

Responding to the Word

In the various contexts of our daily readings, we come across many people's attitude to the Word: some who feared and trembled at it, and others who rebelled against, and despised it. In all of these things we have examples for our learning: examples of faithfulness, and examples of disbelief. We shall consider both, in our pursuit for exhortation and encouragement.

THE KING OF JUDAH

Jeremiah chapter 36 recounts the giving of a particular revelation to Jeremiah, when he was in prison. So "Baruch wrote from the mouth of Jeremiah all the words of Yahweh, which he had spoken unto him, upon a roll of a book" (Verse 4). Those who initially heard it, had the approach described in Isaiah 66 (above): ***"they were afraid both one and another,*** and said unto Baruch, We will surely tell the king of all these words" (Jer. 36:16). So they approached the king, Jehoiakim, and arrangements were made to read the words before him. His reaction, however, was very different:

"it came to pass that when Jehudi had read three or four leaves, he cut it with the penknife, and cast it into the fire that was on the hearth, until all the roll was consumed in the fire that was on the hearth. ***Yet they were not afraid ...***" (Jer. 36:23-24).

Here is the example of the Apostasy down through the Ages. Many times men have sought to suppress and destroy the words of the Living God, but by His Grace it has survived through to our day. "Yet they were not afraid ..." – this is the natural man: ***"There is no fear of God*** before their eyes" (Rom. 3:18). So it was that through his lack of obedience to Divine requirements, the king was overcome by the power of Sin, as vested in the Babylonian army.

THE KING OF BABYLON

The events we have just described took place, we are told, "in the fifth year of Jehoiakim, the son of Josiah king of Judah" (Jer. 36:9). Chapter 35 spoke of events "in the fourth year of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah King of Judah, that was the first year of Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylon". We see then, that Nebuchadnezzar's first year was the fourth of Jehoiakim, and that therefore Jehoiakim's fifth year was Nebuchadnezzar's second. Interestingly, the events of Daniel chapter 2 are said to have happened "in the second year of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar" (Dan. 2:1) – and this therefore means that these events happened in the very same year as Jehoiakim sought to destroy the Word of God. And what a difference we see in the attitude of this Gentile Monarch! Following the revelation of the Image described earlier in this chapter, we see Nebuchadnezzar's response: "The king answered unto Daniel, and said, Of a truth it is that ***your God is a God of gods, and a Lord of kings, and a revealer of secrets,*** seeing thou couldest reveal this secret" (Dan. 2:47).

The very same year in which Judah's king despised and sought to destroy the Word, Nebuchadnezzar recognised the greatness of Israel's God, and the revelation that was made known to him. Even so it has been from the cutting off of the Israelitish olive branches (Rom. 11), that because of the Jewish rebellion against their Messiah, Gentiles come to accept and embrace Israel's Hope, and look forward to that day when the kingdoms of men shall have an end, with the God of Heaven's kingdom being established in their place.

It is interesting to note that Nebuchadnezzar's recognition of Israel's Deity goes beyond lip service: it would appear that when the Babylonian army came against Zedekiah's forces, they did so in recognition that they were doing the will of Yahweh. So Nebuchadnezzar ***"gave charge concerning Jeremiah*** to Nebuzar-adan that captain of the guard, saying, Take him, and look well to him, and do him no harm; but do unto him even as he shall say unto thee" (Jer. 39:11-12). So Babylon's king knew about the prophet Jeremiah – could that have been through Daniel? We know of a certainty that Daniel was familiar with Jeremiah's prophecies, for

Daniel 9:1 tells us that he understood them. Could it be therefore that Daniel, who had access to the King made request concerning Jeremiah? This seems even more likely when we read Jeremiah 40:

*“... the captain of the guard took Jeremiah and said unto him, **Yahweh thy God hath pronounced this evil upon this place. Now Yahweh hath brought it, and done according as he hath said: because ye have sinned against Yahweh, and have not obeyed his voice, therefore this thing is come upon you**” (Jer. 40:2-3).*

How marvellous is this! The captain of the guard not only knew about Jeremiah: he also knew that the Babylonians were bringing the judgments of God upon the place, because of Israel’s disobedience! How appropriate are the words of Proverbs: “whoso despiseth the word shall be destroyed (Jehoiakim): but he that feareth the commandment (Nebuchadnezzar) shall be rewarded” (Prov. 13:13).

THE PROPHET JEREMIAH

By contrast to Judah’s King, Jeremiah delighted in the law of Yahweh. 2 Kings 22:8 describes how Hilkiyah the high priest “found the book of the law in the house of Yahweh”. Jeremiah (Hilkiyah’s son - Jer. 1:1) seems to allude to this discovery, in saying “thy words were found, and I did eat them; and thy word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of mine heart ...” (Jer. 15:16). Desiring to assimilate the word of Yahweh into his very being, Jeremiah sought after the bread of the word. The Psalmist wrote: “Taste and see that Yahweh is good: blessed is the man that trusteth in him” (Psa. 34:8), and this is what Jeremiah did. Trusting in Yahweh’s power to save, he sought to devour the spiritual bread that had been found, and which Jehoiakim sought to destroy.

However, preaching the message of the Word had personal repercussions for Jeremiah:

“... I am in derision daily, every one mocketh me. For since I spake, I cried out, I cried violence and spoil; because the word of Yahweh was made a reproach unto me, and a derision daily”.

Here, we can identify with the experiences of the prophet. Not that we, in our day, suffer the same degree of persecution; but that as we proclaim the gospel message, we will invariable find ourselves mocked, and reproached. But how do we deal with this situation? The human tendency is to stop preaching: to cease that which is bringing reproach upon us. That was Jeremiah’s initial approach:

“Then I said, I will not make mention of him, nor speak any more in his name. But his word was in mine heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I was weary with forbearing, and I could not stay” (Jer.20:8-9).

Jeremiah tried to evade his duty, to cease from speaking Yahweh’s Word. But in practice, he found that he could not: the Word was as a fire in his bones: he could not help himself from withholding it. Herein we see an example for our own circumstance: do we ever feel that other might mock us for the things we believe and stand for? Are we ever reluctant to preach the word regardless of the consequences? Jeremiah provides the answer. Let us preach in earnest, and leave the consequences to Yahweh, knowing that at the last, He will plead our cause.

THE APOSTLES

The Apostles also had this same attitude of mind. They were called, and commanded by the religious leaders of their day, “not to speak at all, nor teach in the name of Jesus”. How did they respond to this?

“But Peter and John answered and said unto them, Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:18-20).

Again:

“We ought to obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29)

And yet again, the prophet Amos wrote in a similar vein:

“the lion hath roared, who will not fear? Adonai Yahweh hath spoken, who *can but prophesy?*”
(Amos 3:8).

When the word of Yahweh is sent forth, though it may fall on deaf ears, it will nevertheless accomplish the purpose for which it was sent – of this there can be no doubt (Isa. 55:11). We are but agents, part of the overall process by which men and women are given the opportunity to come unto Israel’s God, and be sharers of the glory yet to be revealed. Some – even many – may disbelieve, but that makes no difference as to the accomplishment of Yahweh’s overall purpose: “what if some did not believe? Shall their unbelief make the faith of God without effect? God forbid: yea let God be true, but every man a liar ...” (Rom. 3:3-4).

ZEDEKIAH

Returning to the example of Judah’s wayward kings, we see the attitude of mind of Zedekiah towards the prophet, who had been imprisoned for speaking out the words of Yahweh:

“Then Zedekiah the king sent, and took him out: and the king asked him secretly in his house, and said, Is there any word from Yahweh...?” (Jer. 37:17).

Notice, Zedekiah was a man of shadows: he would not approach the prophet directly, but “secretly”. So the word came:

“... And Jeremiah said, There is: for, said he, thou shalt be delivered into the hand of the king of Babylon” (Jer. 37:17)

In the next chapter, we read of an ultimatum given to Zedekiah by the prophet, that if he would surrender to Nebuchadnezzar, he and his house would live. But if he resisted: “then shall this city be given into the hand of the Chaldeans, and they shall burn it with fire, and thou shalt not escape out of their hand.” (Jer. 38:17-18).

How did the king respond?

“And Zedekiah the king said unto Jeremiah, I am afraid of the Jews that are fallen unto the Chaldeans, lest they deliver me into their hand, *and they mock me*” (Jer. 38:19).

What a contrast we have between Zedekiah and the prophet! One who was mocked, and persecuted by his own people for the Truth’s Sake, and an old and foolish king who would no more be admonished (Eccl. 4:13). Fearing the people, and how they would mock him, Zedekiah went forward to his own destruction rather than obey the commandments of Yahweh.

OURSELVES

Against the background of the various individuals we have considered, we see examples of belief, and unbelief. In the Bible that we have before us, we have a powerful thing: the “power of God unto salvation” to those that believe. How do we approach the Living Word? The Thessalonians set forth an example:

“when ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God which effectually worketh also in you that believe” (1 Thes.2:13)

The Word is a living power, able to transform the lives of those who receive it. It is not a passive thing, but rather, once it is permitted access to men’s hearts, it works within them dispelling works and thoughts of darkness, that ultimately Yahweh be glorified. So, we do not receive it in the same way as we might read books and novels etc written by the heathen that tantalise the fleshly disposition of all men, but as servants of the living God, it becomes an influence for good, being “able so save our souls.”

Again, the well-known words to Timothy:

“Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the Word of Truth” (2 Tim. 2:15).

Notice the point here: if we contract a workman to do some repairs or building for us in our houses, how would we react if when we came home at the end of the day and the workman had done nothing? Even so, we have a work to accomplish, labouring in the Word and in the doctrine. Only if we assimilate the principles of the Word of God into our hearts and minds will it be able to have an effect upon us, preparing us for the coming day of glory.

And yet again, more well known words to Timothy:

“till I come, give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine ... take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them: for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee” (1 Tim. 4:13,16).

Notice particularly the command to “give attendance to ... **doctrine**”. In our day, the preaching of doctrine is increasingly unpopular. Folk don’t like to hear the doctrines, and so there is a move towards so-called “non-doctrinal preaching”. As a substitute for the doctrines that give life, some ecclesias engage in other activities, such as Teddy Bear Picnics. As justification, they point out the numbers that they have been able to get to attend – yet their attendance is based on activities that have nothing to do with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is the Word that saves, and if we remove that word from our preaching, we are presenting nothing but an empty husk that can accomplish nothing.

In all of these examples we have seen, they direct our minds to our Master and Redeemer: the One who was the “word made flesh”. He did not shirk from the preaching of the Word, even though the adversary crucified him for it. In him, as our Elder Brother, we have the supreme example to uphold. We see in the bread and in the wine before us the emblems of Christ’s obedience to His Father’s Will. As we partake of these things, let us therefore “taste, and see that the Lord is good”, and resolve to receive, follow, and obey the calling of the Gospel. Only by this means can we obtain entry into that glorious kingdom-age to come.

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