

I want you to think about the Rechabites.

God gave Israel cities that they did not build – vineyards that they did not plant –
and he called Israel to be fruitful and multiply in the land.

God also called Israel to bring burnt offerings, grain offerings, and drink offerings –
and at the annual Feast of Tabernacles,
the LORD urged his people to rejoice (drinking wine and strong drink)
at his holy place.

Jonadab, the son of Rechab, told his sons *not* to plant (or have) vineyards
or build houses, or drink wine or sow seed.

Jonadab told his sons to be nomads –
contrary to what God told Israel to do!

And yet God blesses the Rechabites!

Jonadab gives his family a whole bunch of commands
that at best go beyond what God had said –
and at worst may even contradict what God had said!

Why does God bless the Rechabites?!
At least you obeyed your father!

God’s point is *not* that everyone needs to be a Rechabite.

We do not need to all become homeless nomadic teetotalers in order to follow Jesus!
But we *do* need to follow Jesus with the same devotion
that the Rechabites showed to their father.

Tonight we are looking at two oracles that were separated in time by about a decade.

Chapter 34 takes place during the siege of Jerusalem in 587 BC,
when Zedekiah was king of Judah.

Chapter 35 happened around a decade earlier,
when Jehoiakim was king of Judah –
during a previous Babylonian invasion.

(Jehoiakim reigned for around 10 years after the death of Josiah –
he rebelled against Babylon, but died before Nebuchadnezzar responded.
His son, Jehoiachin, would only reign for three months before the invasion of 597,
and Jehoiachin – along with Ezekiel and many other leaders of Jerusalem –
would be taken into exile in Babylon –
leaving his uncle Zedekiah (the last son of Josiah) as king in Jerusalem.)

In other words, our text for tonight *starts* with God’s final verdict against Jerusalem,
and then backtracks to the *reason* for God’s verdict.

But both oracles are bound together with a common set of vocabulary
that demonstrates that these two passages should be understood together.

1. Halfway Repentance Is Not Enough (34:1-22)

a. The First Word – Jerusalem Will Be Destroyed and You Will Be Taken Captive (v1-7)

34 The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD, when Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon and all his army and all the kingdoms of the earth under his dominion and all the peoples were fighting against Jerusalem and all of its cities: ² “Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Go and speak to Zedekiah king of Judah and say to him, ‘Thus says the LORD: Behold, I am giving this city into the hand of the king of Babylon, and he shall burn it with fire. ³ You shall not escape from his hand but shall surely be captured and delivered into his hand. You shall see the king of Babylon eye to eye and speak with him face to face. And you shall go to Babylon.’ ⁴ Yet hear the word of the LORD, O Zedekiah king of Judah! Thus says the LORD concerning you: ‘You shall not die by the sword. ⁵ You shall die in peace. And as spices were burned for your fathers, the former kings who were before you, so people shall burn spices for you and lament for you, saying, “Alas, lord!”’ For I have spoken the word, declares the LORD.”

⁶ Then Jeremiah the prophet spoke all these words to Zedekiah king of Judah, in Jerusalem, ⁷ when the army of the king of Babylon was fighting against Jerusalem and against all the cities of Judah that were left, Lachish and Azekah, for these were the only fortified cities of Judah that remained.

Verses 6-7 give a very clear timestamp for this oracle.

Lachish and Azekah are the only fortified cities in Judah that remain in Jewish hands.

The armies of Babylon are drawing near.

The countryside is overrun.

The fortified cities and villages are ruined.

The onrushing tide of the nations has flooded all the land.

Only Lachish, Azekah, and Jerusalem still stand as islands amidst the raging sea.

Lachish and Azekah guarded the two main roads to Jerusalem.

Together they form a triangle that protects the hill country of Judah.

If one falls, then there is nothing to stop the Babylonian army.

The “Lachish letters” are pieces of clay pots with messages inscribed on them – they come from the early 6th century – during the Babylonian siege.

One of them signals the coming of the end:

“Let my lord know that we are watching over the beacon of Lachish,
according to the signals which my lord gave, for Azekah is not seen.”

So Jeremiah’s message to Zedekiah comes *just before* that message from Lachish.

Lachish had been the last city to fall to Sennacherib a century earlier.

That *Assyrian* Siege of Lachish is commemorated in the great palace of Sennacherib – with a whole *room* devoted to a carving of the great siege.

But for Judah, the Siege of Lachish was important –

because it was the *last* battle that Sennacherib won!

In the days of Hezekiah, in the days of the prophet Isaiah,

the LORD *delivered* Jerusalem from the Assyrians,
and saved his anointed king from his foes!

As Zedekiah watches out over the beacons of Lachish and Azekah
no doubt he was praying that God would deliver the son of David once more!
Remember your covenant with David!
Do not forget your anointed king!

But Jeremiah arrives to tell him that the LORD decrees the destruction of the city.
Nebuchadnezzar will burn the city of Jerusalem with fire.
Zedekiah himself will die in peace –
but the city will not be spared.

What does Jeremiah mean “You shall die in peace”?
We will hear the conclusion of the story in chapter 39.
Zedekiah indeed saw Nebuchadnezzar face to face.
His sons were slaughtered before him.
That was the last thing that Zedekiah ever saw.
Then Nebuchadnezzar put out Zedekiah’s eyes,
and took him captive to Babylon.

So it is true: “You shall not die by the sword.”
Your eyes will be gouged out and you will die in captivity in Babylon!

That may seem like a strange way to “die in peace”!
That doesn’t sound like “shalom”!

Some have suggested that there is an implied “if” here –
namely, *if* you hear the word of the LORD (and thus surrender to Nebuchadnezzar),
then you will die in peace.

After all, in chapter 21, Jeremiah had said to Zedekiah and all the people
that if they surrender, they will live,
but if they fight, they will die.

The solution is found in Zedekiah’s own understanding of what Jeremiah says.
In chapter 32, verse 4, we heard Zedekiah ask:

“Why do you prophesy...
Zedekiah king of Judah shall not escape out of the hand of the Chaldeans,
but shall surely be given into the hand of the king of Babylon,
and shall speak with him face to face and see him eye to eye.
And he shall take Zedekiah to Babylon, and there he shall remain until I visit him,
declares the LORD.”

Chapter 32 was quoting from chapter 34!
Zedekiah was quoting from *this prophecy* when he said that.

(After all, Jeremiah was *in prison* in chapter 32).

Zedekiah interprets the prophecy to mean that he will be taken captive to Babylon – and then *restored* to the throne (“until I visit him”).

But the second half of Jeremiah 34 provides a different interpretation.

Look down to verse 20-21.

The people of Jerusalem will be destroyed –
their dead bodies given to the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth.
But Zedekiah will be given into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar.

Compared to the fate of the people, Zedekiah will get off easy.

But what should we make of the funeral reference in verse 5?

And as spices were burned for your fathers, the former kings who were before you, so people shall burn spices for you and lament for you, saying, “Alas, lord!”

For Zedekiah, this means that there will be a people left to lament over him!

The practice in Israel was to bury the king,
and then to have a funeral fire – burning spices as a sweet aroma.

Just a comment here:

verse 5 does not *require* us to burn spices at funerals!

But it does *recognize* the value of funeral customs.

Scripture does not *command* particular funeral practices.

But scripture does *commend* the practice of giving honor to the deceased.

b. The Second Word – Love Your Neighbor As Yourself (v8-22)

i. You Enslaved Your Brothers Again??! (v8-16)

⁸ *The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD, after King Zedekiah had made a covenant with all the people in Jerusalem to make a proclamation of liberty to them, ⁹ that everyone should set free his Hebrew slaves, male and female, so that no one should enslave a Jew, his brother. ¹⁰ And they obeyed, all the officials and all the people who had entered into the covenant that everyone would set free his slave, male or female, so that they would not be enslaved again. They obeyed and set them free. ¹¹ But afterward they turned around and took back the male and female slaves they had set free, and brought them into subjection as slaves. ¹² The word of the LORD came to Jeremiah from the LORD: ¹³ “Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: I myself made a covenant with your fathers when I brought them out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, saying, ¹⁴ ‘At the end of seven years each of you must set free the fellow Hebrew who has been sold to you and has served you six years; you must set him free from your service.’ But your fathers did not listen to me or incline their ears to me. ¹⁵ You recently repented and did what was right in my eyes by proclaiming liberty, each to his neighbor, and you made a covenant before me in the house that is called by my name, ¹⁶ but then you turned around and profaned my name*

when each of you took back his male and female slaves, whom you had set free according to their desire, and you brought them into subjection to be your slaves.

Verses 8-16 then give a heartbreaking example of Judah's faithlessness.

In the Law of Moses, God had made it clear
that Israelites were not supposed to enslave each other.

In verse 14, Jeremiah paraphrases Exodus 21:2 and Deuteronomy 15:12.

God had set his people free from slavery in Egypt.

Therefore, God's people should not enslave each other!

Yes, there may be situations where a person runs into trouble,
and rather than starve to death, they may sell themselves into slavery.

But in modern terms we would call it "indentured service" –

because it was only for a term of six years.

And after six years, you must set him free.

Under King Zedekiah the people of Jerusalem obeyed the LORD's command!

They obeyed and set their slaves free.

But then they turned around and brought them back into subjection again.

What went wrong?

The law of the Sabbatical year was intimately connected
with the law of the Jubilee – the 50th year,
when *land* would be restored to its rightful owners.

If the Jubilee year has been ignored for hundreds of years,
and land has gradually been accumulated in the hands of the wealthy,
then what will happen when the slaves are set free?

They have no land to return to.

Their land is still in the hands of their former masters!

If I am one of the freed slaves, what am I supposed to do?

So, yes, the officials of Jerusalem freed their slaves –

but under such conditions that the slaves were forced back into slavery again!

After all, there were two different times (a decade apart)

when Nebuchadnezzar invaded.

Perhaps it was during the first invasion that they freed the slaves –

and then as soon as Nebuchadnezzar went home, they forced them back.

Freeing the slaves only works if the Jubilee principle of the *land* is honored!

Obviously there are *lots* of differences

between the OT situation and the American Civil War.

Land ownership worked differently – and slavery worked differently!

And for that matter, it was not southern slaveholders who freed their slaves –

but President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation!

Perhaps this is why Zedekiah will be allowed to die in peace in Babylon!

Very few slaveholding rulers have ever emancipated their own slaves.

Usually they are forced to do it by others!

But Zedekiah tried –

maybe only half-heartedly – maybe it didn't really work –
but unlike everyone else, he tried!

ii. Therefore I Proclaim Liberty to the Sword: All the Curses from Abraham to Goliath Will Now Come upon You (v17-22)

¹⁷ “Therefore, thus says the LORD: You have not obeyed me by proclaiming liberty, every one to his brother and to his neighbor; behold, I proclaim to you liberty to the sword, to pestilence, and to famine, declares the LORD. I will make you a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth. ¹⁸ And the men who transgressed my covenant and did not keep the terms of the covenant that they made before me, I will make them like^[a] the calf that they cut in two and passed between its parts— ¹⁹ the officials of Judah, the officials of Jerusalem, the eunuchs, the priests, and all the people of the land who passed between the parts of the calf. ²⁰ And I will give them into the hand of their enemies and into the hand of those who seek their lives. Their dead bodies shall be food for the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth. ²¹ And Zedekiah king of Judah and his officials I will give into the hand of their enemies and into the hand of those who seek their lives, into the hand of the army of the king of Babylon which has withdrawn from you. ²² Behold, I will command, declares the LORD, and will bring them back to this city. And they will fight against it and take it and burn it with fire. I will make the cities of Judah a desolation without inhabitant.”

Verses 17-22 then speak of what God will do to the people who disobeyed him.

Since they failed to proclaim liberty to their brothers,

God will proclaim to them liberty to the sword, to pestilence, and to famine.

They wanted it to *look* like they were obeying God –

but they refused to do the *hard thing* of giving the freed slaves the resources to stay out of slavery!

They wanted to look good by freeing their slaves,

but they also wanted to hold on to the land that their fathers had taken from others.

And the result is that God makes the cities of Judah “a desolation without inhabitant.”

I’ve summarized this as “all the curses from Abraham to Goliath will now come upon you.”

When it says “make a covenant” in Hebrew the word is to *cut*.

The way you make a covenant is by *cutting* animals in half
and walking between the animals together.

The picture of “cutting a covenant” goes back to Genesis 15 –

and here in verse 19, Jeremiah reminds them of what the picture means.

When you walk between the parts of the calf

you are saying “may I be cut in half if I do not do what I promise today.”

In Genesis 15, God alone walked between the pieces of the animal.
God has promised – and he will do what he has promised.

But now God has called Israel to be faithful – to walk before him and be blameless.
At Sinai Israel had promised to obey God and walk according to all the words of his law.

In the book of Deuteronomy, God laid out the blessings of the covenant for obedience –
and the curses of the covenant for disobedience.

Indeed, bodies being fed to the birds of the heavens and the beasts of the earth
goes all the way back to the curses of Dt 28 –
but in the context of the curse upon the son of David,
it would also cause people to remember what Goliath had said to David.

And the particular reason given here in chapter 34 is because they have mistreated the poor.
We'll come back to this in a minute –
but first we need to see a picture of righteousness!

Chapter 35 provides a contrast to this faithless pattern.

2. Faithful Sons: the Example of the Rechabites (35:1-19)

a. The Rechabites Obeyed Their Father (v1-11)

35 The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD in the days of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah: ² “Go to the house of the Rechabites and speak with them and bring them to the house of the LORD, into one of the chambers; then offer them wine to drink.” ³ So 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 I brought them to 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, above the chamber of Maaseiah the son of Shallum, keeper of the threshold. ⁵ Then I set before the Rechabites pitchers full of wine, and cups, and I said to them, “Drink wine.” ⁶ But they answered, “We will drink no wine, for Jonadab the son of Rechab, our father, commanded us, ‘You shall not drink wine, neither you nor your sons forever. ⁷ You shall not build a house; you shall not sow seed; you shall not plant or have a vineyard; but you shall live in tents 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, to drink no wine all our days, ourselves, our wives, our sons, or our daughters, ⁹ and not to build houses to dwell in. We have no vineyard or field or seed, ¹⁰ but we have lived in tents and have obeyed and done 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 for fear of the army of the Chaldeans and the army of the Syrians.’ So we are living in Jerusalem.”

We hear about Jonadab the son of Rechab in 2 Kings 10 – in the story of Jehu.

Jehu was the one whom God had appointed to bring an end to the line of Ahab.
Jonadab the son of Rechab joined Jehu in the revolt against the house of Ahab
and participated in the slaughter of the Baal-worshippers
and the destruction of the temple of Baal in Samaria.

This means that Jonadab lived in the second half of the 9th century B.C. –
and that he was part of the northern kingdom of Israel.
And this means that the Rechabites have been following Jonadab’s orders
for over 200 years.
They survived the deportation of the northern kingdom by the Assyrians in 722 –
at least in part because they were nomads!
If they had been landowners and farmers, they would have been displaced –
but because they were nomads, they could just disappear!

And for the last hundred years or so they had continued their nomadic existence
living on the fringes of Judah –
recognizing the authority of the house of David,
but only coming to live in Jerusalem for fear of the armies of Nebuchadnezzar.

Verses 8-10 get to the heart of the Rechabites’ obedience:

⁸ *We have obeyed the voice of Jonadab the son of Rechab, our father, in all that he commanded us, to drink no wine all our days, ourselves, our wives, our sons, or our daughters, ⁹ and not to build houses to dwell in. We have no vineyard or field or seed, ¹⁰ but we have lived in tents and have obeyed and done all that Jonadab our father commanded us.*

Notice the repetition of the word “obeyed” –
It is actually the word “shama” – to hear
(“Hear, Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one”)

It is the same word used in 34:4 – “Hear [or obey] the word of the LORD, O Zedekiah”
Or 34:10 – “And they heard [or obeyed], all the officials and all the people...”
that they would set free their slaves.
“They heard [or obeyed] and set them free.”
Or 34:14 – “But your fathers did not hear [or obey] me or incline their ears to me”
Or 34:17 – “Therefore thus says the LORD – you have not heard [or obeyed me]...”

Yes, the word can be translated “hear” “listen” or “obey” –
all of them are good translations!

Just like when you say to your child,
“Did you hear me?”
The implication is clear: if you heard me, you should have obeyed me!

b. But This People Has Not Obeyed Me (v12-17)

¹² *Then the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah: ¹³ “Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Go and say to the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, Will you not receive instruction and listen to my words? declares the LORD. ¹⁴ The command that Jonadab the son of Rechab gave to his sons, to drink no wine, has been kept, and they drink none to this day, for they have obeyed their father's command. I have spoken to you persistently, but you have not listened to me. ¹⁵ I have sent to you all my servants the prophets, sending them persistently,*

saying, 'Turn now every one of you from his evil way, and amend your deeds, and do not go after other gods to serve them, and then you shall dwell in the land that I gave to you and your fathers.' But you did not incline your ear or listen to me. ¹⁶ The sons of Jonadab the son of Rechab have kept the command that their father gave them, but this people has not obeyed me. ¹⁷ Therefore, thus says the LORD, the God of hosts, the God of Israel: Behold, I am bringing upon Judah and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem all the disaster that I have pronounced against them, because I have spoken to them and they have not listened, I have called to them and they have not answered."

So the LORD replies by contrasting the Rechabites with Jerusalem.

The verb translated "listen" at the end of verses 13, 14, 15, 16

is all the same verb – shama.

You have not listened to me – you have not heard me – you have not obeyed me.

c. The Blessing of the Rechabites (v18-19)

¹⁸ But to the house of the Rechabites Jeremiah said, "Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Because you have obeyed the command of Jonadab your father and kept all his precepts and done all that he commanded you, ¹⁹ therefore thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Jonadab the son of Rechab shall never lack a man to stand before me."

And so God promises that Jonadab son of Rechab shall never lack a man to stand before him.

It's not that the nomadic, teetotal life is inherently better than the city life.

It's that the Rechabites *heard* and *obeyed* their father!

So what do we do with all this?

The principle behind the Jubilee and Sabbatical laws is the principle of the 4th commandment.

The fourth commandment does not merely say that *you* are supposed to rest.

The fourth commandment says that you are supposed to give rest to *others*.

"You, nor your son nor your daughter, your manservant nor your maidservant,
nor your livestock,
nor the stranger that is within your gates,"

In other words, the sabbatical principle is that you are responsible to give rest to those who are under your care.

The fourth commandment is addressed to heads of households as well as to magistrates.

Those who are in positions of authority –

those who are called to make people work for 6 days –
are called to give rest on the 7th day.

But don't interpret this *narrowly*!

Don't make this only about what you do on Sunday!
(That would be the route the Pharisees took.)

The principle of the Sabbath is all about economics!

In the OT God applied it to Sabbath years –

and Jubilee years (the 50th year – after 7 sabbatical years!)
And it has to do with giving rest to sojourners – to strangers –
not just your household.
When slaves were set free, they were supposed to be given the wherewithal
to support themselves.
Land was to be restored every 50 years – to give them a chance!

I want you to think about the way God set up Israel as a nation.
If Israel obeyed God,
then no single Israelite could have accumulated great land and wealth.
Every 50 years, the land reverts to the original owners.
It's a system that rewards mediocrity – and punishes ambition.
If you try to expand your farm at the expense of others,
you will lose it all.

What this means is that much of what we call the “welfare state” has biblical warrant.
The idea that we should leave “charity” to the church – or to the individual –
has no real biblical support.
Plainly there are better and worse ways of providing for the poor.
The old Roman approach of grain and circuses may keep the peace,
but it is not necessarily the best thing for the poor!

The old testament model of restoring their land to them
has the advantage of making them depend on their own labor.
OT law does not apply directly today –
but the principles would be beneficial for modern societies to consider.
However you construct your welfare system,
you want it to restore dignity and honor to the people you are helping.

So what does it mean today to “proclaim liberty” everyone to his brother and to his neighbor?

God had told Israel that when they set the slaves free
they should give them all that they needed in order for them to *be free*.
God had said to give to the freedman *as the LORD your God has blessed you,*
you shall give to him.
You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt,
and the LORD your God redeemed you. (Dt 15:14-15)

The specifics of Deuteronomy are related to the particular redemptive setting of Israel.
But the principle applies to all generations.
The pattern of the Exodus is to guide our attitude towards those who are helpless.
You were helpless slaves – you had no hope and no future –
but the LORD your God redeemed you.
He gave you a hope and a future.
Therefore when you see others who have been oppressed and mistreated,
you are to help them find a hope and a future.

It may cost you.

Indeed, God's wrath came upon Jerusalem precisely because they refused to pay the cost.

A friend of mine put it this way:

“People often speak of generosity to the poor as an exercise of charity. We've earned our stuff and where we have extra we may generously elect to share with those who don't have stuff. Charity cast this way is optional -- something "nice" people volunteer for... [We] need to shift our moral/ social discourse away from this kind of optional "charity" toward "justice" -- a justice that obliges us.

“This is simply to say that the poor have an inalienable claim on us and that the morality of our systems -- the morality of US individually and corporately -- is best judged by a barometric measurement of their effects on the poor. Removing the injustices that create and sustain poverty is an individual and social obligation.” [Michael Pahls]

Let me give you a couple of individual examples:

I know a man who buys houses, fixes them up, and rents or sells them.

Yes, it's a business.

And the business will only work if he makes a profit!

(He has to provide for his own family!)

But this gives him an opportunity to help people

who might otherwise slip between the cracks of the housing system.

I know another man who had to close his business and let all his employees go.

But he worked hard to find jobs for all his employees –

and kept them on the payroll until he *at least*

helped them get an interview for a good job.

We live in a day that is only concerned for the bottom line.

But idolatry invariably undermines its own god.

Zedekiah and his people wanted to *look* good –

but they were not willing to go *all the way* in *doing* good.

And so their half-way obedience demonstrated their idolatry.

They loved their property – they loved their *stuff* and their status –

more than they loved the LORD – more than they loved their neighbor.

And the result was that Jerusalem was burned with fire –

and they lost everything!

The category of person that fits best into the helpless and needy
would be the undocumented farm worker of today.

For *decades* U.S. law made it illegal for farm workers to come to the US –

but farmers desperately *needed* farm workers to harvest their crops.

In other words, the *system* was rigged against the poor.

I'm not going to try to solve the US immigration issue tonight!

But I will say that when you have an unjust law,
the solution is *not* to enforce the unjust law.

Yes, it will be expensive to *fix* the injustices done to the migrant workers.

But the price tag will only get higher the longer we wait!

I wish that we had a political party that sought to remedy the injustices done to the poor –
without doing further injustice to the unborn.

But that will probably require Hispanics and African-Americans to come together
to form their own political party.

That would be a delicious irony –

that “white America” would disintegrate,

only to be rescued by a coalition of immigrants and former slaves!

In the United States, “we the people” are the “sovereign.”

Whether you like it or not, you are part of the highest authority in the land.

And therefore, you are responsible – each according to your ability –
to help remedy the injustices in our land.