

THE INDESTRUCTIBLE WORD OF GOD

Jeremiah 34:1 to 36:32

This collection of narratives from various periods of Jeremiah's ministry is grouped around Israel's response to the revealed truths of God.

I. Ignoring the Word (34:1-22)

As the chapter opens, Jeremiah was preaching his usual message to Zedekiah. The city was doomed to destruction and its citizens would go into captivity.

1. The Word Declared

Jeremiah fearlessly delivered his word directly to Zedekiah (34:6). He would not be executed by the Babylonian monarch. Rather he would be taken into exile and die the slow death of the brokenhearted. Actually Zedekiah was captured as he tried to flee the city and was taken to Nebuchadnezzar, who ordered his sons killed before his eyes and then put out the Hebrew king's eyes with a hot iron. Burned upon those sightless eyeballs was a horrible spectacle that could never be erased.

2. The Word Heeded

Frightened Zedekiah was impelled to do something to win back the favor of God. "Zedekiah, the halting, the afraid, the vacillating, under the impulse of some qualm of conscience, had gathered the people together into the temple,... and had entered into solemn covenant to give liberty to all those to whom liberty was due."

3. The Easing of the Crisis

Just after this significant social reform was inaugurated, with the potential of securing the favor of God, and the survival of the city, Nebuchadnezzar lifted the siege. Word had come to him of the approach of the Egyptians, and he marched to meet them. It appeared that the danger was over, for what chance would Nebuchadnezzar have in the Pharaoh's own front yard? Accordingly, the owners immediately put their recently emancipated slaves back into bondage (34:11). In other words, when a religious move tended to bring them security they favored it. When there was no personal advantage to it, they turned the other way.

Deathbed repentance is a dubious affair. Many of those expecting to die eventually get well. Their record of reform has not been impressive.

Left to their own initiative the leaders in Jerusalem would never have freed their slaves. The pressure of the situation, both from God and man, influenced them to act in a pattern foreign to their disposition. Once the pressure was off they went back to their old ways.

4. Convenient Religion Condemned

Jeremiah was indignant. In behaving like this the people had polluted the name of the Lord.

Nothing could displease God more then, or now, for his very nature is to effect justice and keep his covenants. Since the people had refused to give liberty to their slaves, God had decided to free the people from his own protection (34:17). All that keeps any of us from destruction is the mighty arm of Providence. If God removed his tender care, we would be exposed immediately to all the destructive forces about us--sword, pestilence, and famine. It is not necessary for God to destroy his people. All that is necessary is for him to remove his protection. Their natural enemies will do the rest.

II. Loyalty to the Word (35:1-19)

During the time when the Babylonians encamped before Jerusalem, Jeremiah took the occasion to teach the people the foolishness of their neglect of the Torah (revelation) of God.

1. The Coming of the Rechabites

Politics makes strange bedfellows. The unsettled conditions in Judah had brought a peculiar band into the safety of the city walls. They were the Rechabites, who were homeless, tent-dwelling nomads; opposed to agriculture and the fruit of the vine.

2. The Test of Faithfulness

Jeremiah escorted the Rechabites to a side room of the Temple, set wine before them, and urged them to drink it. As Jeremiah expected, they politely turned down the invitation. The wine was no temptation to them whatsoever. Why did they refuse it? Not because it was physically harmful. This issue they had probably never raised. Their ancestor had so instructed them, and they followed him without question. It was not for them to ask whether a matter was right or wrong in itself. If their father taught it, that was sufficient reason for them.

3. Prophetic Application

Jeremiah used the occasion to upbraid his fellow Hebrews. The Rechabites had obeyed Jonadab without question for all these years. Yet Israel had no inclination to follow the instruction of the Lord, so carefully given through his prophets (35:12-15). The Rechabites were more faithful to the commandment of a man than God's people were to his teaching. Thus it always has been. Men have been disposed to follow other men whom they can see rather than God, whom they cannot see.

III. Attacking the Word (36:1-32)

1. The Purpose of the Word

The prophet was told to record his oracles uttered over a period of twenty years that the nation might hear and repent.

2. The Word Proclaimed

The faithful proclamation of the word resulted in a great stir in the city, as

it always does.

3. The Destruction of the Scroll

When the scroll was brought to Jehoiakim, he was sitting by an open fire, surrounded by his own courtiers. As the prophecies were read he deliberately cut them into pieces with his penknife and threw them into the fire (36:22-23, 32). Thus he demonstrated his defiance of the laws of God. As the pages turned to ashes, the foolish king thought that their words were nullified.

4. The Word Restored

No sooner did the news reach Jeremiah that the scroll had been burned than he began to dictate its content to Baruch. And to it were added many similar words of wrath (36:27-32). The attempt of Jehoiakim to destroy the word of God had not only ended in total failure but had also resulted in a stronger condemnation than ever for him and his followers.

Today men have learned that they can never destroy the Bible by open attack. History is too full of witnesses to the contrary. Now its greatest enemies are either those who pretend to be its friends or who as its friends become its most dangerous foes. On the one hand, "It is mutilated in the house of its friends, and its claim to be the very Word of God is dismissed as the survival of an antiquated doctrine of inspiration." On the other hand, even more dangerous to its survival are those who find no place for it in their hearts and lives. To believe the Bible is to live by it.