

Trust and Obey

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Date: 02 February 2014

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[0 : 00] But we're going to turn now to our Bible reading this morning and we continue in our studies in the prophet Jeremiah and Bob will be speaking to us from chapter 34 and 35.

If you have one of our church Bibles, that's page 663. And we're going to read these two chapters. And you'll see it's all about the words that God commands his prophet to speak to king and people alike.

Jeremiah chapter 34 at verse 1. The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord when Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, and all his army and all the kingdoms of the earth under his dominion and all the peoples were fighting against Jerusalem and all of its cities.

Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, go and speak to Zedekiah, king of Judah, and say to him, thus says the Lord, behold, I am giving this city into the hands of the king of Babylon and he shall burn it with fire.

You shall not escape from his hand, but shall surely be captured and delivered into his hand. You shall see the king of Babylon eye to eye and speak with him face to face, and you shall go to Babylon.

[1 : 27] Yet hear the word of the Lord, O Zedekiah, king of Judah. Thus says the Lord concerning you, you shall not die by the sword, you shall die in peace. And as spices were burned for your fathers, the former kings who were before you, so people shall burn spices for you and lament for you, saying, Alas, Lord, for I have spoken the word, declares the Lord.

Then Jeremiah the prophet spoke all these words to Zedekiah, king of Judah, in Jerusalem, when the army of the king of Babylon was fighting against Jerusalem and against all the cities of Judah that were left, Lachish and Azekah, for these were the only fortified cities of Judah that remained. The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah from the Lord after King Zedekiah had made a covenant with all the people in Jerusalem to make a proclamation of liberty to them, that everyone should set free his Hebrew slaves, male and female, so that no one should enslave a Jew, his brother. And they obeyed, all the officials and all the people who had entered into the covenant, that everyone would set free his slave, male or female, so they would not be enslaved again. They obeyed and set them free. But afterward they turned around and took back the male and female slaves they had set free and brought them into subjection as slaves.

[2 : 50] The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah from the Lord. Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, I myself made a covenant with your fathers when I brought them up out of the land of Egypt, up out of the house of bondage.

At the end of seven years, each of you must set free the fellow Hebrew who has been sold to you and has served you six years. You must set him free from your service. But your fathers did not listen to me or incline their ears to me.

You recently repented and did what was right in my eyes by proclaiming liberty each to his neighbor. And you made a covenant before me in the house that is called by my name. But then you turned around and profaned my name.

And each of you took back his male and female slaves whom you had set free according to their desire. And you brought them into subjection to be your slaves. Therefore, thus says the Lord, you have not obeyed me by proclaiming liberty, every one to his brother and to his neighbor.

Behold, I proclaim to you liberty, to the sword, to pestilence and to famine, declares the Lord. I will make you a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth.

[4 : 01] And the men who transgressed my covenant and did not keep the terms of the covenant that they made before me, I will make them like the calf that they cut in two and passed between its parts.

The officials of Judah, the officials of Jerusalem, the eunuchs, the priests and all the people of the land who passed between the parts of the calf.

And I will give them into the hand of their enemies and into the hand of those who seek their lives. Their dead bodies shall be food for the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth.

And Zedekiah, king of Judah, and his officials, I will give into the hand of their enemies and into the hand of those who seek their lives, into the hand of the army of the king of Babylon, which has withdrawn from you.

Behold, I will command, declares the Lord, and will bring them back to this city, and they will fight against it and take it and burn it with fire. I will make the cities of Judah a desolation without inhabitant.

[5 : 05] The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord in the days of Jehoiakim, the son of Josiah, king of Judah. Go to the house of the Rechabites and speak with them and bring them to the house of the Lord, into one of the chambers.

Then offer them wine to drink. So I took Jezaniah, the son of Jeremiah, son of Habizaniah, and his brothers, and all the sons of the whole house of the Rechabites.

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 his officials, above the chamber of Maseah, the son of Shalom, keeper of the household.

Then I set before the Rechabites pitchers full of wine and cups, and I said to them, Drink wine. But they answered, We will drink no wine.

For Jonadab, the son of Rechab, our father, commanded us, You shall not drink wine, neither shall your sons forever. You shall not build a house, you shall not sow seed, you shall not plant or have a vineyard, but you shall live in tents all your days, that you may live many days in the land where you sojourn.

[6 : 19] We have obeyed the voice of Jonadab, the son of Rechab, our father, in all that he commanded us, to drink no wine all our days, ourselves, our wives, our sons, and our daughters, and not to build houses to dwell in.

We have no vineyard or field or seed, but we have lived in tents and have obeyed and done 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 for fear of the army of the Chaldeans and the army of the Syrians.

So we're living in Jerusalem. Then the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah. Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Go and say to the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, Will you not receive instruction and listen to my words, declares the Lord.

The command that Jonadab, the son of Rechab, gave to his sons to drink no wine has been kept, and they drink none to this day, for they have obeyed their father's command. I have spoken to you persistently, but you have not listened to me.

I have sent to you all my servants, the prophets, sending them persistently, saying, Turn now every one of you from his evil ways and amend your deeds, and do not go after the other gods to serve them, and then you shall dwell in the land that I gave to you and to your fathers.

[7 : 46] But you did not incline your ear or listen to me. The sons of Jonadab, the son of Rechab, have kept the command that their father gave them, But this people has not obeyed me.

Therefore thus says the Lord, the God of hosts, the God of Israel, Behold, I am bringing upon Judah and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem all the disaster that I have promised against them, because I have spoken to them and they have not listened.

I have called to them and they have not answered. But to the house of the Rechabites, Jeremiah said, Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Because you have obeyed the command of Jonadab your father and kept all his precepts and done all that he commanded you.

Therefore thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, Jonadab, the son of Rechab, shall never lack a man to stand before me. Amen.

And may God bless to us this, his word. Now, could we have our Bibles open, please, at page 663, the passage that was read for us.

[9 : 09] And before we look at it together, let's have a moment of prayer. Amen. Father, we know that in our own understanding, in our own efforts, we cannot understand and obey your word.

So we pray that the gracious Holy Spirit, one who inspired these words and caused human beings to write them down, we pray that that same gracious Holy Spirit may take the words of Scripture and use them to lead us to the living word, Christ Jesus, in whose name we pray.

Amen. We all know the experience, don't we?

Had a wonderful holiday, restful, enjoyable, and then it comes to an end, and it's the Monday morning when we return to work. Everything is low-key.

Perhaps it's been our honeymoon. Perhaps it's been a special celebration. But we're back with a vengeance to ordinary living. Now, it's true that both things happen in life.

[10 : 25] Life is not all romance. Life is not all ordinary and everyday. We have both of them intertwined. And the Bible is a very realistic book.

In the last few weeks, we've been looking at the glorious poetry of Jeremiah 30 to 33, the book of the promises of God, the book where in glorious technicolor, Jeremiah pours out the vision of the new creation of the world to come.

And it's been a stimulating and exciting experience to read these chapters and to work through them. At least it's been for me. I can't speak for anybody else. These are glorious, exciting chapters. But now, we've come to the prose, if you like. We're back with a thud to the kind of situation in which Jeremiah received these words. And we've got a series of incidents which take place in the closing years of the kingdom of Judah.

Let me remind you, Jeremiah, preaching in the last days of the kingdom of Judah before they are taken off to exile in Babylon, preaches in the reign of four kings, beginning in the great reforming reign of Josiah, a reform which was glorious, magnificent, but which came to nothing because it was very largely the personal faith and dedication of the king.

[11 : 46] He's followed by Jehoiachin, who doesn't last very long. Then the last two kings, Jehoiachin, nasty piece of work, if ever there was, and Zedekiah, a rather wet and wimpish individual.

And the incidents we have here, beginning in chapter 34, are not in chronological order. Something doesn't have to be chronological in order to be true. They're grouped together thematically.

What was it like when Jeremiah received this glorious vision? What is it like on Monday morning to receive the glorious visions of Sunday and so on? Now we need both.

Even whether you're a down-to-earth individual, or whether you're an incurable romantic like me, you need to recognize that there are both these things in life.

There is the prose as well as the poetry. You see, we need the poetry. We need the future. We need the glorious visions of the new creation. Otherwise, we'll not persevere.

[12 : 46] We'll get tired. We'll get disillusioned. And we'll give up because we're simply stuck in the treadmill. On the other hand, we need the prose as well.

Otherwise, we'll have unrealistic expectations of what we can expect from life in this world. And from here to chapter 45, Jeremiah is showing us God's people's abject failure to grasp the wonders of the new covenant.

This revelation meant nothing to them. They simply despised it. They simply rejected it. And in particular, it's about reactions to the word from the Lord.

Thus says the Lord. In 34, 1, 8, and 12. And in 35, 18 to 19, thus says the Lord of hosts.

So, like the bookends of this section, thus says the Lord. So, the chapter is about obeying. The chapter is about listening to the word of God.

[13 : 50] But it's not just obeying in the sense of recognizing that certain things are true. It is about a relationship with the Lord as well.

Because obedience in the sense of mechanically carrying out a set of rules is not gospel. It's legalism. That's why I've given our title, Trust and Obey.

The trusting and the obeying go together. If we don't trust, we're not likely to obey. And if we truly trust, we will certainly be led to obey.

Imperfectly, certainly. Chapter 34 is about disobeying. And chapter 35 is about obeying. So, that's my two main points.

In 34, disobedience is deadly. And in 35, obedience is life-giving. So, let's take chapter 34 first.

[14 : 44] Disobedience is deadly. Now, this is a little earlier than chapters 32 and 33. Jeremiah is not in prison.

Verse 2. Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, Go and speak to Zedekiah, king of Judah. The situation is dark, though, and getting darker. Apart from Jerusalem itself, verse 8 tells us that only two other towns, Lachish and Azekiah, stood at where standing out against the Babylonian invader. And we know this, actually, from other sources. We were discovered many decades ago in the ruins of the city of Azekiah, an actual inscription from the commander from, sorry, in Lachish.

There was an inscription which had the words of the commanding officer there, who says, we no longer see the signals from Azekiah, telling them that Azekiah had fallen, the signals had gone, and only Lachish and Jerusalem remained.

So, it's pretty deadly. And Zedekiah, a weak man, is on the throne. So, what is happening then? That's ancient history, but what is it actually saying to us? And the first thing it's telling to us is that when we do not trust and obey, we rely on vain and empty hopes.

[16:07] That's verses 1 to 7. Verse 2, thus says the Lord, I am giving this city into the hand of the king of Babylon, and he will burn it with fire.

Now, running through this whole book, there's the powerful undercurrent. God will never abandon his city. God will come up the last minute. He'll save his city as he's done before.

After all, he had done it 100 years and more before, when he rescued the city from the Assyrian armies. There was one huge difference then. When God rescued the city of Jerusalem from the Assyrians, you can read about this in 2 Kings 19 and in Isaiah, and godly king sat on the throne, King Hezekiah, who exemplified trusting and obeying.

You see, this King Zedekiah thinks he can have the privileges without the responsibilities. There are wars without the obedience. And Jeremiah long before in the so-called temple sermon has said, do not say this is the temple of the Lord because the Lord will destroy it.

The crucial issue is, was Zedekiah obeying the word of the Lord? Because even as late as chapter 38, Jeremiah says Zedekiah's life, that the city would be spared if only people would obey.

[17:31] And today, we have the persistent fantasies of those who tell us that the Lord will save institutions without any attempt to reform them, without any attempt to listen to his word, without any turning to the Lord.

Because the Lord has once blessed a church, because he's once blessed an individual, doesn't mean he is committed to continuing to do so unless the individual, unless the institution trusts and obeys.

So, they still believe the Lord will come to save his city, even although they didn't obey. Incredibly, as it seems, actually in AD 70, when the Romans set Jerusalem, many of the rabbis still believed, with the exile behind them, that God would come to the rescue of his city.

Vain hopes if we trust in anything other than the word of the Lord. We trust in institutions, if we trust in outside help, like later on we are told that Pharaoh's army came out of Egypt.

We trust in Egypt, which Isaiah had warned them not to. Do not go down to Egypt and trust in chariots and horses. That's the first thing marked by disobedience, is vain hopes.

[18:43] Now, I'm going to call panic piety in verses 8 to 11. The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord, after King Zedekiah had made a covenant with all the people in Jerusalem to make a proclamation of liberty.

Now, this is more promising, isn't it? Made a covenant. It strikes a happier note until we see that Zedekiah's name is attached to a covenant. And therefore, we shouldn't expect too much.

Now, the background here is the year of Jubilee in Leviticus 25. On the year of Jubilee, slaves were to be freed and debts were to be cancelled.

Now, throughout most of Israel's history, that seems to have been ignored, and even the great reformers like Hezekiah and Josiah don't seem to have done much about it. First thing we need to realize is that slaves, we mustn't think of Uncle Tom's cabin and stories like that.

Slaves were not like they were, say, in the American South. Rather, they were people in debt who would actually come to somebody and say, look, I'll give you, I'll sell my services to you.

[19:54] And the other thing was, after, in the seventh year, they were to be released. This seems to have fallen into disuse, as I say. And this ceremony seems to have been born out of desperation.

Zedekiah, it appears, had set these people free so they could join in the defense of the city. This appears not to have been a genuine change of heart.

See, it's always easier to go through a public ritual rather than to trust and obey, isn't it? It's always easy to talk the talk. It's always easy to become accepted among a group of people because we

appear to be doing the right things.

This is a good initiative, but he had no conviction to see it through. He was fitful and inconsistent. When we don't truly obey the Word of God, what we'll do is we'll indulge in outward acts of piety, panic piety, as I call it.

And that seems to me to be what's happening here. What he did was right. What he did was good. But in verses 12 to 22, this panic piety is followed by covenant breaking.

[21 : 03] It's hardly done when it's undone. Verse 12. The word of the Lord came, verse 11, sorry, Afterwards they turned round, took back the male and female slaves they had set free, and brought them into subjection as slaves.

Carries out the public act, and it's hardly carried out when he undoes it. And notice what the Lord has to say. The Lord says, This is a man who understands nothing about me.

Because, thus says the Lord, verse 13, I made a covenant with your fathers when I brought them out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage, saying, At the end of seven years, each of you must set free, the fellow Hebrew, who has been sold to you and has served for you for six years, set him free.

Now that was what the Lord had said through Moses. And what had Zedekiah done? Verse 15. You recently repented, and did what was right in my eyes, by proclaiming liberty each to his neighbor, and you made a covenant before me in the house that is called by my name.

But then, same word, you repented again. In other words, you turned round and did my will. You had hardly done it when you turned round and undid it. The very heart of the covenant is God rescued his people from slavery.

[22 : 27] So a man who is not prepared to rescue his people from slavery, the Lord's people from slavery, or worse still, who does it and then immediately undoes it, is clearly a man who knows nothing about covenant, knows nothing about trusting and obeying.

It would have been better had Zedekiah not done this at all. And what the book of Ecclesiastes says, it's better not to make a vow than to make a vow and then not pay it.

There was no real change of heart. You know, the grim words which follow. Verse 17. You have not obeyed me by proclaiming liberty, by proclaiming freedom.

Everyone to his brother and to his neighbor. Behold, I will proclaim to you liberty. I'll set you free, but I'll set you free to be destroyed by the Babylonians. The freedom to be destroyed.

You see, disobedience is often held out as freedom. Liberation from rules, liberation from regulations, liberation from everything that holds us down and suppresses us.

[23 : 31] But at the very heart of obedience to the Lord, it's not obedience to rules, it's response to his covenant love. That is the point. Trust and trust as well as obeying.

Freedom to be destroyed. And in verse 22, I will bring them back to this city. That's the Babylonians. They will fight against it and take it and burn it with fire. I will make the cities of Judah desolation without inhabitant.

So you see, disobedience is deadly. Disobedience feeds itself on vain hopes and fantasies and delusions. Disobedience is happy with panic, public piety.

But disobedience is at heart covenant breaking. Essentially saying, Lord, I don't care about you. I know you are the God of the covenant. I know you are the God who rescued his people. I'm not going to do that.

Now, that's chapter 34. It is a grim chapter, and it's meant to be a grim chapter. There's no way we can make this pretty. There is no way we can make it easy.

[24 : 36] Let's look now at the second chapter, chapter 35, which I call, Obedience is Life-Giving. Now, this is an incident that takes place some years earlier in the reign of Jehoiakim, in the days of Jehoiakim, the son of Josiah, king of Judah.

Now, it may not seem obvious. You may have wondered, as Willie was reading these chapters, what they had to do with each other. But I think they're deliberately put together because they are about trusting and obeying.

You see, the reason for this chapter being where it is, I think, here is a contrast to the covenant breakers, the covenant, especially Zedekiah, of chapter 34, really about these people, not otherwise known, called the Rechabites, who are founded by this man, Jehonadab.

Some centuries before, in 2 Kings chapter 10, he had joined with Jehu, the king of the warlord, who came to the throne after destroying the house of Ahab.

It's back in 2 Kings 10. Now, the Rechabites were Spartan people in their lifestyle. They lived in tents. They were teetotal. They were traditionalists.

[25 : 46] In fact, their name was taken by a society in the 19th century, the Rechabites, who advocated total abstinence from alcohol and simplicity of lifestyle.

Now, what on earth are we going to make of a chapter like this? It's a puzzling chapter. It sounds a very, it sounds quite a non-life-giving chapter.

Why am I calling this, Obedience is Life-Giving? Now, first of all, notice that the reason the Rechabites are held up as a model, it's not a call for ultra-traditionalism.

It's not a call to abandon your homes and go and live in tents. What they are a model for is their obedience, not everything about the lifestyle.

See, Jeremiah puts wine in front. Jeremiah, in the book of Jeremiah, you get many of these acted parables, and here's another acted parable. Verse 2, Go to the house of the Rechabites, speak with them, bring them to the house of the Lord, into one of the chambers, then offer them wine to drink.

[26 : 54] So I took Jazani, the son of Jerob, son of Habazani, and his brothers, and all his sons, and the whole house of the Rechabites, and he sets before them wine, pictures of wine and cups, and says, drink.

Which they refused to do, because they had taken an oath not to do so. And that, of course, was where the Rechabites of the 19th and early 20th century took their view.

The trouble is, if you're going to make this into a kind of tirade against drinking alcohol, you're moralizing this is not gospel.

Now, if people choose to be teetotal or vegetarian or anything else, that's fine, but it's not a given of the gospel. And we mustn't use this passage in this way, so that we make it a legalistic passage rather than a life-giving passage.

That's the first thing. The model is their obedience. It's a parable, as I say. I don't mean it didn't happen. What I mean is it's a kind of active parable, a kind of object lesson.

[28 : 02] And as with the parables of our Lord, we mustn't press every detail. When our Lord tells his parables, it's wake-up calls, telling us things that we need to hear.

And many of the details are there to give us colorful background and so on, like the Good Samaritan and so on. But I think the second thing I want to say, and I think this is extremely important, we need to learn that God blesses flawed people.

The letter of James says, we all fail in many ways. You see, these people were not totally obedient to the Lord.

After all, the Lord had said, settle in the land and build houses. He said, no, we're not going to settle and build houses. We're going to live in tents. Presumably the reason they had come into Jerusalem, because of the Babylonian army, come behind the safety of the walls.

The Lord has said, build houses. He had also said, plant vineyards. Presumably to plant vineyards, to use the wine that was grown there. In other words, the Lord is not saying, you've got to be like the Amish people of America, who basically absolutize a lifestyle of an earlier generation, without all the kind of things we are accustomed to.

[29 : 22] Or in fact, evangelicals of an earlier generation, who, if you like, absolutize a particular lifestyle. No theater, no alcohol, no fashionable clothes, that sort of thing.

That's what C.S. Lewis called chronological snobbery. When you take a particular age, a particular generation, and you say, this is absolute, we made it now. A kind of legalism and narrowness, which did not commend the gospel.

Easy to laugh at that kind of thing, isn't it? How easy it is for us, of course, to absolutize our feeling liberated and superior, isn't it?

We look at these people, and we say, how dull, how narrow. We look at ourselves, and say, how liberated we are. You see, it's very easy to go from a lifestyle with silly distinctives, to one with no distinctives at all.

And to castigate everyone who disagrees with us as Pharisees. Now, Sunday school teacher was telling the children that story that Jesus tells in Luke, about the Pharisee and the tax collector.

[30 : 33] And she was waxing eloquent on the tax collector, realized he was a sinner. He didn't pretend he was better than he was, whereas the Pharisee bragged about his lifestyle.

At the end, she says, now, boys and girls, we're going to have a little prayer, and we're going to thank God that we're not like the Pharisee. See what I mean? So often, we have a kind of

self-righteousness that would make a self-respecting Pharisee blush.

God blesses flawed people. God bless these Rechabites. Not because of their traditionalist lifestyle, but because they were loyal to the oaths they had taken.

And that's the third point I want to make. God still honors obedience. Look at verses 12 to 17. Then the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah. Thus says the Lord of hosts, go and say to the people of Judah, and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, will you not receive instruction and listen to my words, declares the Lord.

These people listened to their human founder, probably listened to him and gave him more credence than they ought to have given to him. Nevertheless, they're an object lesson of obedience. Whereas this is a contrast to people who would refuse to obey the Lord.

[31 : 51] Verse 14, I have spoken to you persistently, but you have not listened to me. I have sent you all my servants, the prophets, sending them persistently.

Right away back, Moses himself, Samuel, Elijah, Elisha, and the other prophets leading up to Jeremiah himself. So you see, these people, their obedience was narrow, their lifestyle was very cramped, but God honored their obedience.

And we need to honor it as well. You see, I think of many good people of my childhood and my teen years, dreadfully narrow in their lifestyle.

I shudder sometimes when I think of it. Nevertheless, these were people who genuinely loved the Lord, genuinely tried to obey his word. The best of them loved the world and loved the world in the sense, not that John means, but loving the world in the sense of being kind to people and loved evangelizing.

Now you see, you can look back and see the silliness of the lifestyle. Future generations will look back and see sillinesses in our lifestyle, which we're blind to. Everybody's blind to what's immediately in front of them.

[33 : 05] But you see, that fuddy-duddy lifestyle, or our trendy lifestyle, what ultimately matters is not, is neither of these.

What ultimately matters is whether we are open to the Lord and to his word. As I say, we need to learn that God blesses flawed people.

We need to learn that the Lord honors obedience. Look at verses 18 and 19. What happens as a result of this obedience? But to the house of the Rechabites, Jeremiah said, Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Because you have obeyed the command of Jonadab, your father, and kept all his precepts, and done all that he commanded you, therefore thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Jonadab, son of Rechab, shall never lack a man to stand before you.

That is a very deliberate echo of the promise to David in chapter 33, where the Lord says, David shall never lack a man to sit on the throne of Israel.

Coin of phrase, we are not David, but we have David's God. We are not the Rechabites, but we have the Rechabites God. God ultimately honors obedience.

[34 : 20] Obedience is ultimately life-giving. All of us fail in many ways. All of us have in our lifestyles and our attitudes many, many things which are not particularly worthy or deserving of praise.

What matters really in the long run is, do we trust the Lord? Do we listen to his words? Are we the kind of people who are willing to put our lives daily under his word and under his spirit?

See, as the hymn we all sing in a moment says, trust and obey, there really is no other way but to trust the promises and to obey the commands. Amen.

Let's pray. Lord God, we are unprofitable and limited servants. So often we do not even do what it is our duty to do.

Yet in your wonderful grace, all you demand from us is openness to your word and spirit, a glad relationship with you and a willingness to obey your word and to follow the spirit who inspired that word wherever he may lead us.

[35 : 36] We praise you for this in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.