

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Against the Flow

(studies in Jeremiah)

People of Conviction

(Jeremiah 35)

Study #8

Introduction: Because he/she told me to...

About a year and a half ago, I discovered afresh what a “sheep” I really am. By that I mean that I have a propensity to follow, sometimes mindlessly, someone else’s lead.

After some time of following my own made-up, unoriginal and largely ineffective exercise regimen, my son, Ben, suggested I look at a website, www.crossfit.com.

I did. Within days I was hooked. I won’t go into a lot of detail about Crossfit, but I could (In fact, if you want to talk about it, I’d love to talk with you. We could talk for hours...) Like I said. I am a sheep and Crossfit has become my exercise shepherd.

Crossfit has a growing national and international following. As one of its services, it posts a “workout of the day” on the website, just for us sheep.

Now I no longer have to think about what I’m going to do for my workout. I don’t have to decide on running, weight training, jump roping, or pull-ups. All I have to do is check the website.

The good folks at Crossfit HQ post the workout of the day around 10pm of the night before. I check it before turning in. Whatever uncertainty the next day brings, at least I know what I’ll be doing, exercise-wise.

Why? ‘Cuz they told me so.

For most of us, there are certain areas of life where “ ‘cuz I said so” works.

Ordered military life relies on the commander’s commands being followed to a “T”. At work, if the boss says so, we do it. Parents should try to not use, “ ‘cuz I said so” very often, but it’ll do in a pinch. And school teachers have been known to employ the tactic to good effect on occasion.

Then, there are other situations (like my Crossfit workouts) where we voluntarily agree to do something just because somebody told us to.¹

You can probably think of times when you have done something simply “because he/she told me to.”

This morning, we are going to watch a group of people who do things a certain way just because a certain someone told them to. And their commitment to follow those orders speaks volumes to us, today, who are called to respond to orders we have received from God.

The episode we are looking at comes from Jeremiah, chapter 35, and the event recorded here occurred *prior to* the event we saw last week, which was recorded in chapter 32.

A note on chronology in Jeremiah...

It used to be that when I thought about literature, I thought in terms of chronology. That is, I could safely assume that the events recorded in chapter 1 of a book would precede the events of chapter 2 and that the events recorded in chapter 3 would follow - in time - what is recorded in chapters 1 and 2.

But with the recent popularity of the technique of the “backstory” to the main plot line (think “Lost”), we can no longer assume a strict chronology.

¹ Kathy, not at all the sheep that I am, has often looked at the Crossfit workout of the day and remarked, “I’m not about to do that!”

Well, Jeremiah was way ahead of his time. Think of his book as a story told with lots of backstories. One of the backstory chapters is the event recorded in chapter 35.

We might have expected that the episode in Jeremiah's life we are exploring this morning, which is recorded in chapter 35 would have occurred AFTER the events of chapter 32 (the purchase of the field at Anathoth) which we saw last week.

Not so. Jeremiah's book was not put together according to a strict chronology.² And, while the purchase of the field at Anathoth took place *months* before the destruction of Jerusalem, the events of chapter 35 took place *years* before that destruction.

In the episode before us, Jeremiah goes to great and very dramatic lengths to make a point to his fellow Jews about life with God. That "point" will not at all be lost on us.

Jeremiah describes a scene that occurred near the end of the reign of Jehoiakim, who ruled for about a dozen years as King of Judah.³

An Offer to the Rechabites (vv. 1-5)

The Word of the Lord (vv. 1-2)

Jewish life in the days of Jehoiakim

Confusion reigns over the reign of kings...

If you sometimes find yourself confused by the many kings of Israel and Judah who are mentioned in the Old Testament, you are in good company! Biblical scholars the world over sometimes pull out their hair trying to make sense of the order of the Jewish kings.

It is especially challenging to keep these kings straight as we near the end of Judah's national existence.

² In fact, one of the things that confounds even the most brilliant Bible scholars who come to Jeremiah is trying to determine the order of events recorded in the book!

³ 609-598 BC

- Among the reasons it is a challenge to keep them straight:
- two different sons of King Josiah served as kings;
 - one of them, Jehoiakim, was appointed to reign as king in Judah by the Egyptian Pharaoh;
 - the other, Jehoahaz, was taken to Egypt;
 - Jehoiakim (whose name was originally Eliakim, and was named "Jehoiakim" by Pharaoh Neco⁴) was taken to live out his days in Babylon;
 - King Zedekiah also was taken to Babylon to finish his life; AND
 - Jehoiakim's son was named (unhelpfully) Jehoiachin!

Whew!

The rule of King Jehoiakim...

Today, though, won't be all that confusing. Today we are only focusing on one event that occurred during the time of Jehoiakim, the very wicked son of the very good King Josiah.⁵

Jehoiakim rebelled against Babylon near the end of his reign. And, by way of response, Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian king, commissioned raiding parties from neighboring vassal states so as to make life miserable for the Jews.⁶

The Jews eventually lost heart and stopped fighting, basically giving in to Babylon. And, at the end of the raids, Nebuchadnezzar had Jehoiakim bound with bronze chains and taken to Babylon.

But the loss of Jehoiakim was no great loss. The Bible sums up King Jehoiakim's life with these words, [*2 Kings 23:37*]...***he did evil in the sight of the Lord, according to all that his fathers had done.***

⁴ See 2 Kings 23:34.

⁵ You may remember that Jeremiah and Josiah began their ministries (one a prophet and the other a king) at nearly the same time. They knew each other well. It surely must have grieved Jeremiah to see the ungodliness of the son of his good friend, Josiah.

⁶ These raids are likely the attacks mentioned by Daniel (1:1-3), which took place in 605 BC (and which led to the exile of the leading citizens of Jerusalem, including Daniel).

Life with God under Jehoiakim

Under Jehoiakim's rule, life was miserable and godless. In 2 Chronicles 36:8 there is a reference to his "*outrageous sacrilege*" (The Message). This detestable act is not specifically spelled out, though, and for that reason is all the more ominous.

The king led the way into rebellion against the Lord. Idolatry, immorality, violence, injustice and more flourished under Jehoiakim's rule - and the people gladly followed.

It was at this time, in a season of gross wickedness, that Jeremiah received a message from God. The Lord was going to make yet another attempt to get the attention of His rebellious people.

[1] The word which came to Jeremiah from the Lord in the days of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah, saying, [2] "Go to the house of the Rechabites and speak to them, and bring them into the house of the Lord, into one of the chambers, and give them wine to drink."

Getting to know the Rechabites

Their origins

Here we are introduced to a remarkable clan of people - the Rechabites.

Nothing at all is known about them until an event recorded in 2 Kings 10. In that passage we read about the bloody extermination of the wicked family of King Ahab (842 BC). King Jehu was a better, more God-centered king than Ahab had been and he led an all-out attack on Baal-worshippers among the Jews of his day. He was aided in this by a man named Jonadab (of the family of Rechab).

Read the story carefully and you'll probably get the idea that Jonadab - like Jehu - was both zealous for God AND pretty ruthless.⁷

⁷ This slaughter of the Baal-worshippers under Jehu was criticized sharply by the prophet Hosea (chapter 1) for its extreme violence.

Over two centuries after Jonadab, in the days of Jeremiah, Jonadab's descendants lived as a separate group within Israel. The Rechabites stood out from the rest of those living in Judah like sore thumbs.

Their characteristics

For one thing, they were not blood relatives of the Jews. They were descended from a people known as the Kenites.

The Kenites are first mentioned in the Bible in Genesis 15, in the days of Abraham. They were a distinct people group. We believe that they migrated into Palestine from Asia.

Rechab was a Kenite. Jonadab was a later Kenite. And the Rechabites of Jeremiah 35 were all Kenites, not Jews descended from Abraham.

There is good reason to believe, too, that the Rechabites were skilled in metal work. If you needed work done on a farm implement or if your chariot needed work, you needed the Rechabites.

Finally, the Rechabites were nomads. They didn't live in cities. The whole clan traveled from place to place. Some think that they were the ancient world's equivalent of modern-day gypsies, or of the traveling blacksmiths of the Middle Ages.⁸

So, the Rechabites were non-Jewish nomads who worked with metal, living within the settled land of Israel. From earliest times they worshiped the Lord and allied themselves with the Jews. So, they were accepted by the Jews as true believers. But they were their own dogs.

It is important to know something about the Rechabites. Otherwise, we'll never understand the "point" of Jeremiah 35.

Despite their wandering ways, these nomadic people found themselves living in Jerusalem at this time, due to extenuating circumstances.

Skip on down to verse 11 for the explanation.

⁸ So, the International Standard Encyclopedia of the Bible.

Their life in Jerusalem

[11] “But when Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came up against the land, we said, ‘Come and let us go to Jerusalem before the army of the Chaldeans and before the army of the Arameans.’ So we have dwelt in Jerusalem.”

When Nebuchadnezzar (king of Babylon) sent raids against the land of Judah, the nomadic unprotected groups of tent-dwelling Rechabites sought the protection of the fortified city, Jerusalem.⁹

We can safely assume that, according to their custom, they were dwelling inside Jerusalem’s walls, but living in a tent city inside the city. The important point to note here, though, is that the whole clan was conveniently located within Jerusalem.

The prophet Jeremiah has received the word from God. So, he moved to set up a meeting with the Rechabites, and to give them wine to drink, per God’s instructions. All of the preparations are recorded in the most minute detail.

The “Set-up” (vv. 3-4)

[3] Then I took Jaazaniah the son of Jeremiah, son of Habazziniah, and his brothers and all his sons and the whole house of the Rechabites, [4] and 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 the officials, which was above the chamber of Maaseiah the son of Shallum, the doorkeeper.

The Rechabites - indoors

First, we note that the meeting with the Rechabites was set inside. Here is a group of people accustomed to living outdoors. They are people of the tent - and Jeremiah holds a gathering for them inside.

⁹ The Rechabites made it clear that although for the present they were in the city, this was not to be seen as a surrender of their principles. They were in Jerusalem only because military action made it necessary.

I would imagine that the Rechabites were at least slightly uncomfortable being indoors.

And it wasn’t just any old building. They were called to a meeting in the Temple!

An imposing location for a meet

There could not have been a more imposing location for this gathering than the place Jeremiah chose.

He invited the Rechabites into one of the rooms off the temple courts which were used for the priests’ residence and for storage.¹⁰

Specifically, it is the chamber of Hanan, **“a man of God.”** This is next to the chamber of a high-ranking court official. It is also next to the chamber of the threshold, evidently an important priestly office.

To my way of thinking, everything about this meeting was orchestrated to impress the Rechabites and to maybe put them at least a little bit “off balance.”

- Outside people are called inside.
- True worshipers are called into the courts of the house of the Lord.
- Laborers are invited to plush accommodations.

It is like inviting newly minted buck private to the General’s office. Or asking a groundskeeper to a meeting in the CEO’s office at USAA. Or inviting a citizen with no experience in high places into the Oval Office.

The meeting of the Rechabites in the temple would have been a bit unnerving. And the text indicates that the whole Rechabite community in the city at the time was taken to the temple chamber for this meeting.

With everyone in place, Jeremiah proceeded to carry out the word of the Lord.

¹⁰ See 1 Kings 6:5; 1 Chronicles 28:12; 2 Chronicles 31:11.

The Invitation (v. 5)

[5] Then I set before the men of the house of the Rechabites pitchers full of wine and cups; and I said to them, "Drink wine!"

This was not just a simple question, "Will you drink wine?" It wasn't even a polite invitation. There was no "Please, help yourself."

It was a summons.

Jeremiah, a well-known prophet of God, was doing his best to be persuasive. There are pitchers of wine on the table. Empty cups are ready to be filled.

Everything was arranged so as to place pressure on the Rechabites to drink wine. It's a very elaborate set-up, a gracious setting that honored the Rechabites.

What we expect is a wonderful scene of drinks enjoyed all around. That is not what we get.

An Offer the Rechabites HAD TO Refuse (vv. 6-11)

The Command of their Ancestors (vv. 6-7)

[6] But they said, "We will not drink wine, for Jonadab the son of Rechab, our father, commanded us, saying, 'You shall not drink wine, you or your sons, forever.'

Their response was immediate and firm.¹¹ No stuttering. No hesitation. They just said, "No."

And why wouldn't they drink? Because their father, Jonadab, commanded that they not do so. There is no argument. There is no debate. Just "No."

Jonadab had other commands that they had also scrupulously obeyed. They are listed for us.

¹¹ Hebrew negative is very strong (*lo* instead of 'al before the verb).

[7] 'You shall not build a house, and you shall not sow seed and you shall not plant a vineyard or own one; ¹² but in tents you shall dwell all your days, that you may live many days in the land where you sojourn.'

In every way they were to live a nomadic life. They were never to build a city for themselves. Never settle down. Live forever in tents to forever show that they knew that they were resident aliens.

We wonder what motivated Jonadab's command. Was it to promote godliness?¹³ Was it to avoid the sinfulness of city life? Was it to promote a clan distinctiveness?

We don't know.

What we do know is that from the time of Jonadab's command to the time of Jeremiah (about as long as from the American Revolution to 2009), the Rechabites have obeyed all of Jonadab's commands.

A Commitment to Obey (vv. 8-11)

Their commitment to obey ancestors

[8] "We have obeyed the voice of Jonadab the son of Rechab, our father, in all that he commanded us, not to drink wine all our days, we, our wives, our sons or our daughters, [9] nor to build ourselves houses to dwell in; and we do not have vineyard or field or seed. [10] "We have only dwelt in tents, and have obeyed and have done according to all that Jonadab our father commanded us."

The lifestyle of the Rechabites is unique. As far as we know, nobody else lived the way the Rechabites lived. In the Bible God certainly never required it.

¹² This ties to their refusal to drink wine or to work at the cultivation of grapes.

¹³ Remember that when Israel settled in Canaan and began to live the sedentary life and to practice agriculture, they encountered the Canaanite culture and religion. Increasingly they were drawn to the fertility-god Baal, to whom the Canaanites turned to bless their crops and flocks, and were tempted to accept the religion of Canaan.

The restrictions that Jonadab placed on his descendants was simply something that he thought would be a good thing. And his descendants (similar to a good Crossfit sheep) obeyed, “*cuz he said so.*”

There is no special reason to put the Rechabites on a pedestal for their lifestyle choices. They were certainly free to live as they did. But, biblically speaking, they would have also been free to live in cities, plant crops, build houses and drink wine!

Think of the Rechabites like the Amish people today. The Pennsylvania and Ohio Amish resist electricity and the internal combustion engine and shirts with buttons. Their distinctiveness separates them from the rest of the culture.¹⁴ But there is nothing especially holy about their lifestyle.

Their lifestyle choices are fine. But the lifestyle choices of both the Amish and the Rechabites are completely of human origin.

The Rechabites - these people with a penchant for obedience “*cuz he said so*” - have provided Jeremiah with just the picture he needs to get a very important point across to the Jews of Judah.

Learning from the Rechabites (vv. 12-19)

A Study in Contrast (vv. 12-16)

[12] Then the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah, saying, [13] ‘Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, ‘Go and say to the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, ‘Will you not receive instruction by listening to My words?’ declares the Lord. [14] ‘The words of Jonadab the son of Rechab, which he commanded his sons not to drink wine, are observed. So they do not drink wine to this day, for they have obeyed their father’s command. But I have spoken to you again and again; yet you have not listened to Me. [15] ‘Also I have sent to you all My servants the prophets, sending them again and again, saying: ‘Turn now every man from his evil way and amend your deeds, and do not go after other gods to worship them. Then you will dwell in the land which I have given to you and to your forefathers’; but you have not inclined your ear or listened to Me.

¹⁴ Note also the modern Hasidic Jews (who wear clothes dating to the Polish ghettos of World War II).

[16] ‘Indeed, the sons of Jonadab the son of Rechab have observed the command of their father which he commanded them, but this people has not listened to Me.’”

Did you hear it?

Three times in this short passage, the Lord points out that Jonadab’s ancestors paid attention to his word.

And three times He points out His own people’s inattention to His words:

“you have not listened to Me” (v. 14);

“you have not inclined your ear or listened to Me” (v. 15)

“this people has not listened to Me.” (v. 16)

This is an argument from the lesser to the greater. There are people, the Rechabites, who obey a MAN just “*cuz he said so*” - while the Jews don’t listen to, pay attention to, or obey what GOD tells them to do!

The Jews stood condemned by the Rechabite community. And we’re going to come back to this prophetic point in just a minute. First, though, let’s see how the narrative ends.

Jeremiah has words for both the Jews of Judah AND for the Rechabite community.

Contrasting Futures (v. 17)

For Judah

[17] “Therefore thus says the Lord, the God of hosts, the God of Israel, ‘Behold, I am bringing on Judah and on all the inhabitants of Jerusalem all the disaster that I have pronounced against them; because I spoke to them but they did not listen, and I have called them but they did not answer.’ “

There was, at this historical moment, a slight window of hope that judgment would not come.

The object lesson that used the Rechabites was more than an object lesson. It was a call to the Jews to obedience and to repentance from their sinful ways.

If they repented - Nineveh-like - God would have relented and the Babylonian destruction could have been averted. But the words of Jeremiah here are clear warnings of exactly what will happen if the people continue on their own, independent, rebellious, sinful ways.

Judgment is coming!¹⁵

But for the Rechabites, the future is bright with the prospects of blessing.

For the Rechabites (vv. 18-19)

[18] Then Jeremiah said to the house of the Rechabites, “Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, ‘Because you have obeyed the command of Jonadab your father, kept all his commands and done according to all that he commanded you; [19] therefore thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, “Jonadab the son of Rechab shall not lack a man to stand before Me always.” ’ ”

God promised that He would bless the Rechabite clan.

Now, it’s probably important to note here that the Rechabites were not blessed by God because they didn’t drink, plant vineyards, build houses or live in cities. No! It is not as if God had really always wanted His people to live the way the Rechabites lived.

It was the respect paid to their father Jonadab’s commands that won God’s approval.¹⁶

And, while we know that destruction did come to Jerusalem, there is good evidence that the Rechabites left the city before the final onslaught of the Babylonians. They survived.

¹⁵ See Deuteronomy 27-28 for a list of the horrible punishments that would come to the Jews if they were disobedient.

¹⁶ And there is, after all, a Commandment to the effect that children should honor their father and mother...

There is even a Jewish tradition that the Rechabites became involved in the service of the Temple during the post-exilic period.^{17, 18} The promises of blessing spoken through Jeremiah came true, proving that great blessing does accompany our obedience!

Conclusion:

You and I may have all kinds of good reasons to behave in certain ways. Some of those reasons would include: the law, tradition, expectations of the people around us, politeness, what a website tells us to do, etc... I’m sure that you could think of other behavior motivators.

But here’s the deal. If we are willing to alter our behavior - sometimes at great expense! - to simply follow social convention or a human rule, HOW MUCH MORE ought we to alter our behavior to follow the commands of the true and living God (who is also our Savior!)?!

So,

- given all that you have received from God (life, salvation, forgiveness - and more!)... AND
- given all that God is (holy, all-powerful, loving -and more!)...

...what obediences have you been withholding from Him? What obediences are you now prepared to give to Him?

And the great news that accompanies the call to obedience? When we obey the Lord, He is genuinely pleased AND we are amply rewarded!

[Hebrews 11:6] And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.

¹⁷ The Mishnah reports that the “children of Jonadab son of Rechab” had a fixed day in the year for bringing wood for the altar of the temple.

¹⁸ There is also, though, the record of a man named Malchijah (of the Rechabite tribe) who helped repair the Dung Gate in the days of Nehemiah (3:14). He is said to be a ruler of the district of Beth-hakkerem (“the house of the vineyard”), indicating that perhaps he, at least, had forsaken the rule of the Rechabites regarding wine.