

The Leaving of a Legacy - The Example of Jonadab and the Rechabites

pastorhugh@svbc.ab.ca / General Adult

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~ Jeremiah 35

Introduction

- Greetings!
- When I spoke on Mother's Day, I spoke on a rather unconventional mother — Rizpah.
- Later, I was told that come Father's Day, I need to do the same. I have risen to the challenge and have chosen to share on a rather obscure biblical father-figure.
- He is not someone who comes up in conversation. However, his impact, although not immediately obvious, was significant and long lasting.
- But before we get to our biblical character, I would like to begin with a question.
- Can you think of one thing that your father — or a father-figure in your life — taught you that was helpful and that you still carry with you today?
- My father was an electrician and was extremely handy. He taught me many things:
 - **How to wire a plug.** I remember him telling me that the word brown has the letter R in it, and so the brown wire goes on the right. The word blue has the letter L in it, and so the blue wire goes on the left. Ever since, when I would wire a plug, I did not need to look it up — I remembered the words of my father and knew where the wires needed to go.
 - **How to lay tiles.** I remember us re-tiling our passageway and bathrooms in the house. We chiselled out the old tiles, chipped and prepared the surface, mixed our concrete mix, and laid

our new tiles, as we listened to the latest album by the Counting Crows, *Recovering the Satellites*, which came out the year I graduated from high school.

- **How to weld.** I remember him teaching me how build jigs, to bend my decorative pieces, to square things up, to tack them together temporarily, and then to get to the actual task of welding. It is not a dragging motion but a zig-zagging motion. You are not bridging two things together, but melding the pieces of steel together. He had an old, oil-cooled arc-welding machine and one of those visors that were permanently pitch black. The only way you could see through it was by the arc of the welding rod. When I started, my welding rod was sticking to everything, I was burning holes in stuff, and the result was what my father referred to as chicken poop — a series of irregular, lumpy blobs piled on top of one another. But in time, I improved, and I was eventually even fixing his mistakes!
- **How to service a vehicle.** I remember him teaching me how to drain and replace the oil, change the spark plugs, change the oil and air filters, replace brake pads, change timing belts and timing belt tensioners, replace ball joints and CV joints. Just the other day, we visited the Benkes; when we arrived, Dave was out in the garage, working on a vehicle, and I thought, “I am with my people!” One of the first services I did on my own car went pretty badly, where I cross-threaded a spark plug. My father calmly fetched his tap and die set, tapped out the threads, and said, “Next time, finger-tight first, then use the wrench.”
- What is truly amazing is how you carry these pieces of information with you. Just last week, I took delivery of my new scooter, and as I was attaching the handlebars, I remembered the words of my father. “Finger-tight first!”

- And so it is that we come to a father-figure in the bible who instilled something in his children that they not only carried with them, but handed down for multiple generations.
- This father-figure is Jonadab, and while the bible has very little to say about him directly, we see the impact of his life and influence playing out quite significantly in [Jeremiah 35](#).
- As you turn there, allow me to provide some background.

Background

- In [Jeremiah 35](#), we see mention being made of the house of the Rechabites.
- The Rechabites were a branch of the Kenites, a pietistic and nomadic Midianite tribe descended from Jethro, Moses' father in law. Although they were not technically ethnic Israelites, they were not a foreign people. Rather, they were an established community within the Israelite nation, with a distinct identity.
- The patriarch of the Rachabite clan was Rechab, although the most significant figure from the clan was the son of Rechab — Jonadab — also referred to as Jehonadab.
- He appears in [2 Kings 10](#) as a fierce devotee of Yahweh in a time of rampant paganism.
- He teamed up with Jehu, whom God had charged through the prophet Elijah, to overthrow the house of Ahab and eliminate the prophets of Baal from Israel.
- Apart from his part in supporting Jehu, Jonadab is noteworthy for instituting a strict, ascetic lifestyle for his family. We do not have an account of him actually instituting this code in the bible. We only learn about it in retrospect, when we get to Jeremiah.
- The code was as follows:
 - Never drink wine.

- Never build houses (live only in tents).
- Never plant fields or vineyards.
- The reasons for this code will become apparent a little later.
- Now, fast-forward 250 years, to the time of Jeremiah.
- The Rechabites had migrated from the northern kingdom of Israel to the southern kingdom of Judah.
- The Babylonian empire, led by Nebuchadnezzar, was sweeping through the region.
- Out of absolute necessity for physical survival, the Rechabites are forced to break one of their rules: **they flee the open country and take refuge inside the walled city of Jerusalem.**
- It is here that God orchestrates their encounter with the prophet Jeremiah.

Jeremiah 35:1-5 ESV

¹ The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD in the days of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah: ² “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.” ³ So 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 I brought them to 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, above the chamber of Maaseiah the son of Shallum, keeper of the threshold. ⁵ Then I set before the Rechabites pitchers full of wine, and cups, and I said to them, “Drink wine.”

Jeremiah 35:6–11 ESV

⁶ But they answered, “We will drink no wine, for Jonadab the son of Rechab, our father, commanded us, ‘You shall not drink wine, neither you nor your sons forever. ⁷ 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.’ ⁸ 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, or our daughters, ⁹ and not to build houses to dwell in. We have no vineyard or field or seed, ¹⁰ but we have lived in tents and have obeyed and done all that Jonadab our father commanded us. ¹¹ 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 are living in Jerusalem.”

Jeremiah 35:12–16 ESV

¹² Then the word of the LORD came to [Jeremiah](#): ¹³ “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. ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ I have sent to you all my servants the prophets, sending them persistently, saying, ‘Turn now every one of you from his evil way, and amend your deeds, and do not go after other gods to serve them, and then you shall dwell in the land that I gave to you and your fathers.’ But you did not incline your ear or listen to me. ¹⁶

The sons of Jonadab the son of Rechab have kept the command that their father gave them, but this people has not obeyed me.

Jeremiah 35:17–19 ESV

¹⁷ 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 pronounced against them, because I have spoken to them and they have not listened, I have called to them and they have not answered.”

¹⁸ 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, ¹⁹ therefore thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Jonadab the son of Rechab shall never lack a man to stand before me.”

- What we have here is an enacted parable.
- God publicly contrasts two things. He is contrasting:
 - Himself and Jonadab as the fathers of two people groups.
 - The people groups themselves — the people of Judah and this pietistic, nomadic clan.
- Through the parable, God demonstrates how far the people of God were from ideal and He provides a basis for the judgment that He was about to bring about, in the form of the Babylonian exile.
- But there are 3 things in the passage that stand out to me.

1. The setting

- I find the setting where God chose for this object lesson to play out to be quite interesting.

- It is not like the Rechabites were out in the fields. At this stage in history, they were inside the city walls.
- God could have chosen for the offer of wine to be made in a public space.
- Instead, He chose for the offer to be made inside the temple.
- This choice was not arbitrary.
- The temple was at the centre of Jewish religious life and the chamber that was chosen was situated near the official's quarters, in the upper reaches of the temple structure.
- The temple chambers is where priestly families and royal officials conducted business or shared sacrificial meals. It was an environment where wine consumption would have been entirely normal and socially expected.
- By conducting the test in this setting, God does two things:
 - First, He places the Rechabites in a position where they would face maximum social and religious pressure to compromise. The choice of setting amplifies the contrast. If they had been offered wine elsewhere, the test would have lacked the symbolic weight.
 - Second, He ensures that this the test, and the results thereof, would be witnessed not just by the public but by the religious leaders of the day.
- The Rechabites' unwavering fidelity became a living rebuke, not just to Judah but to those religious leaders who claimed to worship God yet ignored His prophetic word.
- There is a lesson in this for us.
- Are we prepared to hold to our convictions, even under social pressure?

- The fact that the Rechabites did this was testament to how strongly and how deeply embedded the code was that had been instituted by Jonadab.
- Are we, as fathers, instilling things in our kids that will hold up in a progressively liberal social and religious climate?
- This brings me to the 2nd standout element in the text.

2. The code

- When Jeremiah offers them wine, they refuse on the grounds that Jonadab had given a set of commands:
 - No wine.
 - No houses (only tents).
 - No planting of anything.
- Now, I do not know about you, but I was curious to know why this specific set of commands.
- While no explicit rationale appears in the biblical text, we can infer that Jonadab had become repulsed by the corruption and immorality he was witnessing in urban civilisation.
- If is true, then his code wasn't just a random lifestyle choice. It was a calculated, **anti-empire, counter-cultural manifesto**. By refusing to do the things that regular urbanites were doing, the Rechabites ensured they could never be tied down, taxed, or corrupted by the idolatrous, urban systems of the day.
- In short, his code served to insulate his people from the rot he was seeing going on around him.

- Notice that we are not talking about isolation but insulation. The Rechabites were semi-nomadic, living somewhat separated from but not entirely isolated from the Jewish nation. They were always within close proximity.
- Again, there is a lesson in here for us.
- What are we doing to safeguard our children from social rot?
- What principles are we instilling in them to ensure that they are able to make a stand for themselves 20 or 200 years from now?
- The benefits of those insulating principles that Jonadab initiated were most significantly realised some 250-odd years later.
- This brings me to the 3rd standout element in the text.

3. The consequence

- Following the prophecy of Jeremiah, Nebuchadnezzar besieged the city of Jerusalem.
- The destruction was catastrophic.
- The Babylonian army burned the house of the Lord and all the houses of Jerusalem and those who escaped the sword were carried into exile, where they became slaves until the rise of the Persians.
- The Rechabites, it seems, were spared this judgment.
- As far as I can tell, they were spared for 2 reasons:
 - Firstly, their ascetic practices—rejecting the ways of the urbanites—paradoxically protected them. Unlike the settled population of Judah, who were trapped in cities during

Nebuchadnezzar's siege and subsequently exiled, the Rechabites could flee before the armies arrived.

- Secondly, God honoured their faithfulness and provided them covenant protection.

Conclusion

- I began this morning by asking if you can think of one thing that your father — or a father-figure in your life — taught you that was helpful and that you still carry with you today?
- I would like to conclude by asking another question: can you think of one thing that you wish your father — or a father figure — would have taught you?
- My father contracted bladder cancer in his late 60's.
- The mass was removed but the cancer metastasised and spread up his spine, leaving him paralysed.
- Over the span of a year, we watched him waste away, until I could carry him like a little child.
- It was my great privilege to be able to bath him, cut his hair and nails, and shave his beard.
- But I remember one instance near the end where I was alone with him in his hospital room.
- He said, "I wonder if the Lord is punishing me for what I did in the war."
- (My father fought in the Rhodesian war.).
- I appreciated the opportunity of sharing with him from [Romans 13](#), which teaches us to submit to those in power because all authority ultimately derives from God.
- But if there was one thing I wish he had taught me, it would have been how to deal practically with the problem of pain. I have worked it out philosophically, in my head. But there is a difference between understanding pain and living through it.

- And that, I guess, is the practical take-away this morning.
- How can we follow the example of Jonadab and leave a legacy that will last for centuries?
- What are the gaps you see and what can you do to insulate your children for the future?