

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the one who came to bring us God's new covenant, Jesus Christ our Lord, amen.

I love this story about re-writing this scroll... Back when I was a new Second Lieutenant in the Air Force, my first boss was a Major who was extremely picky over every written document that went out of our offices. In the Personnel business we have a ton of form letters. It seemed we had a pre-written letter for every situation. When your next assignment came, or when it was time for promotion testing, then when you got promoted, we sent you a form letter. When you were getting close to retirement, you guessed it, we sent you a letter. The trouble with form letters is that when the regulation changes sometimes the form letter needs to change too. So, one of my first projects was to review over 100 form letters, compare them to the current regulations, with all the most current changes posted, and rewrite the letters as necessary. Most of the letters only needed minor corrections such as dates or names of the commanding officers who signed the letters. Nevertheless, every letter I sent up the chain to my boss, Major Cecil E. Palmer III, would come back to me bleeding in red ink, even those letters with such minor changes. I would meticulously make all the changes Major Palmer required and get the package back usually within one day, only to have the letter returned with additional changes. This would go on, sometimes for weeks. Most of the time the letters would end up exactly the way I had originally drafted

them. It was frustrating to say the least, especially since that wasn't my main job, it was what we called an "Additional Duty."

My Form Letter project took place in the 1st year of King, er, um, Major Palmer, or about 1985. We had the first mass produced computers with 5 ¼ inch floppy disks. So, I quickly became an expert on word processing. As frustrating as it was to reproduce all those letters, it must have been maddening for the Prophet Jeremiah to have his scribe Baruch write down all his prophecies only to have the King cut it up and burn it in the fire. At least I had the benefit of computer word processing. Jeremiah and Baruch had to start from scratch. My boss didn't like the word choices or maybe the tone of the letters, but the King to whom Jeremiah addressed this summary of his oracles didn't like the content of his preaching contained in the written document Jeremiah produced.

Up to this point Jeremiah had been a leading prophet in both the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah, where the city of Jerusalem is located. He was called by God when he was only a boy. We don't know his exact age when God called Jeremiah, but back in Chapter, one God speaks, and tells Jeremiah He knew him even before he was conceived in his mother's womb. Before he was born, God consecrated Jeremiah to this task of speaking truth to power. Of course, Jeremiah protested, but God silenced those objections by assuring him God would be with him and deliver him. So, for the next 20 years

Jeremiah pleaded with Israel and Judah to repent and return to the Lord their God. For all those 20 years they ignored Jeremiah's preaching. At one point, back in chapter 5, God tells Jeremiah to run through the streets of Jerusalem and try to find even one person who acts justly and who seeks truth. If Jeremiah could find just one righteous person God declares He would pardon the whole city. Sadly, all Jeremiah was able to find were people who felt no anguish, who failed to take correction, those who had made their faces harder than rocks, and an entire city who refused to turn back and repent. So, after 20 years, God instructs Jeremiah to summarize all his preaching into one document. This is where we pick up the story in today's text.

By this time the king was a man named Jehoiakim. He objected to being told he was a sinful king who was leading his nation astray. Jeremiah had warned the King that his actions were heading headlong toward destruction. I think it's safe to say King Jehoiakim didn't take the reading of the scroll that summarized all the coming destruction very well. First, Baruch read the scroll in the presence of a great number of the people from all over Judah who had come to Jerusalem for a religious fast. Now these national fasts were held during times of national distress. Judah was being threatened by the vastly superior armies of Babylon from the north. All those prophecies from the past 20 years were about to unfold. Yet, despite seeing the writing on the wall, the people continued in their own pursuits.

When the court officials heard what had been read, they took the scroll to King Jehoiakim who was warming himself next to the fire pit in his winter home. They were shocked to hear of the coming desolation. The description of the reading of this scroll to the king is like something out of an ancient Hebrew Sitcom. The King was so irate he cut the scroll into pieces as it was being read to him and threw the pieces into the fire.

Nobody likes to have their actions called out, but when we stray from God, we need to be held accountable from time to time. That was the main function of the Prophets. God sent lots of them to each and every king who ruled over God's people and almost all of them either ignored their warnings, mistreated them or even murdered them. Sometimes we all act as if God will never hold us accountable for our actions. Yet, as we see over and over again in scripture, God does indeed hold both kings and paupers accountable. I know we Lutherans like to talk a lot about Grace, especially when we get to throw in words like free grace and unmerited mercy, but the Bible also says judgment day is coming as well.

I had the honor of visiting our oldest member this week, Lowell Schenck. He was my Jeremiah. He reminded me that there were two criminals on crosses next to Jesus. He said the one on the left derided Jesus, but the one on the right asked to be remembered when Jesus came into his kingdom. Lowell pointed out both criminals deserved what they were getting and both of them had a choice to

make. Only the one who asked Jesus to remember him got to be with Jesus in paradise, that very day. The other made his choice too. Unfortunately, he remained separated from Jesus and from God. Lowell went on to tell me that he attended a church for over 16 years and never once heard the word hell mentioned, not even once. Folks, that's what Lutheran Theologian and martyr, Detrick Bonhoeffer called "Cheap Grace".

The truth is, all of God's Prophets, including Jesus, present us with a choice. They came to hold us accountable for living every day, not just Sunday morning, as if judgment day were today. Yes, Jesus came to usher in a new Covenant, just as Jeremiah foretold some 2500 years ago, but even under this new covenant, we're given the same choice. Do we follow Jesus, or do we follow the kings and queens of this world? God's new covenant might be less, "if you love, honor and praise God then God will bless you," and more, "God has already blessed you and so out of love and gratitude I'll love, honor and praise God," but we're still called to make a choice to follow Jesus. When we take all of God's blessings and still bow down to worship money, job, family, or possessions instead of giving God our undivided praise and worship, we're not much different than King Jehoiakim or the people under his reign. God's free Grace doesn't mean we can ignore the great commands of Jesus to love the Lord God with all our heart, strength, mind, and soul, and to love our neighbor as our self. If we choose money, or career, or

family, or possessions over following Jesus we will end up in the same place as the criminal who was crucified on the left side of Jesus, alone and separated from God. Isn't that the very definition of hell? Being separated from God... I like to think God will find a way to get every single soul to heaven and I have no idea who will end up in hell, but one thing I do know is that if anyone does wind up down there, it's by their own choice...

May you read the law and the prophets and realize just how much Jesus has really done to deliver you from the consequences of your sin. May you experience the joy of being so loved by Jesus. Being loved so much He was willing to die for you in order to bring you with him into paradise. May gratitude and thanksgiving flow from that joy so that you do turn toward God and find the paradise Jesus promised his followers, not after this life, but like the criminal on Jesus' right, may you be with Jesus today and every day of this life in the paradise of the Kingdom of God. Amen.