord, from the temple court, in the chamber of Gamaria. Gamaria's signet seal has been found archaeologically. It is a great easy-to-read seal. Baruch was reading the scroll at the entrance of the New Gate to the Lord's House. This is a prominent entrance point. It is not exactly like standing in Fountain Square, but it is like that. We don't really have one designated entrance into our cities today, and most of us, when we come into our cities, are driving into them. This would be like taking over all of the airwaves of the city and, through some kind of fantastic device, all of a sudden have God's Word read in every car, to every person as they're coming into the city. Can you imagine that? Imagine, every device within a metro area, every car radio, every set of earbuds, every cell phone, they all get wiped out to hear God's Word. What would happen? That's fun to think about, isn't it?

So Baruch reads Jeremiah's scroll publicly, and this is what happens. There is one man in the crowd whose name is Micaiah, which is a fantastic name. Micaiah's name means "who is like the Lord." He is in the crowd and he hears Baruch reading God's Word. So he says, "The officials need to hear this." So, Micaiah leaves the crowd and reports the words he heard, God's Word, to the people, revealing His own character and nature, and revealing God's covenant requirements: the necessity of repentance. Remember, this report includes our whole series on

Jeremiah: the Gospel according to Jeremiah. Micaiah hears it and he reports it to the leaders of the land. It would be like someone in the crowd, once we take over all the airways of our city, saying, "You know what? The mayor, all the city officials, the police department, everybody has to have a dedicated hearing of this Word."

So all the officials are gathered together and Baruch reads the scroll again. The officials send a man named Jehudi, and he says to Baruch, "Take that scroll and bring it." They officials gathered together and Baruch read the scroll again. It probably took about two hours to read the scroll. It takes four hours and nine minutes to listen to Jeremiah all the way through, and this scroll is about half of the book. The officials say, "We must report this to the king." So we see that the scroll, the Word of God, is going from all the people, to a group of officials, and now it's headed toward the king.

The officials asked Baruch, "Tell us, how did you come about to write these words? Was it at the prophet's dictation?" And Baruch, answering the officials, answers our question this morning: How does the Bible come about? In Jeremiah 36:18, Baruch answers the officials. This is how the Bible comes about:

"He [Jeremiah] dictated all these words to me, while I wrote them with ink on the scroll."

That is how It came about.

Sometimes you see the title of a book, and just the *title* of a book grips your heart. Has that ever happened to you? That happened to me this week with Andrew Shead's book. How is this for a title of a book: *A Mouth Full of Fire*. Subtitle: *The Word of God in the Words of Jeremiah*. I started reading Andrew's work. It is in a series of volumes on biblical theology. This is what he says:

"Through the act of writing, divine words take up residence on paper, and by means of their inscribed presence amongst us can be proclaimed again and again, venturing forth into the world to do their job of tearing down and building up ... Written words enable the Word to be heard into the future, and, more than this, enable the word to shine more brightly than ever it did by preserving it until it can be illuminated by its eventual fulfillment."

That is a mouth full of fire. What he is saying is that God's Word spoken to Jeremiah has an audience that includes you and includes me, and that God wants His Word to be written down so that it can be transmitted, so that it can be read again and again, and the consequence of its original issuance can be reproduced again and again, generation after generation, and nation after nation. The Bible is God's idea.

When these officials hear the Word read and its requirements upon us, their response is to tell Baruch, "You guys better hide." In Jeremiah 36:19, the officials tell Baruch:

"Go and hide, you and Jeremiah, and let no one know where you are."

Then they go in and report to the king. The king sends Jehudi to get the scroll. The scroll had remained in the chamber of the secretary. Now Jehudi, the royal messenger, goes and pulls the scroll out, and he reads it. It's not Baruch; there's another Scripture reader.

As Jehudi reads this scroll, he unrolls it and reads a portion. As he reads three or four columns of the scroll—think of all that we have heard this fall from Jeremiah of who God is and what He requires, and His right indictment of our sinfulness and rebellion—the king pulls a knife from his side and slices off that portion of the scroll and casually tosses it into the fire that is in front of him to keep him warm.



This is a gut-wrenching scene for a believer to read.

We need to have in our minds that picture of a scroll, knowing that reading it would take two hours. The word in Hebrew for "column" is literally

"a doorway." You can see that as you look at a scroll. It looks like a door of text, doesn't it? Jehudi, this royal messenger, stands before the king, who is trying to keep himself warm. He unrolls three doors of the scroll and reads It, the true Word of God, and the king just slices it off. Can you imagine the courage of Jehudi to unroll three more doors? And the king slices it again. Three more columns; he slices it again. Jehudi doesn't quit. He reads the entire scroll until the king burns it all.

This intentional, persistent rejection and scorn of God's Word, the act itself, strikes us with such hubris. But we learn that even more devastating than the act of destruction itself is that neither the king nor any of his servants who heard the Word feared it; and they did not rend their garments. In Hebrew, the word "to read" is *kara*. The Bible is sometimes called a *Mikra*, "that which is read." The verb "to cut or to tear" your garments is *qara*. It sounds the same. And when you are reading this in Hebrew, it cuts you to think that the king is *kara-ing* the Word of God and he is not *qara-ing* his garments in a gesture of lament. To rend your garments is to act with repentance. It is the action of Josiah earlier when the Word of God had been rediscovered in his reign. We read that when the king heard the Words of the Book, he tore his clothes and asked what we should do. The king Jehoiakim's closest counselors urged him not to burn the scroll, but he did not listen to them.

God's Word cannot be stopped by an impious king. We read in Jeremiah 36:27:

"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.'"

Walter Brueggemann says, "God cannot be defeated." He is not deterred by the king's refusal. God, the God of the Bible, beloved in Christ, is a scroll maker. And He will continue to make scrolls. Any particular scroll from God can be dismissed, as this first one, but it will promptly and repeatedly be reiterated. The king cannot eliminate the scroll because God, the living God, intends for the scroll to be present. He intends for His Book to be voiced, read, and heard. It is a clear and dramatic announcement that God will not leave the king scroll-less even if the king wants no scroll.

God speaks to Jeremiah about Jehoiakim and pronounces a judgment on him: that none of his descendants will sit on the throne, and that his dead body will be cast out to the heat by day and the frost by night. That the king will lie unburied is just about the worst thing that can happen to someone in the ancient world. Then Jeremiah takes another scroll, gives it to Baruch, and Baruch writes on the new scroll, from the mouth of Jeremiah, all the words of the first scroll that the king had burned with fire. The last phrase in Jeremiah 36:32 is so fantastic:

"And many similar words were added to them."

The king imagined that the burning of the scroll finished the episode, that the scroll had been burned, that it no longer existed. But the narrative continues with the weighty words, "*Many similar words were added.*" The king's resistance and rejection of the Word of God actually generates a larger, more comprehensive, and more demanding scroll. The king's action does not terminate the threat of the scroll. It just magnifies it.

God has a relentless resolve to communicate to us because He longs for repentance. God will generate as many copies of the Bible as are needed. He will generate as many scrolls as necessary to complete the Great Commission. Christopher Wright, the British commentator, sums up this passage in a memorable phrase. He says, "The king is dead. Long live the scroll." I love that. "The king is dead. Long live the scroll."

Jehoiakim tries to burn the scroll with fire to keep himself warm on a wintry night. God had told Jeremiah, in Jeremiah 5:14:

"I am putting My words as a fire in your mouth."

Jeremiah responded in Jeremiah 20:9:

"If I say, 'I will not mention Him, or speak any more in His Name,' there is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot."

God speaks. He reveals Himself to Moses at a fiery bush that is not consumed. When God descends on Mount Sinai, He comes in visible glory with fire. It is a refining fire: His word burns up sin and idolatry and renews the world.

This passage this morning has a number of implications for us. I have four of them.

Number one: We've seen all this fall that **God watches over His Word**. He told Jeremiah that with the almond tree, right at the beginning. This means for Christians that **our faith is text-based**. This is really important. Throughout church history, God's people have always had higher literacy rates than the surrounding society. There is increasing evidence in the United States that right now literacy rates are declining. People are losing their ability to read. It is crucial for us as believers to be able to read. It is a very profound theological act for a parent to read to their children and to read God's words to them. God has sent us a text message.

Christopher Wright says:

"The message of Jeremiah's words, and its authority as God's Word, will not depend on the living presence of the human spokesperson, but will be transferred and carried by the written word, the scriptures – written, copied, translated, and read within the community of faith. The Bible is God's idea – not just the human construct of religious people preserving their sacred writings for posterity."

The Bible, this Book, is God's idea. That is central to our faith. So be a good reader and be a lover of the text.

Number two: **The Word of God prevails over kings, over politicians, over governments, over nations.** The Bible is currently banned in fifty-two countries in the world. The more I read Jeremiah, the more I see how much Jeremiah has affected Paul, his self-perception and his writings. When Paul was imprisoned toward the end of his life, he expressed a thought very similar to Jeremiah's. He says to Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:8-9:

"Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel, for which I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal. But the Word of God is not bound!"

The Word of God still goes forth. That means that our highest loyalty has to be to the Word of God. If Jeremiah has taught us anything, it is that all leaders, all kings will be held to account by

Christ. We have seen that in Jerusalem and Judea all this fall. We are going to see next week Jeremiah's sermons to the surrounding nations. God's Word cannot be bound. It continues to go forward in the world. It cannot be stopped. It shows up in the most astonishing places.

Bill Bright went to a Sunday school class at Hollywood Presbyterian Church. I also love the power of Sunday school class for adults. It's like a double dip of the Word of God. Alex Aronis, who used to be the pastor of Kenwood Baptist Church, went to the same Sunday school class as Bill Bright, and had the same Sunday school class teacher. Henrietta Mirs is her name. She was a fantastic adult Sunday school teacher. She also was the author of the tract *Four Spiritual Laws* that God has used in saving hundreds of thousands of people. I never got to hear her teach, but I have experienced the fruit of her teaching.

Bill Bright said, "We should do something for college students. How about Campus Crusade for Christ (Now called CRU)? So that is where that started. It is a dangerous thing for the kingdom of darkness for you to go to an adult Sunday school class. You can go there and have the Word of God germinate in you, and you can decide to start a whole ministry!"

Bill Bright shared this story, a true story:

"In the 1930's, Stalin ordered a purge of all Bibles and all believers in the former Soviet Union. Millions of Bibles were confiscated and multitudes of believers were sent to the gulags. In Stavropol, Russia, this order was carried out with a vengeance. A few years ago, Cru sent a team to Stavropol. When their team had difficulties getting Bibles shipped from Moscow, someone mentioned the existence of a warehouse outside of town where these confiscated Bibles had been stored since Stalin's days. One member finally asked the officials if the Bibles were still there and could be removed and distributed again to the people. The answer was 'Yes!'

"The next day the team returned with a truck and several Russian people to help load the Bibles. One helper was a young man, who was a skeptical, hostile, agnostic collegian who had come only for the day's wages. As they were loading the Bibles, a team member noticed that the young man had disappeared. Eventually, they found him in a corner of the warehouse weeping. He had slipped away hoping to quietly take a Bible. What he had found shook him to the core.

'Inside the first page of the Bible he had picked up was the handwritten signature of his own grandmother! Out of the many thousands of Bibles still left in the warehouse, he had stolen the one belonging to his grandmother. She had no doubt prayed for him and for her city, and her prayers had followed him. Now this young man's life had been transformed by the very

Bible that his grandmother found so dear."

The king is dead. Long live the scroll. God's Word cannot be chained.

Number three: **Rejecting God's word is catastrophic.** That is just the truth. **But receiving it is lifechanging.** I suspect that very few of us have ever taken the Bible and ripped it up and burned it to keep warm. I'm guessing that none of us here have. And I'm going out on a limb and imagine that none of those joining online have done that either. But sometimes our rejection of God's Word is more subtle. Sometimes our rejection of God's Word is just our neglect of it. We think other things are more important. Maybe we think *we're* more important. God's Word is meant to be heard and received. Let's not neglect it.

Number four. Lastly, **receiving God's Word means to listen well.** Take it in. But it also means to **share it.** It means to **share in its distribution, its dissemination, its ongoing communication.** Very few among us have a calling like Jeremiah's. But many more of us share a calling that is more like Baruch's, to copy God's Word, to disseminate it, to read it, to share it, to support it, to carry it with us wherever we go. Sometimes someone may have never heard God's Word, but they might receive It or hear It through you.

It is amazing how you can send a text message now of a Scripture verse. It's like the Text in a text. We are called as a believing community to receive these documents, not to neglect them; to make them our own; to read them; to seek to understand them; and then to share in their distribution.

There are so many hidden acts of faithfulness that happen in our church. Yesterday, at the workday event, there were so many people here doing all kinds of things: painting, cleaning, getting things ready for the holiday season. It was so much fun. One of my favorite hidden acts of service is to see the team of volunteers that come back into the sanctuary and restock the Bibles. We go through cases of those Bibles. They just wander off from here. I love it. There is a fund at Kenwood for Bible translation and distribution. If God blesses you, or touches your heart sometime, and God entrusts you with some treasure that you were not expecting, one of the things you could do is to give a special gift to that fund, because God's Word cannot be bound. The king can burn it up and God will always say, "Take another scroll."

So, Beloved of God, this is God's Word to us. It shows us how the Bible actually came about. It is His design, His intention, for us to hear, receive, cherish, love, and distribute and disseminate it. Why? So that the response when God's Word is first delivered might be that it is reproduced in every generation.

Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, thank You for Your Word. Thank You that Your Word cannot be chained or bound. It cannot be destroyed. It cannot be thwarted. And so, Lord Jesus, we honor You and we praise You this morning and we thank You. We treasure Your Word and we receive it. Lord, we want to do all that You have commanded and we want to share Your Word with others. So we pray, Lord, that You would plant Your Word deep within us, until the whole world is filled with Your glory.

In Jesus' Name, Amen.