

LifeWay Explore the Bible Series for May 1: Speak the truth regardless of circumstance_41805

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Speak the truth regardless of circumstance

Jeremiah 36

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Jeremiah 36 provides one of the most vivid examples in the Old Testament of the confrontation between the prophetic word and royal power. Although many prophets speak about the abuses of kings, as with Amos, few prophets actually speak to the king, as in the case with Jeremiah.

Therefore, we should consider the political implications as well as the theological dimensions of Jeremiah. To assert that this text is solely about failing to follow God's word is to miss the political dimensions inherent to the text as well. As we have seen throughout the book, much of Jeremiah's ministry is lived out in the tension experienced when one "speaks truth to

power."

The reign of King Jehoiakim

Chapter 36 should be read in conjunction with chapter 26. In chapter 26, we find that Jeremiah announces a word from God at the beginning of the reign of King Jehoiakim, son of Josiah. In chapter 36, Jeremiah receives another word from God-this time four years later. And then verse 9 suggests it was not until the fifth year that the word was announced to the people who had come, ironically enough, to the fast in Jerusalem. The implication is quite clear-the call for repentance and the message of impending judgment announced at the beginning of Jehoiakim's reign apparently had gone unheeded.



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Yet even the message at the beginning of chapter 36 holds out for the possibility of repentance. In verse 3, God announces 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." A similar note of hope is expressed by Jeremiah to Baruch in verse 7. There is a presumed hope that perhaps by reading

this “word from the Lord”—this scroll—that the people will change. By the end of the chapter, the result is known—the hope for repentance and the forestalling of judgment is in vain.

Another scroll, another king

This is the second time a king of Judah received a scroll. According to 2 Kings 22, King Jehoiakim's father, King Josiah, also had a scroll presented to him. Ironically, it is the grandson of Shaphan, Micaiah, who brings this new word from the Lord to the son of King Josiah, Jehoiakim. Although the same two families are involved in similar incidents, the final result in each case could not be more different.

In both cases, the scroll is understood by a scribal official to be of great importance. In both cases, the document is read to the king. At this point, however, the stories diverge. When Shaphan, the royal secretary read aloud the “book of the law” to King Josiah, we are told the king tore his clothes (2 Kings 22:11), humbled himself before the Lord and was repentant.

When the scroll is read to Jehoiakim, he offers no signs of contrition—in fact, the narrator makes the explicit statement in verse 24 that no one tore their garments upon hearing the scroll. Rather than tearing his clothes as did his father, Jehoiakim simply tears apart the scroll itself.

Jehoiakim fails to appreciate the gravity of the moment and mistakes royal power for absolute authority. Whereas Josiah understood himself as bound to the word of God, Jehoiakim apparently considers such a word as a rival to his own authority. The tearing and burning of the scroll signals his dismissal of such a challenge. Jehoiakim will discover, however, that scrolls can be rewritten and God's message supersedes the destructive work of a rebellious king.

Irony in judgment

The concluding verses in chapter 36 continue to highlight the irony present in this text. The judgment announced in these verses creates a sense of “poetic justice.” Earlier in the chapter, we are told the king was sitting in his winter apartment and a fire was burning in the firepot. As the scroll was read before him, he would cut portions of the text off and then cast them into the fire until all of the scroll had been consumed.

In the announcement of judgment, the king is told he will be “cast out” to the heat by day and the frost by night. This king who had sat by the heat of the fire to avoid the frost of night will be met with an ironic reversal of fate. The one who had cast portions of the scroll into the fire will be himself be cast out. And just as Jehoiakim continued until all of the scroll had been consumed by the fire, so too shall the judgment of God consume him, his offspring, his servants, all the inhabitants of Jerusalem and all the people of Judah (verse 31).

And we are told the rationale for such harsh judgment in a short, yet tragic concluding statement—“they have not listened.” The word that came to the people in the first year of the reign of King Jehoiakim is the same word that came in the fourth year of the reign of King Jehoiakim—the call to repentance and contrition was met with apathy and obstinance.

Political worlds, political words

Chapter 36 is indeed about refusing to hear the word of God. But this chapter is also about the arrogance of leaders—about those who mistake power for absolute authority. Jeremiah dares to challenge the dismissive attitudes of such leaders. And perhaps, herein, remains the most difficult application of this text for the modern reader. Few of us would deny that we should listen to God's word—that appears to be a given in most congregations. But how do we, as the people of God, embody the spirit of

Jeremiah in announcing hard words of judgment to those who hold positions of leadership and authority over us? How do we “speak truth to power”?

Discussion questions

- ◆ *How are we like Jehoiakim in our response to God's word for us?*
- ◆ *Can we become like Jeremiah and speak truth to power?*

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