

# THE STORY OF THE RECHABITES

## BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

Jeremiah 35:1–19

## A VERSE TO REMEMBER

They drink [no wine] to this day, for they have obeyed their ancestor's command. (Jer. 35:14b)

Daily Bible Readings			
<b>M</b>	Oct. 13	Prov. 23:29–35	The Dangers of Strong Drink
<b>T</b>	Oct. 14	Eccl. 9:4–10	Keep Earthly Pleasures in Perspective
<b>W</b>	Oct. 15	Eph. 5:11–19	Be Filled with the Spirit
<b>Th</b>	Oct. 16	Num. 6:1–8	The Nazirite Vow
<b>F</b>	Oct. 17	1 Thess. 4:1–7	Called to Holiness
<b>Sa</b>	Oct. 18	1 Thess. 5:1–10	Keep Awake!

## STEPPING INTO THE WORD

This lesson's Scripture passage is likely one that you have never encountered. It is the story of how the prophet Jeremiah used an unusual group of people as a means to scold the Judeans. They were the Rechabites, and their origin story has its roots in a bloody era.

Generations before in Israel, the prophet Elisha anointed Jehu, a commander in the army of Ahab, as the new king of Israel (2 Kgs. 9:4–6). This was a great surprise, given that King Ahab was still alive and very much in power. He and his wife Jezebel had led one of the most ruthless regimes in history. The time had come for God to take action. Thus, Jehu was appointed to remove the whole royal family (v. 8).

Jehu apparently took to his new role with zeal. Second Kings 10 describes how he enlisted various leaders across Samaria to kill the sons of Ahab who had been entrusted into their care. Seventy males of various ages had been raised in foreign courts to protect them from local Israelite political threats, only to die at the hands of their guardians. Jehu heaped their heads outside his base at Jezreel and continued his slaughter of the rest of Ahab's family.



On his journey, Jehu “met Jehonadab son of Rechab coming to meet him” (v. 15). The two confirmed their friendship and apparently traveled together for the remainder of Jehu’s mission, to rid Israel of the Baal worship that Ahab institutionalized. We are told nothing else of Jehonadab (or Jonadab) until Jeremiah’s account.

*Holy God, we thank you for the gift of your holy word and for all the blessings in our lives. Help us to continue to grow into the people you would have us to be—a covenant community dedicated to you and you alone. Kindle such love in our hearts that our choices make clear our devotion to you. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.*



## SCRIPTURE

Jeremiah 35:5–11

**35:5** Then I set before the Rechabites pitchers full of wine and cups, and I said to them, “Have some wine.” <sup>6</sup>But they answered, “We will drink no wine, for our ancestor Jonadab son of Rechab commanded us, ‘You shall never drink wine, neither you nor your children, <sup>7</sup>nor shall you ever build a house or sow seed, nor shall you plant a vineyard or even own one, but you shall live in tents all your days, that you may live many days in the land where you reside.’ <sup>8</sup>We have obeyed the charge of our ancestor Jonadab son of Rechab in all that he commanded us, to drink no wine all our days, ourselves, our wives, our sons, or our daughters, <sup>9</sup>and not to build houses to live in. We have no vineyard or field or seed, <sup>10</sup>but we have lived in tents and have obeyed and done all that our ancestor Jonadab commanded us. <sup>11</sup>But when King Nebuchadrezzar 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 Arameans.’ That is why we are living in Jerusalem.”

*Note:* Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

## A DEDICATED PEOPLE

**I**n this lesson, Jeremiah encounters the Rechabites, who originally lived around 200 years earlier and were still living according to laws outlined by their ancestors. Apparently Jonadab (the Jehonadab of 2 Kings) had decreed that they should show their loyalty to the Lord, in part, through alcoholic abstinence. Perhaps in response to what he saw happening in his own time,



the leader also required the community to remain nomadic—they were not to build houses or engage in farming. Anything that would tie them to one location was forbidden. They were only in Jerusalem now because the outlying areas had become too unsafe due to the ongoing war with Babylon.

The background Scripture describes how Jeremiah, upon prompting from God, invited the Rechabites into a room where they were offered wine to drink. They stayed true to the rules of their community and refused to drink. This provided the prophet with another opportunity to chastise the people of Judah.

The description of the Rechabites may bring other Scripture passages to mind. For example, Samson was dedicated before his birth to be a Nazirite, which means “dedicated one” (Judg. 13:3–7). According to Numbers 6:1–21, Nazirites were men and women who made a special vow of dedication to God. This normally included a refusal to drink alcohol, cut their hair, or be in the presence of a corpse—and the vow was usually temporary. In addition, there are other scattered references in both Testaments to similar special vows. For example, the men that the apostle Paul joined for a special period of self-dedication were probably under short-term Nazirite vows (Acts 21:23–26).

God sent two messages through Jeremiah after the temple incident. The first was directed to the people of Judah. God pointed out the stark contrast between the Rechabites, who were faithful to the two-hundred-year-old commandment of their human ancestor, and the Judeans, who blatantly disregarded the commandments of their Lord. Punishment would come as the result of Judah’s disobedience. Second, God honored the Rechabites for their loyalty, promising that “Jonadab son of Rechab shall not lack a descendent to stand before me for all time” (Jer. 35:19).

Of course, obeying God is never meant to be unobliging obedience. We are expected to search our collective memory concerning God before we act. We are to determine as best we can whether our action will be pleasing to God. Sometimes new situations make it necessary to consider new responses. Prayer is always in order. What matters is that we do the best we know to do.

 **What are your thoughts about the Rechabites’ commitment to follow their leader’s guidance? What can you learn from them?**



## LIVING AS GOD'S COMMUNITY

The significance of this Scripture account relies heavily on understanding the covenant relationship between God and the Hebrew people. Exodus 19–23 contains the story of the people's call and commitment at Sinai, as well as the details of the instructions they are to follow. Within these texts, God offers a wonderful opportunity. If the people would accept and honor the covenant relationship, then through it they would become truly special. Indeed, they would be a “treasured possession” (19:5). They would also become “a priestly kingdom” (v. 6). This means they would be set apart to serve God in a specific way. Genesis 12:3 and 1 Peter 2:9 say this role was to be a blessing to other nations. Finally, they would be “a holy nation” (Exod. 19:6). They would be set apart to live a particular way—according to God's laws (see Lev. 19).

It may be helpful at this point to recall that the Hebrews saw the presentation of the law or teaching of God as a gift. The instructions were intended to show people how to live into the blessings of a right relationship with God and one another. Thus, Jesus sums up the heart of the law as loving God above all else and loving one's neighbor as oneself (Matt. 22:34–40; Mark 12:28–34; Luke 10:25–28). As the incarnation of these divine intents, Jesus models for us what it means to keep God's covenant and to be fully human.

Accordingly, response to God's law or teaching was intended to come from our gratitude for all God has done and our choice to put God first in all areas of our life. The word we translate as “obey”—with all the English connotations of being forced to do something, like it or not—actually carries the sense of “listen carefully to,” “pay attention to,” or “heed.” God has given wise and helpful instruction, and we benefit most when we take it seriously enough to follow it.

As we reflect on this passage, we do well to consider our choices. Will we follow God's ways, or do we prefer our own guide to life? It may sound mechanical or even childish to suggest that we constantly need to review God's teaching and try to follow it, yet this is the case. Each day, we have a choice as to whether we will try to be faithful to God or whether we will flout our freedom and turn away.



**Jeremiah referenced the behavior of non-Judean people to teach the Judeans how to honor God. What can we learn about obedience and devotion from non-Christian people?**



## STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

**W**ithin the Jewish community, then and now, the law serves as a guide to holy living and an invitation to renew the Mosaic covenant. Moment by moment, faithful people recommit to God by the choices they make.

Today's passage was chosen for study almost a hundred years ago. The designer of these lessons, the Committee on the Unified Lessons Series (CUS), celebrated 150 years of coordinating Bible studies for multiple denominations in 2022. Part of that celebration included crafting our 2025–2026 Scripture study cycle as an affectionately titled “Throwback Year.” Our lessons are based on those from 1929–1930 in an effort to highlight how the church of the twenty-first century approaches Scripture alongside (and in contrast to) the church almost a hundred years ago.

This provides insight into the selection of our Jeremiah text. The original 1929 lesson notes used Jeremiah 35 in support of temperance. Many commentators say that the chapter is not about total abstinence, however. Nowhere does Scripture condemn the use of alcohol—only its abuse and drunkenness. Housing and agriculture are certainly not forbidden, although the Rechabites eschewed them. Their way of life is not the point; their rules are not considered models for modern faithful living. The Rechabites' faithfulness and obedience to a command, in contrast to Judah's disobedience, is the point.

While traveling on a plane many years ago, I sat next to a Jewish gentleman who observed Kosher law. During a long flight over lunchtime, he discovered that his meal was missing due to a mistake in the system. I offered to share my meal if there was anything he was allowed to eat. His answer both astounded and educated me. “I am free to eat anything,” he replied, “I choose to eat only that which declares my loyalty to God.”

It is important to recognize the degree of our freedom. We are not free to do anything we want. It is easy to blame others or to feel as if we have no control over what happens to us. This can sometimes be the case, of course, but we *always* have a choice in how we respond to and within our circumstances. We are free, and within limits, we can make life-changing choices for good instead of bad. God grant that it be so!



**What are some obstacles to obeying God that you recognize in your own life? Which are easier to overcome? Which do you find more difficult?**



## SCRIPTURE NOTES

*The following notes from the Uniform Series provide additional information about today's Scripture.*

1. Jeremiah 30–33 emphasizes God's intention to build and plant Israel and Judah following impending judgment. Jeremiah 34–38 emphasizes God's purpose to pluck up and pull down Judah because they had turned from God and disregarded God's prophet, Jeremiah. The backdrop for 34–38 is the looming threat of Babylon. God is handing Jerusalem into Babylon's hands and fiery destruction (34:2).
2. The Rechabites are related to Midianites or Kenites, the in-laws of Moses' wife, Zipporah. Rechab was the father of Jehonadab (Jonadab). He supported Jehu (reigned 842–814 BCE) in his purge of the Baal prophets (2 Kgs. 10:15–28). The Rechabites lived as nomads, rejected all forms of urban and rural life, refused to drink wine or strong drink, and would not cultivate vineyards or plant any other crops. Jeremiah 35 encapsulates the complete obedience of the Rechabites by three verbs: obeyed, kept, done.
3. Obedience to the covenant is the appropriate response to God's deliverance. In Christ, God has called us to bear good fruit (Matt. 7:15–20; see Gal. 5:22–23), not for our salvation but as the effect of it.
4. Jeremiah 35 calls the church to inspect the character of its obedience in light of Jesus' words, "Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (Matt. 7:19).