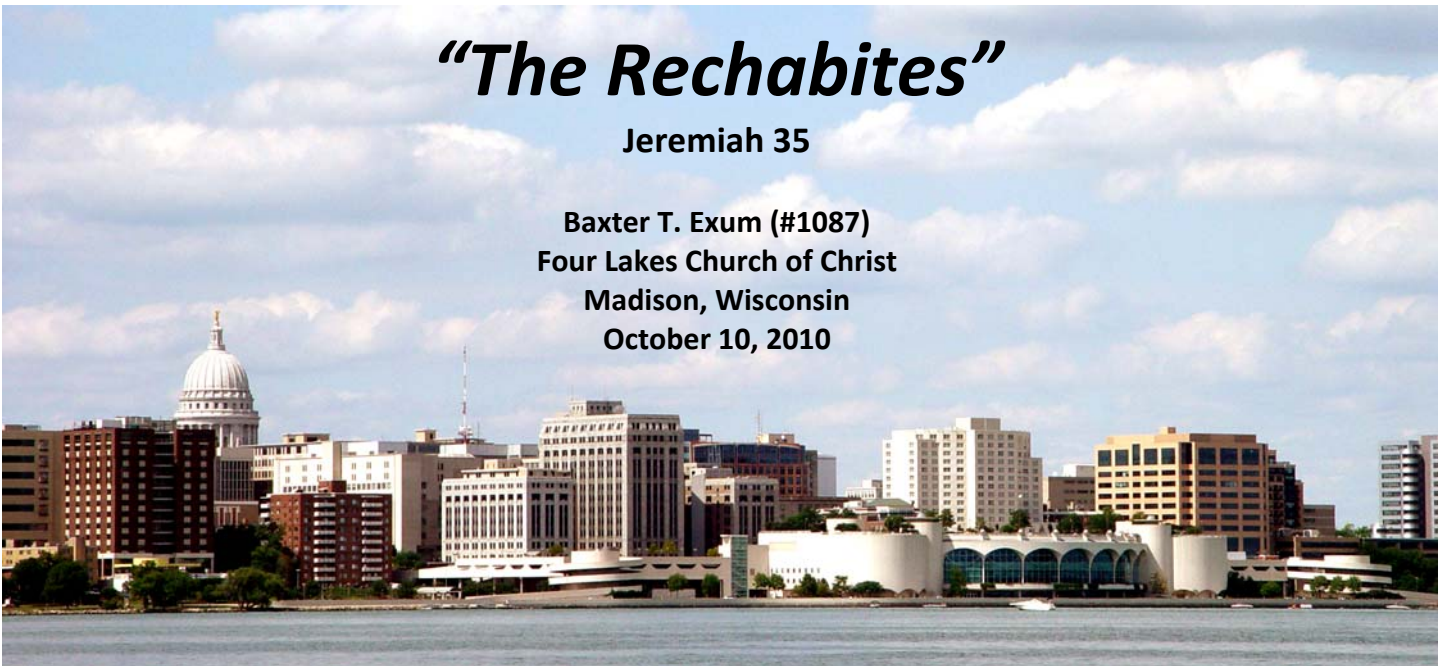


“The Rechabites”

Jeremiah 35

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Introduction:

In the history of the world, there have been many nations that have risen to a position of power, but have then fallen into a state of decay. I realize that we are in the middle of an election season right now, there is a bit of uncertainty as to the direction in which this nation will go, and so with this bit of uncertainty, we can perhaps understand at least some of what was going on in the nation of Israel during the days of Jeremiah the prophet. As we have been studying in our Sunday morning adult Bible classes this quarter, the nation of Israel seems to have been on the rise under the rule of Saul, and David, and Solomon. But after the death of Solomon, the nation began a long stretch of moral decay. The nation divided, and because of the decay, the Northern Ten Tribes were completely wiped out by the Assyrians in 721 BC. The Southern Two Tribes held on a little longer and were weakened by a series of attacks starting in 606 BC, another in 597 BC, and ending with the final attack when the remainder of the people were taken to Babylon as slaves in 586 BC. In the years leading up to that final attack, God had His prophet, Jeremiah, inside the city of Jerusalem, preaching to the people, trying to get them to turn away from sin and back to God. We know, however, that the people were very stubborn and refused to listen. Over and over again, the people continued to abuse the prophet Jeremiah—they threw him in prison, they tossed him in an abandoned well, and generally harassed him because of his preaching. Jeremiah, though, kept on preaching, and sometimes he would use some rather unusual illustrations. He used figs, and bonds, and yokes, but this morning I would like for us to consider one of Jeremiah’s most unusual illustrations as God tells Jeremiah to offer wine to a family who had maintained a commitment to abstain from alcohol for at least the past 250 years. The passage is found in Jeremiah 35, and in our pew Bibles the Scripture is found starting on page 1246.

By way of background, I should point out that the first 33 chapters of Jeremiah are basically in chronological order. However, when we get to chapters 34-39, we find that Jeremiah (apparently as an older man) goes back and summarizes some of the highlights of his career as a prophet, some of the more unusual stories, and our passage for this morning is one of those stories, the account of Jeremiah’s challenge to a group of people known as the Rechabites. Jeremiah 35:1-19...

¹ The word which came to Jeremiah from the LORD in the days of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah, saying, ² "Go to the house of the Rechabites and speak to them, and bring them into the house of the LORD, into one of the chambers, and give them wine to drink." ³ Then I

took Jaazaniah the son of Jeremiah, son of Habazziniah, and his brothers and all his sons and the whole house of the Rechabites, ⁴ and I brought them into the house of the LORD, into the chamber of the sons of Hanan the son of Igdaliah, the man of God, which was near the chamber of the officials, which was above the chamber of Maaseiah the son of Shallum, the doorkeeper. ⁵ Then I set before the men of the house of the Rechabites pitchers full of wine and cups; and I said to them, "Drink wine!" ⁶ But they said, "We will not drink wine, for Jonadab the son of Rechab, our father, commanded us, saying, 'You shall not drink wine, you or your sons, forever. ⁷ 'You shall not build a house, and you shall not sow seed and you shall not plant a vineyard or own one; but in tents you shall dwell all your days, that you may live many days in the land where you sojourn.' ⁸ "We have obeyed the voice of Jonadab the son of Rechab, our father, in all that he commanded us, not to drink wine all our days, we, our wives, our sons or our daughters, ⁹ nor to build ourselves houses to dwell in; and we do not have vineyard or field or seed. ¹⁰ "We have only dwelt in tents, and have obeyed and have done according to all that Jonadab our father commanded us. ¹¹ "But when Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came up against the land, we said, 'Come and let us go to Jerusalem before the army of the Chaldeans and before the army of the Arameans.' So we have dwelt in Jerusalem."

¹² Then the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah, saying, ¹³ "Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, 'Go and say to the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, "Will you not receive instruction by listening to My words?" declares the LORD. ¹⁴ "The words of Jonadab the son of Rechab, which he commanded his sons not to drink wine, are observed. So they do not drink wine to this day, for they have obeyed their father's command. But I have spoken to you again and again; yet you have not listened to Me. ¹⁵ "Also I have sent to you all My servants the prophets, sending them again and again, saying: 'Turn now every man from his evil way and amend your deeds, and do not go after other gods to worship them. Then you will dwell in the land which I have given to you and to your forefathers; but you have not inclined your ear or listened to Me. ¹⁶ 'Indeed, the sons of Jonadab the son of Rechab have observed the command of their father which he commanded them, but this people has not listened to Me.' "" ¹⁷ "Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of hosts, the God of Israel, 'Behold, I am bringing on Judah and on all the inhabitants of Jerusalem all the disaster that I have pronounced against them; because I spoke to them but they did not listen, and I have called them but they did not answer.' "

¹⁸ Then Jeremiah said to the house of the Rechabites, "Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, 'Because you have obeyed the command of Jonadab your father, kept all his commands and done according to all that he commanded you; ¹⁹ therefore thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, "Jonadab the son of Rechab shall not lack a man to stand before Me always.' ""

And here we are, roughly 2600 years later, living in a land where we don't want anybody telling us what to do, and we have a lesson on the importance of obedience to the word of God. Yesterday in our class on how to prepare a sermon, we learned that you can sometimes determine the main point of a passage by looking for words that are repeated, and you might have noticed that various forms of the word "obey" are repeated three times in this chapter, and the concept of obedience is repeated even more than that in several different ways. And that is the main idea in this chapter: *If a bunch of people can so strongly follow the centuries-old tradition handed down to them by their ancestors, then God's people ought to also be able to listen to God in*

His word. This is the central thought. Now of course, many have misunderstood the central message in this chapter. As I was preparing this morning's lesson, I ran across an article from a preacher who I normally respect, but his article brought out four lessons from Jeremiah 35: 1.) According to him, at least, this chapter teaches that it is a sin to drink wine. 2.) Just as the Rechabites were not to build houses, we today are not to put our trust in riches. 3.) Just as the Rechabites were not to sow seed, young people today are not to sow their wild oats, and 4.) Just as the Rechabites were not to plant vineyards, so also we today are not to live our lives in such a way as to produce sour grapes. No!!! That's not it! That's not the main point!

Another author used this passage to come up with some amazing alliteration. He referred to the Israelites being challenged by A PEOPLE WHO PROCLAIMED AND PRACTICED PRINCIPLES FOR A PROTRACTED PERIOD, EVEN IN THE PRESENCE OF A PROVOCATIVE PROPOSAL FROM A POWERFUL PROPHET. Very interesting, and that's getting closer, but as Jeremiah looks back over his life, he sees the incident with the Rechabites as God's way of encouraging obedience among the people of Jerusalem.

I. And so as we think about the importance of obedience this morning, I would like for us to start by looking at the Rechabites who had an amazing FAMILY LEGACY OF OBEDIENCE.

When we start looking into who these people were, it appears that they were not true Jews, although they had been circumcised, and they seem to have been converts to the Law of Moses. It appears, in fact, that the Rechabites were the descendants of Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses. You may remember that Jethro gave Moses some very good advice, encouraging Moses to delegate some of the responsibility involved in leading the people of Israel. And we also know that Jethro and his people seem to have been loyal to the nation of Israel.

In fact, many years later, after God ordered the death of Ahab (the wicked king, the husband of Jezebel), the Bible tells us that during the time of Elisha, Jonadab (a descendant of Jethro and Rechab) was so upset by the way the nation of Israel was going, that he also helped to destroy Ahab's legacy. Basically, King Jehu approaches Jonadab and says, "Are you with me?" And Jonadab responds, "Watch this!" as he proceeds to kill all of those who remained from the family of Ahab (2 Kings 10). After this, Jonadab made his descendants promise to live a different kind of life, a life that would remove them from the mainstream of society and would therefore help them survive the wickedness that the Twelve Tribes of Israel were getting involved in. Jonadab was a man who hated sin and refused to back down.

And as we notice in our text this morning, Jonadab made his descendants promise that they would not drink alcohol, that they would live in tents, that they would not plant crops, and that they would not plant any vineyards. So here we are in Jeremiah 35, at least 250 years later, and the descendants of Jonadab are still maintaining their respect for their great-great-whatever-grandfather's wishes. 250 years! So, what were you doing 250 years ago? That would have been around the year 1760. That's about the time George Washington got married. Now imagine that George Washington made his descendants promise that they would never drink wine, that they would live in tents, and that they would not plant crops. And then try to imagine faithfully maintaining that pledge up until modern times. That is roughly what we are talking about here in Jeremiah 35! In a time when people were putting their trust in riches and large fortified houses, and in a time when people were getting drunk all around them, the descendants of Jonadab, the Rechabites, stood alone.

And with that as background, the prophet Jeremiah calls these people into the temple. It was rare for them to even be in Jerusalem in the first place—they were there only to avoid getting killed by the Babylonians who were closing in all around the area—so Jeremiah calls them in (which must have been quite a spectacle in

itself—I'm almost thinking of something like maybe a huge Amish clan being summoned to a huge public event in a big city). But the prophet Jeremiah brings them into an inner chamber of the temple, he takes what must have been the finest wine in the land (the best of the best that had been given to the priests), he puts the wine in large bowls or pitchers, he puts some cups out there, and then he tells them that they are to take a drink—the prophet Jeremiah is serving as the bartender.

And yet they say “No” to God’s prophet, because 250 years in the past their family took a solemn vow that they would not. Again, this is not about drinking wine, it is not about planting crops, it is not about living in tents, but these people are being used by Jeremiah as an example of obedience—a family legacy of obedience. Jeremiah, therefore, was testing these people. He was not trying to get them drunk. He was not trying to get them to sin, but he knew what their answer would be. He put the wine on the table, he gave them cups, but they refused—all because they were committed to the principles that had been laid down by their ancestors.

II. The real question, then, is: Why did Jeremiah do this? Why would Jeremiah make such a public scene out of this family’s refusal to drink wine in the temple? Well, the answer comes (starting in verse 13) as GOD MAKES A STATEMENT, AS GOD TELLS US WHAT THE ILLUSTRATION MEANS.

And the main point of this whole illustration (according to God) is this: Here is this family demonstrating loyal obedience to their ancestor who has been dead for hundreds of years, and yet you (the nation of Israel) refuse to listen to Me, Your God who continually sends you My servants and My prophets. Notice God’s message to the people (in verse 13), **“Will you not receive instruction by listening to My words?”** In other words, God is using the obedience of the Rechabites to their long-dead great-great grandpa to shame the nation. Now, Jonadab was a great man. The Bible tells us that he was zealous, that he worked to rid the nation of idolatry way back when. He came up with a plan for preventing his family and his descendants from being sucked in by the evils of the world. He was a great man, he was a great leader, but Jonadab was just a man, those restrictions were not inspired. So here were the Rechabites being faithful to Jonadab, but the people of Israel had rejected the Lord, who was so much more than Jonadab. Shame on you, God says.

And what is the message? What does God want the people to do? God’s message comes in the middle of verse 15, **“Turn now every man from his evil way and amend your deeds.”** That’s it! That is what God wants. Just as the Rechabites obeyed the promise made to Jonadab, God wants His people to obey His word. And I would say: That is a message we need to hear today.

As far as I know, we do not have any Rechabites with us today (if you are a Rechabite, please let me know); however, there are many people around us who through their dedication to various secular pursuits can put many of God’s people to shame. We see people who are more slaves to fashion than some of us are slaves to God. We see people all around us who are amazingly dedicated to a hobby, or sport, or maybe some kind of team. Their dedication to a rubber puck or the inflated skin of a dead animal is admirable. We stand in awe of those who will stand in a stadium for three hours in the snow at 10 degrees with their chests painted green. If Jeremiah were here with us today, I believe he would say: If they can do that, then what’s your problem? Not that those things are wrong, but if they can do that, then what is holding you back from following the word of God?

This morning, then, we have considered the Rechabites, a tribe of people who were faithful to the tradition of their ancestors. Their faithfulness, their obedience, is then used by Jeremiah as an example. If they can be faithful to Jonadab, then the rest of us can be faithful to God who is so much more—the main point of Jeremiah 35.

III. **But before we end our lesson, we do need to consider verses 18-19 as we find that THE RECHABITES WILL BE REWARDED FOR THEIR EXAMPLE OF OBEDIENCE.**

In those last two verses, Jeremiah delivers a message directly from God to the Rechabites, ***“Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, ‘Because you have obeyed the command of Jonadab your father, kept all his commands and done according to all that he commanded you; therefore thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, ‘Jonadab the son of Rechab shall not lack a man to stand before Me always.’”*** And again, the focus is on their obedience to the command of their father, and the reward was that they would never lack a man to stand before the Lord. In other words, someone from that family would always be faithful to God.

Remember: This account takes place shortly before the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586 BC. So, things were about to get really, really bad. However, we have an interesting passage concerning what happens many years later when the Israelites finally come back to Jerusalem and start rebuilding the wall. In the fine print concerning the rebuilding of the wall, the Bible says in Nehemiah 3:14, ***“Malchijah the son of Rechab, the official of the district of Beth-haccherem repaired the Refuse Gate. He built it and hung its doors with its bolts and its bars.”*** Very interesting! Just as God promised, many years later the descendants of Rechab were still around, they were still active, and they were still obedient to God.

But really, it seems (in a symbolic way) that faithful Christians today are the true descendants of Rechab. It has been suggested that some of the earliest Christians were from this particular tribe. We do not know for sure, but we do know from the Scriptures that God’s people will always be blessed when they obey the Lord. As Jesus said in John 14:23, ***“If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our abode with him.”*** Or, as we learned in our Scripture reading this morning (from Hebrews 5:8), that ***“having been made perfect, [Jesus] became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation.”***

Conclusion:

This morning, as we bring our thoughts on this passage to a close, we have been reminded that God wants our obedience. Yes, this morning we have considered A PEOPLE WHO PROCLAIMED AND PRACTICED PRINCIPLES FOR A PROTRACTED PERIOD, EVEN IN THE PRESENCE OF A PROVOCATIVE PROPOSAL FROM A POWERFUL PROPHET. But more importantly, we have also been reminded of the value of an obedient example. Just a few moments ago, I asked what all of you were doing back in the year 1760, the year that George Washington got married. Again, that’s about the length of time that the Rechabites held firmly to the example set by Jonadab. But as we end, perhaps I could flip that around a little bit. Where will we be in the year 2260? Where will our descendants be 250 years from now? Will our descendants be able to look back in history at our example of obedience to the gospel? Will they be inspired by that?

The Bible teaches that we must turn away from sin and that we must allow ourselves to be briefly buried in water so that our sins can be forgiven. We do this in response to the death, the burial, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. If you have turned from this path, we would invite you back. But if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, if you are ready to set an example for future generations, we would invite you to let us know about your decision as we sing this next song. Let’s stand and sing...