

Burning the Scroll

M.W. Bassford
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Introduction.

- A. I've heard it said before that the true test of being a Christian comes not when God tells us to do something we would have done anyway, but when He tells us to do something we would NOT have done. In the first case, our obedience is just a coincidence of God's desires and our own. Only in the second instance are we truly asked to submit our wills to His, and only then can we truly put God in first place.
- B. All that is certainly true, but an even sterner test of our discipleship comes when God's word calls our attention to a sin that we are already committing and demands that we change. We're just bopping along, doing our thing, when suddenly we are made to realize that just doing our thing has led us to disobey God and injure our relationship with Him. What do we do then? Do we admit the truth and repent, or do we close our ears to the warning and continue doing what we're doing? Our answer may determine our eternal destiny.
- C. A man who made the right decision in this regard is David. We love to whale on David for his great sin with Bathsheba, and rightly so, but as we consider that story, we also need to remember how David repented. As soon as Nathan brought him to see his sin, he received God's word and renounced the evil he had been doing. David's sin still had a number of tragic consequences in his life, but his repentance saved his soul.
- D. In direct contrast to this, we see a less well known story recorded in Jeremiah 36, a story in which a descendant of David reacts in a way completely unlike David. Just as there's a lot to learn from the story of David's repentance, so too there is much we can draw from the story of this man, a wicked king named Jehoiakim. Let's turn to Jeremiah this evening to see what we can take from the story of burning the scroll.

I. God's Warning.

- A. As so many of the stories of the divided kingdom do, this one begins with a warning from God to the people of Judah to repent or else perish. We see this warning recorded in Jeremiah 36:1-3. Jeremiah is supposed to write down on a scroll everything that the Lord has commanded him to prophesy against Judah. As the text continues to say, Jeremiah gives the scroll to Baruch the son of Neriah to read in the house of the Lord when all the people are assembled there for a fast. It's difficult to tell from the text just what this scroll consisted of. We might think that if this story is recorded in Jeremiah 36, then the scroll contains Jeremiah 1-35, but that's actually not the case. Jeremiah is not a book that is written chronologically, and many of the prophecies that it contains do not say when they were written. It is certain, though, that the scroll had nothing good to say.
- B. It's interesting, though, what God says His object here is. This is not a "You're going to catch it now!" prophecy. Instead, God has Jeremiah proclaim this message to the people in hopes that they will hear the warning and repent. This is not the first time that God has warned Judah about the consequences of their sin; it will not be the last time, either. God already knows what the effect of this warning is going to be—absolutely nothing—yet He repeats the warning anyway, to give the people one more chance.
- C. We see God describe what's behind this repeated forbearance in Ezekiel 18:21, 23. God always wants the wicked to repent because He takes no pleasure in destroying any of them. I can remember, back when I was still in the training program at Dowlan Road, sitting in on the elders' meetings and wondering why they gave some out-of-duty Christians chance after chance, sometimes for a year or more, before formally marking them. I didn't say anything, of course, but in my heart of hearts, I wanted to see those bad Christians get blasted, and when the elders finally and regretfully took the final step, I wanted to say, "See? Should have done that a year ago!" The problem is, I was missing out on the point that this verse expresses. It's not a happy time when a church is forced to put a brother or sister out, friends. Instead of looking at things from a righteous, up-on-a-soapbox perspective, we need to consider the erring Christian with compassion and act accordingly.
- D. Of course, as important as it is that we have compassion for others, it's even more important that we recognize the compassion of God for us. God is compelled by His nature to punish sin, but He would much rather everyone did right so that He doesn't have to punish anyone. That's why He gives us His commandments: not to put us in a moral straitjacket and make our lives miserable, not to confuse us with minutiae, but to warn us so that we can hear the warning and live. Every commandment in the Bible is an expression of God's love and desire not to see us destroyed. Let's consider them in that light.

II. The Officials' Warning.

- A. This original warning from God is then echoed by some of the officials who happen to hear the scroll being read and recognize that they need to warn the king. We see the gist of their story recorded in Jeremiah 36:11-13, 16. They hear the words of the scroll, see what a dire predicament they're in, and take thought for themselves and for the king who can do something to solve the problem, both personally and nationally. They make sure that this is not a message that the king is going to overlook.

- B. This is often the way that the warning of God comes to us. Sometimes, we get it from God more or less directly, as we're studying the word on our own, but more often, we hear it through the lips of someone else. That could be a preacher or Bible class teacher, or even just a brother or sister who looks at our lives, sees that we're in spiritual trouble, and, speaking the truth in love, tells us that we need to change.
- C. Brethren, we need to recognize how important this is, both for us to have these conversations when we see a problem, and for us to listen when we're the ones with the problem. Sure, in both cases, we can refuse to pay attention. We can say that another's sin is none of our business, or we can angrily claim that our sin is none of anyone else's business. In either case, though, we're making a critical mistake. Look at what James says about this in James 5:19-20. Sin is a big deal, friends. When we speak out, we are doing nothing less than giving someone else a chance to save his soul from death. When we listen, we are saving our own.

III. The King's Reaction.

- A. So far in this story, so good. God has done what only He can do, and the officials have made sure that God's warning will fall on the right ears. Sadly, though, things take a turn for the worse when we look at the king's reaction. Jehoiakim makes a fatal mistake. We see the story unfold in Jeremiah 36:22-24. Today, if we get a letter that we don't like, we might crumple it up and throw it in the trash can. Jehoiakim cuts his unwelcome news up with a knife and tosses it in the hearth by which he was warming himself.
- B. What's interesting about this also is how impulsively Jehoiakim responds. It says he does this when the reader has read three or four columns. To understand what's going on here, we have to understand how ancient scrolls worked. Each scroll had two rolls, and as the scroll was read, the scroll was unrolled from one side and rolled onto the other, like the spools in an audio cassette. Of course, it wouldn't be terribly efficient to have each line take up the entire length of the scroll—otherwise, you'd spend the whole time rolling and unrolling. What they did, then, is have the text grouped in columns that were as wide as a comfortable opening of the scroll. When the Scripture tells us that Jehoiakim reacts by what would be to us the third or fourth page, it's showing us that he hadn't even really begun to hear the scroll before he erupted.
- C. The sad thing about the way that Jehoiakim responds isn't just the negativity of his reaction; it's how common it is to all of us. Our typical response to unpleasant warnings from God's word is, "You can't tell me what to do!" That's why the Isaiah prophecy quoted in Acts 28:26-27 appears so often. Of all the Old Testament passages cited in the New Testament, this is the one most commonly quoted. Even "The just shall live by faith" appears in Scripture only three times. This cynical description of human nature shows up six times.
- D. It's important, friends, that we understand this, not just so that we are prepared for unwise reactions in others, but so that we can stomp this tendency out in ourselves. Too much of the time, whenever anyone criticizes our spiritual state, our first reaction is to get defensive. We tell them that they don't understand, that what we're doing isn't really like that, and so on and so forth, until instead of us being the bad guy for sinning, in our minds, they become the bad guy for telling us about it. When we have that reaction, friends, we become the people whom Acts 28 describes. We need to recognize this temptation and throttle it. We need to hear truth about ourselves and then act to save our souls, even when that truth is painful. If we don't, if we refuse honesty when it hurts, we will never be the people that God wants us to be.

IV. God's Response.

- A. We see the final chapter of this sad tale in God's response to Jehoiakim. Jeremiah by this point in time is in hiding because the king now wants to kill him, but the word of the Lord comes to the prophet regardless. God expresses His outrage at Jehoiakim's rejection of the truth and continues on to prophesy against the wicked king. We see this prophecy in Jeremiah 36:30-32. Jehoiakim now has run out of chances. Because neither he nor his people listened, God is going to destroy all of them for their evil. It didn't do Jehoiakim any good to burn up the scroll. Instead, Jeremiah just reproduces it and adds more prophecies to it.
- B. Friends, we need to recognize that that's the way truth is. The truth is not like the monster under the bed. If we ignore it, it will not go away. We can destroy our Bibles if we want. We can go around destroying every Bible we find if we want. None of that will change even the smallest word in Scripture or make it any less relevant to our lives. In fact, when we reject the truth, we need to understand the gravity of what we are doing. God, who loves us more than we can imagine, has made an effort to save us from sin when He didn't have to. Our Christian friends have made the effort to warn us even though that effort is uncomfortable and unpleasant. To all of that, we're saying that we just don't care. Is it any wonder that it makes God angry?
- C. At bottom, what we're really dealing with is what Paul discusses in Galatians 6:7-8. We're mocking God. We're saying, "God, I know what You've told me to do, but I'm just not going to listen because there's this sin in my life that I care more about than I care about You. And I think I'm going to get away with it, too." We need to remember, friends, that we will reap what we sow. If we reject God's warnings, we are going to pay just like Jehoiakim did. It is likely that we will pay in this life. It is certain that we will pay in the life to come. God doesn't want to send us to hell, but He absolutely will if we dare Him to do it. Let's be wise and listen.

Conclusion. If you need to hear God's warning and hear the gospel, now is the time to obey.