

Book Burning

<i>Text</i>	Jeremiah 36
<i>Readings</i>	Psalm 119:81-96; John 5:31-47
<i>Theme</i>	The Word of God through Jeremiah was written down and read to the people, the officials and the king, but was largely ignored.
<i>Purpose</i>	To emphasise the importance of reading and hearing God's written word and responding to it in faithfulness and obedience.

In recent years two major surveys have been conducted among church attendees in New Zealand regarding the Bible and how much it is read. These were conducted in 1997 and in 2001 and the results were arranged according to denominational affiliation. Over half of those who attend the mainline denominations, that is, Anglicans, Methodists and Presbyterians, only read the Bible occasionally or hardly ever.

When Roman Catholic attendees were surveyed 80% of them said they read their Bible occasionally or hardly ever.

Regular Bible reading was highest amongst those attending Brethren, Baptist and Seventh Day Adventist churches.

Bear in mind that these statistics are for people attending church, not for the general non-Christian population.

A similar survey was conducted in the Netherlands in 2004. It revealed that only 54% of people in the Netherlands have a Bible in their homes. Bible ownership is lower among Roman Catholics than Protestants, so much so that Hindus, Buddhists and the unchurched are more likely to possess a copy than they are!

But although more Protestants *own* a Bible, that doesn't mean they *read* it. 47% of them said that they read the Bible at the most once a month. And those who were reading it said that they read it more out of cultural interest than as a means of strengthening their faith. And almost no one reads the Bible at the table any more for family devotions.

These surveys show that Bible reading is not strong among many people attending church. And it would be safe to assume that it will be far less among unbelievers. Most unbelievers ignore the Bible. They regard it as an ancient book full of myths and fables. That concept is reinforced by novels like "The Da Vinci Code" that claim that the gospels are full of errors and are not an accurate record of what happened.

Of course, none of this is new. For centuries people have ignored the Word of God and not listened to its message.

There have even been times in history when people actively tried to get rid of the Bible and attempted to destroy it.

Today we will look at one incident like that from the reign of King Jehoiakim. He became king of Judah in 609 BC after the death of his father. That was a very significant time in the history of the world.

There were three main world powers – the Assyrians, the Egyptians and the Babylonians.

In 612 BC the Assyrian Empire had fallen before the rising power of the Babylonians.

The Egyptians, under Pharaoh Neco, had been trying to recreate the influence of ancient Egypt. As Assyria lost control they moved North and occupied Syria and Palestine.

But in 605 BC, Egypt too was defeated by the Babylonian army under Nebuchadnezzar in one of the most decisive battles in the ancient world fought at Carchemish by the Euphrates River. That defeat marked the end of Egypt as a world power.

Judah had been under Egyptian control during these early years of Jehoiakim's reign. The king was a political opportunist and he vacillated between Egypt and Babylon. Now that Egypt had been defeated he wondered what to do. Would Egypt be able to fight back or should he switch to support Babylon? Jeremiah urged him to submit to Babylon and warned him against relying on Egypt, but the king ignored his words.

In response, the Lord told Jeremiah to write down all that he had said to him over the 20 years of his ministry and record it on a scroll. This gives us a very interesting perspective on the **writing of the Bible**.

Up till this point Jeremiah had been speaking and prophesying. Now he had to *write it down*. Books with pages had not been invented and so Baruch wrote on a scroll made of papyrus or leather. It was time-consuming and tedious work. What he wrote probably covered most what we have in chapters 1-24 and chapters 46-51. As we will see, what Baruch wrote would be the first edition. When it was destroyed they would write a second edition that was even longer.

Like most books this was written for a *purpose*, which is described in 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 wicked way; then I will forgive their wickedness and their sin."

This was written to warn the people of the coming judgement. It wasn't given as mere information to add to their pool of knowledge but rather to turn them from their wicked ways. God wanted them to repent and get rid of their idolatry and immorality and pagan worship.

If they did so he promised to "forgive their wickedness and their sin."

This is still the purpose of God's word. Verse 3 is a good statement of the intent of the entire Bible. The Bible is "not a neutral document." It was written to bring about a conviction of sin, a change of mind and a transformation of life.

God has given you this book to show you your sin and failure in the light of his law and to urge you to turn away from it. If you do that then he promises to forgive you because of what Jesus has done.

This is the main message of the Bible: it is very simple, but profound. It is clear and easy to grasp, yet it has a world of depth and meaning to it, a meaning we will never fully grasp this side of heaven.

God has written this book for you – for you to read and hear and take in and believe and obey. It was written so that you may have life.

This was also why the Lord had Jeremiah and Baruch write down this message in the 7th century BC. What they wrote was read **three times** in that one day.

The first reading took place in the temple.

Jeremiah himself was not allowed to go to the temple and so he told Baruch, who was his friend and secretary, to go there. He did this on a national day of fasting. These days were often set aside in times of great crisis. We don't know what state of emergency prompted this particular fast. It may have been because the Babylonians had just overthrown the city of Ashkelon in Philistia which was right on Judah's doorstep. That meant the Babylonians would invade Judah as their next point of conquest.

The problem with their fasting was that they thought it was enough in itself; that the external act of fasting was sufficient. Fasting, however, was an empty formality unless it came with a heart conviction and a genuine sorrow for sin and a true love for God. Yet the people gave no evidence of these qualities.

But the fast did mean that many people were gathered in Jerusalem and that there was a big crowd in the temple. Baruch's first reading of the scroll was from a room in the upper court of the temple. This meant that he looked out over the courtyards below and could be seen and heard by a large audience.

But there was little reaction. People went about their usual activities. There was no general conviction or confession of sin, and no widespread repentance – certainly nothing like the reaction to the preaching of Jonah in the city of Nineveh.

What happens today when God's Word is read and preached? Do you listen to what is said, or do you read the newsletter, or switch your mind over to what you will do in the afternoon or evening, or what you have planned for the rest of the week?

Does the Word of God make any difference to you? Does it touch your heart?

Does it convict you of sin?

Does it prompt you to pray?

Does it lead you closer to a living faith in the Lord Jesus Christ?

How do you respond to the Bible?

Of all those who heard God's word in that first reading only one man had any recorded reaction. His name was Micaiah and he was the son of Gemariah. He was concerned about what Baruch had read and went off to his father and to the other government officials who were in a meeting right at that time. They sent for Baruch to come and to give a **second reading of the scroll**.

This took it up a level. Now Baruch addressed the cabinet of the government. He addressed the rulers and leaders of the nation. He had moved from the temple to the seat of government in the palace of the king.

These government officials responded in fear. The Hebrew word is very strong and can also be translated as "dread". They realised the significance of what was written and they could see the consequences for the city and the nation.

Would that we saw more of this reaction in our nation today! Would that we saw more people respond in a fear of the Lord and a dread of the judgement to come! This would be a right response and a healthy reaction instead of the indifference we so often see.

Some of these officials listening to this reading were sympathetic to Jeremiah and to the concerns of the scroll. They seemed to welcome the opportunity of presenting it to the king without the message coming directly from them.

But they were also concerned about the reaction of the king. They remembered what had happened to the prophet Uriah. He had spoken out against the king and then had fled to Egypt. But the king had sent men after him to track him down and had him brought back to Jerusalem and killed with the sword (Jeremiah 26:20-23).

Jehoiakim was a ruthless man and the officials feared for the safety of the prophet and his secretary. They feared that the king would respond with anger and violence and so they advised Jeremiah and Baruch to hide.

They worked on what we call a “need to know” basis. They did not need to know where these two would hide and so they would not be implicated in their disappearance.

This brought the scroll to its **third reading**.

Baruch went into hiding and the officials went to inform the king. He ordered that the scroll be brought to him. This took the reading of the scroll to the highest level. It had been read to the people in the temple, to the government officials in their meeting, and now it was read to the king in his palace rooms.

It was the ninth month of the year which meant that it was the middle of winter in Jerusalem. The king was in the winter rooms of his palace with a fire blazing in front of him in a brazier to try to stay warm in the cold weather. He sat there while his court attendants stood around him, and Jehudi read the scroll.

After he had read three or four columns the king reached out with his knife and cut off that section of the scroll and tossed it into the fire! Three of the king’s officials urged him not to do this but it made no difference. He continued to cut off the scroll section by section as it was read until the whole lot was burned in the fire.

The king and his attendants did not react as the officials had done. They showed no fear nor did they tear their clothes. There is a play on words in the Hebrew in these verses (23-24); the king did not tear his clothes, rather he tore the scroll in pieces.

The king was indifferent to God’s word. It made no impression on him. He didn’t really care. He did not listen and he certainly didn’t respond with confession of sin or with a prayer of repentance or with obedience. Instead he showed utter contempt for the word of the Lord. He destroyed what God had written.

This has happened at other times in history.

In the early days of the English Reformation William Tyndale translated the Bible into the English language. The only version of the Bible authorised by the Roman Catholic Church was called the Vulgate. It was written in Latin. Few people at that time spoke Latin and only the educated people could read it. The ordinary people of England couldn’t read the Vulgate Bible and they weren’t allowed to own a copy.

The church was furious that Tyndale had translated the New Testament into English and Archbishop Wolsey began to burn all the copies he could find at St Paul’s Cathedral in London. The Catholics persuaded people to give up their English New Testaments and tried to buy up as many as they could so they could be burnt. Those who distributed these Bibles were often tortured and killed.

In China today most of the Christians worship in house churches rather than in the government approved Three Self Churches. Only approved copies of the Bible are permitted which carry a government seal so that the communist party knows who has a copy of the Bible. The government searches out illegal copies of the Bible and destroys them.

These are two examples of systematic destruction of the Bible by the church or the government. But sometimes Bibles are destroyed by individuals.

The Gideons is a Christian organisation that seeks to distribute copies of the Bible to hospitals and hotels and motels. They also distribute a small copy of the New Testament to all pupils beginning high school. All the pupils of the Year Nine class at my high school received a copy. Immediately after receiving theirs, some threw it into the rubbish bin. Others tore their copy to pieces. Some kept it to use as paper to roll cigarettes.

Today too God's word is ignored, despised, mistreated and destroyed.

Yet people can do this in other ways.

Many liberal theologians and ministers have an edited version of the Bible – a “Reader's Digest” copy. They only believe parts of it. They only accept certain sections as being God's word and they leave out all the parts they don't agree with.

Others in society reinterpret the Bible to suit their own ideas or philosophy.

And still others never read it. They ignore it.

What are you doing with the Bible? Do you own a copy? Do you appreciate that you can have one in this free country? Do you bring it to church on Sunday so you can follow the reading and preaching of God's word? Do you open and read it during the week, or does it sit on the back seat of your car, or gathering dust on a shelf at home? Someone has said that if all the neglected Bibles were dusted off at the same time we would have a record dust storm that would obscure the sun for a whole week!

Someone else expressed the opposite of that by noting that the Bible that is falling apart usually belongs to someone who isn't!

Does your Bible show signs of being read?

Do you know your Bible?

Are you putting effort into reading and it and studying it, or does it lie around unread?

We have an abundance of Bibles on the market in New Zealand in every possible translation and variation – The NIV, the NASB, the King James and the New King James, the Revised Standard Version and the English Standard Version, the Worshipper’s Bible and the Spirit-filled Bible, the Women’s Devotional Bible and the Men’s Devotional Bible – but all these are no help to you unless you read your Bible, and absorb it and believe it and obey it.

Jehoiakim thought he had disposed of God’s word by burning it. But it wasn’t that easy. God told Jeremiah and Baruch to **write it out again**.

They took another scroll and wrote a second edition – “And many similar words were added to them.” The second edition was more comprehensive than the first! The king’s response produced a version that was larger and even more demanding.

What Jeremiah and Baruch wrote down is recorded here for us to read. We don’t have that original scroll but we have many copies of it. All that Jeremiah preached and all he did has been recorded in this book that bears his name.

And we have the other 38 books that make up the Old Testament, all of which testify about Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ. “These are the Scriptures that testify about me”, said Jesus (John 5:39). The 27 books of the New Testament were added to these “so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31).

This is the Word of God. It is the Word of Life.

If it is going to help you towards faith in Jesus you not only need to have a copy at home but you also need to read it for yourself and as a family. You need to study it, retain it in your mind, believe it in your heart, and live it out in your life.

Amen.