

Jeremiah - the Secret to the Rechabite Blessing (Jer 34-35)



Jeremiah 34-45 is a collection of incidents in Jerusalem during the Babylonian sieges leading up to the city's fall. Ch 35 took place 15-16 years BEFORE Ch 34. It is not a chronological but logical pairing. Ch 34 is about 'Promise Breakers', Israel who disobeyed God's command. Ch 35 is about 'Promise Keepers', Rechabites who obeyed their patriarch's command.

A. Promise Breakers - Disobedience to God's Command (34:1ff)

1. Background

- i. It is the final days of Jerusalem (34:1ff) under the Babylonian siege, which lasted 30 months (589-586BC) with a temporary lift. Inflation was raging again for food and water and the real estate was crashing. Starvation was a real fear, and the thriving black market made the rich richer and the poor poorer. The people living in the rural areas rushed into the city to escape the Babylonian army, and the city was crowded with a swelling population from outside. By now all the towns of Judah were captured except Jerusalem, Lachish and Azekah (34:7). Archaeologists have dug up 21 'Lachish letters' calling for help.
- ii. In such a chaotic time one man was walking around the city, talking to the people in high places (king, princes, politicians) and in low places (slaves, gypsies). Jeremiah has long been prophesying an unpopular message, *'Jerusalem will be taken by the Babylonians. The city will be burned to the ground shortly. Everyone will be taken as slaves to Babylon. Your best option is to surrender now for a favourable deal from the Babylonians. If you fight them, you will die. But if you surrender, at least you will survive.'*
- iii. At one point it looked like Jeremiah's prophecy failed when Pharaoh's (Hophra) army marched in from the west and pressured the Babylonian army to withdraw from Jerusalem for a short time (~588 BC). The people must have sighed in relief, *'The worst is past. Jeremiah missed it. Now we are going to be safe.'* But Jeremiah told them, *'The Babylonians are coming back to finish what they have started. God will summon them back and they will destroy Jerusalem.'* In a matter of weeks Babylonians returned and burned the city to the ground. But during the time of respite, deep corruption in their socioeconomic system was exposed.

2. Jeremiah's Word to King Zedekiah

- i. Zedekiah was a 'career politician' who came to the throne 11 years ago at the age of 21 (597BC). He replaced his nephew, Jehoiachin whose reign only lasted 100 days. Zedekiah was a man of expediency and a double-minded man who stood for nothing as a matter of principle. Jeremiah was a man of principle. You knew exactly where Jeremiah stood because he would tell you whether you like it or not. Zedekiah's attitude toward Jeremiah was a mixture of 'curiosity' and 'disdain.' On four separate occasions he asked Jeremiah, *'Please tell me, are we going to win or lose?'* But each time Jeremiah gave him the word of the Lord, he did not listen – only to ask Jeremiah the same question again and again.

In the first invasion, Babylonians took away all the skilled and educated people from the upper class, and left only the poor and unskilled population. And they put Zedekiah in charge as a puppet king. But after a decade in power, Zedekiah wanted to become a real king, and he devised a plan to play Babylon and Egypt against each other. He did this by entering into a secret alliance with the Egyptian Pharaoh, Hophra.

- ii. Zedekiah resisted surrendering to Babylon. After his alliance with Egypt against Babylon, they would most certainly kill him though they may let the slaves and the poor live. This was what happened to Jehoiachin whom he replaced. Zedekiah was only 32 years old. What was he to do in this situation?

At this crucial time Jeremiah gave Zedekiah the word of the Lord, *'Zedekiah, thus says the Lord, if you surrender now, the Babylonians will not kill you. You will live and die in peace to be gathered as other kings of Judah before you. (I.e. you will have a royal funeral as an honoured monarch.) It is not too late. Surrender now and save more people's lives in the city.'* (34:4-5)

Zedekiah did not listen. He fought the Babylonians to the end, and when the walls of Jerusalem were breached, he escaped by the plain only to be caught. The gracious God still fulfilled Jeremiah's prophecy and let Zedekiah live to old age. But Nebuchadnezzar killed Zedekiah's sons before his eyes before gouging his eyes out. Zedekiah survived according to Jeremiah's word, but his disobedience cost him dearly.

3. Jeremiah's Word on Slavery

- i. Jeremiah was walking through Jerusalem and he saw a bunch of Hebrew slaves, and asked them, *'How long have you been slaves?'* Some said, *'10 years.'* Others said, *'15 years.'* Jeremiah asked, *'Who is your master? Are they gentiles?'* They replied, *'No, we have Jewish masters.'* There Jeremiah saw that the deep structural decadence in the city was rooted in its evil unjust economic system. This was one of the reasons God was about to put the entire nation of Judah under Babylonian slavery.
- ii. In the law of Moses a Jewish man could sell himself up to 6 years for economic reasons, then in the 7th year he must be set free (C.f. Ex 21:2-6; Lev 25:10; Deut 15:12-18). God has redeemed them from the slavery in Egypt to be free people, so none of God's people were to suffer under lifelong slavery. All God's people were born free and were to remain free, except in the time of economic crisis for a maximum of 7-year cycle. But the ruling class reengineered the economic system, so that the slaves could never get out of slavery. They changed the rulebook from 'service' to 'perpetual servitude.'
- iii. Jeremiah preached to immediately end slavery. This was long before William Wilberforce! This violation of basic human rights was blatantly against God's law, and this injustice stirred up God's anger. By now the city was surrounded by the Babylonian army, and everyone, both rich and poor, was about to be slaughtered or at best become slaves to the Babylonians.

For once, Zedekiah and the ruling class listened to Jeremiah, and began to release their Jewish slaves. Really for them, there was nothing to lose when their nation was about to be taken captive. So the social reform began taking place according to the word of God.

But once the Babylonian army withdrew from Jerusalem because of the Egyptian army, they changed their mind and took back their slaves again! They probably gave credit to Zedekiah's foreign policy (with Egypt) for the lifting of the siege rather than following Jeremiah's prophetic word for economic reform.

- iv. Jeremiah thundered against them, *'Therefore, thus says the LORD: 'You have not obeyed Me in proclaiming liberty, everyone to his brother and every one to his neighbour. Behold, I proclaim liberty to you (i.e. Jubilee)', says the LORD – to the swords, to pestilence, and to famine! And I will deliver you to trouble among the kingdoms of the earth.'* (34:17) Because the people had not released their slaves, the Lord was going to release them from His protection to experience the sword, disease, starvation and slavery in a foreign land, and they would all become slaves of Nebuchadnezzar.
- v. We can all repent and change for a short time during a crisis. But the question is, can we remain changed after the crisis has passed? Jeremiah said to Zedekiah, *'What are you doing, Zedekiah? When there is a dire crisis you obey God. But as soon as the crisis is over, you go right back to your old ways. You have not changed one bit. You have 'polluted God's name' in doing so. Therefore, God's judgment over this city still stands, and He will bring back the Babylonians to finish the job they have begun.'*

4. Lesson

- i. Why is Trump so popular despite everything? He is not a man of expediency, not a career politician like Zedekiah. He tells you what he thinks, and the next thing we see - he does what he says.
- ii. Corrupt economic systems breed corrupt political systems. God built into the Jewish law the mechanism to protect basic human rights, and this includes freedom at its centre. The 7-year sabbath cycle and the 50th year Jubilee (7 x 7-year cycle) purges the unsustainable bubbles in the property and financial sectors.
- iii. Our society has no such safety valves, so it heats up with greed until one day the system just implodes – the only way to take out the bubble in the absence of the sabbath year cycles. And on its way up, it creates a slavery system heavily favouring the rich and disadvantaging the poor. Now the global debt is around \$250 trillion. How will be it repaid? It cannot. How will it end? Not well.
- iv. World Economic Forum - Davos Summit theme is 'The Great Reset' (Aug 17-20, 2021). *'You will own nothing, and you will be happy.'* Are they planning to free people from economic slavery or enslave the rest of the world?

The question is 'Who will own everything and be even happier?' Interestingly, the Jubilee year begins on 7 Sept 2021 and ends on 26 Sept 2022. It will be very interesting to watch what happens.

B. Promise Keepers – Obedience to Man’s Command (35:1ff)

1. The Rechabites

Ch 35 goes back to 15-16 years earlier to Jehoiakim’s reign (609-598 BC) during the first Babylonian invasion (v11 c.f. 2 Kings 24:1-2, 602-601BC). It tells Judah’s prophetic history when Jeremiah was a younger man and Judah was in a situation very similar to Zedekiah’s last days.

- i. Rechabites were not Jews, but Kenites who lived in tents like gypsies or bedouins. Moses married a Kenite woman and Jethro was his father-in-law (Judg 1:16). The Kenites tagged along and entered the promised land because of Moses. There the Kenites said, *‘We will stay in tents and not live inside the city.’* They were ‘strangers’ in the gates of Israel’s cities. Among them was a man named Rechab with a son named Jonadab born in the days of rapid moral decline in the cities. So Jehu (841-814 BC) and Jonadab worked together to clean the nation of moral and spiritual decay. They purged Israel of Baal worship (c.f. 2 Kings 10:15-27) during the days of King Ahab, and together steered Israel away from the brink of destruction.
- ii. In those days Jonadab declared, *‘We will keep pure, and not live in the cities like the rest of you. We will not build houses, but will live in tents. We will not sow and plant vineyards because your agricultural practice is full of Baal worship. Furthermore, we will not touch wine because it is the number one cause of social problems and promiscuity among the young people.’* And Jonadab charged all his descendants to live in tents as nomads and never to touch alcohol from generation to generation. See no evil, hear no evil – like the Amish. Jonadab thought, *‘As long as we can separate ourselves from the corrupting influences of the society, keep pure, and live a simple lifestyle, we will be able to hold back the nation from total corruption (as a voice of conscience).’* It is reminiscent of the Nazarite calling.

2. One day Jeremiah was walking through the besieged city, and he saw tents pitched inside the city.

- i. Jeremiah asked, *‘Who are you?’* They said, *‘We are Rechabites. We live in tents, but we had to come into the city to seek safety from the Babylonian armies outside.’* Jeremiah brought these dusty, thirsty Rechabites into the temple and poured out lovey cool wine for them, *‘Please, drink this wine and you will feel better.’* But they refused, *‘We do not touch wine because our fathers commanded us not to touch it.’* That was more than 200 years ago when Jonadab commanded his descendants not to drink wine! They were thirsty from their journey to the besieged city which was packed to the brim, but they were prepared to collapse from exhaustion and thirst rather than to drink wine because of their forefather’s command.
- ii. Jeremiah said to Israelites, *‘These people are willing to die for their forefather’s command given over 200 years ago, but my people are not prepared to keep the word of God that is coming to them afresh today!’*

3. Contrast between the Rechabites and Judah

- i. The Rechabites obeyed a fallible human leader (v14). Judah’s leader was their eternal God (cf. Mal 1:6).
- ii. Jonadab gave his command to the Rechabites only once. God repeatedly spoke to His people (v15).
- iii. The Rechabite restriction was about temporal issues. God’s word to His people was on eternal issues.
- iv. The Rechabites obeyed Jonadab’s command for 240 years. God’s people constantly disobeyed Him (v16).
- v. The Rechabites’ loyalty will be rewarded. God’s people will be punished for their disloyalty (v17).

4. Profound Lesson on Obedience

- i. Jeremiah was not saying the Rechabites’ ascetic lifestyle is better, any more than the Amish who withdraw from modern life and technology. But God’s people must learn the Rechabites’ obedience and faithfulness. God promised them, *‘Even though you are not My people by bloodline, and even though your obedience is to your human ancestor’s command rather than My word, I am so thrilled to find such a people on earth who knows how to be faithful and obedient. Therefore, I promise you that there will always be Rechabites to stand before Me.’* ‘Stand before Me’ usually means serving God in a special way. Rechabites exist to this day in Syria and Arabia, who follow the Rechabite rule.
- ii. How willing we are to take human customs which are only relative and make them absolute; while we take the absolute command of God and make it relative!