Jeremiah 35, 1 Samuel 15 & Romans 6

The Rechabites: Obedience from the Heart

Scripture Readings

> *“We will drink no wine, for Jonadab the son of Rechab our father commanded us.” — Jeremiah 35:6*
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> *“I have spoken unto you, rising early and speaking, but ye have not hearkened unto me.” — Jeremiah 35:14*
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> *“There shall not fail to Jonadab the son of Rechab a man to stand before me for ever.” — Jeremiah 35:19*
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> *“To obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams.” — 1 Samuel 15:22*
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> *“Ye have obeyed from the heart the form of teaching into which ye were instructed.” — Romans 6:17*

Who Were the Rechabites?

To understand the force of Jeremiah 35, it helps to trace the Rechabites back to their roots. Midian was a son of Abraham — but not a son of Isaac, and not a son of Jacob. God could say to Abraham about Isaac, “thy son, thine only,” even though Abraham had other children, because it was through Isaac and Jacob that the covenant people would come. Out of Midian came the Kenites, and Moses’ father-in-law and wife were Kenites of Midian. So these were Gentiles — not Israelites.

Jael in Judges 4 was a Kenite. When Sisera, the enemy of Israel, fled from a lost battle and took refuge in her tent, she received him with seeming hospitality and then drove a tent pin through his temples while he slept. It is not hard to understand the significance of the instruments she used. A tent pin is the mark of a sojourner — someone whose home is temporary, who holds lightly to where they are and is ready to move. The pin does not go deep; it only holds the tent for a season. And what was used to drive it in? A hammer. And Jeremiah 23 tells us that God's word is a hammer. Jael applied the pilgrim experience, with the force of the word of God, to destroy the enemy of Israel's purposes. Though she was not an Israelite, she had the character of a mother in Israel.

Out of the Kenites came a distinct family — the Rechabites, descended from Jonadab the son of Rechab. We see Jonadab himself in 2 Kings 10, where he went in with Jehu into the house of Baal to witness the execution of the entire priesthood of Baal in the middle of Israel. This was a man of the most uncompromising character. And it was this man who laid a commandment on his descendants: drink no wine, build no houses, sow no seed, plant no vineyard. Live in tents.

The Test in the Temple Chamber

It would not have been much of a test if someone had simply offered the Rechabites a cup of wine at the roadside. But Jeremiah, at the Lord's instruction, brought them into one of the most important rooms in the house of the Lord — the chamber of the sons of Haman the man of God, beside the chamber of the princes. This was a room of significance, a room not everyone was permitted to enter. And there before them were set bowls full of wine, and cups. And Jeremiah the prophet himself said: drink.

Their answer was immediate and unwavering: "We will drink no wine, for Jonadab the son of Rechab our father commanded us." They gave the reason. It

was not that wine was wicked in itself — the commandment was not a moral prohibition but a test of obedience. Jonadab had not told them to abstain from wine because there was something inherently evil in it. He had set up a test. And Brother Kelly makes an important observation: there is nothing immoral in a father setting up a test of obedience for his children. Parents do it all the time. The command is not required to be about something inherently wrong. The point is obedience itself.

And they obeyed — not grudgingly, not with complaint, not looking sideways at what others were allowed to do. We do not read any of them saying, “Why did I have to be born into the house of Jonadab?” We do not read them raising the fairness of it. They simply said: our father commanded us, and we have done it. Even Jonadab had long been gone from the scene. That is how we know it was from the heart — they obeyed when no one was watching to keep them in line.

The Lesson to Israel

The Lord did not bring the Rechabites into that inner chamber to test them for their own benefit. The test was a demonstration. Having shown that these Gentiles had maintained a father’s command across generations, in the face of real temptation, the Lord turned to Israel and said: “I have spoken unto you, rising early and speaking, and ye have not hearkened unto me. I have sent unto you all my servants the prophets, rising early and sending, and ye have not hearkened.”

Did Jonadab rise early? Did he send prophets? No. He issued a commandment once, and his descendants kept it. Israel’s God had done far more than that — He had spoken again and again, sending prophet after prophet, and they did not listen. The contrast was devastating. And what was the consequence? “I will bring upon Judah and upon all the inhabitants of Jerusalem all the evil that I have pronounced against them, because I have spoken unto them, but they have not

hearkened."

But to the Rechabites came the promise: "There shall not fail to Jonadab the son of Rechab a man to stand before me for ever." What a reward for faithfulness. Not that they were rewarded for being better than Israel by nature — they were Gentiles without the covenant. But their obedience was counted. Their standing before God was assured because they kept the commandment of their father, and the Lord recognised it.

The Application to Every Soul

The message is not only for Israel. The God we are speaking about — called here Jehovah, but the same God throughout the whole Bible — is the one God and Father of all. He has commanded all men everywhere to repent. He has sent His Son. He has spoken through the gospel going into every corner of the world — by men on bicycles with little amplifiers riding through poor villages, the message going out in every language. And what is the response of men? The same as Israel's. Not yet. Not now. I want to do my own thing first.

And to those of us who are already the Lord's — who have received the Saviour, whose sins are washed away by His blood — the example still applies. We can hear the word of God and think, yes, I know that, but I do not feel like listening to it just now. That is the attitude of Israel. And 1 Samuel 15 sets out the gravity of it plainly.

To Obey is Better Than Sacrifice: 1 Samuel 15

Saul was sent by the Lord to utterly destroy Amalek — man, woman, child, ox, sheep, camel, and ass. He did most of it. He spared the best of the sheep and the oxen and the king Agag. When Samuel came and heard the bleating of the sheep, Saul gave a very familiar excuse: the people did it, not me, and besides, they were going to sacrifice them to the Lord. It is a remarkable thing how quickly the

act of disobedience can be dressed up as something spiritual.

Samuel's response cuts through all of it: "Hath the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams." How many things in the Christian life can become a substitute for simple obedience? Attendance at meetings, reading the Bible, saying the right things — all of these are good, but if the Lord has shown me something that I have declined to do, or something in my life that I have chosen to leave unaddressed, none of that other activity makes up for it.

"For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry." Those are striking comparisons. We do not think of a small act of disobedience, of just going our own way a little, as being in the category of witchcraft or idolatry. But that is what it is in God's sight. Rebellion is rebellion, whatever form it takes. Saul was rejected from being king because he rejected the word of the Lord.

Moses, who was a man of God, could not enter the promised land because he smote the rock when God told him to speak to it. His anger with the people caused him to disobey. God still brought the water out — His purposes are never frustrated — but Moses bore the consequence in God's government. And David, who sinned grievously with Bathsheba, paid for it through four of his sons. These were men of God. The point is not that they were cast aside forever, but that disobedience has real consequences in God's government, even for those He loves.

Obeying from the Heart: Romans 6

Romans 5 and 6 make clear what happened to us at conversion. By the disobedience of the one man Adam, the many were constituted sinners. By the obedience of the one Man, Christ, the many are constituted righteous. Grace has

overabounded where sin abounded. But this is not a licence to continue in sin; it is the ground on which we now, as those freed from sin, yield ourselves to righteousness.

“Thanks be to God that ye were bondmen of sin, but have obeyed from the heart the form of teaching into which ye were instructed. Now, having got your freedom from sin, ye have become bondmen to righteousness.” That middle phrase is the key: obeyed from the heart. That is what the Rechabites did. They were not merely complying with an external rule while inwardly longing to be free of it. It was in their hearts. Even generations after Jonadab, with no one watching them and no enforcement of his commandment, they maintained it because they respected him and what he had told them.

We have the great privilege of obeying from the heart the teaching we have been instructed in. We know why we do what we do — not because a man told us and we dare not disobey, but because we have received grace, and we love the One who showed us that grace, and we want to obey Him. The Rechabites are our example: faithful to a father’s commandment at every cost to themselves, in the most testing of circumstances, and with no one there to enforce it. How much more does our Father’s commandment deserve our wholehearted, heartfelt obedience?

“To obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams.” — 1 Samuel 15:22