

The Books of Jeremiah and Lamentations

Lesson 18: Broken Promises and a Faithful Family -- Jeremiah 34:1–35:19

There is a particular kind of guilt that comes from making a promise in a moment of fear and then taking it back when the fear passes. King Zedekiah and the people of Jerusalem knew that guilt. With Babylon pressing the siege, they made a solemn covenant before God to free their Hebrew slaves, just as the law required. They cut a calf in two and walked between the pieces, a vow that said, in effect, “May it be done to me as to this calf if I break my word.” For a moment, it was a beautiful thing. Captives went free. And then the army of Pharaoh marched out of Egypt, the Babylonians pulled back, the pressure eased, and the people changed their minds. They reached out and took their freed slaves back again.

God was not silent about it. “You recently repented and did what was right in my eyes... but then you turned around and profaned my name.” The freed slaves were brought back into bondage, and the people who broke covenant would themselves know bondage. There is a terrible justice in it. They proclaimed liberty to others while their own hearts were still enslaved, so God proclaims to them “a liberty... to the sword, to pestilence, and to famine.” A vow made before God is not a bargaining chip to be picked up in fear and dropped in comfort.

Then God does something striking. He sends Jeremiah to find a family called the Rechabites and sets pitchers of wine before them. “Drink wine,” he says. And they will not. Generations earlier, their forefather Jonadab had commanded his descendants to drink no wine, build no houses, plant no fields, but live in tents as sojourners. And for some two hundred years his children had obeyed, simply because their father had said so. When the wine is offered, they answer, “We will drink no wine.” Their obedience is not to a law of God at all; it is honor to a father’s word, faithfully kept across generations.

God holds up this nomadic family as a living sermon to a covenant-breaking nation. “The sons of Jonadab... have kept the command... but this people has not obeyed me.” If a family can keep a human father’s word for two centuries, how much more should God’s people keep the word of their heavenly Father? And the chapter ends with a promise that ought to make every parent and grandparent lean in: “Jonadab... shall never lack a man to stand before me.” Faithfulness handed down in a family is precious to God, and He does not forget it.

Group Discussion: Zedekiah and the people made a solemn covenant to free their slaves, then took it back when the danger eased (34:8–11). Why is it so easy to make promises to God under pressure and quietly abandon them once the pressure lifts, and what does this reveal about the human heart?

Personal Reflection: The Rechabites kept their forefather’s word for generations, simply because he had said so (35:6–10). What faithful pattern, in worship, integrity, or devotion, do

you want to be handing down to those who come after you, and what would it cost you to live it consistently?

Read Jeremiah 34:1–35:19

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?

5. 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?
6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?

10. 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.

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: Ecclesiastes 5:4–5, “When you vow a vow to God, do not delay paying it... It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay”; Deuteronomy 6:6–7, the command to teach God’s words diligently to your children; Matthew 5:33–37, where Jesus calls His people to be so truthful that their “yes” means yes and their “no” means no; Luke 6:46, “Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do what I tell you?”; 2 Timothy 1:5, the faith that lived first in Lois and Eunice and then in Timothy.

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