



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

BOOK ON FIRE

SERMON BY REV. JUNE BARROW ■ MAY 31, 2020

We've all seen the photos: a mountain of burning books. It's what oppressive regimes do. In order to manage the narrative they have created, opposing ideas must be silenced. So offending books and often art are piled high and set alight. Why? Because stories and art, thoughts and ideas, facts and truth have power.

One of the most disturbing books is the Bible. It has been burned and banned, censored and silenced, edited and outlawed. In 52 countries today, Bibles are politically problematic. They are either difficult to obtain, dangerous to own, or entirely banned. In some places today, the Bible is still being burned. It is literally a book on fire.

How the Bible Came to Be

How did the Bible come to be? In Exodus 17:14, God said to Moses: "Write this on a scroll as something to be remembered..." And Moses did. And so did others. The Lord chose the people, chose the moments, chose what should be remembered. From Moses, to Isaiah, to John, to Peter, to Paul the call came. "Write this down..." And so the Bible came to us, written over a period of 1,600 years by more than 40 authors. It's full of power and promise and truth. It is the Word of God. And that's where trouble comes. The Word of God creates a response in us and requires a response from us. It's like an invitation you get in the mail with an RSVP. You must respond.

Remember the story of King Josiah, way back in the 600's B.C. He was a good man who loved his people and wanted to rule well. When he came to power, his country was a moral mess, the Temple

was in ruins, and the Bible forgotten. Think about this: already at this time, the Bible is an old, dusty book. The Psalms were already 400 years old. The Law that Moses gave—the Ten Commandments—was at least 800 years old. For them, just like for us, the Bible was an ancient document and they lived, as they saw it, in the ever-changing modern world. And for them, just like for us, the Bible is the Word of God.

While Josiah is king, one day a temple worker found a dusty scroll, lying in a corner, forgotten for decades. It was the book of Deuteronomy. As it was read to the young king, he was pierced to the heart at how far his people had drifted away. In sorrow, he tore his robe and then instituted many reforms. Josiah responded with respect and obedience. There was renewal and revival in the land and King Josiah ruled well and peacefully. God blessed him and the nation.

A New King and the Word of God

Later a new king arises, and his story is found in Jeremiah 36.

We are in Jerusalem and it is 605 B.C. Jehoiakim is king, Jeremiah is the prophet, and Baruch is Jeremiah's assistant. The worship of God has again been forgotten and the country is in trouble. King Jehoiakim chose a lavish lifestyle and his first act as king was to build an elaborate palace which the nation's budget could not afford. And so he used impressed labor—forcing his own citizens to work without pay as builders. He had no regard for the needs of the people, and no interest in the words or will of God. He led the people away from God. But the Word of God comes to him anyway.

During the fourth year that Jehoiakim son of Josiah was king in Judah, the LORD gave this message to Jeremiah: "Get a scroll, and write down all my messages... Begin with the first message back in the days of Josiah, and write down every message, right up to the present time...."

Jeremiah 36:1-2

Jeremiah dictates and Baruch his scribe writes them down. Normally prophets spoke directly to kings, as advisers, but this king does not want a conversation with a prophet. So Jeremiah sends Baruch to the Temple on a day when it will be filled with people from all over the country. Jeremiah says:

“Read the messages from the LORD that I have had you write on this scroll. Read them so the people who are there from all over Judah will hear them. Perhaps even yet they will turn from their evil ways and ask the LORD’s forgiveness before it is too late.”

Jeremiah 36:6-7

A great crowd hears the message, including some government officials, who know trouble when they hear it. They take Baruch to the palace and ask him to read the scroll again, to a group of the king’s advisers. Alarm grows, for they know the king will learn of this. They send Baruch away with a warning that he and Jeremiah should go into hiding for their own safety.

What words did they know would upset the king?

“A beautiful cedar palace does not make a great king...”

Jeremiah 22:15

“Instead of caring for my flock and leading them to safety, you have deserted them and driven them to destruction.”

Jeremiah 23:2

This is what the LORD says: “O Israel, my faithless people, come home to me again, for I am merciful.”

Jeremiah 3:12

How will the king respond? The Word of God requires a response. When King Josiah heard the Word of God, he received it, believed it, and it changed him and it changed the country. How will King Jehoiakim respond?

It was late autumn, and the king was in a winterized part of the palace, sitting in front of a fire to keep warm. Each time [his aide] finished reading three or four columns, the king took a knife and cut off that section of the scroll. He then threw it into the fire, section by section, until the whole scroll was burned up. Neither the king nor his attendants showed any signs of fear or repentance at what they heard.

Jeremiah 36:22-24

Jehoiakim's reaction is cold and steady. The burning of the book is not impulsive or hot-blooded. It is a cold despising of the message, a defying of the will and words and warnings of God. It is calm disdain; it is scorn; it is contempt.

It is ironic. A hateful king believes he can silence the word and work of God with a small fire. But like fire, the word of God has power. Like fire, it is dangerous. Like fire, it changes things. So here we have a book on fire, in order that all it contains might be destroyed utterly and forever.

But here is another verse: **“Is not My word like a fire?” says the LORD** (Jeremiah 23:29).

Around the time I turned 40, some events occurred in my life that were unsettling. I couldn't make sense of them and I couldn't just brush them aside. And so, because I had nowhere else to turn, I turned to the Lord. I wanted to hear from God, to hear His voice speak to me. I had a loving family, but I needed to know my Maker. So I began to read the Bible. Every day I read one chapter. For reasons I don't recall, I started in Isaiah. I read a chapter, thought about it, wrote in a journal about it and I prayed it all back to God. Some I didn't understand and couldn't make perfect sense of. But I was listening, because I wanted to hear, I needed to hear from the Lord. I was willing to hear, ready to confess anything, willing to believe, eager to obey. I wanted the Lord and His voice and His words. That experience was life-changing for me. I did a lot of remembering and repenting and reflecting. I learned that God saw me very differently—

so much more lovingly—than I did myself. I read in Isaiah that God wanted to lead me, care for me, heal the hurt places, make me whole, that He knew my name, that my name was written on the palms of His hands.

One day during this time, I had a three-hour drive in the car alone. The radio was off; in the silence I told the Lord again that I would receive anything He had to say to me. I expected to remember something else from my life that I needed to confess. And then very clearly these words formed in my mind, like a voice speaking them: “I am delighted with you.” The impression was so strong and the impact so great that it brought tears. But, because I am a skeptical person, by the time I went to bed that night, I was thinking, “Well who knows what that was.” The next morning, I opened the book of Isaiah and turned to the next chapter, which was Isaiah 62. And then I got to verse 4 and read, “You will be called ‘She is my delight’... for the LORD takes delight in you.” I remember precisely the moment; I remember how that felt, to know that the God who made everything, would speak to me. The Bible is the living Word of God. The Holy Spirit speaks through it. The Bible is a book on fire.

God Keeps His Covenant

Jehoiakim is the king of the covenant people of God. The covenant was made by God long ago. Jehoiakim believes he can silence and sideline God. He believes he can fire God and cancel the covenant God made. But we have a covenant-keeping God. Jeremiah wrote about God’s intention to keep covenant with us:

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart!”

Jeremiah 29:11-13

“The days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will make a new covenant... I will put My law in their minds, and write

it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.”

Jeremiah 31:33

The new covenant is the fulfillment of the old covenant, the one a king tried to cancel. It is fulfilled in Jesus, the promised one who came, who in His life and death and resurrection fulfilled the will and plans of God. A small king defied God and sought to cancel the covenant. Jesus fulfilled the covenant and what He cancelled was the power of evil and sin and death.

Jeremiah wrote: “I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with unfailing kindness” (Jeremiah 31:3).

The Word of God invites us to a relationship of fearlessness and peace and trust. The stories of God show us what people are like and what God is like. The promises of God assure us and give us courage for the future. The warnings of God are His messages of mercy to call us home to Him.

So what happened to Jeremiah and Baruch? Soldiers are sent to arrest them, but they are hidden. Both Jeremiah and Baruch will outlive and outlast that king.

And what happened to the scroll? The Word of God lives still. Here’s the rest of the story.

After the king had burned the scroll on which Baruch had written Jeremiah’s words, the LORD gave Jeremiah another message.... So Jeremiah took another scroll and dictated again to his secretary, Baruch. He wrote everything that had been on the scroll King Jehoiakim had burned in the fire. Only this time he added much more!

Jeremiah 36:17-32

Where is that scroll today? It’s right here, in the Bible in front of you, in your Bible at home. The Word of God doesn’t fail, can’t be destroyed, though people still try. All over the world and even close to home, the Word of God is outlawed, edited, dismissed, and scorned.

With words and weapons, with libel and laws, the Word of God is threatened every day. And the Word of God will stand.

The Bible has Power

My Chinese friend, who was raised to be an atheist, whose father is still a member of the Communist party, was handed exactly one chapter of the Bible when she was a university student. One page, and it was enough for God to speak to her, to call her. As a result of one chapter, she declared herself a follower of Jesus and was secretly baptized. She loves the Lord today and works to train Christians leaders throughout China.

The Bible has such power. It's not the book, the binding, the paper, the translation, the language. It's that God speaks through His word. The word of God will not be destroyed. There is no political party or professor or media influencer or king who can destroy the Word of God. There is no fire hot enough, no human leader powerful enough to eliminate it. Jesus said, "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away" (Matthew 24:35). That's the power and that's the danger. Because the Word of God creates a response *in* us and requires a response *from* us.

"Is not My word like a fire?" says the LORD. It is. God speaks in His word and He will speak to you. Yes, the word of God is like a fire. It melts fears and resistance. It ignites true faith in us. It illumines our confused understanding. It warms our spirits when the world feels cold and uncaring. It gives light for the dark days that come to every generation. It burns away unworthy priorities. It refines our motives and intentions. It reveals sin and frees us from the grip of guilt. It kindles courage to meet the challenges ahead. It sparks imagination to see more clearly the power and love and goodness and majesty of our great God.

Practical Points for Reading the Bible

I don't know anyone who would say, "Oh yes, the Bible. I've read it, I know it, I understand it." Most people would rate themselves rather

low in their Bible mastery. But we are all life-long learners! Here are some practical helps about coming to the Word of God.

Come as a learner. We do not stand over the Word of God to judge it. We stand under the authority of the Word of God that it might judge us, and teach us, and show us God. We have open hearts, not hard hearts. We are teachable, not arrogant.

Understand what you can understand. Peter himself said that some things in Paul's letters are hard to understand. And even the disciples said to Jesus, "This is very hard to understand. How can anyone accept it?" (2 Peter 3:16 and John 6:60) What do you understand? What does speak to you? Start there. There are places in scripture I can't explain and don't understand yet. I set those to one side and focus on what I can understand. And over time, I learn more, see more, understand more.

Receive, believe, respond.

Two kings, Josiah and Jehoiakim, both heard the word of God. Clearly, hearing is not enough. One received it, believed it, and set out to obey it. The other despised it, defied it, and set out to destroy it. What is your response?

Trust in God's Love for You.

If you feel dissatisfied with your knowledge of the Bible and with knowing God, if you feel inadequate, praise God. Jesus said that we are blessed when we know our own spiritual poverty. Blessed when we feel a hunger and thirst for what is right. God fills empty hands and open hearts. Come to the Word of God. Your prayer can be: *Lord, would You speak to me? Show me what I need to see and hear and believe and do.*

"Is not my word like a fire?" asks the LORD. Oh yes, it is!

