The Unbelief of Jehoiakim

The Paradigm of Disobedience (Jer 26, 36)

This is Dr. Gary Yates and his teaching on the book of Jeremiah. This is session number 20 “Jehoiakim: the paradigm of disobedience in Jeremiah chapter 26 and 36.”

The title of our lesson is “The Unbelief of Jehoiakim.” We’re going to be looking specifically in the segment at two chapters: Jeremiah 26 and 36. In our previous lesson we looked at the second section of the book of Jeremiah, Jeremiah 26-45. We saw that in contrast to the messages of judgment in the first half of the book, this section focuses on the life of Jeremiah and more than just a biography it gives a theological statement about how the people of Judah, the kings, the leadership, responded to the word of God. We saw that the recurring problem is that throughout this section it tells us that the people, the kings, the leaders, military officials did not listen, they did not obey the word of God.

Jehoiakim Literary Frame

We also saw that there is a Jehoiakim frame around chapters 36 to 45 that I believe helps us to have an interpretive grid to understand this section of the book. There is a Jehoiakim episode or message in chapters 26 and chapter 35. So we have one panel of this part of the book that goes from chapters 26 to 35. There’s another Jehoiakim episode in chapter 36. Then there is a message from the time of Jehoiakim in chapter 45 and that provides the second panel 36-45.

We saw that those sections parallel one another. They’re designed to demonstrate that the time of Jehoiakim was a watershed moment. In the chapters we are looking at today, we see how the unbelief of Jehoiakim really sets in stone and makes God’s judgment of Judah not something that is just a possibility, but something that God begins to warn is irrevocable and is going to happen because the king has rejected God’s word. We really see two stories of unbelief, rejection, and the king’s ultimate antagonism to the
message of prophets like Jeremiah.

**Four Parallels Between Jeremiah 26 and 36**

Now it’s interesting that these two sections chapters 26 and 36 introduce the two panels in the second half of the book because in many ways these two stories very closely parallel one another. There are four specific parallels that I would like to note and then we’re going to get into the specifics of each chapter.

The first parallel is the time of the two narratives that we’ve already mentioned. They are both from the time of Jehoiakim chapter 26:1 says that the first episode occurs early in the reign of Jehoiakim. He reigns from 609 to 597 BC. So, sometime early in his reign, Jeremiah preaches this “Temple Sermon” that is ultimately going to demonstrate the unbelief of the king. Then in chapter 36:1 it says at that the time that God commanded Jeremiah put his messages in a scroll and had them read them in the temple that’s chapter 36:1.

The second parallel is that the setting of the stories, both of them take place at the Jerusalem temple. The first passage is the story about Jeremiah’s “Temple Sermon.” Again I think this is a second version of the sermon we read about in chapter seven. The sermon in chapter seven focuses more on the message of Jeremiah. He’s warning them to not put their trust in the temple in the Lord, and if they do not amend and change their ways, then God is going to do the same thing to Jerusalem and to his house there that he did in Shiloh back in the time of the judges. In the second story God commands Jeremiah to have Baruch go to the temple and read the scroll there. So, both of these both of these passages are going to take place in the temple. I believe that particular setting adds weight and seriousness to both of these stories. The temple was the place where the people of Judah met with God; it was God’s dwelling place. So when the prophet comes there with a warning of judgment, it’s something that needs to be taken seriously, because this is God’s dwelling place. If you’re going to live in God’s presence, if you’re going to dwell in God’s presence and enjoy his blessings and benefits as part of the covenant, then
you need to meet the responsibilities that God places on those who come into his presence.

Thirdly, both of these are stories, and this fits with the overall message of chapters 26-45, that focus on response to the prophetic word. In chapter 26, Jeremiah delivers an oral sermon. There are going to be various groups of people who have their opinion and their response. In a sense, there is a debate about the message of Jeremiah but it’s going to involve the prophets and the priests as the religious officials. It’s going to involve the people as they’re taking sides in this story. It’s also going to involve the civil leaders, the elders and the officials and their involvement in this as well.

In the second account, in chapter 36, Jeremiah’s scroll is read at the temple by Baruch and again various people are going to respond to this. Baruch reads this in the presence of all the people so what’s their response going to be? There are a group of officials and scribes who hear that message and take it seriously. So there’s their interaction and their feedback message. Then, finally, the message is taken to the king and to his officials and to his servants and we have their response to the message as well.

The fourth and final parallel between these two stories is these are stories that basically have the same structure. They have the warnings of the prophets about judgment. Jeremiah is a prophet of judgment because the people have not lived up to their covenant responsibilities. The prophet is warning them of the judgment that is coming, there is a response of rejection to that message in some way in some aspect. Then as a result of that there is an announcement of judgment. So it’s very appropriate that these two passages, that these two narratives, introduce the two primary blocks in the book in the second half of Jeremiah because their very similar to each other.

Jehoiakim is the featured individual here. Louis Stuhlman makes this comment about Jehoiakim, “Jehoiakim becomes in the book of Jeremiah a prototype of infidelity and disobedience who is afforded every opportunity to hear, but instead chooses to disobey.” So think of the fact that this is the heritage, this is the legacy, that Jehoiakim leaves behind. I think about it that as we read the stories of the kings as well in the books
of Samuel and Kings it’s going to tell us that the king did either what was evil in the eyes of the Lord or was right in the eyes of the Lord. In the Northern Kingdom of Israel there are zero kings that ultimately the narrator assesses by “he did what was right in the eyes of the Lord.” Even in the line of David it is a minority of those kings that did what was right in the eyes of the Lord. So Kings is a historical account, while it is a historical account it also reminds us that their political successes, their military accomplishments, what the economy of the nation was at the time of their rule and reign, the length or the duration of their reign, the respect that people had for them or the disrespect that the people had that’s ultimately not the issue. The ultimate issue is: what’s the Lord’s assessment of what this king did.

For Jehoiakim and in fact, the four kings that come at the end of Judah in Jeremiah’s ministry the assessment for all of them is that they did what was evil in the eyes of the Lord. We see that especially Jehoiakim. He is incredibly antagonistic and hostile to the message. There is never a time Jehoiakim and Jeremiah meet face to face and anytime we see Jehoiakim reacting or responding to the word of God in the book of Jeremiah it’s with anger, it’s with hostility, and it’s even with violence toward the prophetic messengers.

**Jeremiah 26**

So let’s go to the story in chapter 26. Again we get a very brief summary of the message, and if this is not the same message of the Temple Sermon and it’s not the same occasion then it’s a very similar message. Jeremiah may have preached more than one time. But here’s what Jeremiah said: the Lord sends him to preach about the Lord’s judgment, “the Lord says ‘it may be that they will listen, and everyone will turn form his evil ways and I may relent of the disaster that I intended to do to them because of their evil deeds.’”

**Key Terms**

A couple of things that are going on here, remember in the Jehoiakim sections 26 to 35 and then 36 to 45. At the beginning of these two panels, there’s the opportunity that
in this stage of Jeremiah’s ministry the people could be spared from judgment. If they will *shub* – a key theological word in the book – if they will turn around, if they will turn from their evil ways then there is always the possibility that God will relent, *naham*, God will change his mind and God will not send the disaster against them.

There’s another word play in all of this that I think is important. The prophets are going to confront the people with the fact that they are doing evil. The Hebrew word is *ra'ah* or *ra’*. So the people are doing evil and as a result of that God is intending to bring calamity or disaster which is also the word *ra'a* or *ra’*. So the Lord is going to give them a punishment that fits the crime. They are doing rah-ah so God is preparing to send *ra'a*, calamity or disaster against them. But if they will have the right response then the Lord will not send the judgment and the disaster that he’s planned. These are not things that are fixed in stone. These are not things that at this point are irrevocably going to happen. If there’s a right response to God then there’s the chance that the Lord may relent and not send the judgment.

But what we’re going to see in both of these panels in 26 to 35 is that opportunity is presented at the beginning of the panel but then at the end of the panel, first panel chapter 35 there’s a national judgment. They are not going to take advantage of the opportunity that the Lord is going to give them. Chapter 36; *ulai*, perhaps, maybe they will respond. I will relent, maybe they will turn and do what God asks of them. But at the end of the section in chapter 44 we have the rebellion, the refugees that are living down in Egypt: “we will not listen to the Lord, will we not obey, we’re going to continue to offer our sacrifices and pay our vows to the false gods.” As a result of that, God is going to send national judgment. Throughout this section, we are reminded of the urgency of God’s word.

The book of Jeremiah is a story about what happens to the word of God as it is proclaimed by Jeremiah. It is about the power of the word of God to bring judgment when people reject it, and the power of the word of God to create new life out of a desperate situation. But listening to God’s word is a matter of life and death. In the first section of the book we have the closing down of the hope and the opportunity that Judah
is going to repent and be spared from judgment. We see the same thing in the second half here. So God tells Jeremiah to go to the temple, proclaim this message. Here’s what he’s to say in verse four: “You shall say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord: If you will listen to me, walk in my law that I have set before you, and listen to the words of my servants the prophets, whom I send to you urgently, though you have not listened, then I will make this house like Shiloh and I will make this city accursed from all the nations of the earth.” That effectively summarizes exactly what we see in chapter 7. The issue here is what’s the response?

**The Verdict on Jeremiah’s Validity as a Prophet**

This passage, some people have actually explained this almost as a formal courtroom—a legal proceeding that is designed to resolve the issue of Jeremiah’s validity as a prophet. So how’s this going to turn out? There’s going to be various people that weigh in on this. Is Jeremiah recognized as a true, valid prophet of the Lord? That really is the tension that is raised by this narrative and the debate over this begins in verse 7. So listen to the people that weigh in. First of all, it says, “the priest and the prophets and all of the people.” The religious officials and the people are going to be the first ones that weigh in on this and their response to this is that after Jeremiah finishes the priest, the people, and the prophets are going to say, “You shall die.” So the first legal verdict that’s going to be given here: Jeremiah deserves to die.

The prophet has announced the coming doom and the destruction of Jerusalem. Their response to that is: “We don’t need to respond to the message, we need to put to death the messenger.” I think there’s a very strong possibility here that they believe that Jeremiah is to be put to death as a false prophet as the book of Deuteronomy lays out because he has dared to speak against the house of the Lord. Their theology is built around the ideas that God is going to bless his people, God is going to protect them no matter what, God has made a commitment to the house of David, and God has made a commitment to his people to protect them, to watch over them. They can’t even imagine that a true prophet would speak judgment and that’s the question they raise. Verse 9, “Why have you prophesied in the name of the Lord saying, ‘This house shall be like
Shiloh and this city shall be desolate without inhabitant”? And all of the people gathered around Jeremiah in the house of the Lord.”

One answer to this could be, “Well, we could go back to our past traditions, read the story of Shiloh and what God did there.” But they’re so committed to their idea that God is going to bless them no matter what, that even that example has not gotten through to them. So, the first verdict that’s given here is that Jeremiah deserves to die.

Now, the second response; now we have some civil officials who are going to respond to this and the people are going to get involved in this. What verse 10 says, “When the officials of Judah heard these things, they came up from the king’s house to the house of the Lord and took their seat in the entry of the New Gate of the house of the Lord.” So it does in some way here seem like, really, almost a formal legal proceeding. Let’s resolve this issue about whether we should listen to this message or not.

Now here again, “Then the priests and the prophets said to the officials and to the people, ‘This man deserves a sentence of death because he has prophesied against this city.’” So again, it’s the priests and the priests, it’s the religious leaders that are causing the most objection to Jeremiah’s message. But notice now that they are saying this to the officials and the people. So it’s going to be, in a sense here, I think, the officials and the people that are ultimately going to resolve this.

Jeremiah’s Defense

As part of the proceeding, Jeremiah is going to speak on his own behalf, finally, in verse 12. Basically, what Jeremiah’s going to say here is: “The Lord has sent me to preach this message.” You are wanting to put to death the messenger, but remember this message is coming from the Lord and it’s something that you need to take seriously. So, he’s going to preach his message all over again. Verse 13: “Now, therefore, mend your ways and your deeds and obey the voice of the Lord your God and the Lord will relent of the disaster that he has pronounced against you.” Again, another opportunity is placed in front of them. If they will repent, then God will relent.

“But as for me, behold, I am in your hands –do with me what seems good and right to you –only know for certain that if you put me to death, you will bring innocent
blood upon yourself.” If we’re to look at this as sort of a formal legal proceeding, Jeremiah says, “If you pass a death sentence on me, you’re going to be guilty before God of putting his messenger to death, and of putting to death innocent blood. You’re going to be held accountable for that because I’ve simply told you what the Lord has told me to say.”

**The Third Response to Jeremiah: Vindicated**

So now, in verse 16 to 19, the third cycle of this response to Jeremiah and his message. Notice who is going to talk here: “Then all of the officials and all of the people”—so now the people are over on this side with the officials—“said to the priest and the prophets.” Here is their verdict: “This man does not deserve the sentence of death for he has spoken to us in the name of the Lord our God.” So they validate (remember its 609 B.C., somewhere around there) they validate Jeremiah as a true prophet of God, and notice who it is that does this: the officials, who later on, as we get near the time of the fall and of the demise of Judah and of the destruction of Jerusalem, the officials of the king are going to be the ones that oppose Jeremiah, but at this point the officials say, and the people agree with them, “This man is a true prophet of God.”

What evidence do they present, was it just they were persuaded by the words Jeremiah said here? They’re convinced by the message. They go back to a historical precedent, and remember, Jeremiah’s already done this: “If you think that Jerusalem is not going to be destroyed, let’s go back to the historical precedent of Shiloh. What did the Lord do to his house there?” Well, the reason that the officials and the people ultimately are convinced that Jeremiah is a true prophet is, again, they go back to historical precedent. The historical precedent for them, is the ministry and the message of the prophet Micah, and the response that king Hezekiah had to that particular preacher of judgment the century before Jeremiah.

**Micah of Moresheth and Hezekiah’s Response to God’s Word**

We’ve talked about this in one of the previous sessions. We were talking about the response to the prophetic word, but listen to what the elders say: “Micah of Moresheth,”
this is verse 18, “prophesied in the days of Hezekiah king of Judah, and said to all the people of Judah: ‘Thus says the Lord of hosts, “Zion shall be plowed as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house a wooded height”’” (Jer. 26:18). We have here an interesting example of intertextuality between the prophetic books. There is a citation here, and a quotation of Micah 3:12. Micah said that Jerusalem was going to be destroyed, in other words, a century ago a prophet came and was giving us exactly the same warning as the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah stands in the tradition of the prophets of judgment. When these prophets of judgment come along and speak a word to us, we’d do well to consider what they say. The response that Hezekiah had should be a lesson to us. They say in verse 19, “Did Hezekiah king of Judah or all of Judah put him to death?” And the answer is, “No.” It says: “Did not Hezekiah fear the Lord and seek his favor? And did not the Lord relent, so that he did not bring the disaster he had pronounced against them?” When this prophet of judgment came along, warned the people of the judgment that was coming Hezekiah repented, the people sought God, and there was a turning to God that led to the Lord not sending the judgment that he had threatened. This goes back to the theology of Jeremiah chapter 18. Whenever a prophet announces something good or something disastrous that’s about to come upon people, the Lord doesn’t send that just to announce to them what he’s going to do no matter what. The Lord is announcing his intentions. Even if there is not an explicit condition attached to that, a condition is usually implicit. Unless the Lord says, “Look, I’m going do this, I’m not going turn, I’ve sworn an oath, I’m not going change,” the Lord is going to give people the possibility and opportunity to respond to his message, and if they do then the Lord is going to relent.

So that’s what happened in the days of Hezekiah, he responded to God’s message in the right way, and the Lord relented, he changed his mind and did not send the judgment. The elders and the officials and the people are saying “We at least need to take Jeremiah’s word seriously, and to put him to death would ultimately bring disaster upon
ourselves.” So the end of this debate, this, really in a sense, a formal legal proceeding at the temple has evaluated and assessed the credibility of Jeremiah and the validity of his ministry and his message. The verdict officially of both the civil leaders of Judah and the people of Judah is that this man is a true prophet of God and we need to take his warnings seriously. The conclusion of all of this is we are about to bring great disaster upon ourselves if we put Jeremiah to death. Jeremiah is validated as a prophet.

Now I think it’s very interesting that in a section in the book of Jeremiah dealing with how the people did not listen to the word of God, a recurring type scene takes place where the prophet delivers a message and that message is rejected, it’s very interesting that the first story there validates Jeremiah’s message. The people themselves along with the leaders confirm that Jeremiah is a true prophet of God. What this does is makes them even more culpable and guilty for the fact that they don’t listen to what Jeremiah says. There’s so much cognitive dissidence going on here because first of all they said to Jeremiah, “How can you preach judgment against God’s house?” Jeremiah says “Think about your own history, go back to Shiloh,” but there is also the fact that these people have recognized Jeremiah as a true prophet of God. If that’s the case where is the revival, the reform, the renewal that’s going to take place? This scene at the very beginning of chapters 26-45 makes the people and the leaders of Judah all the more guilty for the fact that they didn’t listen to Jeremiah’s message and they didn’t respond in a positive way.

Now you’re saying, “I thought this was a section of the book that was talking about the rejection of Jeremiah’s message. Everything that you have read so far seems to be validating Jeremiah. There’s an introductory story here about the acceptance of Jeremiah’s message.” But as we’ve worked our way through the narrative, and all the people who have responded to this, there’s one person that’s missing. We’ve seen the response of the prophets, the priests, we’ve seen the people and their response and they seem to be somewhat fickle because they start out on the side of the priests and the prophets who are angry and say that Jeremiah needs to die. They come over to the side of the officials and the elders who say that this man is not deserving of death, but in the midst of all of this and the different audiences and the different groups that are
responding, the one person that is not involved here, for whatever reason, is Jehoiakim, the king.

**Jehoiakim’s Response: Uriah**

What’s his verdict on the message of Jeremiah? Well, he’s not involved in this scene, but what the narrator does, really an effective thing here, is he puts in an appendix to the story. He begins by telling us there was a courtroom scene at the temple that officially validated Jeremiah as a prophet, so the nation is going to listen to him. And the answer to that is: “no,” because the king himself is absolutely hostile, and absolutely unwilling to hear anything that these prophets of judgment have to say. So what happens in verses 20-24 is that we have an appended story of another episode that deals with king Jehoiakim’s response to the prophetic word of a prophet by the name of Uriah.

Uriah may not be a name we’re familiar with, he’s not a prophet whose words are included in the canon of Scripture, but like Jeremiah he was preaching a message for the people of Judah that was exactly the same as that of Jeremiah. He’s saying the exact same thing to them. You need to repent, you need to change, God is preparing to send judgment. Jehoiakim, when he hears that message, becomes angry. The royal response is such that Uriah knows that the king is trying to put him to death, and he flees and he escapes to Egypt. So that is the same place that ultimately Jeremiah’s going to end up.

But Jehoiakim doesn’t stop there, he doesn’t say “Well, we got rid of him, we sent him off to Egypt.” He actually uses his diplomatic and political connections with Egypt to send his officials down to Egypt. They take Uriah, they bring him back it says in verse 23, “They took Uriah out of Egypt and brought him to King Jehoiakim, who had him struck down with a sword and his body was dumped into the burial place of the common people.” It says that Jehoiakim is directly involved in putting the prophet to death, and by his response here he demonstrates that he is the paradigmatic example of unbelief in the book of Jeremiah.

The validity of Jeremiah’s message, the warnings that Jeremiah is bringing about judgment, the people and officials in chapter 26, they don’t know how all of this is going to unfold. The Babylonians haven’t even come at this time. But they’re saying, “At least
we need to take seriously warnings of judgment. We need to step aside and assess our lives and where we stand with God, and are we being faithful to the covenant, because remember what Hezekiah did.” Jehoiakim doesn’t want to do any of that sort of assessment, he acts in anger and in indignation. So this story that seems to begin so positively, so maybe the people and maybe the nation, maybe the leaders are going to respond in a proper way, chapter 26 casts the die, Jehoiakim is a man who will not respond to God, who will not obey, and as a result of that God is not going to relent from the judgment that he sends.

Remember in each of the panels in chapters 26-35 and 36-45 it begins with a possibility, *ulai* “perhaps” the people will respond properly and God will spare the judgment. But we really don’t need to get to the end of the section to find out what’s going to happen, in the very first story the unbelief, the rejection of the word of God, the disobedience of the king reflects what these two panels are going demonstrate to us. God brings judgment against Judah because of their disobedience that’s reflected in the life of the king.

**Jeremiah 36: Opening the Second Panel**

So that’s the opening to the first panel chapter 26, when we go to the opening of the second panel. This parallel passage in chapter 36 we’re going to see another pretty obvious example of Jehoiakim’s blatant hostility to the word of the Lord. Again we’re going to have a very brief summary of Jeremiah’s message and the issue is going to be: how do the people respond? God has Jeremiah dictate this message, the words of Jeremiah are the words of the Lord. The words of Baruch are the words of Jeremiah that are the words of the Lord. But again there is the possibility raised at the very beginning here that maybe this message and maybe these warnings of judgment if the people will listen, *shama*’, and if they will turn, *shub*, from their evil ways there is the possibility that God will relent, *naham*, and not send judgment against his people.

Chapter 36 verse 3 says this: “Write these words down and announce and summarize all the messages of judgment that I have given. It may be that the house of Judah will hear of all of the *ra’a*, disaster, the calamity, that I intend to do to them so that
everyone will turn from his ra’a, evil way and that I may forgive their iniquity and their sin.” When Jeremiah gets ready to send Baruch to the temple with this message, think about the courage it’s going to take for Baruch to deliver this. It’s too hot a message for Jeremiah to come out of hiding, so Baruch gets to be the messenger. But why is he doing all this? Verse 7: “It may be that their plea for mercy will come before the Lord and that everyone will turn from his ra’a, evil way. For great is the anger and the wrath that God has pronounced against this people.” So that’s why Baruch goes to the temple.

This is a short summary of what this is all about. It’s the warnings of judgment. Chapters 1-25 may reflect for us something of what this scroll was like. After the scroll was destroyed it says that many similar words were added to it but perhaps the scroll that Baruch goes to the temple to read is something very similar to what we have in chapters 1-25.

**Jeremiah 36: People’s Response**

Now the question becomes, just like in chapter 26, what’s the response to the message? And again we’re going to have these various voices that are going to weigh in. First of all, let’s think about the response of the people, how did the people themselves respond? Verse 9, we’ve got a couple of insights into this. “In the 5th year of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah (605 BC is the year) all of the people in Jerusalem and all of the people who came from the cities of Judah to Jerusalem proclaimed a fast before the Lord.” So Jeremiah and Baruch picked a very opportune time to bring this message. The people have already proclaimed a fast and that’s the reason they’re coming to the temple in the first place. Now Old Testament law only required the people of Israel to fast one day a year on the Day of Atonement as expression of their repentance and their confession for sin. So this is a special fast that has perhaps been proclaimed by the leaders of Judah because they realized that they are in a time of national crisis and they need God’s help.

The significance of this is that if they are fasting and if they are praying to God it seems like that they would be especially open to responding to what the prophet has to say to them. I think about the time in the post-exilic period when Ezra and Nehemiah are leading the people and Ezra reads the scroll of the Book of the Law and they read it from
early in the morning until noon time, for 5 hours or 6 hours. The people stand, they listen, they are attentive to the message. But when they hear what the message has to say they are struck to the heart they begin to weep, they begin to cry, they mourn, and they repent. Actually, Ezra and the leaders there have to stop the mourning and say, “Hey, this is a day of celebration,” but there is nothing here in the fasting that indicates that the people responded in this particular way to the message of Jeremiah.

It says in verse 10, “Then in the hearing of all the people Baruch read the words of Jeremiah from the scroll in the House of the Lord in the chamber of Gemariah” and that’s the last time that the people are mentioned in this story. The Word of the Lord was read in the hearing of all the people. Well, where is their response? In chapter 26 they’re directly involved in Jeremiah’s temple sermon. Remember they side with the prophets and the priests at the beginning who say that Jeremiah needs to be put to death. They come over to the side of the officials and the elders to ultimately say that Jeremiah should not be put to death, but here we don’t have anything. The question that if I could go back and interview the narrator I would ask is, “What was the response? What was the reaction?” By virtue of the fact, we’re reading between the lines here a little bit, that there is no mention of the response of the people, it sort of reflects the emptiness of the fast that they had proclaimed. They are there doing this religious observance and supposedly a fast was a time when you humbled yourself over sin. Here’s a prophetic message that’s confronting them, that they’ve been listening to for 20 years and there is no response.

**Fasting in the Prophets**

There are a couple of other prophetic passages that talk about the emptiness of fasting without a response of obedience and commitment to do what God commands you in his word. Isaiah chapter 58 talks about this and it say this, the Lord speaks to the people and he says, “They seek me daily and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that did righteousness and didn’t forsake the judgment of their God.” They’re doing their religious rituals, they appear to be very religious and that’s what we seem to have here. They appear to be very sensitive to God, they proclaim a fast. This is a national disaster, this is a time of crisis; we need the Lord. That’s good, but they don’t
really seek to know what God’s will is in terms of living that out in their lives. “They ask for righteous judgments, they delight to draw near to God,” that’s what they’re doing here.

They even ask God a question in verse 3 and I can imagine the people in Jeremiah’s audience who heard the scroll and Baruch’s audience here they would have said the same thing. “Why have we fasted and yet you do not see it? Why have we humbled ourselves and you take no knowledge of it? Behold in the day of your fast.” Here is the problem. You’re upset about the fact that God is not recognizing your fast, here’s the issue: “in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure and you oppress all of your workers.” You have got this national observance and you are all getting together, you’re praying and you are fasting and you’re pretending to seek God but as soon as the fast is over you go back to work and disobey the law and oppress the poor and the needy. That’s why God doesn’t pay attention to your fast. This message would have been very appropriate to the people that were there in Baruch’s audience that were hearing the scroll. “Look, you have come to fast. Let’s deal with the real issue here. You need to come back to obeying God’s word.” “Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to hit with a wicked feast, feasting like yours this day will not make your voice be heard on high. Is this the fast that I choose, a day for a person to humble himself?” Is that really what’s going to please God? Is it to bow down his head like a reed and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? “Will you call this a fast and a day acceptable to the Lord?” Yeah, just going to the temple and praying some prayers and pretending to be humbled, is that really what God wants? And the answer, of course, is, “No.” Here’s what the Lord says, Isaiah 58:6, “Is this not this the kind of fast that I have chosen: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, to break every yoke. Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and to bring the homeless poor into your house, when you see the naked to cover him? Then, if you fast in that way, will you turn back to God, take care of the needs of them, then your light shall break forth like the dawn and your healing shall come speedily.”

There’s a similar passage to this in Zechariah 7 in the postexilic period. They had
a fast where they observed the time when Jerusalem had fallen, when the temple had been
destroyed. They come to the prophets, “Should we continue observing these fasts?”
They’ve done that throughout the time of the exile. Zechariah says the real issue is not
whether you go through the observances of the fast or not. The real issue is, are you
going to obey God?

So, I think it’s just interesting here that in Jeremiah chapter 36, they’ve come to
seek the Lord, to pray, to confess their sin, but yet they’re not responsive to the message
of the prophet.

Second Response: Jeremiah 36:11-20

There’s a second response in verses 11-20 and it tells us there that, and actually
this is in verses 11-18, that there are officials here who hear the message and do respond
to it in a positive way. The first one is mentioned in verse11. “When Micaiah son of
Gemariah, the son of Shaphan.” This family is involved in the life of Jeremiah. Back in
chapter 26, when the prophet Uriah is put to death by Jehoiakim, it’s another member of
the family of Shaphan that protects Jeremiah from the same thing was happening to him.
So Micaiah, this member of this family is a supporter of Jeremiah. He hears the message,
he takes it to other officers and scribes. They hear it, they take the word seriously and
their response is, after Baruch sits down and reads it again, here’s what it says, verse 18,
“When they heard all of these words, they turned to one another in fear.” When a prophet
of the Lord warns you of judgment the right response is fear.

They say this message is serious we need to take it to the king. So they bring it to
the king. Verse 20, the king is sitting in his comfortable palace. The firepot is burning to
keep him warm. It says in verse 22, it was in the ninth month, the king was sitting in the
winter house and there was fire burning in the pot before him. As they read the scroll of
the prophecies to him, it tells us that Jehoiakim takes a knife and strip by strip cuts up the
scroll and throws it into the firepot. Now what was it that motivated this kind of
response? Well, obviously it was his anger and hostility. But, verse 24 says this, “Yet
neither the king, nor any of the servants who heard all of these words, was afraid.” So
you have the scribes and the officials, they hear the warnings, they fear the Lord. They
reverence God’s word. They take it seriously. Jehoiakim hears the word of the Lord, he
does not fear and he commits Jeremiah’s scroll to the fire and turns it into ashes.

In some sense, I wonder if Jehoiakim doesn’t think, “Alright, if this prophet wants
to condemn me with a message, let’s see whose word has power here. Let’s see who has
authority here. Is it the prophet? Or is it the king?” In his royal authority and in his royal
position, at the royal palace, he commits the prophet’s words to the fire. Maybe even in
some sort of magical sense thinking that by destroying the message, I’ve destroyed the
reality that it’s talking about. But when we come to this confrontation between prophetic
power and royal power throughout the Scriptures, it’s always the prophetic power of the
word of God that is going to win this battle. Jehoiakim has all the troops, all the power,
all the authority, all the officials on his side. But Jeremiah has God and he has the power
of God’s word.

**Power of the Word of God**

This reminds me in some sense of the confrontation between Moses and the
Pharaoh back in the story of the Exodus. In Exodus chapter 10, it says that Moses comes
to the Pharaoh and he says, “This is what the Lord says, let my people go.” This is the
message of God, this is God’s royal decree. And then a few verses later, I believe it’s in
verse 10 of that chapter, Pharaoh says, “This is what the pharaoh says, ‘Get back to work
and I’m no longer going to give you straw to make your own bricks.’” So we come down
to this confrontation of whose word has power. Is it the word of Moses and the word of
the Lord? The pharaoh says, “I don’t know who the Lord is. What authority does this
God of Israel have what authority does his word have over the word of the king of Egypt?
Let’s see whose word has power.” As you work your way through the rest of the story,
the Pharaoh is going to lose really badly.

The same thing here, Jehoiakim may think that he has destroyed the word of God,
he disregards it. He orders the arrest of Baruch and Jeremiah but the officials were smart
enough to hide him. By the consequences of these choices are that in verse 30, Jehoiakim
has brought judgment on the nation. Then there is also going to be the judgment that God
brings directly on Jehoiakim himself. The Lord says this, “He will have no one to sit on
the throne of David and his dead body shall be cast out to the heat by day and to the frost by night.” I think about him sitting in the warm comfort of his palace and enjoying his royal authority, disregarding the word of God. The punishment is going to fit the crime because he is not even going to be given a decent burial. His body will be subjected to the heat and the frost and there will be no one to carry on the royal line because God is getting ready to destroy the house of David.

The response of the king is what brings judgment against the people of Judah. Jehoiakim believed that by destroying the scroll he was able to put an end to the warnings of judgment. But all that God does is simply commission Jeremiah to write another scroll. Instead of the first scroll no longer being in effect, it says, “that many similar words of judgment were added to this.” Again thinking about the process of the composition of Jeremiah, it’s likely that Jeremiah and Baruch continued to add words to revise, to reshape, to remold, to reform the message throughout the time of Jeremiah’s ministry and the remainder of his life. Until we see the book in the form that it is put in today.

Whose word has power? Is it the king? Or is it the prophet? And we’re going to understand and we definitely see from all of this that real power is in the message that the Lord communicates through his messenger and through his servant.

**Hezekiah and Jehoiakim’s Opposite Responses to God’s Word**

Now remember that a part of what is going on in the stories of the kings of Judah here is, there’s this hope and this expectation that the Lord might do for the people of Jerusalem in Jeremiah’s day, what he did during the time of Isaiah. Maybe the Lord is going to step in at the eleventh hour and deliver Jerusalem from danger. They were hoping for that, they were expecting that. In a sense that’s what their theology really drove them to. But what the story of Jeremiah is going to say is that that kind of response is not going to be forthcoming because the response of the kings in Isaiah’s day was not the same as the response that King Jehoiakim and later King Zedekiah are going to have to the prophetic word.

In fact, let’s go back to the story of the book of Kings and the story of Isaiah and
Hezekiah. Let’s think about Jehoiakim in the light of God’s dealing with the kings of Israel and Judah throughout their history. When we go back to the book of Kings it is going to tell us that there are three incomparable kings in Israel and Judah’s history. The first one is that Solomon was an incomparable king. He was incomparable in his wisdom. There was no one like him. Kings is also going to tell us that there was no one like Hezekiah (2 Kgs 18.5). He was incomparable in his faith. No one trusted the Lord like Hezekiah did when the city of Jerusalem was surrounded by the Assyrians and that’s why the deliverance came in the days of Isaiah. Thirdly, it is going to tell us that there was no one like Josiah. There was no other king like him in terms of his obedience to God’s law and the reforms that Josiah brought about when the scroll of God’s law was found, Josiah took God’s law and God’s commandments seriously in a way that was true of no other king. There was no other king like Solomon, no other king like Hezekiah, and no other king like Josiah.

Those last two kings Hezekiah and Josiah are behind the scenes of what we’re reading in Jeremiah 26-36. It is significant in light of the fact that Jehoiakim is a son of Josiah. It is also significant in light of the fact that they are looking for a deliverance of Jerusalem like what was experienced by Hezekiah. The two stories that we have just read are there to say Jehoiakim was not a Hezekiah, and Jehoiakim was not a Josiah.

First of all, it is explicitly stated in chapter 26. Did not Hezekiah respond to the word of the Lord in the days of Micah when Micah warned of the judgment. Didn’t Hezekiah fear the Lord, respond to the message and turn to the Lord in prayer and ask for God’s mercy? Yes. But immediately after we read that in chapter 26 in the very same section of verses that follow we have the story of King Jehoiakim putting Uriah to death. So the obvious idea, why isn’t there going to be a deliverance like in the days of Hezekiah, look at the response of the two kings to the word of the Lord.

**Jeremiah 36 and 2 Kings 22-23: Jehoiakim and Josiah compared**

But when we go to chapter 36 this is more implicit. There we have a contrast between Jehoiakim and Josiah. C. D. Isabel in an article in JSOT back in 1978 laid these things out and I think it’s a very helpful illustration here. He argues that the story in
Jeremiah chapter 36 bears a very close relationship to the story of Josiah (2 Kings 22-23). When you compare these two passages you do see some very interesting parallels. In both stories you have the response to a newly discovered scroll. In Josiah’s case they found the Book of the Law. They had gotten so far away from God that they even lost the commandments of Moses. They discovered that and bring it to King Josiah. In Jeremiah chapter 36 the officials have heard the scroll of Jeremiah’s prophecies and they bring that scroll to the king. So the issue is how is the king going to respond? Both of these scrolls are words of judgment. Josiah hears the covenant curses that are found in passages like Deuteronomy 28. Jehoiakim hears the warning of the covenant curses that God is about to bring on Judah through the preaching of Jeremiah.

But the difference is the response of the two kings. It tells us in 2 Kings 22 that Josiah when he heard the warnings of judgment tore, kara, his garments. It also tells us that he humbled himself, he responded and pleaded and ultimately Judah was spared from judgment. Josiah and his officials feared the Lord. Then there are all kinds of positive reforms and changes that are brought about as a result of the reading of the scroll. It tells us when they bring the scroll to Jehoiakim that he cut up the scroll, kara. This is the same word that refers to the tearing of Josiah’s garments in one passage is used to talk about the tearing up and destruction of the scroll in another.

It tells us that Josiah burned in the fire all the pagan implements that were used as part of Judah’s idolatress worship. It tells us in the story of Jehoiakim that he burned up the word of God and tried to do away with that. So I think there is a very close similarity and a very close parallel between 2 Kings 22-23 and Jeremiah 36 to say let’s look at these two kings. One responded in faith, fear and obedience. One acted on the message. One reacted with no fear, anger and hostility toward the word of God. Judah in Josiah’s day was spared from judgment. Judah in Jehoiakim’s day comes under a sentence of judgment because of the response of the king.

Know I want to close with an illustration from a moment in American political history. Back in the vice presidential debates in 1988, now many of you may be too young to even remember this, it’s kind of an obscure thing. But Lloyd Benson and Dan
Quail were engaged in the vice presidential debate this was the presidential election between Michael Dukakis and George Bush senior. At one moment in the debate Senator Benson charged Dan Quail with being too young and too inexperienced to serve as vice president; he wasn’t qualified to the job. Quail responded by going back to the democratic candidate John F. Kennedy and pointing out that he had the same basic experience requirement, they were basically the same age and that was his response to Senator Benson’s charge. Benson, as he responded back to Quail said this, he said, “Senator Quail I knew Jack Kennedy. Jack Kennedy was a friend of mine, you are no Jack Kennedy.” Even though the Democrats lost the election that year it was a very powerful moment in that debate.

I believe the prophet Jeremiah and the narrator of these two amazing stories is pointing a finger in the face of Jehoiakin and saying, “King Jehoiakim you are no Hezekiah. King Jehoiakim you are no Josiah. I knew Josiah, Josiah was a friend of mine you are his son. You are no Josiah.” And because of the kings response to the word of God judgment is going to come.

How we listen to God, how we respond to God is a matter of life and death. We’re going to be reminded of that again and again as we study through Jeremiah 26-45. We see that initially and right up front here with the two stories of Jehoiakim in Jeremiah 26, 36.