



SIMPLE OBEDIENCE

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 Jeremiah 34:1-35:19
 24th Message
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The obscure and relatively unknown stories of the book of Jeremiah give fresh insights into the word of God. The prophet presents a case study in faithfulness in chapters 34 and 35 of this ancient text, recounting two stories connected by theme but not chronology. The first story is set during the reign of Zedekiah, just prior to the fall of Jerusalem; the second ten years earlier, in the reign of Jehoiakim. The two accounts provide a contrast in faithfulness to covenant loyalty. The first story is negative, the second is positive. The challenge for us this morning is whether we will be obedient and faithful to covenant promises.

The first story highlights the promise breakers.

The word which came to Jeremiah from the LORD after King Zedekiah had made a covenant with all the people who were in Jerusalem to proclaim release to them: that each man should set free his male servant and each man his female servant, a Hebrew man or a Hebrew woman; so that no one should keep them, a Jew his brother, in bondage. And all the officials and all the people obeyed who had entered into the covenant that each man should set free his male servant and each man his female servant, so that no one should keep them any longer in bondage; they obeyed, and set them free. But afterward they turned around and took back the male servants and the female servants whom they had set free, and brought them into subjection for male servants and for female servants. (Jer 34:8-11, NASB)

King Zedekiah made a covenant to release slaves, i.e., Jews who were unable to pay their debts and therefore had to go into slavery. Zedekiah's action is consistent with the requirements of the Law (Deut 15:1-11; Exod 21:1-6), to cancel a slave's debt after six years of service. We are not sure of the reason behind his benevolent action. It may have been motivated by economics. Jerusalem was under siege from Babylon, and masters didn't have enough food to feed their slaves, so they released them. Whatever the motive for the release, it was an act of kindness consistent with God's word.

However, the initial action of loyalty was followed by a reversal. Again, we are not sure of the circumstances. Perhaps the army of Babylon had gone off to war against Egypt and thus there was no longer a food shortage. That is the implication in verses 21-22. But the fact remains that the leadership reneged and took back the slaves. The words "turn around" and "took back" come from the same Hebrew word "to return." The double turning indicates fickleness and inconsistency. A promise was given and a promise was broken.

This brings us to God's response.

"Thus says the LORD God of Israel, 'I made a covenant with your forefathers in the day that I brought them

out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage, saying, 'At the end of seven years each of you shall set free his Hebrew brother who has been sold to you and has served you six years, you shall send him out free from you; but your forefathers did not obey Me or incline their ear to Me. Although recently you had turned and done what is right in My sight, each man proclaiming release to his neighbor, and you had made a covenant before Me in the house which is called by My name. Yet you turned and profaned My name, and each man took back his male servant and each man his female servant whom you had set free according to their desire, and you brought them into subjection to be your male servants and female servants.'"

"Therefore thus says the LORD, 'You have not obeyed Me in proclaiming release each man to his brother and each man to his neighbor. Behold, I am proclaiming a release to you,' declares the LORD, 'to the sword, to the pestilence and to the famine; and I will make you a terror to all the kingdoms of the earth.'" (Jer 34:13-17)

God and Zedekiah made covenants, unconditional promises that were independent of the actions of the other party. God released the people of Israel from slavery. He was faithful to his covenant and did not turn back. Zedekiah too released slaves but he was not faithful to his covenant. He reneged and went back on his promise.

God does not take very kindly to this breach of covenant. Zedekiah and his officials would suffer a harsh judgment. God says, in effect, "You did not release the slaves, so I will release the sword, the pestilence, and the famine." The implication is that God holds back the floodwaters of judgment, but there is a point at which he opens the gates.

Has anyone, a spouse, a parent, a friend, a boss, ever made a commitment to you and then broken it? That can be a deeply hurtful thing. But even beyond that, a broken promise greatly affects the nature of the relationship. We take loyalty and disloyalty to promises very seriously. So does God. When we are unfaithful in our covenant relationship with God, it hurts him deeply and drastically affects the intimacy that both parties long for.

The story of Zedekiah is contrasted with the story of the Rechabites, in chapter 35.

The word which came to Jeremiah from the LORD in the days of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah, saying, '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.' (Jer 35:1-2)

The context changes from the days of Zedekiah to the time of Jehoiakim, his brother. Most of the accounts in Jer-

emiah 30-39 take place during Zedekiah's reign. But the chronology is unimportant. This account, which occurred at least ten years earlier, is placed here to establish a contrast with chapter 34.

In chapter 34, the main characters are Zedekiah and the other leaders of Judah, public and well-known figures. In chapter 35, however, the main characters are the Rechabites, an obscure family clan. They are mentioned in 2 Kings 10, where we read that Jonadab (or Jehonadab), the son of Rechab, joined himself to Jehu when Jehu ruthlessly slaughtered the worshippers of Baal. First Chronicles says that the house of Rechab may have been connected with the Kenites.

Jonadab, who was zealous for the Lord, much like Jehu, instituted strict disciplines for his family. They were nomads, living in tents, not houses, and they did not raise crops. They did not plant vineyards, and they did not drink any wine. They lived a Spartan existence.

What was the purpose behind this vow? Perhaps Jonadab reasoned that being sojourners would help his family in not assimilating into the culture. A nomadic life aids purity of heart, as Israel learned in the wilderness.

But there were other reasons for Jonadab's instructions. The Rechabites were metal workers (*rechab* means chariot-eeer). This small family clan lived in an area until the supply of ore or fuel was exhausted, then they moved on. Thus they could not establish a permanent home or plant crops. They possessed a great deal of technical information about metalworking, and this information had to be handed down father to son and jealously guarded. But why no wine drinking? They feared losing their livelihood! As the saying goes, "Loose lips sink ships."

But Jeremiah is instructed by God to call the Rechabites to the temple and give them wine to drink.

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, 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 Shalum, the doorkeeper. 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!" (Jer 35:3-5)

What a test! Jeremiah brings the entire family into the temple of the Lord, a very holy and public place. The entire family fits into one chamber, so this incident was witnessed by important leaders. There in this public setting the prophet of God sets before this family pitchers of wine and tells them to drink.

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. 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.' "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, nor to build ourselves houses to dwell in;

and we do not have vineyard or field or seed. We have only dwelt in tents, and have obeyed and have done according to all that Jonadab our father commanded us. 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." (Jer 35:6-11)

The Rechabites refuse to drink. Even though Jeremiah the prophet gave them permission to do so, and even though they had already compromised a bit by moving into the city for fear of the Babylonians, the Rechabites remained faithful to the covenant vow of Jonadab.

Then the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah, saying, "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. "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. 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. 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.' " " " (Jer 35:12-16)

The key word in the text is "listen" or "obey." Both of these words come from the same Hebrew word, *shema*. This term means more than merely hearing; it means to hear and then put into practice what one has heard. In verse 13, the words "receive instruction" mean to listen and act on what is heard.

Thus the contrast is made between the Rechabites and Zedekiah. The Rechabites listened; Zedekiah did not. The Rechabites made a promise and remained faithful; Zedekiah made a promise and broke it. The important fact in the stories is not the specific details of the Rechabite way of life. God doesn't tell the people of Judah to sell their homes and abstain from wine. What is important is the fact that the Rechabites lived in obedience and integrity. God had spoken to Judah again and again, sending his prophets and inviting repentance time and time again, but Judah did not listen. The Rechabites, on the other hand, listened and continued to obey even after 240 years.

Not only is there a contrast in fidelity, there is a contrast in results.

"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.' "

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; 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." " (Jer 35:17-19)

Here we observe two different destinies. For Judah, the result of failing to listen would be judgment and disaster. They would lose their land and cities and be carried off into exile. But the Rechabites would never lack a man to stand before God. The Davidic line is cut off with Zedekiah, but the line of the Rechabites would continue.

It is not clear how this promise of God was fulfilled, but there are some obscure clues. There is a mention of Jonadab in the title of Psalm 71 in the LXX. Nehemiah 3:14 has a reference to Malchijah the son of Rechab, who repaired the Dung Gate in Nehemiah's restoration of Jerusalem. A Jewish tradition holds that the Rechabites entered the Temple service by the marriage of their daughters to priests. There is an assertion by Hegesippus that a Rechabite priest protested the martyrdom of James. The Talmud has a statement that the Rechabites had a special day, the seventh of Ab, for participation in the wood festival of priests and people. And finally, professed descendants of this sect still exist in Iraq and Yemen. Two different stories of covenant loyalty and disloyalty end in two different destinies.

What does God want from us? Entering into a covenant relationship with us, he calls upon us to be his people and promises to always be our God. He sent his Son to die for us. He forgives our sins. He promises us a glorious destiny. What does he want in return? He desires us to love him; to have contrite and humble hearts; to listen to his word, and to obey him. He promises to take care of the rest.

Why is that so hard? Why is simple obedience so difficult? The flesh constantly trips us up, but there is something that gives power to temptation: we just do not believe that God has our best interests in mind. We don't believe that he will fill us, satisfy us and care for us. We don't believe that if we simply obey, God will do the rest. We are afraid to surrender and obey. Out of fear we hold on, clutching and clawing for the life that we desire. Judah's response seems absurd, but we are no different than this ancient people. Not much has changed in 2600 years. The question remains: Will we obey or not?

I will conclude with four principles for us to ponder.

1. We are called to be people who listen to God.

How will we be able to navigate the waters of life if we do not know what God has to say? In the text, everything hinges on the ability and willingness to listen. In listening we receive correction, discipline and guidance. To listen is to resist autonomy. In listening to God we stop listening to ourselves, our desires, selfish thoughts and lustful wishes. We turn down the volume on our own voice and turn our attention to God's voice.

Have you noticed that people like to talk about themselves? We have all been in conversations with people who only talk about themselves and never ask about us. We find great enjoyment in the company of people who can listen as well as talk. We need to develop the skill of listening. And we especially need to listen to God. Prayer is not

just a time to talk to God; it is also a time to listen. We need space in our life to listen. We need solitude, silence and quiet. We need to be still.

There are two ways in which we need to listen. First, we need to listen to the revealed truth of God's word. This is what James means when he says, "Therefore, putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls" (Jas 1:21). God's word has everything we need to help us make moral and ethical decisions. We need to listen to that word so that it goes deep into our souls. We will not be able to live in the way God intends if we don't hear his word.

Second, we need to hear God's voice for guidance in circumstances when the choices we face don't involve moral or ethical decisions. We can be so busy trying to figure out our own path, studying the options and asking the opinions of others that we don't take time to simply listen. It is wise to seek the wisdom and counsel of others, but theirs is not the most important voice. God may want us to stay in a difficult job. We need to hear that from the Lord. God may want us to love our neighbor in a very practical way. We need to hear that from the Lord. God may be telling us that we need help in our marriage. He may want us to get involved in a ministry. He may want to initiate healing in a broken relationship. We need to hear that from the Lord.

2. We are called to be people who act on what we hear.

"But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was" (Jas 1:22-24).

After we listen, then we need to act on and implement the things that God tells us. Janet Lindeblad Janzen writes: "Faith and obedience are an inseparable unity, a symbiotic relationship with each depending upon the other, each giving life to the other. Faith manifests in obedience, and obedience begets faith. They are of the same essence, and it is impossible to know which comes first. Nor do we need to. 'Obey the truth,' says MacDonald, 'and let theory wait.' The theory may spring from life, but never life from theory."¹ Let us be a people who act on what we hear from God. Simple obedience is trusting him, not ourselves. We confess to the lie that we told. We unhook the computer that connects us to pornography. We stop thinking about leaving our spouse. We walk away from the unhealthy relationship. We humble ourselves and ask forgiveness. We give that financial gift as an act of worship. We reach out in extravagant love.

Daily we face moral and ethical issues. Obedience may not always seem logical, expedient or financially fruitful. The results may be quite different from what we anticipated. But God doesn't ask us to figure it out; he simply wants us to follow through and not worry about the results.

3. We are called to be people of integrity to our commitments and promises.

When we make a promise, entering into covenant, we need to follow through. The text says that God is very serious about this. We need to be serious as well. Let us keep

our promises to God and those that we make to one another. Let us not be like Zedekiah, taking back our word and taking covenant loyalty lightly. Let us be like the Rechabites, who in the face of great temptation had the integrity to be faithful. Once more the words of James come to mind: "But above all, my brethren, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath; but your yes is to be yes, and your no, no, so that you may not fall under judgment" (Jas 5:12).

Do you commit to various things and then back out? It is much better to follow through on a few promises than make all kinds of commitments and fail to follow through. We might make a vow that later on seems a little ridiculous, but we still need to be faithful. The covenant of Jondab could be considered over-zealous and strange, but that isn't the point. The Rechabites followed through.

This is a great word for our marriages. We don't need to worry about whether we married the right person or not. We just need to be faithful. This is a great word for parents. When we promise our children something, we shouldn't change our minds or use our promise later to bargain on their behavior or performance. This is a great word for friendship and loyalty to brothers and sisters in Christ. Faithful actions speak so much louder than words.

4. The blessings that come from obedience will be much sweeter than the results of disloyalty and disobedience.

"But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does" (Jas 1:25).

We disobey God's word because we seek vainly to bless our own lives. The text clearly illustrates that disobedience has the opposite effect from what we want. The one who obeys is the one who finds the blessing.

And the blessings may not be physical. There may be a great personal cost in keeping our word or acting on what God has told us to do. The Rechabites had a hard life living as sojourners, yet they kept their promise.

How will we be blessed for our obedience? Simple obedience reduces our anxiety and fear because we don't have to worry about results. We can give up control. If God asks us to do something, then the results are up to him. If we have a difficult marriage, we don't have to fret about how

God can redeem it; we just need to be faithful and continue to love.

Another blessing of obedience is confidence before God. God promised the Rechabites that they would not lack for a man to stand before him forever, i.e., they had confident access to God. It is a great blessing to stand in the presence of God without fear, guilt or shame, to have confidence whenever we approach him.

Simple obedience also reduces inner turmoil and yields the fruit of peace. Despite the circumstances we don't suffer the tension of being double-minded, constantly changing course, figuring out the best angle or trying to get out of our commitments. We can rest in the fact that God will direct and guide our path according to his plan for our life. We have great assurance that we are simply doing the right thing.

Is God speaking to you right now? Is he trying to get your attention? What is he asking you to do? Then go from here and, in the words of the shoe commercial, *just do it*. Sometimes we think we don't have enough faith to obey. But if we wait, that moment may never come. "It is not a matter of having enough faith and then doing something spectacular. It is a matter of stepping out in obedience in the small thing, the thing close at hand, despite wavering faith."²

Of course, we don't implement the Nike slogan in our own strength. We don't have the power or the strength to do what God asks us to do, even what we want to do. But, we can choose to take a step of faith, a step of simple obedience, trusting that God will supply what we lack to accomplish what he says. Everything comes from God; nothing comes from us. But the choice is always ours. Our "small steps of obedience will exercise our faith, breathing life into it and making it grow stronger."³

May God grant us the grace to hear his word.

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1. Janet Lindeblad Janzen, with Richard Foster, *Songs for Renewal* (San Francisco: Harper, 1995), 61.

2. Janzen, *Songs for Renewal*, 61.

3. Janzen, *Songs for Renewal*, 61.