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For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled. (2 *Corinthians* 10:3-6)

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The Preservation of Scripture: The Indestructible Word of God (*Jeremiah* 36)

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Jeremiah 36:32: "Then took Jeremiah another roll, and gave it to Baruch the scribe, the son of Neriah; who wrote therein from the mouth of Jeremiah all the words of the book which Jehoiakim king of Judah had burned in the fire: and there were added besides unto them many like words."

The divine providential preservation of Scripture is a foundational Biblical doctrine, given special emphasis in the confessions of the Protestant Reformation era. In *Westminster Confession of Faith* 1:8 (and *Second London Baptist Confession of Faith* 1:8), for example, the framers declare that the Holy Scriptures in Hebrew and Greek "being immediately inspired by God, and by His singular care and providence kept pure in all ages, are therefore authentical." God's Word is immediately inspired by God in the original languages of Hebrew and Greek (compare 2 *Timothy* 3:16 "given by inspiration," *theopneustos*, God-breathed), and it has been providentially preserved in all ages. It is, therefore, authentical.

Sadly, in the modern era the doctrine of the preservation of Scripture has largely been either neglected, abandoned, or altogether redefined. This should not be the case, however, because it is a Biblical doctrine, and one that authentic believers seem instinctively and typically to know and affirm from the point of their conversion. God is sovereign and all powerful. God loves his people and provides them all they need in Scripture for life and godliness. God inspired his Word and gave it to his people. Will the LORD then let that which he has given fall into corruption? Will he rely on human reasoning to reconstruct a supposedly "corrupted" Word from scattered tatters remaining from this corruption? No! God has preserved his Word, and he himself will continue to keep his Word pure in all ages.

As noted, the divine preservation of Scripture is a Biblical doctrine. We learn of this doctrine in Scripture in two ways. First, we learn of it by means of various brief didactic or propositional passages that explicitly declare and teach this doctrine. Such passages include:

Psalms 12:6, 7: "The words of the LORD are pure words: as silver tried in a furnace of earth, purified seven times. Thou shalt keep them,¹ O LORD, thou shalt preserve them from this generation for ever."

¹ Some interpreters suggest that "them" here refers to the people of God, rather than to the "pure words" of verse 6. It is possible, however, that reference is being made both to the preservation of God's words to his people and to the people themselves.

Psalms 119:89: “For ever, O LORD, thy word is settled in heaven.”

Isaiah 40:8: “The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever.”

Matthew 5:18: “For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled.”

Matthew 24:35: “Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away.”²

Second, beyond such propositional declarations, this doctrine is also affirmed in extended narrative passages where it is sometimes more implicitly assumed and asserted. These types of narrative passages include *2 Kings* chapters 22-23 (compare *2 Chronicles* 34-35) which describe how in the days of godly King Josiah “the book of the law” had been suppressed until reclaimed by Josiah and read aloud before the people, leading to an unprecedented time of revival and reformation in the life of the nation. These narratives also include *Jeremiah* 36, our focus in this article, a record of the prophet Jeremiah, a prophet whose ministry had commenced during the reign of godly King Josiah (see *Jeremiah* 1:1-3). In fact, Jeremiah’s ministry had come during the times of three kings: Josiah and then two of his sons, Jehoiakim and Zedekiah. We turn now to meditate on what *Jeremiah* 36 conveys to us regarding the doctrine of the divine preservation of Scripture.

I. Exposition

Our faithful fathers, the *Authorized Version* translators, divided *Jeremiah* 36 into four paragraphs, sections, or thought units (verses 1-10; 11-26; 27-31; and verse 32).

² It might be said that *Matthew* 5:18 and 24:35 frame the *Gospel of Matthew* with two affirmations of the preservation of Holy Scripture. Near the beginning of the first *Gospel*, as Christ begins the Sermon on the Mount, *Matthew* 5:18 makes reference to God’s preservation of the least “jot” (a reference to the Greek letter *iota*, made with a short line like the English letter “i”) and the least “tittle” (likely a reference to the Hebrew letter *yod*, also made with a mere dash of a pen stroke) of his Word (the law) until the end of the age. It is noteworthy that reference is made to a Hebrew letter (“tittle” or *yod*), the original language of the Old Testament, and to a Greek letter (“jot” or *iota*), the original language of the New Testament. The LORD will preserve the words of both inspired testaments. Near the conclusion of the *Gospel*, as Christ teaches on the Mount of Olives, he assures his disciples that his own words (like those recorded in this *Gospel* itself) will not pass away but remain to the end of the age.

We will follow their lead in examining these four parts of our passage in turn:

1. **The LORD commands the writing of his Word by the prophet (1- 10);**
2. **There is a wicked attempt to suppress and even to destroy the Word of God (11-26);**
3. **The Word of the LORD is given to his prophet once again (a re-commissioning) (27-31);**
4. **The preservation, and even the triumph, of the indestructible Word of God (32).**

First: The LORD commands the writing of his Word by the prophet (1-10)

Notice the setting (1). Godly Josiah, the last best hope for the nation of Judah, had gone the way of all flesh, having fallen in battle against Egypt, and he had been succeeded by his son Jehoiakim. It is said of Jehoiakim in *2 Kings* 23:37: “And he did that which was evil in the sight of the LORD, according to all that his fathers had done.” The events of *Jeremiah* 36 transpired during the fourth year of wicked Jehoiakim’s reign.

We are told “this word came unto Jeremiah from the LORD” (1). Notice it does not say that Jeremiah drew upon his own experiences, or Jeremiah decided of himself that he would compose some religious literature, but it is the LORD who gave him his Word. The LORD is the great Initiator, the great Source, of Holy Scripture. As Peter would write in *2 Peter* 1:21: “For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.”

Jeremiah is ordered to take “a roll of a book [*muh-gi-loth sepher*, a scroll] and write therein all the words that I have spoken...from the days of Josiah, even unto this day” (2). Notice the specific call to write down the words. This is Scripture describing the divine command to inscripturate God’s Word. Though some contemporary scholars are uncomfortable with the “mechanical dictation” view of inspiration (preferring instead to speak of the so-called “organic” view of inspiration), the godly men of old often firmly stressed the passive role of the human authors. John Owen, for example, described the human authors as “pens” in the hand of God as the “expert writer,” and as “instruments of music” struck by God as the expert

musician.³ There are indeed places recorded in Scripture where the LORD clearly commands or dictates that his words and revelations be written down. We see this in many places in the Old Testament where the inspired prophet prefaces his record of the special revelation given to him with the introduction, “Thus saith the LORD.”⁴ We should not be embarrassed to speak of the dictation of Holy Scripture. There are many other places where the Biblical penmen are instructed to write down what they have seen, heard, or experienced. Compare:

In *Exodus* 17:14 it says, “The LORD said to Moses, Write this for a memorial in a book...”

In *Habakkuk* 2:2 the LORD tells the prophet, “Write the vision, and make it plain upon tables.”

And in *Revelation* 1:11 John is told, “What thou seest, write in a book.”

Jeremiah was specifically told to write down the warnings God had given him against Israel, Judah, and all the nations. God’s purpose in doing this is gracious. This is always his purpose in sending his Word. The Bible is his love letter to a sinful and fallen world.

Do not be fooled by the language of contingency in verse 3, “It may be that the house of Judah will hear all the evil which I purpose to do unto them...” God knew how Judah would respond. He knew the judgment that was coming upon them for their rebellion. Yet this shows they had no one to blame but themselves. God gave them ample opportunities to repent.

Jeremiah calls for Baruch son of Neriah, his faithful scribe and assistant (4). Baruch served as the secretary writing “from the mouth of Jeremiah all the words of the LORD, which he had spoken unto him, upon a roll of a book.” Notice that God apparently gave Jeremiah the supernatural ability to remember all these things. The same ability was given to the apostles and Gospel writers to recall the words of our Lord Jesus Christ. Compare:

John 14:26 “But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all

things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you.”

Notice also the prophet’s use of a secretary or amanuensis. This will occur in the New Testament as well. Tertius writes down *Romans* for Paul (16:22: “I Tertius, who wrote this epistle, salute you in the Lord”). Silvanus likely wrote *1 Peter* for Peter (5:12: “By Silvanus, a faithful brother unto you, as I suppose, I have written briefly...”).

Jeremiah then commands Baruch to take the book and read it in the hearing of the people “in the LORD’s house upon the fasting day” (see 5-6). Jeremiah says he cannot go, “I am shut up; I cannot go into the house of the LORD” (5). Jeremiah was likely under arrest for his unpopular prophesying (compare 20:2 which describes how he was put “in the stocks” or 33:2 which says he was “shut up in the court of the prison”). Notice that though there is an attempt to impede the messenger, they cannot impede the message. They burned William Tyndale at the stake for the “crime” of translating the holy Scriptures from the Greek New Testament into the English tongue, but they could not stop the people from reading the Word and hearing the Gospel. To try to do so would be like standing on the beach and attempting to hold back the waves.

Notice also Jeremiah’s confidence in the power of the Word of God read publicly, as he commissions Baruch to read it “in the ears of the people in the LORD’s house upon the fasting day” (6). Again, he expresses the hope that that the hearing of the Word itself would bring repentance to the people and escape from God’s righteous anger (7).

Baruch obeys the command of his master the prophet (8: “And Baruch...did according to all that Jeremiah the prophet commanded him, reading in the book the words of the LORD in the LORD’s house”). This verse is a proof text for the public reading of Scripture as a vital element in Scripturally regulated public worship. We can properly place it alongside Paul’s instruction to Timothy, “Till I come, give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine” (*1 Timothy* 4:13).

In verse 9 there is a mention again of the occasion, a fast proclaimed during Jehoiakim’s reign. This raises a question that perhaps part of the problem rested in the announcement of an apparently unauthorized “holy day” or fast. We are told in verse 10 that Baruch read “in the higher court,” “In the ears of all the people,” but it is noted that it was especially

³ John Owen, *The Collected Works* (Banner of Truth, [1968] 2006), 16:298-299.

⁴ This statement appears twice in *Jeremiah* 35:18-19, preceding *Jeremiah* 36.

read “in the chamber of Gemariah the son of Shaphan, the scribe” (10). This ensured that “the words of Jeremiah” read “in the house of the LORD” would also eventually reach the ears of the king.

Second: There is a wicked attempt to suppress and even to destroy the Word of God (11-26)

When Michaiah the son of Gemariah heard these words, he went “into the king’s house” to the princes and the court functionaries (11-12). He then reported to the king’s servants what Baruch was saying (13). These princes then sent to a man named Jehudi (a messenger? an enforcer?) to summon Baruch to bring them the roll he had been reading (14). Baruch comes and sits before them and reads Jeremiah’s words (15), and the princes are filled with fear saying to Baruch, “We will surely tell the king of these words” (16). Why were they filled with fear? We know that Jeremiah had previously prophesied that Jehoiakim would die an ignoble death (see 22:18-19). This written prophecy also foretold the fall of Judah to the king of Babylon, that the throne would be left empty, that the king’s “dead body” would be “cast out in the day to the heat, and in the night to the frost,” and that great punishment would come upon all (see 36:29-31).

Next in verse 17, they question Baruch as to where these words came from. Baruch answers truthfully that they came directly from God’s prophet, “and I wrote them with ink in the book” (18). There must have been some good in these princes, as they instruct Baruch and Jeremiah to hide themselves (19). With this warning given, they then took the roll to the king and laid it up “in the chamber of Elishama the scribe” informing the king of its dire prophesies (20). The king then sent Jehudi to fetch it and to read it to him in the presence of his court (21). I imagine the king at this point being like a cartoon character as he listened with his face growing red and steam coming out of his ears!

We are told in verse 22 that it was the ninth month, the wintertime, and the king had a roaring fire burning before him (22). In verse 23 we read that as Jehudi read “three of four leaves [columns?]” that the king would “cut it with a penknife [a knife used to sharpen the point of a scribe’s reed pen]” and throw it into the fire. Note that there were two reactions. First, some had no fear at the message and no fear of God at mutilating and destroying his Word (24). Second, others, however, to their credit, interceded “to the king that he would not burn the roll: but he would not hear them” (25).

The king then, no doubt in a murderous rage, ordered the arrest of Baruch and Jeremiah (26a), but note the wonderful description of God’s protection for them in the final line of verse 26: “but the LORD hid them” (26b). Choice saints will often be harassed in this world, but the LORD is also often so pleased in his wisdom and mercy to hide them.

Do you see what happened? Wicked men believed that they had been able to destroy the Word of God. There is great historical irony in this chapter. King Josiah had rediscovered and preserved and protected and reaffirmed the Word, but his wicked son was attempting to destroy it. In but one generation a people can be led by godly men who revere the Word of God, and in the next, sadly, ungodly men may arise, forfeit their godly heritage, despise it, and try to destroy it. Would this wicked king have the last word? Had he succeeded in destroying God’s Word, in holding or suppressing the truth in unrighteousness? No. We must hear the rest of the inspired narrative.

Third: The Word of the LORD is given to his prophet once again (a re-commissioning) (27-31)

The Word of the LORD comes again to Jeremiah (27). How downcast he must have been in the moments just before this intervention. His ministry was under attack. He was shut out of the public square. He was under threat of arrest and injury from the king. His prophecies were cut up and burned. Jeremiah might well have been experiencing an episode of what Spurgeon would later call the minister’s (or the prophet’s) “fainting fits.”⁵ It is all too easy, and sometime with good reason, to become discouraged in the ministry.

Notice, however, the LORD’s command, “Take thee again another roll...” (28). The LORD instructs Jeremiah simply to announce again the words that the king had tried to suppress, including judgment administered by Babylon, Jehoiakim’s death and the punishment of his seed and servants (29-31). Why? Because the LORD had graciously warned them, “but they hearkened not” (31). In their stubbornness, they would not listen.

It would be terrible if a man went down a road and came to a place where a bridge had collapsed and he, not knowing the danger, fell into an abyss. But what if the bridge was out and signs had been posted all along the road warning of the danger, but this man

⁵ C. H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students, Complete and Unabridged* (Zondervan, 1954), 154-165.

looked the other way refusing to read them? What if roadblocks had been set up, but he drove around them? What if workers (heralds) had been set along the road to flag down and warn travelers, but he ignored them? We would not so much feel sorrow for his misadventure as we would wonder at his obdurate foolishness!

Fourth: The preservation, and even the triumph, of the indestructible Word of God (32)

The account comes to its conclusion in verse 32. The final verse serves as a capstone for all that has come before. Jeremiah acts in obedience to the LORD's command (28). This is the outstanding mark of godly men, obedience to the LORD's command.

The prophet takes another roll and gives it to Baruch, and he wrote again (under the superintendence of the Holy Spirit) all the words the king had attempted to destroy. What is more, we read, "and there were added besides unto them many like words." Now remember, this account comes from a time when the canon of Scripture was not yet complete. They had the law (*torah*), and at this time the words of the prophets were being revealed. Here we see how even the book of *Jeremiah* itself was revealed stage by stage until the full measure of that inspired book was perfectly complete. We see here the dogged determination of the LORD both to complete and fulfill the giving of his written revelation, alongside an equally potent determination to preserve it in all ages. This is the indestructible Word of God.

II. Application

Having worked through our passage, we can draw at least four applications from this chapter, drawn from the four sections we have expounded.

First, we see that Scripture is initiated and ordered by God himself (1-10)

It does not have its origins in the will of man, but in the mind of God. The older Protestant men used to speak of the "divinity" of the Holy Scriptures. In one sense we do not worship the book, but the Author of it. Yet, in another sense, it is his Word. It is God-breathed and reveals who he is. There is Divinity in it, because the voice of God is in it.

Second, we see the brazen hostility of sinful men to the Word of God (11-26)

In *Romans* 1:18 the apostle Paul described those who hold or suppress the truth in unrighteousness. The

actions of King Jehoiakim in *Jeremiah* 36 are merely an ugly and pronounced example of that perverse spirit.

I remember a few years back reading of a well-known (British) actor who proudly claimed that in every hotel he stayed that had a Gideon Bible, the first thing he would do would be to take the Holy Bible and rip out the pages therein from the book of *Leviticus* because of its denunciation of the homosexual behavior to which he was enslaved. He despised the teaching of *Leviticus* 18:22: "Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind: it is abomination." *Jeremiah* 36 reminds us that as many times as that man ripped out those pages, he could not suppress or destroy the Word of God. The Puritan exegete Matthew Poole observed, "Wicked men get nothing by opposing themselves to the revealed will of God, how ungrateful soever it be to them, but the addition of guilt to their souls, and the increase of Divine wrath; God's counsels shall stand, and what he speaks shall most certainly be accomplished."⁶

The attacks on God's Word are more sophisticated than this man who simply rips out the book of *Leviticus*. Today we have credentialed scholars and authorities who tell us that certain passages are not in the so-called "best manuscripts." As Solomon said, there is nothing new under the sun. The arch-heretic Marcion of Pontus did this sort of thing in the earliest days of the Christian movement. He rejected *Matthew*, *Mark*, and *John* completely and used only what Irenaeus of Lyons called a "mutilated" copy of *Luke*.⁷ Tertullian of Carthage described Marcion as that "Pontic mouse" who had "gnawed the Gospels to pieces."⁸ He also took the epistles of Paul and whittled them down to ten, taking out the parts even of those which he did not like.

There are certainly more subtle ways in which the content of Scripture can be diminished. Just down the road from where I live in Albemarle County, Virginia there is Monticello, the home of American founding father Thomas Jefferson who, in his day, influenced by Enlightenment rationalism, tried to make the Scriptures more palatable to his "sophisticated" sensibilities by removing all the miracles and keeping only the so-called moral teachings of Jesus Christ. The

⁶ Matthew Poole, *A Commentary on the Holy Bible* (Hendricksen, 2010), 2: 606.

⁷ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1.27.

⁸ Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, 1.1.

work is known as *The Jefferson Bible*.⁹ It ends with Christ's death on the cross but excludes any account of his resurrection. The popular English novelist Charles Dickens produced a similar work for his own children in the mid-nineteenth century, presenting Jesus primarily as a kind ethical teacher. This work was later published as *The Life of Our Lord*.¹⁰ In the mid-twentieth century the liberal American theologian Harry Emerson Fosdick wrote a book for children titled *Jesus of Nazareth* in the popular World Landmark series. In that work he explained to his readers how that the miracles recorded in the *Gospels* do not match up with modern "scientific thinking" and how that the resurrection of Jesus need not be understood "literally" but as a "spiritual" experience or "vision" of his disciples.¹¹

Beyond these types of "penknives," our adversary makes use of other effective devices to remove the Scriptures from our view and to dissuade us from accepting them in their fullness. The old-time American radio preacher J. Vernon McGee once made the point that to neglect the Word of God by not reading it might be as bad as throwing it into the fire. He cited this jingle, which envisions a young boy asking his mother about an unused Bible in their home:

Mom, I found an old, dusty thing high upon the shelf. Just look!

Why, that's a Bible, Tommy dear, be careful that's God's book.

God's book, the young man said, Then Mom before we lose it, we'd better give it back to God 'cause you know we never use it.¹²

Perhaps we have not cast the Scriptures into the flames, but before we denounce this wicked king, we need to examine ourselves and ask whether we have attempted to suppress its power through our negligence of reading and hearing God's Word.

Third: Here we also see the LORD's commitment to preserve his Word (27-31)

⁹ Thomas Jefferson, *The Jefferson Bible: The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth* (Beacon Press, [1904] 1989).

¹⁰ Charles Dickens, *The Life of Our Lord: Written For His Children During the Years 1846-1849* (Simon & Schuster, 1999).

¹¹ Harry Emerson Fosdick, *Jesus of Nazareth* (Random House, 1959), 87, 178.

¹² J. Vernon McGee, *Thru the Bible with J. Vernon McGee* (Thomas Nelson, 1982), 3: 410.

We see this in the re-commissioning of Jeremiah to take another roll and write in it all the former words. This reveals to us that in the days of Jeremiah God was zealous and able and careful to preserve his Word. We must not think that God's divine zeal, ability, and providential care for his Word has been abated by one iota in our day.

We are living at a pivotal time. We are living in a time of technological revolution, as was also the case during the time of the Protestant Reformation. Up to the 1500s all the copies of the Scriptures were preserved through handwritten copies (manuscripts). Then, there was the invention of the printing press. God allowed in his providence at that time for the true text, what we call the traditional Protestant text, to be printed and then for these printed editions to be used in making faithful translations of the Bible. We are now living in the digital age. Many are reading the Bible on phones and computers. We might wish they would use hard copies, held in their hands, and we should continue that as our main practice, but many in our age and beyond will read the Bible digitally. This might be disturbing to some. Is AI (Artificial Intelligence) going to corrupt the Bible? Will it be possible for modern textual critics in their academic institutes and think-tanks to alter the digital text by applying various algorithms to the analysis of manuscripts? Will the true text be challenged and distorted? Will some parts of it be unjustly omitted? *Jeremiah* 36 reminds us that God's Word, in the end, will not be suppressed, even in the digital age, no matter what the penknife might be.

Fourth: We are reminded that God's Word will triumph, that he will preserve and keep his Word (32)

Some have spoken of the *tenacity* of the Word of God. In the past I have compared the attempt to suppress God's Word to be like trying to hold an inflated beach ball under the water. You might be able to hold it down for a few seconds, but it is going to break the surface and pop back up. God will preserve his Word no matter how sinful men may endeavor to war against it!

The Word of God is indestructible. Scripture has been well described as an anvil that has broken many a hammer. Let us rest in his provision today for his people in all things, including his provision of his Word.