Let us turn to the word of God, the book of the prophet Jeremiah, chapters 34 and 35. We've come to a portion now for the next five chapters, which is largely narrative. So, I'm going to use *‘The Living Bible’,* which is a little easier to listen to a narrative; so, I'm sorry if you brought another Bible and will find it difficult to follow.

Jeremiah 34 and 35. *This is the message that came to Jeremiah from the Lord when Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, and all his armies from all the kingdoms he ruled, came and fought against Jerusalem and the cities of Judah:*

*“Go tell* ***ZEDEKIAH****, king of Judah, that the Lord says this: ‘I will give this city to the king of Babylon and he shall burn it. You shall not escape; you shall be captured and taken before the king of Babylon; he shall pronounce sentence against you and you shall be exiled to Babylon. But listen to this, O Zedekiah, king of Judah: God says you won’t be killed in war and carnage, but that you will die quietly among your people, and they will burn incense in your memory, just as they did for your fathers. They will weep for you and say, “Alas, our king is dead!” This I have decreed, says the Lord.’”*

*So, Jeremiah delivered the message to King Zedekiah. At this time the Babylonian army was* ***BESIEGING JERUSALEM****,* ***LACHISH****, and* ***AZEKAH****—the only walled cities of Judah still standing.*

*This is the message that came to Jeremiah from the Lord after King Zedekiah of Judah had freed all the slaves in Jerusalem— (for King Zedekiah had ordered everyone to free his Hebrew slaves, both men and women. He had said that no Jew should be the master of another Jew for all were brothers. The princes and all the people had obeyed the king’s command and freed their slaves, but the action was only* ***TEMPORARY****. They changed their minds and made their servants* ***SLAVES*** *again. That is why the Lord gave the following message to Jerusalem.)*

*“The Lord, the God of Israel, says: ‘I made a covenant with your fathers long ago when I brought them from their slavery in Egypt. I told them that* ***EVERY HEBREW SLAVE*** *must be* ***FREED*** *after serving six years. But this was not done. Recently you began doing what was right, as I commanded you, and freed your slaves. You had solemnly promised me in my Temple that you would do it. But now you* ***REFUSE*** *and have* ***DEFILED MY NAME*** *by shrugging off your oath and have made them slaves again.*

*‘Therefore,’ says the Lord, ‘because you* ***WILL******NOT LISTEN TO ME*** *and release them, I will release you to the power of death by* ***WAR*** *and* ***FAMINE*** *and* ***DISEASE****. And I will* ***SCATTER*** *you over all the world as* ***EXILES****. Because you have refused the terms of our contract, I will cut you apart just as you cut apart the calf when you walked between its halves to solemnize your vows. Yes, I will butcher you, whether you are princes, court officials, priests, or people—for you have* ***BROKEN YOUR OATH****. I will give you to your enemies, and they shall kill you. I will feed your dead bodies to the vultures and wild animals. And I will surrender Zedekiah, king of Judah, and his officials to the army of the king of Babylon, though he has departed from the city for a little while. I will summon the Babylonian armies back again, and they will fight against it and* ***CAPTURE*** *this city and* ***BURN*** *it. And I will see to it that the cities of Judah are completely destroyed and left* ***DESOLATE*** *without a living soul.’”*

*This is the message the Lord gave Jeremiah when Jehoiakim (son of Josiah) was the king of Judah: “Go to the settlement where the families of the* ***RECHABITES*** *live and invite them to the Temple. Take them into one of the inner rooms and offer them a drink of wine.”*

*So, I went over to see Jaazaniah (son of Jeremiah, who was the son of Habazziniah) and brought him and all his brothers and sons—representing all the Rechab families— to the Temple, into the room assigned for the use of the sons of Hanan the prophet (the son of Igdaliah). This room was located next to the one used by the palace official, directly above the room of Maaseiah (son of Shallum), who was the Temple doorman. I set cups and jugs of wine before them and invited them to have a drink, but they* ***REFUSED****.*

*“No,” they said. “We don’t drink, for Jonadab our father (son of Rechab) commanded that none of us should ever drink, neither we nor our children forever. He also told us not to build houses or plant crops or vineyards and not to own farms, but always to live in tents; and that if we* ***OBEYED****, we would live long, good lives in our own land. And we have* ***OBEYED*** *him in all these things. We have never had a drink of wine since then, nor have our wives or our sons or daughters either. We haven’t built houses or owned farms or planted crops. We have lived in tents and have fully* ***OBEYED*** *everything that Jonadab our father commanded us. But when Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, arrived in this country, we were afraid and decided to move to Jerusalem. That’s why we are here.”*

*Then the Lord gave this message to Jeremiah: “The Lord, the God of Israel, says: ‘Go and say to Judah and Jerusalem, “Won’t you learn a* ***LESSON*** *from the families of Rechab? They don’t drink because their father told them not to. But I have spoken to you again and again, and* ***YOU WON’T LISTEN OR OBEY****. I have sent you prophet after prophet to tell you to turn back from your wicked ways and to stop worshiping other gods, and that if you* ***OBEYED****, then I would let you live in peace here in the land I gave to you and your fathers. But you wouldn’t* ***LISTEN*** *or* ***OBEY****. The families of Rechab have* ***OBEYED*** *their father completely, but you have* ***REFUSED*** *to listen to me. Therefore, the Lord God of Heaven’s armies, the God of Israel, says: Because you* ***REFUSE*** *to listen or answer when I call, I will send upon Judah and Jerusalem all the evil I have ever threatened.”’”*

*Then Jeremiah turned to the* ***RECHABITES*** *and said: “The Lord of the armies of Heaven, says that because you have* ***OBEYED*** *your father in every respect, he shall* ***ALWAYS*** *be favorable to his descendants.”*

***Theme of These Chapters: Know God and Obey Him***

From chapter 34 onwards, we have a series of narratives---events from Jeremiah's life. And at first sight it looks as if someone has just jumbled them all together and gone round interviewing his friends, and just put in a big bag everything that he could pick up about Jeremiah's life. There's no ***CHRONJOLOGICAL*** order. For example, we read chapters 34 and 35, yet 35 occurred 17 years ***BEFORE*** chapter 34. And those who study Jeremiah expecting to find a straight biography get very confused. The order of events is not chronological but ***LOGICAL*** and the events are very carefully chosen and edited to highlight ***THEMES*** and ***TOPICS***. And as it happens, most of the chapters we have in our divided Bible go in PAIRS. And that's why I'm taking pairs of chapters on Sunday morning---not to try and rush you, but because they belong together and are on the same theme. In this case, the theme is chapter 34: ***DISOBEDIENCE TO GOD'S COMMAND***. And the theme of chapter 35---taken from 17 years earlier---is the theme of ***OBEDIENCE TO MAN'S COMMAND***. And the ***LESSON*** we are going to draw out this morning is that there is an extraordinary quirk in our human nature which is more ready to obey ***HUMAN CUSTOM*** than ***DIVINE COMMANDMENT***. And it applies to every one of us in this church. And so, we come under the tyranny of ***TRADITION*** instead of the liberty of ***TRUTH***. We come under the ***POWER OF PRECEDENT*** instead of the ***POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT***. And it's a weakness in all of us and we're going to see the contrast drawn out in these two chapters. But the ***THEME*** is that unmentionable four-letter word ***'OBEY'***.

Now, there are ***TWO STAGES*** in forming a relationship with someone. The ***FIRST*** is to know about them, to ***HEAR ABOUT THEM***---to find out their name, where they live, what they do, and all sorts of details like that. And you may hear about things they have done and said, and have some idea of their character. ***THEN*** comes the moment (the ***SECOND STAGE***) when you step into their life, or they step into yours, and you not only know ***ABOUT*** them, but you ***KNOW*** them.

Now, both stages are essential to ***KNOWING GOD*** too; and one of the reasons for studying events that happened 3000 years ago (or a little under 2,500 years ago) ... one of the important reasons for doing this is that this is ***ABOUT GOD***, and what he ***SAID*** and how he ***FELT*** and how he ***REACTED***. It's to help you to know about ***HIM***. That's the whole purpose of reading this book. That's why it makes you ***WISE*** to salvation, because you know ***ABOUT*** God. But if you don't take the ***NEXT STEP*** and then step into God's life, or have him step into yours, then you'll know more and more ***ABOUT GOD***, but you'll never get to ***KNOW HIM***. In fact, I'll give you a simple illustration. You know that about 14 days ago, I had an afternoon with the Archbishop of Canterbury. I'd never met him before. I've heard a lot about him. I've heard what he said. I've heard stories about him, personal stories from friends. Dear Lindsay Blake used to tell me quite a lot about him, when he was a young man. But last week or the week before last, I ***KNEW*** him. And we chatted together about many things. And the relationship became real.

Now, it's ***ONE THING*** to study what happened to Jeremiah ... way, way before Christ. And it's ***ANOTHER THING*** to take what God said to him and ***APPLY IT TO YOURSELF***, and say, "God, you're the same God today. Therefore, what you said to ***HIM*** you're saying to ***ME***. And I want to be involved in this thing." And so, we're going to study ***ABOUT GOD*** this morning. But unless you take what I say, and you take it into your own life and let him say it to ***YOU***, in your situation, then you don't ***KNOW*** him. You only know a little more ***ABOUT*** him.

***The Historical Context***

Now, having said that, let's get right into the particular ***TIME*** and ***PLACE*** in which God said these words. The historical background is important and though history can be boring, I'm so thrilled that the ***BIBLE ALONE***---among all the sacred scriptures around the world, whether it's the Koran, the Holy Vedas or whatever it is---this book ***ALONE*** is a book of ***HISTORY***. It's a book which ties God down to the ***PARTICULAR***. It's been called a *'scandal of particularity'*. All other religious books are ***GENERAL*** truths. They're not tied down to real life. They are ***PLATITUDES***, they're ***CLICHES***, they're ***JARGON***. They state philosophical ideals. This book says, "At such and such a time and at such and such a place, ***GOD SAID***, and ***GOD DID***." And that's ***FACT***. And I can take that fact and then apply it to MY situation, because I live in a time and place. I don't want general, vague generalities. I want something ***SPECIFIC*** that God will say to ***ME***. NOW hear the God who spoke to Jeremiah then. So, let's see what he said ***THEN***, and see if he doesn't speak to ***US*** (now). *"Master, speak ... your servant heareth."*

***Chapter 34: Disobedience to God***

Now, chapter 34 is a chapter, alas, of ***DISOBEDIENCE*** to God. But let me ***FIRST*** paint the scene very quickly if I can. ***HISTORY LESSON*** coming up ... It's the last days of Jerusalem. The very final weeks have come. Jerusalem, that tiny city... just a few acres, is totally ***SURROUNDED*** by a gigantic army---a Chaldean army whose capital city is Babylon, hundreds of miles across the desert to the east. And Jerusalem is under siege. ***INFLATION*** is rocketing. ***FOOD*** is scarce. Even ***WATER*** is scarce. The people are hungry and thirsty and poor---though there's a black market and a few are getting rich. Most of the land is now in enemy hands. Just three cities are left: Jerusalem, Lachish (which was rather bigger...It was about 18 acres altogether), and a third town, Azekah was it? ... Azekah. Three towns were left. And it looked as if everything was ***FINISHED***. The people from the country roundabout (if they could) had run into the city...got inside the walls. So, the place was ***CROWDED*** with all kinds of people.

And ***ONE MAN*** walked those streets talking to people from the highest place in society to the lowest. Talking to the ***KING*** one day and a ***SLAVE*** the next. Talking to the local gypsies---the ***NEXED***---who'd come in from their caravans and tents and had lived within the city to escape the Chaldean army and its cruelties. And so, in that thronged, crowded, mixed city, Jeremiah just ***SPEAKS*** and ***LISTENS*** to people. But as he listens to ***PEOPLE***, he listens to ***GOD***. And he has a word for each person he speaks to. That's the background. I've painted the scene.

Now, at one point ... at one point it looked as if Jeremiah's ***PREDICTIONS*** were going to prove ***FALSE***. Jeremiah had said, *"The city will fall. The city will be burned. Everybody will be taken away captive to Babylon."* He'd said it again and again and again. Therefore, he said, *"By far the best policy is* ***SURRENDER*** *now, make terms ... at least you'll live. But if you fight it out, you'll die."* And he was therefore regarded as a ***TRAITOR***. Morale was going down because of Jeremiah. And ever since, his name has gone down into history as those who lower morale by being ***PESSIMISTIC*** and looking on the ***GLOOMY*** side. "We've got a Jeremiah in our midst," people say, meaning somebody who says, "It's no use fighting. The tide of history is against us." Now, at one point it looked as if he might be wrong. Because at one point the Egyptian army from the west marched against the Chaldeans. And to meet this threat, the Chaldeans withdrew their army from Jerusalem and went off to meet the Egyptians. And immediately they *said, "Jeremiah, you're wrong. Jeremiah, we're free. They've gone."* Jeremiah said, *"They'll be back."* And within almost a matter of weeks they were ***BACK***.

Now, that's the ***HISTORICAL*** background. And something happened during that little brief respite, which is the subject of chapter 34. ***SOMETING HAPPENED*** during that little lifting of the blockade that showed what was wrong with the ***WHOLE NATION OF ISRAEL***, which was like a flash of lightning that lit up the ***CORRUPTION*** at the ***CHARACTER*** of this little nation. And Jeremiah spotted it by the power of the Spirit of God. And that's what we're going to look at.

Now, I've said that Jeremiah was in touch with everyone from the top to the bottom. And in the first eight verses or so of chapter 34, Jeremiah speaks to the sovereign, the KING. And he says, *"You will be* ***CAPTIVE****, yet you will be* ***FREE****."* And the very next day he spoke to some ***SLAVES***. And of the slaves, he said, *"You were* ***FREE****, but you are now* ***CAPTIVE****."*

***The King’s Political Expedience vs. Jeremiah’s Dedication to Principle***

Now, what did he mean by these two statements? Let's look at the ***FIRST***. He went to the ***KING***. It's a very strange relationship between Zedekiah and Jeremiah. I want to try and paint it for you, because this kind of relationship exists in many places today. Zedekiah was the ***PROFESSIONAL*** ***POLITICIAN*** who was a man of pure ***EXPEDIENCY***. You could never pin him down to a principle. You could never tell what he was ***REALLY*** wanting to do. If you want a modern illustration, Harold Wilson and the common market is a perfect parallel. Whereas Jeremiah was a man of ***PRINCIPLE*** who always knew exactly where he stood and said it. And people knew what he stood for---whether they liked it or not. And here we have the professional politician whose only principle was to ***STAY IN POWER***. And you have the powerful ***PREACHER*** whose ***PRINCIPLE*** was: there is a difference between right and wrong.

Now, between two men like that, there is a strange ***RELATIONSHIP***. ***FIRST*** of all, on Zedekiah's side, Zedekiah would never have been king at all if it hadn't been for Babylon. When they came the first time and took away all the aristocracy and even the skilled craftsmen, and just left a handful of poor, illiterate, unskilled people in the city ... they took a ***NOBODY*** called Zedekiah and they said, *"You can be king and look after that poor lot for us."* And so, Babylon put him on the throne; and therefore, he **OWED** his position to ***BABYLON***. And yet, as soon as he got that position, he was scheming how to get free of Babylon's yoke and be the king of an ***INDEPENDENT*** nation, and not a ***SATELLITE*** of the Babylonian empire. And typically, it's happening all over Africa today. Typically, this new little nation... or this little nation with this new ***LITTLE*** king who wanted to be a ***BIG*** king. He played off the ***EASTERN*** great power against the ***WESTERN*** great power. And he turned to Egypt just as African nations turn to Russia and play Russia off against America.

So, he turned to Egypt, and played Egypt off against Babylon. And he said, *"I believe* ***EGYPT*** *will get us out of the control of* ***BABYLON****.*"---Just as nations say, "I believe Russia will get us out of the control of the west." It's the same thing all over and over again. And so, this little puppet king---this little upstart, a nobody who would become a somebody---was determined to ***STAY*** in power, and to get ***MORE*** power by playing off the great powers against one another. It's a strangely ***MODERN*** situation. And his attitude towards Jeremiah was a mixed one (as it was bound to be) because he was a ***DOUBLE MINDED*** man anyway. It was a mixture of ***FEAR*** and ***FASCINATION***. He feared Jeremiah because Jeremiah kept saying, *"You will be taken captive, Zedekiah. Your city will be burned."* He ***FEARED*** Jeremiah because he lowered morale. He approved when Jeremiah was put in prison. And yet, on the other hand, he was ***FASCINATED*** by this man of principle. On ***FOUR*** separate occasions, he said, *"Jeremiah, will you tell me really? Are we going to win, or are we going to lose?"* On ***TWO*** occasions, Zedekiah saved Jeremiah's life. And this is the attitude, you know, between the ***POLITICIAN*** and the ***PREACHER***. So often there is a kind of fear and a fascination. Preachers are a ***NUISANCE*** to politicians. And yet, there is the kind of fascination, that when a man gets up and says, "***THIS IS THE TRUTH***," you can't ignore that! And there is part of you that wants to know if what he says is ***RIGHT***.

And so, Zedekiah and Jeremiah met frequently, sometimes in prison, sometimes out of it. And one day Jeremiah realized something quite profound as he looked into Zedekiah's face. He saw ***FEAR***.... fear. And he realized that the reason why Zedekiah was holding out, desperately, against all odds, and why he would not surrender --- The fear was that if he surrendered, everybody in Jerusalem would LIVE, but he would ***DIE***. And that was the fear. And Jeremiah saw it in a flash. He was given the gift of ***DISCERNMENT*** by the Spirit of God. And he realized that this was the ***ONE THING*** holding Zedekiah back from surrendering. That he knew the people would be safe. But he knew that when a nation surrendered in those days, the ***PEOPLE*** were ***SAFE***, but the ***KING*** was put to ***DEATH***. And that was at the ***ROOT*** of his policy.

***Jeremiah Confronts Zedekiah***

And so, Jeremiah said, *"Lord, what do I tell this man?"* And God said, "*Jeremiah, you go and tell him: He will be taken captive, but he will die in peace. And there will be a royal funeral for him, away there in Babylon. And they'll burn incense, and they'll say, 'Our king is dead.' So, he doesn't need to worry about this."* And Jeremiah went to see the king and he said, *"Your* ***FEAR*** *is* ***GROUNDLESS****. Surrender!"* But Zedekiah didn't take any notice. And he went on fighting. The ***RESULT*** was that Jeremiah's prediction came absolutely ***TRUE***. He was taken captive. He was not killed. He was taken to Babylon, and he did die peacefully. But!... But, because he did not take Jeremiah's advice when it was given, do you know what happened to him? When he was taken captive, Nebuchadnezzar gouged his eyes out. He lived, but as a ***BLIND*** man. And he died a blind man. And so, God's word comes true, ***IN DETAIL***. And yet a man is still ***FREE*** to refuse it. A man is still ***FREE*** to take no notice of God's advice. And the ***TRAGEDY*** is that what God says will come ***TRUE***, but it will be ***WORSE***... It will be worse. Whereas, if a man ***ACCEPTS*** God's advice, his word will come ***TRUE***, and it will be ***BETTER***.

The very next day after seeing the king, Isaiah was...sorry... ***JEREMIAH*** was walking through the streets, and he met a bunch of ***SLAVES***. ***JEWS***! And he said, *"What? Are you slaves?" "Yes." "How* ***LONG*** *have you been slaves?"* And one man said, "*10 years*." Another man said, *"15 years."* Another man said, *"I've been a slave since I was a boy."* Jeremiah said, *"What? Who is your* ***MASTER****? Is it a Gentile?" "No. No, we have* ***JEWISH*** *masters." "What?"* said Jeremiah. And he made some inquiries. And you know what he found? He found this...

Let me tell you about ***GOD'S LAW FOR SLAVERY***, because it isn't slavery as we know it. I wish we could use a different term for slavery in the Bible, because this is what God said, *"A man can sell himself."* Notice that. It's a ***VOLUNTARY*** action. He can sell himself for a limited period, if he needs the money. We would call it a ***'CONTRACT'***. And he could sell himself for ***SIX YEARS*** only, *"And then,"* said God, *"in the seventh year, he must be* ***RELEASED****. He must be -- because there must be no slaves in Israel."* And so, it was a six-year contract. And it was a way of ***SETTLING YOUR DEBTS***. If you were desperately poor and you hadn't got money, you went to someone and you signed a contract for six years. And do you know what they did to show that you were under contract? They pierced the lobe of your ear with a bread awl. And you were six years under contract. But you knew, that in the ***SEVENTH*** year, you would be a ***FREE*** man again. Your debts would've been paid; you could make a ***FRESH START***. It was a ***HUMANE*** provision of God's law. It wasn't slavery as we know it, where you can force... where you can capture an African in the jungle, and sell him in the West Indies, in chains. No, it was a man ***VOLUNTARILY*** contracting himself for six years to get out of his debts.

But because of ***INFLATION***, more and more people in Jerusalem had been selling themselves...contracting themselves. And the few 'black marketeers' who were making the cash in that situation, they were ***AMASSING SLAVES***! The slave was worth 20 or 30 sheckles of silver. That's what ***JUDAS*** sold our Lord for: the price of a slave. And that was the situation. And -- because of the financial pressures---what was happening was this: those Jewish masters were ***NOT*** releasing the slaves after six years. They were keeping them on ***INDEFINITELY***. The situation allowed them to exploit literally, ***SLAVE LABOR***.

And then came that ***SIEGE***. And as it got worse and worse, King Zedekiah, for the first time, began to think, *"I wonder if we've upset God..."* It's incredible, but he began to think that. And the whole thing had been from God for years and years prophet after prophet... Isaiah, Micah... They had all said, *"It's* ***GOD*** *who's doing this to you, because you're* ***NOT OBEYING HIM****!"* Finally, Zedekiah --- something clicked in his brain! He thought, *"I think God's upset, you know. What have we done to upset him?"* As if he didn't know!! He could have just gone and asked Jeremiah, and Jeremiah could have given him the whole works. But Zedekiah thought it out himself. And Zedekiah said, *"I think I know what it is. We haven't been releasing slaves in the seventh year."* And that's all he could think of. It's incredible! But that's all he could think of. So, Zedekiah called together all the wealthy businessmen, those who had been making a packet in that besieged city. And he said, *"Brothers,"* he said, *"I think we've been upsetting God. You haven't been releasing your slaves in the seventh year, have you?"* And they said, *"No, we haven't." "Right!"* he said, *"Into the temple..."* And there they swore, before the Lord God, that they would ***RELEASE*** their slaves. And release them they did. So, at least the siege did some good for someone. And the slaves were ***RELEASED***.

And it was only days after that that the Egyptian army marched, and the Chaldeans were taken away from Jerusalem to meet this new threat. And the ***SIEGE WAS LIFTED***, and the blockade went. Why didn't Zedekiah learn his lesson? Why didn't he realize that the ***FIRST*** little step of obedience toward God was bringing ***MORE LIBERTY***? Because I must now tell you what happened as soon as the blockade was lifted. Do you know what happened? As soon as it was lifted, the masters forced the slaves ***BACK*** into slavery again. It's all there in chapter 34. As soon as the crisis was over, they went ***RIGHT BACK TO WHERE THEY WERE***!! They said, *"It's fine. It's over now. Crisis is over. Danger averted. We can go back to our old life."* And herein lies the ***MESSAGE*** of chapter 34: death-bed repentances, you know, are ***TESTED*** --- If the person recovers! All of us can ***CHANGE*** in the ***CRISIS***. The ***REAL TEST*** is whether we ***REMAIN CHANGED*** when the crisis is over. And this chapter is so true to human nature. When you're under pressure, you make ***RESOLVE*** after ***RESOLVE*** after ***RESOLVE***. Look how we fought during the Second World War. Look how we ***RESOLVED*** to make a world fit for heroes to live in. Look how we ***RESOLVED*** to end all wars. And look how Winston Churchill entitles his final volume of World War II series, ***'How the Great Democracies Triumphed and Thus were able to Resume the Folies Which had so Nearly Cost Them Their Lives'***. That's human nature. It's ***YOUR*** nature, it's ***MY*** nature. And Zedekiah went back and the masters went back and the slaves went back into slavery. And Jeremiah came thundering the word of God to Zedekiah. He said, *"What do you think you're doing? As soon as the crisis is on, you'll OBEY God. And as soon as it's over, you* ***DISOBEY*** *again.* ***YOU HAVENT CHANGED ONE LITTLE BIT!*** *And therefore, I tell you that my word still stands, the Chaldeans will be back."* And back they came... and back they came.

I've told you of a man I went to visit once in the hospital. He was very, very seriously ill. And he said, "Padre," he'd been in the forces and just a term he used, he said, "Padre," he said, "if I get out of this," he said, "if I get back to my wife and family, I'll be in your church every Sunday." And he got better, but we didn't see him. And about 15 months later in that very same place up in Langar, there he was in hospital again with the same trouble. Seriously ill. And again, he said to me, "If I can just get out of this, I'm gonna live right." And again, he got better, and we saw no more of him. And I've never seen that man since. I wonder if God will ever give another chance. But how ***TRUE*** to human nature?

***Expediency Yields to Principle only During a Crisis***

Now, what was going wrong? I'll tell you what was going wrong. Because the man at the ***TOP*** was a man of ***EXPEDIENCY***, everybody else down the line was a man of ***EXPEDIENCY***. And to repent when there's a ***CRISIS*** is ***EXPEDIENCY***. Or to put it another way, if *'honesty is the best policy'*, it's NOT honesty. Honesty is only honesty when it's the ***WORST*** policy. Do you understand what I'm saying? It's not what we do under pressure, ***IT'S WHAT WE DO WHEN WE'RE NOT UNDER PRESSURE, THAT IS THE TEST OF WHO WE REALLY ARE***. And so, chapter 34 reveals that like sovereign-like people. And so, Jeremiah tells him about the ***SLAVES***.

Do you know why I believe Jimmy Carter is having such success (***ONLY BECAUSE IT WAS ONLY HIS first YEAR IN OFFICE)*** in America? Because America realized that in Richard Nixon, they had a man of ***EXPEDIENCY***. They're complaining about Jimmy Carter that he won't give definite answers on particular political situations... that he won't give his policy. I'll tell you why he won't... because he's got a ticket on principle. He's saying, "I'm not gonna say what I'm gonna do in these situations. I'm standing as a man who knows the difference between right and wrong." And that's why he's appealing. Such a man would not get in in this country, because we haven't had a Richard Nixon yet. We haven't got to the point where a prime minister has been revealed as a man of pure ***EXPEDIENCY***, even in moral realms. If we did get that low, we might then be ready to say, "We're gonna go for a man of ***PRINCIPLE*** next time.” And if the people at the ***TOP*** are people of ***PURE EXPEDIENCY***---who keep shifting, and whose only principle is to ***STAY*** in power and get MORE power---then that will filter right the way down. And the tragedy is that what happens to the people at the ***BOTTOM*** is that they get ***EXPLOITED***, they become the ***SLAVES***, they become the hands instead of the men. And that's what's happening to our society. Isn't this relevant? It's like reading the papers and it all happened during the siege of Jerusalem away there nearly 400 years before Christ.

Well now, Jeremiah accuses them of ***TWO THINGS***. He accuses them of ***PERFIDY*** and of ***PERJURY***. Perfidy is ***TREACHERY*** against men. It's to break your promise. He said, *"You set those slaves free; you promised them their freedom, and now you've taken it back again. But worse than that, you promised them their freedom* ***IN THE NAME OF GOD****. You took an oath on the name of the Lord, and now you're* ***POLLUTING****..."* that's the literal word he uses... *"you are* ***POLLUTING******THE NAME OF GOD****."* And this is the ***SOCIAL CONSCIENCE*** of the prophets. They combined relationships with God and relationships with men in such a way that what you do to your fellow men is ***POLLUTING*** the name of God. Those two things belong together. ***PERFIDY*** and ***PERJURY*** are the ***SAME SIN*** in God's sight. And these are very strong words. And he's saying, *"Because at the* ***TOP*** *you are men of expediency, all the way down we've got expediency. People changing their policy, not according to* ***PRINCIPLES****, but according to* ***PRACTICALITY****."*

So, we get the ***POLITICIAN*** and the ***PREACHER***. And the ***POLITICIAN*** says to the preacher, "You are ***IMPRACTICABLE***." And the ***PREACHER*** says to the politician, "You are ***UNPRINCIPLED***." And somehow, we've got to get ***TOGETHER*** the principles and the practice if you're going to have a ***HEALTHY NATION*** that God can ***BLESS***.

***Obedience of the Rechabites: Honored by God Forever***

Now let me move on quickly to the second chapter, chapter 35. Bear in mind that it was 17 years ***EARLIER***---it's a different King, Jehoiakim---and it's a brilliant piece of ***EDITING***. And it was done by a man called ***BARUCH***, who whom we'll be meeting for the first time next Sunday morning. He was a stenographer, or a secretary. And we'll be hearing about him next Sunday morning, because he appears then by name for the first time. He edited this, and he did a brilliant job... because he goes now back in time...17 years to a different situation, a different reign. But he remembers an event which stands in stark ***CONTRAST*** to this later act of ***DISOBEDIENCE*** regarding the slaves---this ***EXPEDIENCY***. And he goes back to an event when Jeremiah tried to make some total abstainers drink. It concerns a group of people called ***RECHABITES***. Now when I was a boy, there was still a group around called the *'Rechabites'*, a Temperance Society. How many of you remember that society? It's still in existence, right? Well, I'll have to be careful what I say. I think there are vested interests here this morning. But let me tell you a bit of the ***HISTORY*** of the Rechabites, and then I may say a little bit about the modern ones too.

Well now, ***FIRST*** of all, the ancient Rechabites... it's a strange story; they were not even Jews. They were a ***WANDERING TRIBE***. If you crossed gypsies and friars, you'd get something like the Rechabites. They wandered around the Sinai desert.

Incidentally, I'm sure you know that the word ***'GYPSY'*** means ***'EGYPTIAN'***. That's where they came from. It's shortened form of Egyptian. And the Rechabites were very much like the ***WANDERING*** ***GYPSIES***. They traveled around the Sinai Peninsula, and they lived in ***TENTS***. They lived a very simple life. They never grew anything. They had animals. The nearest group today are the Bedouin. If you've ever seen a Bedouin encampment, you've seen the Rechabites. Only their original name was not Rechabites it was Kenite, **K-E-N-I-T-E**, Kenite. And Moses married a Kenite girl!

And so, this tribe became related to the people of God. And they decided to ***GO ALONG*** with the people of God. And they tagged along 40 years through the wilderness, and they decided to go into the Promised Land with the Jews. And they went in ***LITERALLY*** with the ‘***JEWS’*** because that name means someone from the tribe of **‘JEW-DAH’**. And they went in with Judah...with the Jews. The difference was that when they went into the Promised Land, the Kenites said, *"We are going to stay in* ***TENTS****. That is our way of life. We'll move around; you'll see us outside the city in the* ***HILLS****. You can live in the cities, but we'll stay out in the countryside."* And so, they literally ***REMAINED*** gypsies. But they were so much part of the people of God now that ***THEY*** ***WORSHIPPED THE GOD OF ISRAEL***. And for all practical purposes, they were part of the people, they were the ‘***STRANGERS WITHIN THE GATES’***.

Now among the Kenites, there was born a man called ***RECHAB***...Rechab. And he had a son called ***JEHONADAB***. And since they called the man 'so and so, son of so and so'... or 'so and so, ben so and so', they called him ***'JEHONADAB BEN RECHAB’***. And that's the man we've got to think about for a moment. For that man was born in a day when the cities were getting more and more CORRUPT. He saw Israel going down and down morally and spiritually. And finally, he felt he had to ***DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT***. And he led a very strong protest movement with a fellow Jew---or a friend who was a Jew---called JEHU. And together they ***CLEANED UP*** the nation in the time of Ahab. The king had brought the corruption in, and Rechab---or Jehonadab ben Rechab as his full name was--- and Jehu, they ***CLEANED*** the nation up for a time.

And Jehonadab said this. He said, *"Now we've gotta* ***KEEP*** *it that way.* ***HOW*** *are we gonna do that?"* He got his own family together and he said, *"Now look, I want you to remain as a* ***PERPETUAL REMINDER*** *of the pure life of the countryside; and therefore, I charge you solemnly, 'Never build a* ***HOUSE****, but go on living in a tent. Never plant a* ***GARDEN****, but go on living off the milk off your goats and your camels. Never plant a* ***VINEYARD****. And therefore,"* and this was the heart of it, *"never touch* ***WINE****,'"* because he had seen that part of the corruption in the city was ***ALCOHOLISM***, which was rife and which was, alas, associated with religious ceremonies...as later the Greek God Bacchus was. And because of that---in that situation where wine was being so abused---he said, *“You remain as* ***TOTAL ABSTAINERS*** *as a testament unto the* ***OTHERS*** *not to abuse wine."* He was not advocating total abstinence for ***EVERYBODY***. But he said, *"Provided there are a group of people within the nation who will be* ***TOTAL ABSTAINERS****, that will hold the* ***REST*** *back. It'll be a reminder to them to be* ***TEMPERATE****."* And so, he charged his ***DESCENDENTS*** to do this. And from that day, not one of his sons or grandsons or great grandsons right down the line would touch wine, ***NOT ONE***. And they became a byword for that more than anything else. Not so much that they lived in tents, but that they were ***TOTAL ABSTAINERS*** from alcohol.

Now, when Jeremiah was walking through the streets of that besieged city, he came across a ***TENT*** in the street...a tent. And inside were some people. And he said to them, *"Who are you?"* And they said, *"We're Rechabites. We're Rechabites."* And he could see that in the ***HEAT*** of that city and in the shortage of ***WATER*** (for Jerusalem was fed by just one spring) he could see that they were ***THIRSTY***, and the Lord suddenly told him to do something, an ***EXTRAORDINARY*** thing. He said, *"Well, you come with me into the temple."* And he took them into the temple where there were crowds of people gathered for worship. And then he said, *"Now, you're thirsty, aren't you?"* And they said, *"Yes, we are, everybody is." "Right,"* he said, *"I've got some lovely cool* ***WINE*** *here for you. There you are."* And he poured out lovely, cool ***WINE***. He handed them each some wine, and they said, *"We don't drink. Our father Rechab said, 'No drink.'"* Now do you know that this was ***200 YEARS*** after Rechab had said it... 200 years!!! Father had told son, *"Don't drink."* Son had told grandson, *"Don't drink."* Grandson had told great grandson, *"Don't drink."* And for all these 200 years they hadn't touched the stuff. And now---though they were ***THIRSTY*** and ***BESIEGED***---they would rather ***DIE*** than ***DRINK***.

And Jeremiah went out to the people, and he spoke to the crowd. He said, *"I've not been trying to break their vows...their pledge."* He said, *"I want you to see what* ***OBEDIENCE*** *is. These men are prepared to obey a* ***MAN*** *after 200 years, and you are not prepared to obey* ***GOD*** *who's speaking* ***TODAY****!!"* What a lesson. I need hardly draw it out. You see, the Rechabites had taken what was a ***RELATIVE*** law and made it ***ABSOLUTE***. By that I mean that Rechab gave it in a particular ***SITUATION*** to a particular ***PEOPLE*** for a particular ***PURPOSE***. He was not laying down a biblical law, for the Bible ***NOWHERE*** lays total abstinence down as a ***LAW*** for either Jew or Christian. But Rechab was giving a ***RELATIVE LAW*** of man. God didn't tell him to do it. God didn't order Rechab. It was a human response to a situation. And yet it had been obeyed for 200 years. *"And yet,”* says Jeremiah, *"this little group of gypsies have kept this* ***HUMAN CUSTOM*** *for 200 years, and you can't even keep a* ***DIVINE COMMANDMENT*** *from today until tomorrow."* Learn the lesson. Because ***HUMAN*** laws like Rechab's are ***RELATIVE***. Alas, they so easily become ***ABSOLUTE***, whereas the ***DIVINE*** laws are ***ABSOLUTE***. And Jeremiah says, *"You make them* ***RELATIVE****. I mean by that, that when God said, 'You shall set a man free in the seventh year,' that applied to* ***ALL TIME****."* But they made it ***RELATIVE***, depending on whether they were going through a ***CRISIS*** or not.

***The Lesson: Divine Commands vs. Human Customs***

Now, do you see what I'm saying? And here's the profoundest ***LESSON*** for us religious people this morning. How prone we are to take ***HUMAN CUSTOMS*** which are ***RELATIVE*** and make them ***ABSOLUTE***, and take ***DIVINE COMMANDS*** which are ***ABSOLUTE*** and make them ***RELATIVE***!! And we are keener to obey the human custom than the divine commandment. How very strange it is. Let me give you ***ONE*** or ***TWO EXAMPLES*** to bring the thing home to you. (***FIRST EXAMPLE***) I believe that the majority of babies are ***CHRISTENED*** in this country because it is ***HUMAN CUSTOM.*** *"Well, my parents did it for me and their parents did it for them. And after all, you gotta do the right thing by your baby. And isn't this the right thing to do? And we must have a christening shawl and a mug and...."* How much ***HUMAN CUSTOM*** there is in that. But I really do believe that the majority of parents---and it's 85% of the parents in this country--- christen their babies, and they do it by ***HUMAN CUSTOM***. And it'll go on and on human custom. But what is the ***DIVINE COMMAND***? The divine command is, *"Repent and be baptized every one of you for the forgiveness of your sins..."* (And a baby hasn't sins to forgive.) *"...And you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit; for the promise is to you and your children and to those afar off, as many as the Lord calls."* Pray God, he'll call your children and that he'll call many that are far off.

Take ***ANOTHER EXAMPLE***. We're in a spate of weddings just now. We had two yesterday, one a few weeks back. We've got another next Saturday and another the Saturday afterwards. And you know, it's amazing what attention is given to human custom at ***WEDDINGS***. Must have this, must have that... couldn't do without confetti... couldn't do without a cake... couldn't do without a best man or a bridesmaid... couldn't do without toast... couldn't do without. And so, it goes on; and down it goes through the centuries. And most of these things are ***SUPERSTITION***. I'll bet most of you don't even know why you throw confetti? And do you know why a bride groom carries his bride over the doorstep?? Because the little demons from his old home...from ***HER*** old home are running on the ground and they will catch her feet and drag them back...drag ***HER*** back. And so, he lifts her up above the demons and carries her into the home. ***AND YOU STILL DO IT***!! What is the ***DIVINE*** part of the wedding ceremony? I'll tell you: "***TILL DEATH US DO PART***." And I wish that couples were more concerned to keep ***THOSE*** words than to have confetti and a white wedding and all the rest of it.

Do you understand what I'm meaning? It happens in ***CHURCHES***. We have a Baptist way of doing things and it's only a custom, and it's come down from the year dot (\*a very long time ago); and so, we do it this way and we're more concerned about our ***CONSTITUTION*** than about the ***COMMANDMENTS OF GOD***. *"And where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty."* And so, we have our CUSTOMS, and they bind us ***MORE*** than the ***DIVINE COMMANDMENT*** does. And God, by both ***CONTRAST*** and ***COMPARISON***, says, *"If* ***WORLDLY*** *people---if people outside the people of God---will obey their* ***HUMAN*** *customs so faithfully, isn't it incredible when* ***GOD'S PEOPLE*** *will not obey the* ***DIVINE*** *commands? Isn't it incredible?”*

And so, Jeremiah drew a ***LESSON***. Let me take the particular issue as an illustration. You see, it's so much ***EASIER*** to do things by ***CUSTOM***. You have no decisions to make. It's safer, it leaves you free outside the area of the custom. The Rechabites had not been told anything about living in cities. They'd been told to live in ***TENTS***. So, they'd moved the tents into the ***CITY***, and they'd gone right ***AGAINST*** the spirit of Rechab. But you see, when you've got a law, ....... ***OUTSIDE IT*** there is freedom to do what you like. And it's easy to have these guidelines. I tell you it's 10 times easier to sign the ***PLEDGE*** and become a total abstainer, than every time you find yourself in a situation say, *"God, what do* ***YOU*** *want me to do in this situation?"* Do you see what I mean? And I was brought up in a Sunday school, where a dear Sunday school teacher told me again and again, he wanted me to *'sign the pledge'* and *'sign the pledge'* and *'sign the pledge'*. Nothing in the Bible about signing pledges. There is the ***FREEDOM*** in the Bible to say, "I will not drink wine if by so doing I cause my brother to stumble." It is a ***RELATIVE***, not an ***ABSOLUTE***. And when we start making it a rule for life, it's the easy way out. You just say, "I don't touch it." No more decisions to make for the rest of your life.

I believe that God will call more of us to be total abstainers in the years that lie ahead on this ***RELATIVE*** but very important ground: that teenage alcoholism is running off the graph, and it's happening to young people in our own fellowship. And for ***THEIR*** sakes, I think more and more Christians will cut it out of weddings and all the other social occasions that pressurize people to touch it. But they will not do it...and we shall not start signing pledges...and we'll not start saying, "This is a ***RULE*** for Christians." It's ***FREE***. You are ***FREE*** to drink and you're ***FREE*** not to. That's real freedom. Because you're ***FREE*** for others. And so, the more difficult way is for me to say, "God," not, "do You want me to make one decision now for the rest of my life?" but, "God, I'm listening; Master, speak."

You see, one is a relationship with a ***BOOK*** and the other is a relationship with a ***PERSON***. One is a matter of living by ***REGULATIONS*** and the other is a matter of living by ***RELATIONSHIPS***. One is a matter of ***TRADITION***, the other is a matter of ***TRUTH***. The Rechabites lived by the tradition of total abstinence. But it shows how much God values ***OBEDIENCE*** that He said to them*, "Even though you are obeying a man-made* ***CUSTOM*** *which is* ***NOT My COMMANDMENT****, I'm so thrilled to find someone in My City who knows what it is to be* ***OBEDIENT****... that I* ***PROMISE*** *you that, though I destroy the city, there will* ***ALWAYS*** *be a Rechabite before Me."*

Now have you got the ***MESSAGE*** for this morning? The message is ***OBEDIENCE TO DIVINE COMMANDMENTS***, which is a million times better than obedience to human customs. "Lord, what do ***YOU*** say?"

So, we take our leave of Jeremiah walking around the streets, calling in at the palace, trying to remove the fears of a king, talking to some slaves who are resentful and bitter, meeting a few gypsies in a tent. And ***EVERY*** situation he meets, he sees with God's eyes. He ***LISTENS*** to God, and he ***SPEAKS*** for God. And he tells us that the most ***IMPORTANT*** thing on earth is that ***GOD'S WILL*** shall be done as it is in heaven. Let us pray.

Father, our circumstances have changed from those days. We live in a different town, in a different age; but Lord, human nature, is just the same. Lord, we're so prone to make resolves in the crisis and forget them when the danger is passed. We're so prone to expediency---to stay in our own little sphere of power, and just decide what's best for that. Oh God, we pray that you'll teach us to be men of principle---not men of custom, but men of principle. Lord, we pray that You'll have mercy on this Nation and give us leaders of principle, so that we can see and hear from them clearly what they believe to be right and what they believe to be wrong. And so, we just ask that You'll take the word that's been spoken this morning and forgive anything in it that's been amiss, but apply it deeply to our hearts. In Jesus' name, Amen. The hymn number 480:

*My God, my Father make me strong,*

*When tasks of life seem hard and long,*

*To greet them with this triumph song,*

*Thy will be done!"*

480.

***SINGING*** (2 Minutes)