

# OpenTheo

## February 5th: Jeremiah 35 & 2 Corinthians 2:12–3:18

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The lesson of the Rechabites. The glory of the new covenant.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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## Transcript

Jeremiah chapter 35. The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord in the days of Jehoiakim, the son of Jeziel, 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 Jeazaniah, the son of Jeremiah, son of Hebaniah, and his brothers, and all his sons, and the whole house of the Rechabites. I brought them to the house of the Lord, into the chamber of the sons of Hanan, the son of Igbariah, the man of God, which was near the chamber of the officials, above the chamber of Measeah, the son of Shalom, keeper of the threshold. 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 you nor 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. 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, 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 are 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 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.

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 pronounced 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 of hosts, the God of Israel, Jonadab, the son of Rechab, shall never lack a man to stand before me. Although it dates from a period much earlier in the ministry of Jeremiah, from the period of the reign of King Jehoiakim, chapter 35 of Jeremiah should be juxtaposed with the chapter that precedes it. The people's breaking of the covenant of emancipation under Zedekiah should be contrasted with the way that the Rechabites kept the command of their father.

The events of the chapter occur during the days of King Jehoiakim the son of Jeziel. More specifically in verse 11 we find that it was during a period when King Nebuchadnezzar came up against the land. Dating this can be a challenge as Jeremiah was barred from the temple courts for a period of time.

Yet we also have to relate it to a period in which Nebuchadnezzar was threatening the land and also was accompanied by the Syrians. We have some reference to this back in 2 Kings chapter 24 verses 1-2. In his days Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came up and Jehoiakim became his servant for three years.

Then he turned and rebelled against him. And the Lord sent against him bands of the Chaldeans and bands of the Syrians and bands of the Moabites and bands of the Ammonites and sent them against Judah to destroy it according to the word of the Lord that he spoke by his servants the prophets. Although there seem to have been raids back in 599-598 BC Nebuchadnezzar does not seem to have come up against Jerusalem himself until the following year.

It seems that either these events date from that later period or from the earlier period around 604 BC a period when Jeremiah would still have had access to the temple courts. Jeremiah is instructed by the Lord to go to the house of the Rechabites and speak to them, bring them to the house of the Lord and offer them wine to drink. The house of the Rechabites is not a building, it is the family of the Rechabites.

From 1 Chronicles chapter 2 verse 55 we learn that the Rechabites were descendants of the Kenites. The Kenites were a people associated with Jethro Moses' father-in-law. The Kenites, at least for some period of time, seemed to have continued a nomadic existence in the south of Judah in the Negev.

The family of the Rechabites, however, seemed to have been in a different location. Jehonadab, who is mentioned here, was a subject of the northern kingdom of Israel in the 9th century BC. Our encounter with him is in 2 Kings chapter 10 verse 15.

And when he departed from there he met Jehonadab the son of Rechab coming to meet him. And he greeted him and said to him, Is your heart true to my heart as mine is to yours? And Jehonadab answered, It is. Jehu said, If it is, give me your hand.

So he gave him his hand, and Jehu took him up with him into the chariot. Jehonadab, or Jonadab, accompanies Jehu as he strikes down the remainder of the house of Ahab in the city of Samaria. Jeremiah is instructed by the Lord to present a test to the people of the house of the Rechabites.

He gathers the whole of the household together in a side chamber of the house of the Lord, the chamber of the sons of Hanan, perhaps a place where they stored wine. Around the main temple structure there was a large series of side chambers that would have been used for storage for various events and feasts, as places for royal use, and for a number of other purposes. These side chambers were part of a structure with three stories that is described back in 1 Kings chapter 6 verses 5 to 6. He also built a structure against the wall of the house running around the walls of the house, both the nave and the inner sanctuary, and he made side chambers all around.

The lowest story was five cubits broad, the middle one was six cubits broad, and the third was seven cubits broad. For around the outside of the house he made offsets on the wall in order that the supporting beams should not be inserted into the walls of the house. Jeremiah sets before the Rechabites pictures of wine and cups, and tells them to drink wine.

The response of the Rechabites is to refuse. Their ancestor Jonadab had committed them to a particular form of life. They would not drink wine, they would not build a house, they would not sow seed, they would not plant or have a vineyard, and they would live in tents all of their days.

They had been committed to a semi-nomadic existence. Their presence in Jerusalem at this time is explained in verse 11 by the fact that Nebuchadnezzar has come up against the land. There is no reason to believe that while they are within Jerusalem they are doing anything other than continuing the way that their father committed them to.

If they had not been doing so, it would be strange indeed for Jeremiah and the Lord to single them out as an example to Judah. Perhaps it is their noteworthy presence in the city and the comments and discussions that they naturally would have provoked among the inhabitants that makes them such fitting examples for Jeremiah's message. The Rechabites as one respond to Jeremiah.

They recount the commandment of their ancestor Jonadab, and then they make a corresponding statement that expresses their observance of each one of his stipulations. The command-observance pattern is encountered on a number of occasions in scripture, perhaps most notably in the description of the construction of the tabernacle at the end of the book of Exodus. The Lord gives the instructions of how everything needs to be made, and then in great detail we hear how each one of those instructions was obeyed.

The significance of the Rechabites' obedience to their father Jonadab is not to be found in any of the specific stipulations. It is not the case that people need to be abstinent from wine, even though this might remind us of the vow of the Nazarites, nor was there anything necessarily more holy in their observance of a semi-nomadic lifestyle. The importance is to contrast their filial piety and obedience of their father Jonadab with Israel's failure to obey the word of the Lord.

Nevertheless, this passage does raise some interesting questions about the place that we should give to extra-biblical customs that families and peoples and groups can adopt, customs that may be connected with their expression of their faith in some way. We might think here of monastic communities, or perhaps a more fitting comparison would be with a group like the Amish. Participants in such communities of discipline may find that they are strengthened in their own expression of faith within that structure.

We might also find in such communities exemplars and models to which the church more

broadly can look. This is certainly part of the role that the Rechabites seem to be playing here. While such observances should not be presumed to have some supererogatory value, as if they earned people a special favour before God, or to bind the conscience in a way that usurps the prerogative that belongs to the word of God alone, it does not mean that they are without great value.

After having presented this test to the Rechabites, Jeremiah is instructed to bring the word of the Lord to the people. Israel's whole identity as a people was supposed to be premised upon their commitment to hear the word of the Lord and to obey it, and they had failed in their most basic vocation as a people. The Rechabites, by contrast, in their filial piety, presented a far greater commitment to obedience than Israel did in their relationship to their God.

Jonadab had delivered this instruction to his family many years ago, and they seem to have kept it for almost two centuries. By contrast, Israel is failing to obey the word that the Lord has delivered to them, not just at Sinai, but repeatedly through the prophets. Time after time he sends the prophets to them, persistently he warns them of the consequences of not hearing, and holds out the promise of continued life in the land.

The Rechabites obey the words of their father, but Israel, the firstborn son of the Lord, has disobeyed his word. The fifth commandment concerns such obedience. Honour your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

In Exodus chapter 20 verse 12. The failure of Judah and the people of Jerusalem to obey the word of the Lord meant that disaster would come upon them. They would be cut off from the land.

Their fate, however, is contrasted with that of the Rechabites. The house of the Rechabites is blessed on account of their obedience of the command of their father. Their scrupulous obedience of his commandments and honouring of his words means that they will live long in the land.

Jonadab will never lack a man to stand before him. They have received the promised blessing of the fifth commandment. A question to consider.

What are some of the benefits and the potential dangers of communities such as the Rechabites? What modern day examples can we think of that might be comparable to them? And what lessons could we learn from them? First Corinthians chapter 2 verse 12 to chapter 3 verse 18. When I came to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ, even though a door was opened for me in the Lord, my spirit was not at rest because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I took leave of them and went on to Macedonia.

But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through

us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are the aroma of Christ to God, among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing. To one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life.

Who is sufficient for these things? For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God's word, but as men of sincerity as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ. Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you or from you? You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts to be known and read by all. And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink, but with the spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone, but on tablets of human hearts.

Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the spirit. For the letter kills, but the spirit gives life.

Now if the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone, came with such glory that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses' face because of its glory, which was being brought to an end, will not the ministry of the spirit have even more glory? For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, the ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory. Indeed, in this case, what once had glory has come to have no glory at all because of the glory that surpasses it. For if what was being brought to an end came with glory, much more will what is permanent have glory.

Since we have such a hope, we are very bold, not like Moses who would put a veil over his face so that the Israelites might not gaze at the outcome of what was being brought to an end. But their minds were hardened, for to this day when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away. Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their hearts, but when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed.

Now the Lord is the spirit, and where the spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another, for this comes from the Lord who is the spirit. Our passage, which begins at the end of chapter 2 of 2nd Corinthians, starts with an image of Christ as a victorious Roman general leading a triumphal procession.

Paul and his fellow missionaries are like willing captives following in the train of the victorious Christ, like the incense that would accompany such a victory procession. Paul and his fellow missionaries are like the aroma of the knowledge of Christ, diffused wherever they go, both among those who reject and among those who accept the message. The aroma of the knowledge of Christ also ascends to God, bringing the sweet smell of Christ to him, like the sacrifices of the old covenant.

This aroma has a dual effect upon human beings, for some it produces life as they respond in faith, while for others it yields death as they reject it. Paul expresses how serious and weighty his ministry is here. He recognises that such a ministry is beyond human sufficiency.

It is God alone who is the sufficiency of Paul and his companions for their work. In 2nd Corinthians 3.1-4.6, Paul provides a deftly theological and richly intertextual defence of his apostolic credentials, which seem to have been called into question by his opponents at points. To anyone who might suggest that he needs letters of recommendation, Paul counters with the fact that the Corinthian church itself is his letter of recommendation.

It is a letter written by Christ himself on tablets of flesh rather than on tablets of stone. This alludes to the new covenant theme of God's writing on human hearts and replacing stone with flesh. In Jeremiah 31.31-34, and in Ezekiel 36.26-27, This supports Paul's reference to himself and his missionary companions as ministers of the new covenant, of the life-giving spirit rather than of the death-dealing law.

Richard Hayes observes of this. Paul's intertextual trope hints, in brief, that in the new covenant, incarnation eclipses inscription. The new covenant is enfleshed rather than inscribed, and its ministry centres not on texts but on the spirit-empowered transformation of human community.

Paul is not challenging scripture itself here. For Paul, scripture is a dynamically living and life-giving word. Rather, he is challenging any ministry that is merely one of a disembodied text, without the power to effect transformation.

To elaborate his case, Paul turns to Exodus 24 as a passage that provides a powerful illustration of the nature of the glory of the old covenant. In Exodus 34.29-35, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone, because he had been talking with God. Aaron and all the people of Israel saw Moses, and behold the skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to come near him.

But Moses called to them, and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses talked with them. Afterward all the people of Israel came near, and he commanded them all that the Lord had spoken with him in Mount Sinai. And when Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil over his face.

Whenever Moses went in before the Lord to speak with him, he would remove the veil, until he came out. And when he came out, and told the people of Israel what he was commanded, the people of Israel would see the face of Moses, that the skin of Moses' face was shining. And Moses would put the veil over his face again, until he went in to speak with him.

The old covenant and its ministry were not without glory. The face of Moses, the great

mediator of the old covenant, radiated with such dazzling reflected glory, that the Israelites could not bear to gaze at it. However this reflected old covenant glory pales in comparison with the surpassing glory of the new covenant.

The temporary and transitory glory of the old covenant is now being eclipsed by the enduring glory of the new. Even if a ministry of condemnation displayed such glory, the ministry of new covenant righteousness should be expected to exhibit an overwhelming splendor. Paul writes that Moses covered his countenance with a veil, so that the children of Israel could not look steadily at the end or the telos of what was transitory.

The term telos has been taken by many to refer to the cessation of the supposedly fading glory of Moses' face. When Richard Hayes argues that we should interpret the term as referring rather to the goal or the purpose of the transitory covenant, he re-words Paul's argument in the passage as follows. The old covenant then was a covenant of veils, hiding the glory of God, the veil of Moses, the veil of the tabernacle, the veil upon the law.

The ministry of Moses, both the man and the text, was one of concealment, providing only glimpses of the glory that it harboured. The glory was present but was not manifest. The new covenant is a covenant of the removal of veils, the removal of the veil of the temple, the removal of the veil upon the text, and the unveiling of God's glory face in Jesus Christ.

It is also characterised by openness. What was formerly hidden and concealed is now declared freely. Paul's use of Moses in this chapter is a phenomenally dexterous deployment of biblical metaphor.

It's a juxtaposition of similarity and dissimilarity to considerable illuminative effect. While drawing a sharp contrast between old and new covenant and their respective ministries, the brilliance of Paul's argument is seen in the way that he discloses the deep affinity between Moses and the new covenant, presenting Moses as a witness to the glory of Christ, anticipating the unveiling to come. As Paul's argument unfolds, we begin to see that, while Moses may be a symbol of veiling, more fundamentally he is a symbol of unveiling, a point that surfaces in verse 16.

Moses' act of entering God's presence and removing the veil becomes paradigmatic for the experience of Christian believers. We all, who with unveiled face look upon the reflected glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory. However, what was intermittently experienced by Moses in the old covenant is fundamentally and enduringly characteristic of the new.

When Moses turned to the Lord, this is an allusion to chapter 34 of Exodus verses 34-35, he removed the veil from his face. While the precise reference of the Lord might seem to be ambivalent here, without clear Christological meaning, in light of Paul's description of



Christ in the verses that follow, the glory of Christ who is the image of God, the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ etc, I believe it's not inappropriate to give it full Christological weight. That is to say, Paul may be suggesting here that the one whose glory Moses saw was Christ himself.

Paul's use of Exodus chapter 34 then is not just a clever allegorical repurposing of the Old Testament text to illustrate a theological point, but is justified by the deep reality shared by Moses and new covenant believers. The glory that Moses saw was the glory face of the Son, the glory face that has been disclosed in Jesus Christ. As with Moses, those who turn to Christ in repentance and faith are transfigured by the sight of his glory, with the effect of renewing them into his image.

Meredith Klein has written, is described according to various figurative models appropriate to Christ's identity, either a spirit lord or a second Adam. Man's reception of the divine image from Christ, the glory presence, is depicted as a transforming vision of the glory and as an investiture with the glory. Moses is the Old Testament model for the former and Aaron for the latter.

Beholding the sinny eye revelation of the glory face transformed the face of Moses so that he reflectively radiated the divine glory. So we, beholding the glory of the spirit lord, are transformed into the same image. The end or the telos of the old covenant was the glorious renewal and transfiguration of humanity in the image and likeness of God.

Moses manifested this glory quite visually, but he had to veil it for a people who weren't ready for it. In Christ we see both transfigured humanity and the glory face of God himself, which is the telos of all previous revelation. There is a pivotal move in Paul's argument in verse 14, which Hayes describes as follows.

In verse 13, Moses is the prophet and lawgiver who veils his own face. In verse 15, Moses is the sacred text read in the synagogue. The single intervening transitional sentence tells us that the veil over the minds of the readers is the same veil that Moses put on his face.

How can that be so? Because Moses the metaphor is both man and text and the narrative of the man's self-veiling is at the same time a story about the veiling of the text. A crucial implication of this is that the veiled glory of Moses is not just the glory of Moses the man, but also the glory of the Old Testament scriptures that he stands for. Although Paul's earlier contrast between inscription and incarnation may have led some readers to expect that he was about to associate scripture with the veil concealing the transfigured humanity, he makes the critical move of associating scripture not with the veil, but with the glorious face of Moses that lay beneath it.

Having carefully developed the multi-layered metaphor of the veiled Moses, Paul's stage is now set for the dramatic unveiling. Richard Hayes remarks again, In other words, Paul

uses the example of Moses' veiled face as a text that can be unveiled to show us the glory of Christ beneath. Paul's argument, which has been steadily building throughout the chapter, now erupts into a magnificent crescendo.

The face of Moses, the face of the law, is no longer veiled when he turns, or when we turn to the Spirit Lord, the giver of liberty. For those who turn to Christ in repentance and faith, the scripture is now seen to be the mirror in which we perceive the glory of the Lord. Through gazing steadfastly at the glory revealed in that mirror, we ourselves are transformed into the likeness of the one revealed there by the Spirit of Christ, from glory to glory. As our reading of scripture is transformed in this new covenant manner, we ourselves are transformed by our reading, to bear the same image of the glory of Christ that we perceive within its mirror.

The telos, or the purpose of the scripture, the transformation of humanity, is thereby achieved in us as the veil is removed from our hearts, enabling us to perceive the glory of the Lord that fills it. The figural and Christological reading of scripture that Paul exemplifies here involves a sort of transfiguration of the text, as the glory of the Lord is encountered within it. What had formerly been veiled is disclosed and opened up in Christ, revealing his radiance throughout all its pages.

The mirror of God's glory precedes a greater revelation yet to come, when we will see Christ face to face. The transformation that we currently experience is a partial one, it's produced by a mediated encounter, it will be surpassed by the direct vision which it anticipates and promises. Seeing Christ himself will be the means of our transformation, as 1st John chapter 3 verse 2 says, There are times in our experience when we witness something truly and arrestingly beautiful, some natural sight for instance that takes our breath away, or a piece of music that is truly remarkable and transcendent.

And on those occasions we are transfigured by the beauty that we witness, our faces open up, cynicism, fear and doubt and distrust wash away, and we light up with joy, awe, wonder, hope and love, and we start to see things around us in a very different light, with a radiant glow to them. This is but a limited illustration of the way that we will be transfigured when we see the glory of Christ himself. It gives us the faintest glimpse of the great transfiguration that awaits humanity and all the creation in the age to come.

And all of this is produced by the Spirit, who communicates a freedom from God to us. A question to consider, what are some of the ways in which Paul discloses the intense interrelation between the messengers of the gospel, the content of the gospel, and the recipients of the gospel in this passage?