Rejecting and Embracing the Word of God
Jeremiah 36 and 45

We're reaching the end of our look at Jeremiah. In fact, next Sunday will be our last. But today, we're going to look at a unique episode - the one place in the Bible where we see how part of the Bible came to be written. But, it's also an episode that tells us why people, maybe even you, react very differently to the Bible - because we get to see two men who are both confronted by God's word but who respond to it in very different ways.

Reading: Jeremiah 36:1-26

We're going to look at three things: what the Bible is; why you might reject it; and how you can embrace it.

What the Bible Is:
We're at the point in Jeremiah when Jerusalem is on the verge of disaster. The chapters before this chapter describe Jerusalem surrounded by the army of Babylon, the ones that follow describe her destruction at their hands.

But in this chapter, Jeremiah hits a very rapid rewind, and we go right back, virtually, to the start, to 18 years before the fall of the city. It's as if Jeremiah wants to remind us why things are going to go so badly wrong for the city in the chapters that follow.

Look at verse 1: it's 'the fourth year of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah.' So it's 605BC. The fourth year of Jehoiakim, but the first year of Nebuchadnezzar, king of a resurgent Babylonian empire. And very shortly in 605, Babylon will defeat Egypt in battle and cement its place as the undisputed regional superpower. A battle that would leave the King Jehoiakim in Jerusalem wondering what designs Babylon had on Judah.

And with that backdrop, Jeremiah instructs Baruch to write on this scroll, at his dictation, all the prophecies Jeremiah's spoken up to this point - which is probably Jeremiah chapters 1 to 25. So this is part of the Bible in the making. And then, because Jeremiah can't go, because he's banned as a trouble maker, Baruch's to take that scroll, and read it aloud in the Temple.

And it takes Baruch 9 months, at least, to finish the scroll. And v9 tells us that he read it in the temple, 'In the fifth year of Jehoiakim…in the ninth month.' December 604BC - the same month that the Babylonian army invaded and destroyed the city of Ashkelon just 80km away. So, if King Jehoiakim had wondered what designs Babylon might have on Judah, he hadn't had to wait long to find out, had he.

Ok, but if that's the history of the scroll, of this book, it's what it says it contains that should make us sit up and take notice. You see, when Baruch reads the scroll to the officials, they want to know, v17, "Tell us, please, how did you write all these words? Was it at his [Jeremiah's] dictation?" And Baruch tells them, yes, v18, "He dictated all these words to me, while I wrote them with ink on the scroll."

So these are Jeremiah's words. And yet, look again at v1-2: 'This word came to Jeremiah from the Lord: "Take a scroll and write on it all the words *that I have spoken* to you." And Jeremiah commands Baruch in v6, "Go…you shall read *the words of the Lord* from the scroll that you have written at my dictation." And then v8, 'And Baruch the son of Neriah did all that Jeremiah the prophet ordered him about reading from the scroll *the words of the Lord* in the Lord's house.'

Now, think about it, that's an extraordinary claim, isn't it? That this book of Jeremiah isn't just Jeremiah's words, it's God's. That when you read it, this is God speaking. But it's not just the content, but motivation behind it that should make you sit up.

Look at v3, as God says to Jeremiah, "It may be that the house of Judah will hear all the disaster that I intend to do to them, so that every one may turn from his evil way, and that I may forgive their iniquity and their sin."

Now, if you've got bad news for someone, there are multiple reasons why you might give it to them, aren't there. You might just need to inform them. 'I'm sorry, but you don't have enough money in your bank account to buy that house.' Or, you might take some pleasure in telling them, as some of you have this morning, 'I'm so sorry Martin, that South Africa beat England 32:12.' But here, the reason for writing the the scroll, and the reason for reading the bad news it contained, was so that the people could hear of the judgement to come, and turn back to God and receive the forgiveness and the welcome God was holding out to them.

Now, I know that some of you enjoy going to these giant theme parks, like Europa-park, with their terrifying rides. But for me, the dragon ride at Legoland is more than enough. Plus, at Legoland they've got these miniature cities, like London, built entirely from lego bricks. Or down at the Swiss Vapeur Parc you can take rides on miniature steam trains through a miniature Switzerland.

Well, Jeremiah's scroll and Jerusalem as a city are like miniatures of the whole Bible and the whole world. You see, if Jeremiah's scroll claims to be God's word - the apostle Paul writes in 2 Timothy 3:16, that 'All Scripture [the whole Bible] is breathed out by God'. - it's all his words.

And the message of Jeremiah is also the message of the Bible in miniature. You see, God is saying to Jerusalem, you've turned your back on me, you want to be free of me, but it ends up with you enslaved, and destruction is coming, but turn to me and I'll forgive you. And the message of the whole Bible is, from Eden onwards, humanity, you and me included, have turned our backs on God and sought our own freedom, but it's ended in us enslaved to just about everything imaginable, but God stands, like a loving father, calling us back to him.

And yet, if that's the message of Jeremiah and the Bible, why do people, then and now, have such a hard time hearing it? Why do we struggle to let God's word change us the way he wants?

Well, two men here give us some clues.

Why You Might Reject It:
Well, a young man, Micaiah, heard Baruch reading the scroll and goes and tells the King's officials meeting in the palace. And so they call Baruch and have him read the scroll to them. And having heard it, they're afraid, and they decide two things: Jeremiah and Baruch must hide themselves, and the king must hear it for himself.

Now, if that was their response, how would you describe the king's? I mean, just picture him, seated there. It's December, and there's a fire burning in the hearth. And, v23, 'as Jehudi read three or four columns [from the scroll], the king would cut them off with a knife and throw them into the fire… until the entire scroll was consumed.' So Jehoiakim hears every word. He doesn't stop the man

reading, half-way. He doesn't become all indignant, and say, 'enough! Stop!' He listens to every word and coldly, callously, calculatingly, throws every word in the fire. And so Jehoiakim begins a line of rulers - of Caesars and Popes and kings and Ayatollas, and Hitler, and Stalin and Pol-Pot and Mao, who have tried to destroy the Bible.

And listen to how Jeremiah describes the king's reaction: v24, 'Yet neither the king nor any of his servants who heard all these words was afraid, nor did they tear their garments.'

So why does he respond like that? I think there are two reasons.

Firstly, he simply does not accept this scroll, and its words, as having any authority over him. He's the king and the son of a king. It's his word that's the authority in Jerusalem, not this scroll.

Now, we may be more polite than Jehoiakim, but we can reject God's word for very similar reasons, can't we? You see, there's always going to be something or someone that serves as the authority in your life. Something that guides you, rules you, adjudicates your decisions for you. It could be traditional morality, or family, or people in positions of authority - like science, or the church. It could be society, and culture, and what everyone else is thinking or doing. It could be your inner feelings - and what just feels good or right to you. Whatever it is, something is going to serve as your guiding light. And increasingly, you're told it's got to be you. Don't look outside yourself for who you're to be, or how you're to behave. Look *inside* yourself. Because to be truly free, you've got to be your own authority. Just like Jehoiakim, it's got to be your word that goes. And certainly not some ancient text claiming authority over your life. Because that will limit your freedom and with it your enjoyment of life.

But James KA Smith, the American philosopher, describes that as being like swimming in your cousin's above-ground swimming pool on a hot summers day. And to start with you're happy to play in the pool. But soon those plastic walls feel constraining. There's not enough room, you wish the pool was bigger, those walls are restricting your fun. So you kick those walls down. And in no time at all, he says, you're not swimming in a pool, you're sat in a puddle of muddy water. The pool hasn't got bigger, it's disappeared.

Make yourself the authority, pursue personal freedom over everything and everyone, and you don't become freer, you become your own prisoner. Unable to make those daily sacrifices on which every deep and lasting relationship depends. You see, true freedom isn't the absence of authority, it's having the right authority.

But the second reason Jehoiakim responds the way he does is in v29, where God reports Jehoiakim as saying, "Why have you written in [the scroll] that the king of Babylon will certainly come and destroy this land?" In other words, Jehoiakim fundamentally doesn't like what the scroll says - because it spell out a world-view and a future different from the one he wants.

Thomas Jefferson was the third president of the United States. And he was a naturalist, and he didn't believe in all the supernatural stuff in the Bible, and so he got a New Testament, and a razor and cut out all the bits he didn't like - all the stuff about Jesus miracles, and resurrection and divinity, and anything that had the whiff of the supernatural about it, and pasted the bits he did like into a book. And he did it so he could have a text that fitted with his own presuppositions. So he had something to read at night that didn't discomfort him.

So Jehoiakim doesn't like stuff about judgment. Jefferson doesn't like stuff about the supernatural. But what could it be for you? Maybe it's nothing, but maybe it's something. You hear or read what the Bible has to say and mentally, even subconsciously, you take out Jehoiakim's knife or Jefferson's razor. It could be that nagging word about forgiving that person who's hurt you. It could be about how you're to use your money. It could be about the way you treat your wife or husband; or about sexuality and marriage. You don't throw the whole Bible in the fire, but mentally, out comes the knife on the the stuff we don't like.

The problem is that when we do that, we're not letting it shape us and change us. We stay stuck as we are, rather than becoming more like the one who wrote it.

But it's not just Jehoiakim who struggles with this scroll. Baruch who wrote it does too. And we get his side of the story in Jeremiah 45 - which happens on the day Jeremiah asks him to write the scroll.

Reading: Jeremiah 45:1-5

So Jeremiah asks Baruch to write out this scroll and internally he's thinking, v3, 'Woe is me! For the Lord has added sorrow to my pain. I am weary with my groaning, and I find no rest.' In other words, God, I've had enough. I don't want and I can't take anymore.

I mean, if you've found Jeremiah hard going, and it feels like chapter after chapter of judgement, imagine living it, which is what Baruch has to do. Because to him, this wasn't just a book, it's his life. These words of judgment and destruction are words about his friends and family and neighbours. And he's been carrying this burden as Jeremiah's secretary for years. And now he asks him to spend months writing it out and then go and risk his life by standing in the temple and reading it out. It's no wonder he hits a wall and has a crisis of courage, is it? It's no wonder his courage fails and wonders if it's all worth it.

You see, Jehoiakim resists the word of God because it challenges his authority and tells him things he doesn't want to hear. But Baruch is wondering, is the word of God, is hearing, writing and obeying God's word, worth it? Because, frankly, it just seems to make my life more difficult.

Let me ask you, do you ever feel like that? That sometimes it would just be easier to ignore God's word, or give in to temptation. Because life is hard enough without this book challenging you.

But there's a second reason Baruch is struggling. Look at v5: as the Lord says to him, "And do you seek great things for yourself? Seek them not."

Now, we don't know much about Baruch, but what we do know is the he came from a distinguished family. His grandfather was governor of Jerusalem, and his brother is one of the king's staff officers.

And maybe there was a time when it had been an honour to serve Jeremiah, this young, up-and-coming prophet. But now? Now, Baruch wanted more from life than this. He wanted to be someone, to achieve something. He wanted to count, to be significant.

And that quest for self glory, to feel like you're someone, is another recurring reason why people turn away from God's word and from faith - because the life of following Christ can seem so small, and I don't want to be small. And Baruch wants success, not suffering. He wants accolades and applause, not abuse. And so do we. But in the words of Eugene Peterson, what God requires of Baruch and of us, is a long obedience in the same direction.

There's a scene in Tolkien's Lord of the Rings, that never made it into the film, where Frodo and his hobbit friends are captured by a Barrow-wight, a wraith-like creature who lived in ancient burial mounds. And the hobbits are entombed in one of those burial mounds. And Frodo is the only one still conscious. And as the hand of the Barrow-wight creeps towards them, to drag them down to death, Tolkien writes, "There is a seed of courage hidden (often deeply, it is true) in the heart of the fattest and most timid hobbit, waiting for some final and desperate danger to make it grow." And as the thought that this might be their end, Tolkien says, "the thought hardened [Frodo]. He found himself stiffening, as if for a final spring; he no longer felt like a helpless prey." He thought about escaping, putting on the ring and abandoning his friends and saving himself, reasoning that everyone back home would understand if he did, but, Tolkien says, "the courage that had been awakened in him was now too strong: he could not leave his friends so easily."

And that hidden seed of courage began to germinate.

But it does too for Baruch. His courage is failing, but something stiffens it, and he does write the scroll and he does go to the temple to read it. He wants something greater for his life than loyalty to God and Jeremiah, but he doesn't desert. And when Jerusalem finally falls 18 years later, he's still with Jeremiah, and it's because of his courage and faithfulness that 2500 years later we're still reading the scroll.

So, to use Tolkien's words, in Baruch's final and desperate danger, what makes that seed of courage germinate? What stiffens his resolve? Why does he embrace the cost of loyalty to God, and his word, when Jehoiakim doesn't? And what can do the same for us? What can leave you willingly accepting the authority of God's word over your life, even when you find it hard? What can give you the courage to keep going when obedience seems more costly than going your own way? And what can leave you happy to choose God's glory over your ambition?

How You Can Embrace It:
Well, Baruch is feeling burdened and miserable. And the Lord says to him, v4, 'Thus says the Lord,: Behold, what I have built I am breaking down, and what I have planted I am plucking up - that is the whole land.' And so at one level, God reminds Baruch that he is in absolute sovereign control. Yes, the days are hard, Baruch, yes your suffering is real, but all this breaking down and plucking up is my doing. So trust me, Baruch. Your life is not out of control. I'm in control.

And yet, it's deeper even than that, isn't it? You see, Baruch feels like his life is breaking down, that his life is being plucked up, and God is saying, Baruch, believe me, I know what that feels like - this people are my people, this is my work, this is my treasured possession being destroyed. What I have built is being destroyed, what I planted is being plucked up. Baruch I get your grief and your sorrow - because it's mine.

I read recently about a Christian minister who was struggling with the pain and suffering of the world. And ironically, he wrote that it was a statue of Buddha that brought him to his senses.

Because there was the Buddha sat, cross-legged, with a smile playing across his face - untouched by the suffering of the world, whilst Christ hung from a cross, experiencing the suffering of the world.

You see, if here Baruch is steadied by the sovereignty and grief of God, you and I can look to Christ, to the cross, where the grief and the sovereignty of God meet. And maybe you feel overwhelmed by life and wonder if holding on to faith is worth it. Well, look to Jesus. Look at the ultimate Word of God, dying for you, bearing your burdens, being overwhelmed by them for you, so that you can always know he loves you and is for you.

But secondly, God rebukes Baruch: v5 again, 'Do you seek great things for yourself? Seek them not.' In other words, Baruch, true greatness does not come by seeking greatness. There are far greater things to be pursued in this life than that.

James and John, two of Jesus' disciples, came to him once, asking to sit at his right and his left hand in glory. In other words, Jesus, when you're great let us in on that greatness. Remember how Jesus answered them? Mk 10:43, 45: "Whoever would be great among you must be your servant… For even the Son of Man came not to be served by to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

AW Tozer, an American pastor, told a story of visiting a church where a lady sang a solo. And the way he describes it I think it would be fair to say that it wasn't all that special. But someone turned to Tozer and said, 'she gave up opera singing for Christ?' To which Tozer said to himself, 'Gave up opera for Christ?! Gave up opera for Christ?! No one ever gave up anything for Christ that comes close to comparing with what he gave up for us.'

And Baruch wrestles with what he has given up for God; and maybe you wonder: is Christianity worth your time, your money, your life? Well… look what Christ gave up for you. Look at the greatness he laid aside. Look at how he humbled himself. Look at how he took the lowest place and serves you. Look at the shame he endured at the cross for you. And he did it all so that you can share in his glory and greatness that we could never earn or deserve.

But thirdly, God stiffens Baruch's courage, by making him a promise. Verse 5, 'I am bringing disaster upon all flesh, declares the Lord. But I will give you your life as a prize of war.' Now maybe you hear that and think - great, he's promising him he's going to survive - I'd want a bit more than just survival. But listen, when the city is going to be starved and decimated, the promise of life is a huge promise.

And in the resurrection of Jesus, God promises you the same: Life in a world that's gripped by death; hope and a future instead of destruction.

So, see Christ giving up everything for you; see him plucked up and torn down for you; see him risen from the dead and reigning in glory for you, and you'll want to live under the authority of his word, you'll want it to shape your life. And that seed of courage will germinate in your trials, and you'll know there's nothing you can give up for him that comes close to what he has given up for you.