

The Books of Jeremiah and Lamentations, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 18: Broken Promises and a Faithful Family

Jeremiah 34:1–35:19

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Doctrinally, this lesson sets the seriousness of vows and obedience before God against the backdrop of His holiness and justice. The broken covenant of chapter 34 teaches that God takes our promises in His name with deadly seriousness; to vow and then renege is to “profane” His name (34:16). The ironic judgment, liberty to the sword for those who would not grant liberty, displays a God whose justice is exact and whose word will not be mocked. The teacher should let this land on a culture, and on hearts, casual about commitments.

The Rechabites of chapter 35 supply the bright contrast: faithfulness, especially faithfulness handed down in a family, is beautiful and precious to God. The teacher must handle this rightly. God is not endorsing the specific content of Jonadab's rule (abstaining from wine, living in tents) as binding on anyone; the law of the Rechabites is not a law for the church, and we do not bind Old Covenant or family customs on Christians. What God commends is the heart of steadfast obedience and honor. The argument is from the lesser to the greater: if a family keeps a human father's word for two hundred years, how much more should God's people keep their heavenly Father's word. The promise that Jonadab will “never lack a man to stand before me” shows God's tender regard for generational faithfulness.

Beyond doctrine, the lesson aims at transformation in two directions. First, toward integrity: that students become people whose word is good, who keep their promises to God and others even when it costs them. Second, toward generational faithfulness: that they intentionally hand down devotion, worship, and obedience to those who come after them, as Lois and Eunice did for Timothy (2 Timothy 1:5). The goal is households of kept promises, formed by the Lord Jesus who is Himself the faithful and true witness.

Question 1

Student Question:

Read 34:8–16. The people made a covenant before God to free their Hebrew slaves, then “turned around” and took them back into bondage (34:11). How does God regard a vow made in His name, and what does His response teach us about the seriousness of our promises to Him?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Set the scene. Under the terror of Babylon's siege, Zedekiah leads the people in a solemn covenant to free their Hebrew slaves, obeying the law that no Israelite should be held in perpetual bondage (34:8–10). For a moment it is genuine repentance: “you... did what was right

in my eyes by proclaiming liberty” (34:15). Then the pressure eases and they take the slaves back (34:11). The good they did is undone.

God’s verdict is sobering: in taking back their word they “profaned my name” (34:16). A vow made in God’s name carries God’s name; to break it is to drag His reputation through the mud. This is why Scripture treats vows so seriously (Ecclesiastes 5:4–5). God is not a party we can negotiate with in fear and then dismiss in comfort.

Teach the holiness of God’s name here. Our promises before God are not private matters; they involve His honor. To say “I will” to God and then quietly not is to treat the Holy One as if He were not watching and not real.

Apply it tenderly but plainly. Most of us have made promises to God in a hard hour, then let them lapse when the hour passed. The call is to be people whose word, especially our word to God, can be trusted.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The seriousness of vows made in God’s name (34:16; Ecclesiastes 5:4–5).
- Breaking a vow as profaning the name of God.
- Genuine but short-lived repentance that the heart does not sustain.
- God’s honor bound up with the promises His people make.
- The danger of treating God as a negotiating partner in a crisis.

Discussion Prompts

- Why does breaking a vow ‘profane’ God’s name?
- What promises to God have you let quietly lapse?
- How should the seriousness of vows shape what we say to God?

Question 2

Student Question:

These people kept their promise only as long as the danger lasted (34:21). Where are you tempted to make commitments to God under pressure that you quietly set aside once life gets comfortable again?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-question presses the pattern of Judah into the student’s own walk. The people kept their covenant only “when the army of Pharaoh” seemed to relieve the siege (compare 34:21–22); their obedience lasted exactly as long as the danger. Fear-driven commitments tend to die when the fear dies.

Help students recognize the pattern in themselves. We bargain in the hospital waiting room, the financial crisis, the broken relationship, “Lord, if you get me through this, I will...”, and then comfort returns and the vow evaporates. The problem is not that we prayed in crisis; it is that our hearts were never truly given.

Distinguish crisis-faith from covenant-faith. God is not despising the cry of the desperate. He is exposing a heart that uses Him as an emergency exit rather than loving Him as Lord. The cure is a settled devotion that does not depend on circumstances.

Move to something concrete. Invite each person to name one commitment they made to God under pressure and have since let slide, and to renew it now, in calm, as a matter of love rather than fear.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Commitments born of fear that die when comfort returns.
- The difference between crisis-faith and covenant-faith.
- Using God as an emergency exit versus loving Him as Lord.
- Settled devotion that does not depend on circumstances.

Discussion Prompts

- What did you promise God in a hard moment and later set aside?
- Why do fear-driven commitments so often fade?
- How can you renew a commitment now out of love rather than fear?

Question 3

Student Question:

Read 34:17–22. Because they refused to proclaim true liberty to their slaves, God proclaims to them “a liberty... to the sword, to pestilence, and to famine.” What does this ironic judgment reveal about God’s justice and the way our treatment of others returns upon us?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The judgment fits the crime with poetic exactness. Because the people would not “proclaim liberty” to their slaves, God says, “Behold, I proclaim to you liberty... to the sword, to pestilence, and to famine” (34:17). The very word they refused to honor becomes the word of their doom. They will be set ‘free’, free to be scattered and destroyed.

Teach the justice of God here. His judgments are not random; they answer the sin in kind. What we sow, we reap (Galatians 6:7). The mercy we withhold from others has a way of returning upon our own heads (Matthew 18:32–35).

Note the gravity of the broken covenant ritual (34:18–19). They had walked between the pieces of a slain calf, invoking that fate on themselves if they broke their word. God takes the self-curse seriously; they will indeed be handed over.

Apply it searchingly. How we treat those under our power, employees, family, the vulnerable, is not invisible to God. The God who heard the cry of Hebrew slaves still hears, and He repays. Mercy shown is mercy that returns; mercy withheld returns as well.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's exact, fitting justice: liberty to the sword for those who denied liberty (34:17).
- Sowing and reaping in God's moral order (Galatians 6:7).
- The mercy we withhold returning upon us (Matthew 18:32–35).
- The seriousness of the self-curse in covenant-making (34:18).
- God's attention to how we treat those under our power.

Discussion Prompts

- How does the judgment fit the sin in this passage?
- Where might the way you treat others be returning upon you?
- What does this teach about God's care for the vulnerable?

Question 4

Student Question:

The people walked between the pieces of a slain calf to seal their vow (34:18–19), a vivid sign of how seriously God takes covenant. What helps you keep your word when honoring a commitment becomes costly or inconvenient?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-question turns the costly covenant toward the student's integrity. The Judeans sealed their vow with blood and still broke it when keeping it became inconvenient. The test of our word is not how it sounds when we give it but whether it holds when honoring it costs us.

Help students see that integrity is forged in advance. We keep our word in the hard moment because we settled, beforehand, that our yes will mean yes (Matthew 5:37). People of integrity are not those who feel like keeping their promises; they are those who keep them anyway.

Name the pressure points. A commitment to give, to serve, to be faithful in marriage, to tell the truth, all are easy to make and costly to keep. The Christian's word should be as good as a contract, better, because it is given before God.

Move to one concrete resolve. Invite each person to name one commitment they are tempted to wriggle out of because it has become costly, and to recommit to keeping it as unto the Lord.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Integrity tested when keeping our word becomes costly.
- Letting our 'yes' mean yes and our 'no' mean no (Matthew 5:37).
- Faithfulness as a settled prior decision, not a feeling.
- The Christian's word given before God as sacred.

Discussion Prompts

- Which of your commitments has become costly to keep?
- How do we prepare in advance to keep our word under pressure?
- What would it mean for your 'yes' to truly mean yes?

Question 5

Student Question:

Read 35:1–11. God commands Jeremiah to offer the Rechabites wine, and they refuse because their forefather Jonadab had commanded it generations earlier. What does their two centuries of obedience reveal about the power and beauty of faithfulness handed down in a family?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Now the bright contrast. God sets wine before the Rechabites, and they refuse: "We will drink no wine, for Jonadab... our father commanded us" (35:6). For roughly two centuries this family had kept a forefather's word, drinking no wine, building no houses, living in tents as sojourners. They obeyed not because God had commanded it but because their father had.

Be clear about what God is and is not commending. He is not making teetotaling, tent-dwelling, or any Rechabite custom binding on others; this is a family rule, not the law of God. What shines is the heart of the thing: steadfast, generational faithfulness, honor for a father's word kept across centuries.

Teach the beauty of handed-down faithfulness. A pattern of devotion passed from generation to generation is one of God's good gifts. What Lois and Eunice did for Timothy (2 Timothy 1:5), what Deuteronomy 6 commands of every household, the Rechabites embodied: they taught and lived obedience until it became a family inheritance.

Apply it warmly. Most of us underestimate how much our small, daily faithfulness shapes those coming after us. The Rechabites' great-great-grandchildren still obeyed because someone, generations back, took a father's word seriously and lived it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Steadfast obedience honored by God (35:6).
- Faithfulness handed down across generations as a precious gift.

- The distinction between commending the heart of obedience and binding a family's particular customs.
- Teaching and living devotion until it becomes an inheritance (Deuteronomy 6:6–7).
- The long reach of daily faithfulness into future generations.

Discussion Prompts

- What is God commending in the Rechabites, and what is He not?
- What pattern of devotion was handed down to you?
- How do small, daily faithfulnesses shape those who come after us?

Question 6

Student Question:

The Rechabites obeyed a command that was not even one of God's laws, simply out of honor for their father (35:8). What instruction or example from a parent, mentor, or godly forebear has shaped your obedience, and how do you honor it today?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-question makes the Rechabite picture personal. They honored a father's word generations old. Most of us, too, owe some of our obedience to someone who went before, a parent who knelt by the bed, a grandmother who never missed worship, a mentor whose integrity we still imitate.

Invite gratitude and remembrance. Ask students to call to mind a specific instruction or example, a grandfather's honesty, a mother's prayers, a teacher's steadiness, that still shapes how they live. Naming it honors both the person and the God who worked through them.

Then turn it toward action. Honoring an inheritance is not nostalgia; it is continued obedience. The Rechabites honored Jonadab not by talking about him but by still refusing the wine. We honor godly forebears by still walking the way they showed us.

Be tender with those who had no godly heritage. For them the call is to become the first link, to start a pattern of faithfulness their own descendants will one day honor. God can begin a godly line with any of us.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Honoring the godly example of those who went before (2 Timothy 1:5).
- Obedience as the true way to honor an inheritance.
- Gratitude for the faithful who shaped us.
- Becoming the first link of faithfulness when there was no heritage.

Discussion Prompts

- Whose instruction or example still shapes your obedience?
- How do you honor that inheritance in the way you actually live?
- If you had no godly heritage, how might you become the first link?

Question 7

Student Question:

Read 35:12–16. God contrasts the Rechabites’ faithfulness to a human father with Judah’s refusal to heed Him, “rising up early and speaking” to them. Why does God find Judah’s disobedience so much more inexcusable than the Rechabites’ obedience is impressive?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

God draws out the lesson explicitly (35:12–16). The Rechabites kept a human father’s command, but Judah would not keep the command of the living God, though He “rose early and spoke” to them again and again. The contrast is meant to convict: faithfulness to a man’s word puts to shame our unfaithfulness to God’s word.

This is an argument from the lesser to the greater. If honoring an earthly father for two centuries is admirable, how much more should God’s people honor their heavenly Father? Judah’s disobedience is inexcusable precisely because their Father is God, their obligation is greater, and His pleading was relentless.

Teach the weight of privilege and revelation. To whom much is given, much is required (Luke 12:48). Judah had the law, the prophets, the covenant, the persistent voice of God, and still refused. Their guilt is heavier than the Rechabites’ obedience is impressive.

Apply it to ourselves with sober honesty. We have even more: the completed Scriptures, the gospel, the Son Himself who said, “Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do what I tell you?” (Luke 6:46). If a tent-dwelling family could keep a father’s word, what excuse have we?

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The argument from lesser to greater: a human father’s word kept, God’s word refused (35:13–14).
- God’s relentless, ‘rising early’ pleading with His people (35:15).
- Greater privilege and revelation bringing greater accountability (Luke 12:48).
- Disobedience to God as more inexcusable than human faithfulness is admirable.
- The pointed challenge of Luke 6:46 for those who call Him Lord.

Discussion Prompts

- Why is Judah’s disobedience more serious than the Rechabites’ obedience is impressive?
- How does greater privilege increase our accountability?
- Where do we call Jesus ‘Lord’ without doing what He says?

Question 8

Student Question:

God “rose early” again and again to send His prophets, persistently calling His people back (35:14–15). Where has God been patiently, repeatedly calling you to turn, and how have you been responding to His persistence?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-question fastens on God’s persistence: He kept “rising early” to send prophet after prophet, pleading, “Turn now every one of you from his evil way” (35:15). God is not quick to give up on His people. His patience is itself a mercy, an open door held open long.

Help students hear the personal echo. Most of us can name an area where God has been calling, and calling, and calling, a sin to forsake, a relationship to mend, a step of obedience to take, and we have kept deferring. God’s repeated nudging is grace, not nagging.

Warn gently against presuming on patience. Judah mistook God’s long-suffering for God’s indifference, and the door did finally close. The kindness of God is meant to lead us to repentance, not to lull us to sleep (Romans 2:4).

Move to a concrete response. Invite each person to name the thing God has been persistently calling them to, and to answer it this week rather than deferring His patience yet again.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God’s persistent, ‘rising early’ call to repentance (35:15).
- Divine patience as mercy and an open door.
- The danger of presuming on God’s long-suffering (Romans 2:4).
- Answering God’s repeated call rather than deferring it.

Discussion Prompts

- Where has God been persistently calling you to turn?
- How have you been responding to His patience?
- What is the danger of mistaking God’s patience for indifference?

Question 9

Student Question:

Read 35:17–19. God pronounces judgment on Judah for not listening, but promises Jonadab that he “shall never lack a man to stand before me.” What does this teach about how God views faithfulness, the reward of steadfast obedience, and the lasting fruit of a godly family line, and how is the call to faithfulness pressed home for us under Christ?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest block of the lesson, where the two chapters meet. God pronounces on Judah the disaster He had threatened, “because I have spoken to them and they have not listened” (35:17). Disobedience to the God who pleaded so long brings judgment. But to the Rechabites God gives a tender promise: “Jonadab the son of Rechab shall never lack a man to stand before me” (35:19).

Weigh the contrast. The covenant nation, with every advantage, faces ruin for refusing God; the obscure nomadic family, faithful in a small and humble obedience, receives an enduring blessing. God measures by faithfulness, not by status, size, or visibility. He notices the quiet, generational obedience that the world overlooks.

Teach the reward of steadfastness rightly. This is not earning salvation by works; it is the truth, woven all through Scripture, that God honors those who honor Him (1 Samuel 2:30), and that faithfulness bears fruit that lasts. The promise about ‘a man to stand before me’ points to the lasting fruit of a godly line, devotion that does not die with one generation but continues.

Press the call home for us under Christ. We are not bound to Jonadab’s rule, but we are called to the same steadfast obedience to our Lord, who Himself is “the faithful and true witness” (Revelation 3:14) and who learned obedience and was faithful to the Father even to the cross (Hebrews 5:8; Philippians 2:8). The Christian who endures in faithfulness, and raises up others to do the same, is laying up fruit that God will not forget (1 Corinthians 15:58; Hebrews 6:10).

Land it pastorally. Faithfulness may look small and go unnoticed by the world, but it is precious to God. The household that quietly keeps walking with the Lord, generation after generation, stands before Him as surely as the Rechabites did. He remembers.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Judgment on Judah for refusing the God who long pleaded (35:17).
- God’s blessing on the Rechabites’ humble, steadfast faithfulness (35:19).
- God measuring by faithfulness rather than status or visibility (1 Samuel 2:30).
- The lasting fruit of a godly family line, ‘a man to stand before me.’
- Faithfulness rewarded as God honoring those who honor Him, not works-righteousness.
- The call to steadfast obedience under Christ, the faithful and true witness (Revelation 3:14; 1 Corinthians 15:58).

Discussion Prompts

- Why does God bless the obscure Rechabites and judge the privileged nation?
- What does it mean that God measures by faithfulness, not status?
- How is the call to steadfast obedience pressed home for us in Christ?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back over both chapters, the broken covenant and the faithful family. Name one specific way the Lord Jesus is calling you to be a person, and to raise up a household, of kept promises and steadfast obedience.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The capstone calls students from study to surrender. Look back across both chapters: a nation that broke its word to God, and a family that kept a father's word for centuries. The question is simple and searching, which will we be?

Press for one specific thing in two directions. First, personal integrity, one promise to God or others to keep with renewed seriousness. Second, generational faithfulness, one way to hand down devotion to those coming after, a habit of worship, family prayer, honest dealing, a faith worth inheriting.

Tie it explicitly to Christ. The Lord Jesus is the perfectly faithful Son, obedient to the Father even to death. We become people of kept promises not by sheer willpower but by being joined to Him and formed by His Spirit. He is both our model and our power.

Invite each person to name their 'one thing' aloud or on paper, a promise to keep, a pattern to pass on, and to carry it into the week as a matter of prayer and obedience.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Moving from knowledge to integrity and obedience (James 1:22).
- Christ the faithful Son as model and power for our faithfulness.
- Personal integrity and generational faithfulness held together.
- Building a household of kept promises through the Lord Jesus.

Discussion Prompts

- Will you be more like the covenant-breaking nation or the faithful family, and where?
- What promise will you keep, and what pattern will you hand down?
- How does being joined to the faithful Christ make steadfastness possible?