



“The Building Without the Book”

September 27, 2020

[Text: 2 Kings 22:3–5, 8–13]

Now in the eighteenth year of King Josiah, the king sent Shaphan, the son of Azaliah the son of Meshullam the scribe, to the house of the LORD saying, “Go up to Hilkiyah the high priest that he may count the money brought in to the house of the LORD which the doorkeepers have gathered from the people. Let them deliver it into the hand of the workmen who have the oversight of the house of the LORD, and let them give it to the workmen who are in the house of the LORD to repair the damages of the house.” . . . Then Hilkiyah the high priest said to Shaphan the scribe, “I have found the book of the law in the house of the LORD.” And Hilkiyah gave the book to Shaphan who read it. Shaphan the scribe came to the king and brought back word to the king and said, “Your servants have emptied out the money that was found in the house, and have delivered it into the hand of the workmen who have the over-sight of the house of the LORD.” Moreover, Shaphan the scribe told the king saying, “Hilkiyah the priest has given me a book.” And Shaphan read it in the presence of the king. When the king heard the words of the book of the law, he tore his clothes. Then the king commanded Hilkiyah the priest, Ahikam the son of Shaphan, Achbor the son of Micaiah, Shaphan the scribe, and Asaiah the king’s servant saying, “Go, inquire of the LORD for me and the people and all Judah concerning the words of this book that has been found, for great is the wrath of the LORD that burns against us, because our fathers have not listened to the words of this book, to do according to all that is written concerning us.” (NASB)

Now wasn’t that an irony—just there in our text! I mean, it would be downright laughable if the consequences weren’t so serious!

You did catch that, right? Okay, let’s recap. King Josiah has ordered the repair, the refurbishing, of the temple. It’s all going well, and then a report comes back to the king, verse 10: **“Moreover, Shaphan the scribe told the king saying, ‘Hilkiyah the priest has given me a book.’ ”** You get it?

Solomon’s temple! Magnificent structure, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, built for one purpose: to be the center of Israel’s

worship. Every day the priests have been offering the lamb for the morning and evening sacrifices. Every day the people of Judah have been coming to present their firstborn, to give their offerings. Year after year the high priest has made his treacherous venture into the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement. Passover celebrations have been rather sporadic lately, but they've happened, too. A whole lot of religion going on in the temple.

But suddenly, only when they do some century-overdue fix ups to the place, do they come across a book. Apparently the king doesn't even know what book it is, apparently didn't know it was missing. "Oh, king, by the way, we found a book." Well, of course, it just happens to be *the* book—the Book of the Law, the Book of the Covenant God gave his people through Moses eight hundred years earlier. For who knows how long, maybe a century, they've been functioning, doing all these religious things, without it. And doing just *fine???* Uh, no. Of course, not! And that's no surprise.

IMAGINE THE BUILDING WITHOUT THE BOOK!

Yeah, imagine that! You know what would happen!

I.

The building without the Book would quickly fill up with our imagination!

No, the people of Judah hadn't been doing very well. Yes, they'd been sacrificing lambs and burning incense morning and evening. Going through all the other motions, too. But they'd also brought into the temple altars to the starry hosts because they imagined those stars were pagan gods who could help them. They'd emptied the Lord's house of its treasures to buy foreign alliances. They'd filled the temple with guilt by sacrificing their own children—just like the Canaanites did—even though Yahweh had always been very clear: **"I had not commanded [this abomination] nor had it entered My mind" (Jeremiah 32:35)**. Without the Book, we can imagine hideous things!

Without the Book, imagine how we'd fill the building. A beautiful cathedral, towering Gothic arches, with the superstitions of relics and indulgences and the sacrifice of the mass. Not eating meat on Fridays, the immaculate conception of Mary, and papal infallibility. A false "faith" that we'd all imagine because it's common to every human's experience: that heaven must be something we earn—like a paycheck and our girlfriend's affection and everything else in life is.

Without the Book, more dated sanctuaries of the 1950s and '60s and '70s we'd fill with talk about the love of God without mentioning His holiness; everything is pleasant and warm and nice, and God wouldn't really punish sin. We'd fill the place with the inclusiveness of God without God's demand for repentance. We'd fill it with supposed care for women (or perhaps care for public opinion) without care for babies and God's teaching on the sanctity of *all* life. We'd fill the place with familiarity without awe. Or perhaps with a total *lack of familiarity* with who God *really* is: a loving Father rather than an angry judge.

Even in a non-descript big-box auditorium where they really intend to live by nothing but the Bible, still the building may be filled with the fantasy of an “age of accountability” instead of infant baptism or with human reason instead of Jesus' clear words, “This *is* My body, this *is* My blood.”

Around the world, houses of worship are active on every Christian Lord's Day, on every Jewish Sabbath, at every Muslim hour of prayer; there's a lot of religion going on! But so much of it is without the Book, just human imagination.

In many places, that's because the Book isn't yet available in the local language! In many parts of the world, missionaries have planted Christian churches but are greatly hindered by the lack of Holy Scripture in the familiar language. Imagine if your learning the things of God could be only these few minutes a week hearing what Pastor has to say, no Bible to read at home. Or if the only Bible you could read was in a language you studied for a few courses in high school. Yes, those words the missionary spoke in your hearing would be precious. Yes, you'd do your best to struggle through the English or French your country had adopted as an “official language.” But it wouldn't be the same as holding, reading, your very own Bible in the language you and your parents and your kids speak at home every day. And without that Bible to study in depth, you'd probably still follow blindly some of your traditional religion and ritual, never know how wrong they were. You'd fill in the gaps with your own imagination.

And then there's the task of training indigenous pastors for developing churches. Without the Book, a well-meaning, sincerely believing man can only go so far in his studies. Imagine your pastor preaching every week only from a few texts he's heard or read from a Bible that's still worse than Greek to him. Imagine him trying to counsel you in all the range of issues that come up in your life without the full counsel of God at his disposal. Imagine a student pastor confessing, “Yes, I believe that our Lutheran doctrine is true and correct,” if he can't pore over the pages of Scripture to see if it really is!

Missiologist Dr. Kwame Bediako of Ghana, West Africa, has said, "No language community should be considered 'reached' until they have the Scriptures available in the mother tongue as the foundation for building sustainable Christian thought, life, and community." (*On the Significance of the Translation of the Bible into African Languages*, Lecture to United Bible Societies Africa Area, delivered in Limuru, Kenya, May 2001.)

The building without the Book we'd very quickly fill up with our own imagination.

II.

And, of course, that's not just saying that without the Book the building would be empty of the Word of God *itself*. It's saying that the building without the Book would be empty of the Word of God *Himself*. It's never really about the Book itself, is it! It's about the One the Book brings us. The Book brings us the living Word, the Word Incarnate, the Word Himself. **"The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us" (John 1:14).**

God's people without the Book had indeed been wandering far from the LORD: **"Great is the wrath of the LORD that burns against us, because our fathers have not listened to the words of this book, to do according to all that is written concerning us" (v 13).** So in verse 11, **"When the king heard the words of the book of the law, he tore his clothes."**

Josiah wasn't tearing his clothes in despair, though. Rather, this was a desperate plea for mercy. The Book doesn't just condemn our sins. It brings us the One who saves us from all those sins. God did speak mercy to Josiah and his people . . . because of the One promised in that Book, the Torah: the Seed of the Woman in Genesis 3, the Lion of Judah in Genesis 49, the Prophet like Moses in Deuteronomy 18, the One represented by all those lambs they were sacrificing in the temple—from all those passages in Genesis and Exodus and Leviticus and Numbers and Deuteronomy about the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. The whole Bible is nothing but the Book of Christ, the Book that teaches us about Christ, the Book that actually gives us, delivers to us, Christ.

And when we have Christ, we have what we could *never* imagine. A Father who is almighty and holy and judges sin *but* with whom we can be familiar, even intimate, because Jesus' death on the cross has reconciled us to Him. The assurance that whatever our sin, we can throw ourselves on God's mercy because Jesus paid for it. And we can

then be sure of forgiveness for all those sinful imaginations with which we’ve filled our churches, our hearts, our religion.

When we have the Incarnate Word, Christ, we have the miraculous, illogical, beyond-reason, beyond-imagination certainty that our baptisms, that the Lord’s Supper, really do give us forgiveness of sins and eternal salvation. We have heaven absolutely free—unlike almost anything else in human experience—because Jesus’ cross earned it for us.

That means we also have Christ’s love to share with *all* who are weak and helpless—especially those who are weak and helpless in that they don’t yet have the Book of Christ in their hands. Imagine again your life, your Christian community, even this building, without the Book, and imagine what might fill them up instead. Because that is the way many in this world are living. But don’t imagine too long. Instead, be a part of giving the Book to those who don’t yet have it.

(Here, if desired, insert any “mechanics” for supporting LBT, referring, for example, to the bulletin insert, special offering, or whatever is being done locally.)

After all, with the Book, you’re giving what—actually Who—has given you eternal salvation: the Word of God Himself. Amen.

[Sermon Outline]

IMAGINE THE BUILDING WITHOUT THE BOOK!

- I. The building without the Book would quickly fill up with our imagination.
- II. The building without the Book would be empty of the Word of God Himself.

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