

A Family's Example

Devotional Reading: 2 Corinthians 6:16–7:4

Background Scripture: Jeremiah 35:1–19

Jeremiah 35:5–11

5 And I set before the sons of the house of the Rechabites pots full of wine, and cups, and I said unto them, Drink ye wine.

6 But they said, We will drink no wine: for Jonadab the son of Rechab our father commanded us, saying, Ye shall drink no wine, neither ye, nor your sons for ever:

7 Neither shall ye build house, nor sow seed, nor plant vineyard, nor have any: but all your days ye shall dwell in tents; that ye may live many days in the land where ye be strangers.

8 Thus have we obeyed the voice of Jonadab the son of Rechab our father in all that he hath charged us, to drink no wine all our days, we, our wives, our sons, nor our daughters;

9 Nor to build houses for us to dwell in: neither have we vineyard, nor field, nor seed:

10 But we have dwelt in tents, and have obeyed, and done according to all that Jonadab our father commanded us.

11 But it came to pass, when Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylon came up into the land, that we said, Come, and let us go to Jerusalem for fear of the army of the Chaldeans, and for fear of the army of the Syrians: so we dwell at Jerusalem.

Key Text

For unto this day they drink none, but obey their father's commandment.—Jeremiah 35:14b

Judah, from Isaiah to the Exile

Unit 2: Jeremiah and the Promise of Renewal

Lessons 5–9

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Identify the invitation and reply regarding wine.
2. Compare and contrast the decision to abstain from wine with similar and dissimilar decisions elsewhere in Scripture.
3. Consider a family tradition that he or she could implement to remind family members to be faithful to God's commands.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. Traditions for Stability
- B. Lesson Context

I. Ancestral Practice (Jeremiah 35:5–6)

- A. Wine Offered (v. 5)
- B. Wine Refused (v. 6)

Intentionally Marked

II. Full Obedience (Jeremiah 35:7–10)

- A. No Houses or Crops (v. 7)
- B. No Deviations (vv. 8–10)

III. Necessary Relocation (Jeremiah 35:11)

- A. Avoiding the Armies (v. 11a)
- B. Sheltering in Jerusalem (v. 11b)

Flexibility Required

Conclusion

- A. Traditions for Faithfulness
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

How to Say It

<i>a fortiori</i>	a for-she-or-eye.
Ahab	Ay-hab.
Assyria	Uh-sear-e-uh.
Babylonians	Bab-ih- low -nee-unz.
Chaldeans	Kal- dee -unz.
Jaazaniah	Jay-ah-zuh-nye-uh.
Jonadab	John-uh-dab.
Kenite	Ken-ite.
Nazarite	Naz-uh-rite.
Nebuchadnezzar	Neb-yuh-kud- nez -er.
Nebuchadrezzar	Neb-uh-kad- rez -er.
Rechabites	Reck-uh-bites.
Samaria	Suh-mare-ee-uh.
Syrians	Sear-ee-unz.

Introduction

A. Traditions for Stability

In the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*, viewers are oriented by the first and well-known song, “Tradition.” The main character, Tevya, acts as a guide throughout the song, telling how traditions help his Jewish community maintain its sense of balance and cohesiveness. After describing one of the traditions he and his fellow Jews follow, Tevya raises a question: “How did this tradition get started? I’ll tell you. I don’t know.” Then he adds emphatically, “But it’s a tradition. And because of our traditions, every one of us knows who he is and what God expects him to do.” Later Tevya declares that, without the traditions guiding him and his fellow Jews, “our lives would be as shaky as a fiddler on the roof.”

That’s an interesting philosophy, and it can be very appealing with regard to family unity. But a given tradition’s ultimate value is validated only insofar as it aligns with

God's Word (Matthew 15:1–7; compare Luke 14:26). Today's Scripture text from the book of Jeremiah invites us to explore this connection.

B. Lesson Context

Today's lesson is the third in a series of five from the book of Jeremiah. The overall context is the same as those: Jeremiah's 40-year prophetic ministry was to warn the people of Judah of God's judgment to come at the hands of the Babylonians. This was to happen because of the Judeans' sinfulness and rebellion against the Lord.

Our Scripture text for today's lesson records events that took place "in the days of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah king of Judah," which is the period 609–598 BC (Jeremiah 35:1). To understand the significance of this time frame, we should view it against the larger backdrop of three chronological pressure points of Babylonian dominance in Palestine. Those three are the years 605, 597, and 586 BC; they are the years the Judeans were carried into exile in successive stages (2 Kings 24:1, 12; 25:1–21). The reference in Jeremiah 35:11 to a family's relocation to Jerusalem due to Babylonian incursion indicates that the invasion of 605 BC is in view.

Those were indeed turbulent times. In an earthly sense, there were power struggles between the world powers of Assyria and Babylon. Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, fell in 612 BC. Babylon's victory at the epic Battle of Carchemish in 605 BC (Jeremiah 46:2) meant the passing of one oppressor only to be replaced by a new one. Is it any wonder that Jeremiah felt inadequate for his task (1:6)?

The incident in today's text occurred at roughly the halfway point in Jeremiah's 40-year efforts to convince God's people to repent of their wrongdoing and return to the Lord. These efforts included use of some rather striking visual aids as teaching tools, all commanded by God: a soiled linen "girdle" or sash (Jeremiah 13:1–11), a visit to a potter's house (18:1–11), and the wearing of a makeshift yoke to symbolize submission to Babylon (27:1–7). Today's Scripture text records yet another visual aid by which Jeremiah tried to appeal to an increasingly wayward people.

A footnote: Jeremiah 35:3 mentions "Jaazaniah the son of Jeremiah," but he is a different Jeremiah than the prophet (compare Jeremiah 1:1 with 35:3).

I. Ancestral Practice

(Jeremiah 35:5–6)

A. Wine Offered (v. 5)

5. And I set before the sons of the house of the Rechabites pots full of wine, and cups, and I said unto them, Drink ye wine.

The opening verses of Jeremiah 35 establish the time, place, and persons of the teaching illustration that is about to unfold. Jeremiah is meeting with *the sons of the house of the Rechabites* and offering them *wine to drink* because of the Lord's command to do so (Jeremiah 35:2). Other than in this chapter of Jeremiah, the Bible reveals little about the Rechabites. A genealogy listing locates them as being from the tribe of Judah (1 Chronicles 2:55), at least at first glance. A closer look, however, reveals that they are descendants of "the Kenites," whose identity, loyalty, and actions are sketched in Numbers 24:21–22; Judges 1:16; 4:11, 17; and 1 Samuel 15:6.

What Do You Think?

Consider a recent time when your deeply held convictions were challenged. What did you do?

Digging Deeper

Looking back on that situation, how would God have been honored or dishonored if you had acted differently?

B. Wine Refused (v. 6)

6. But they said, We will drink no wine: for Jonadab the son of Rechab our father commanded us, saying, Ye shall drink no wine, neither ye, nor your sons for ever.

The Rechabites' response to Jeremiah's offer is immediate and firm: *We will drink no wine*. They base this decision on the instructions of *Jonadab the son of Rechab*, a forefather of some 200 years previous. He was a prominent leader among the Rechabites during the time of King Jehu (reigned 841–814 BC). Jonadab knew the king personally and had been invited on a "ride along" to help the king abolish idol worship in Samaria, part of the northern kingdom of divided Israel (2 Kings 10:15–17). The southern kingdom of Judah was not immune to such influences, as Jeremiah well knew (Jeremiah 11:13; 32:35, etc.).

Jonadab's specific reason for the prohibition is unknown. Wine is depicted in both positive and cautionary ways, depending on the context. In the Old Testament, wine is depicted as a source of refreshment and delight (Psalm 104:15; Zechariah 10:7) and is associated with the blessing of the Lord (Genesis 27:28; Deuteronomy 7:13; 11:14). Wine was used during celebratory occasions (Genesis 14:17–20; Isaiah 25:6), though it

certainly was possible to abuse it as illustrated by Noah (Genesis 9:20–23; compare Proverbs 23:29–35; Isaiah 5:11, 22).

Wine was prohibited to those engaged in special service to the Lord (Leviticus 10:8–9) and to those who had taken a Nazarite vow (Numbers 6:1–3). At the same time, wine was included in certain offerings to the Lord (Leviticus 23:13; Numbers 15:5, etc.). Cups of wine are also used to symbolize the wrath and judgment of the Lord (Psalm 75:8; Revelation 14:10; 16:19).

The book of Jeremiah itself illustrates this variety of approaches to wine, using it to describe scenes of both celebration (Jeremiah 31:12) and judgment (25:15). Jeremiah even compared himself to a “drunken man ... whom wine hath overcome,” so disturbed was he at the lies being spread by the false prophets of his day (23:9).

Perhaps Jonadab desired his descendants to participate in the Nazarite vow (or something similar) in order to reflect passionate devotion to the Lord (compare Judges 13:1–7). Possibly such abstinence could serve as a deterrent to taking part in Baal worship or other pagan religious practices. Jeremiah 35:7, next, seems to offer the bigger-picture answer.

What Do You Think?

What are examples of traditions or habits you have inherited from a family member?

Digging Deeper

Which of these traditions or habits do you find fruitful? Which are potentially harmful?

Intentionally Marked

My grandfather loved to be the videographer at family gatherings. I saw a few of his clips when I was a kid, and there was something distinct in all of them: his trademark. We knew the films were his because at some point during filming, he would turn the camera upside down. He was known for his shenanigans, and not just when behind the camera. This quirky tradition marks every film he made.

As my grandfather’s films bore his “trademark,” my faith is marked by the things I do with consistency. It’s often been easy for me to fall into patterns. Continued long enough, these patterns may become traditions. While these patterns can be good, at times—if I’m honest—they can be questionable. Perhaps like me, you adopt the same prayer posture or return to the same requests. Maybe you insist on doing your devotions at the same time each day. Occasionally, I wonder whether I’ve been as eager to follow

God as I've been to follow my routines. When I recognize this, I ask God to help me see things in a new way. As you hold your own routines and traditions before your heavenly Father, what would He say about them?

—B. R.

II. Full Obedience

(Jeremiah 35:7–10)

A. No Houses or Crops (v. 7)

7. Neither shall ye build house, nor sow seed, nor plant vineyard, nor have any: but all your days ye shall dwell in tents; that ye may live many days in the land where ye be strangers.

This verse offers some insight as to Jonadab's command to abstain from drinking wine. The restriction seems to be part of a larger pool of prohibitions to improve chances of long life. The picture of living *in tents* is that of a nomadic, easily movable lifestyle as contrasted with a settled, agrarian one. The latter would require planting *seed* for the harvesting of grain and the cultivation of a *vineyard* for making wine (compare and contrast the use of the words *house(s)* and *vineyard(s)* in Deuteronomy 28:30; Isaiah 65:21–22; Jeremiah 32:15; etc.).

To forego all the trappings that accompany a settled life carries with it the possibility of both positive and negative results. The positive is the envisioned longer life, perhaps based on the idea that there won't be a temptation to resist an invading army to protect house and crops. In this sense the people of the tribe would be *strangers* in and to the land. There also would not be a temptation of defilement by mixing seed (Leviticus 19:19; Deuteronomy 22:9). Negatively, one can see a risk of legalism as human prohibitions add to and supersede God's Word (compare Matthew 15:1–9; Mark 7:9–13).

Various factors may have contributed to Jonadab's requirement of a mobile lifestyle. One should keep in mind the challenging times in which he lived in the 800s BC. The worship of Baal was heavily promoted in the northern kingdom of Israel, primarily by King Ahab, who was spurred on by his evil wife, Jezebel (1 Kings 21:25). Jezebel had no scruples whatsoever about seizing the vineyard of Naboth, a godly man whose devotion to the Lord's law prevented him from selling his vineyard to Ahab, who had his heart set on possessing it (1 Kings 21:1–7). The depth of her depravity is evident in the steps she took to have Naboth executed on false charges so Ahab could have his vineyard (21:8–16). Perhaps Jonadab concluded that not owning property such as a vineyard was one way to avoid the malicious intentions of power-mad individuals such as Jezebel and Ahab. The Lord's prophets indicted ruthless men who abused their power and took houses and fields at will from those who had no ability to resist them (Micah 2:1–2,

etc.). Perhaps for Jonadab and his fellow Rechabites, the philosophy was, “You can’t lose what you don’t have.”

But there may be a simpler explanation still. Sale of property was highly restrictive in the promised land (Leviticus 25:13–34; Numbers 36). So perhaps Jonadab just decided to go with the flow that a nomadic lifestyle offered in the environment. Additionally, a nomadic lifestyle reflected that of the patriarch Abraham (Hebrews 11:9–10).

What Do You Think?

What about being a Christian causes you to feel like you “stand out” among others you know?

Digging Deeper

If asked about why your life shows these differences, how would you respond?

B. No Deviations (vv. 8–10)

8–9. Thus have we obeyed the voice of Jonadab the son of Rechab our father in all that he hath charged us, to drink no wine all our days, we, our wives, our sons, nor our daughters; nor to build houses for us to dwell in: neither have we vineyard, nor field, nor seed.

The Rechabites exhibit complete compliance to their ancestor Jonadab’s desire. We don’t know precisely how the Rechabites survived under such a restrictive lifestyle, but evidently they had up to that point. Perhaps Jonadab, again in deference to Abraham, taught his family to walk by faith and to trust that God would provide their daily needs.

What Do You Think?

What helps traditions or habits to “catch on” within a family?

Digging Deeper

What traditions or habits would you like to foster in your family or community?
How would you help these “catch on”?

10. But we have dwelt in tents, and have obeyed, and done according to all that Jonadab our father commanded us.

More than 200 years have passed since Jonadab’s lifetime, and the Rechabites remain faithful in their obedience to his requirements. The promised land had experienced much turmoil since his day, including the conquest of the northern kingdom in 722 BC. Yet the Rechabites find Jonadab’s desire still valuable and workable. At some level, this

can illustrate what God intends for His covenant people so that faithful obedience to Him can be passed on generation after generation.

III. Necessary Relocation

(Jeremiah 35:11)

A. Avoiding the Armies (v. 11a)

11a. But it came to pass, when Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylon came up into the land, that we said, Come, and let us go to Jerusalem for fear of the army of the Chaldeans, and for fear of the army of the Syrians.

Here we learn why the Rechabites are in Jerusalem and available to receive the invitation to drink wine. The Babylonian king *Nebuchadrezzar* (an alternate spelling of *Nebuchadnezzar*) had begun his invasion of Judah in 605 BC, the fourth year of Jehoiakim's reign (Jeremiah 25:1). Accordingly, the Rechabites' plan of relocation described in this verse may have occurred not long after they learned that Nebuchadnezzar and his troops were on their way. The Babylonians' brutality was probably well-known throughout the territory. This verse refers to them as *the Chaldeans*, which is another name for them.

The Rechabites calculated that it would be safer for them to enter well-fortified Jerusalem rather than risk being overrun by two armies. Jerusalem would in time prove unable to resist the Babylonians; several passages make clear that the Lord was allowing the Babylonians to serve as the instruments of His judgment in attacking Jerusalem (2 Chronicles 36:15–21; Jeremiah 34:1–2, etc.).

During their invasion of Judah, the Babylonians secure the assistance of other peoples. These include those who had once been subject to the Israelites and are eager for revenge. The Syrians had faced more dealings with the now-exiled northern kingdom of Israel since their territory lay just to the northeast of Israel. Conflicts between the Syrians and the northern kingdom became especially frequent during the reign of King Ahab and the ministries of the prophets Elijah and Elisha in the 800s BC (1 Kings 20–21; 2 Kings 6:8–7:20, etc.). But the Syrians had also come under the control of King David during the expansion of his kingdom (see 2 Samuel 8:5–6). We easily imagine that they were more than willing to administer any “payback.”

B. Sheltering in Jerusalem (v. 11b)

11b. So we dwell at Jerusalem.

We can see from this turn of events that Jonadab's instructions about living as nomadic "strangers" were not considered inviolable. Should circumstances change and the Rechabites' find themselves threatened by deadly force, they did not see themselves to be betraying Jonadab by shifting to self-preservation mode. This may be seen as a kind of "rigid flexibility" or "flexible rigidity."

The point of this real-life illustration is driven home in the eight verses that follow this one. God, through the prophet Jeremiah, challenges the people of Judah and *Jerusalem* to learn from the Rechabites' example of faithfully following the instructions of their ancestor (Jeremiah 35:12–16). The message is delivered in the form of what is called an *a fortiori* argument. This kind of logical argument takes a "how much more" format, either stated or implied. Here, the idea is, "If the Rechabites can follow their ancestor's instructions faithfully, how much more should you residents of Judah follow the instructions of your heavenly Father?"

These *a fortiori* arguments in the Bible are particularly important in Paul's letter to the Romans for proving the reality of God's grace (Romans 5:9–10, 15, 17; 11:24). If only God's covenant people had followed the Lord's instructions that faithfully! Blessings awaited for doing so. Refusal to obey was inconsistent with logic.

Because they refused to listen to and obey the Lord's voice, judgment was inevitable. The final statement in Jeremiah's message to the people in this chapter conveys the Lord's disappointment: "I have spoken unto them, but they have not heard; and I have called unto them, but they have not answered" (Jeremiah 35:17).

Also notable is a contrast with King Jehoiakim in the next chapter (Jeremiah 36). That chapter opens by noting the time to be the fourth year of his reign, or about 605 BC (compare Jeremiah 25:1). Here, the Lord yet again tries to get the attention and obedience of both king and people, this time via a written scroll (36:1–3). With the Babylonian invasion underway (36:9), the message on the scroll did cause fear among the people, but not changed behavior (36:16).

In contrast with the Rechabites, King Jehoiakim did not follow the godly example of his father, Josiah (see 2 Kings 23:25). Instead of heeding God's message, Jehoiakim cut the scroll in pieces and burned them (Jeremiah 36:22–23). This demonstrated his utter contempt for God's words. This action contrasted sharply with that of his father, who in anguish tore not the message but his clothes when he realized how far the people had strayed from the Lord's words (2 Kings 22:11). Jehoiakim was demonstrating disrespect not only for his father, but for the Lord as well.

What Do You Think?

When have you had to reconsider a deeply held-to tradition or habit, whether to be consistent or to change course?

Digging Deeper

What sort of circumstances would justify the changing of a long-held tradition or habit?

Flexibility Required

When we have tried-and-true methods that faithfully produce good results, it can be difficult—and sometimes even unnecessary—to question our ways. But occasionally, extenuating circumstances upend “the way we’ve always done it.”

This was certainly the case in education in recent years. During the initial months of the COVID-19 lockdown, remote instruction became the norm for teachers all over the world. Overnight, their tried-and-true methods no longer worked. Activities and methods always used to teach certain concepts were set aside. Faced with unprecedented months of being unable to gather in person, it was clear that something needed to change.

Such necessary adaptations didn’t mean that the former ways were bad. Rather, new circumstances demanded a shift. We can struggle to know when to hold fast to our traditions and when we should loosen our grips due to a change in circumstances. The important qualifier is what God is asking from us, not what makes us comfortable. Is there a tradition that you need to bring before God, asking for His wisdom to evaluate?

—B. R.

Conclusion

A. Traditions for Faithfulness

Traditions are a double-edged sword. Often the very word *tradition* carries a negative connotation. It can be associated with an old-fashioned, out-of-date practice that people adhere to with little, if any, thought about its significance. We do something a certain way because “that’s the way we’ve always done it.” In a positive sense, traditions can help us not repeat mistakes of the past as we walk in faithful obedience to the Lord’s commands.

While the Rechabites’ traditions are not necessary for us to follow today—nor were they for all people of that time—their example of faithfulness ought to serve as an inspiration. In sharp contrast to the Israelites, who lived in sin and failed to repent of their wicked

ways, the Rechabites lived in obedience to the ways set down by their father, Jonadab: ways that did not conflict with God's Word. May we follow their example when it comes to heeding God's Word, walking in faithful obedience to how He has called us to live.

B. Prayer

Father, grant us the courage to examine our traditions and the wisdom to know which to keep, which to modify, and which to abandon. May our traditions always be a way of serving You as You would have us. Use us to encourage the formation of families and communities who honor You. In Jesus' name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Use traditions to foster faithfulness to God.