

The house of the Rechabites

Jeremiah 35.

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There are some lessons, I think, behind the story of the Rechabites. Their manly refusal of wine has, of course, been emphasized by Temperance Reformers, and their history been bent, to serve the teetotal cause. This seems to me to miss the whole end of the chapter. The test which God permitted Jeremiah to apply to them was not, as some might think, a temptation to drink. God, who knew their principles and their faithfulness to them, wished to bring out their obedience to their father's word in contrast to the disobedience of Israel to His laws.

It was not a temptation to evil, but a test of principle, and it found them staunch and true. You train a horse to jump, and when he has practised and you know his mettle you take him to the five-barred gate. Your object is not to break his leg nor to throw him, but simply to show that the training and discipline have done their work.

But why did Jonadab the son of Rechab issue such strange commands to his sons? "Ye shall drink no wine, neither ye, nor your sons for ever: neither shall ye build house, nor sow seed, nor plant vineyard, nor have any: but all your days ye shall dwell in tents; that ye may live many days in the land where ye be strangers."

In the first place, it is obvious that you cannot make this a teetotal question. The whole instruction is one; it relates as much to house-building, and seed-growing, and fruit-growing, as it does to wine. You cannot do what Jehoiakim did in the next chapter, excise with your penknife what you do not wish to hear. The knife and the fire serve the *self-will* of the man who hates God's thoughts, but not the *broken spirit* of the one who longs to be suitable to God. Who then was Jonadab? What led him to the conclusion to which he came, and induced him to pass so stringent a rule, and to urge so strange a life on his posterity?

His short story, as given in the inspired record, is found in 2 Kings 10: 15-28. His ride with Jehu, and his presence with that king when he destroyed the Baal-worship — that is all. But when you study things, perhaps you begin to understand. What were the times in which Jonadab, or Jehonadab, lived? His name means "The Lord (Jah) is liberal." Evidently his father Rechab had known something of the true God, and had desired his son to bear the testimony throughout the whole of his natural life that God is good. Else why give him such a name? It is when we have tasted that the Lord is gracious we become anxious to transmit the knowledge and conviction of His liberality and grace to our offspring. Yet think of the times in which that testimony was to be borne. Ahab king most of the time, with Jezebel — the most wicked woman of all ages — inciting him to evil. His death did not end the evil, for Azariah, his successor, followed on the same lines. Finally Joram came to the throne. Against him God, through Elisha, sent Jehu. The people were sunk in idolatry, they had turned to Jehovah the back and not the face; the prophets of Baal swarmed over the country; even the removal of 450 of them by Elijah had made little impression; and the sins of Jeroboam wherewith *he made Israel to sin* were raging among the Israelites. So common and so dreadful was this departure from holiness and truth, that it became a formula to describe the state of kings and people: "He departed not from the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, who caused the children of Israel to sin." It was at this time that Elisha said to Gehazi, "Is it a time to receive money, and to receive garments, and oliveyards, and vineyards, and

sheep, and oxen, and menservants, and maidservants?" Elisha had wished to teach Naaman that "Jah is liberal," but Gehazi, by his wish to get a settlement on himself, had frustrated his intention. "The leprosy therefore of Naaman," said the prophet, "shall cleave unto thee, and unto thy seed for ever."

Do we perceive these lessons? Do we discern the times? Do we understand the state of things around us?

Now it is possible, if not probable, that Jonadab knew Elisha; at any rate, he seemed to have formed the same estimate of his environment that Elisha did. Both appear to have stood morally apart from their generation, Elisha in his service, and Jonadab in his testimony. The days were evil, and he was not at home in them. He was surrounded, it is true, by the favoured nation of God; but they had sunk, as God said they would, to the level of the nations among whom they dwelt (Ex. 34: 11, etc. etc.). When Jehu appeared, like a great revivalist in the midst of the evil, commissioned by God to punish Israel for their sin, he may have thought: "Here comes the change I have longed for; now the worship of Jehovah will prosper; now the people will learn God's righteous ways." And, on Jehu's invitation to ride in his chariot (evidently being known as one who would rejoice to see God's glory manifested), he gave him both heart and hand, to see his zeal for Jehovah. Surely he must have thought the tide had turned when the huge congregation of Baal-worshippers was exterminated.

Alas! how soon must he have been disillusioned. Twice is it immediately stated that Jehu departed not from the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat who made Israel to sin. He went wrong himself, and led others wrong too.

Was it the sense of the hopelessness of things in an outward way that led Jonadab to be a stranger and a pilgrim in the midst of his own people? Was it the feeling that if, like Abraham, he was on the Divine ground, he was, equally, with Abraham, apart from all that surrounded him? Did he realize that where Jehovah was rejected and His word despised was no settling place for him? Of the father of the faithful it is written: "By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country; dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise; for he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God." For him and his children, the life of strangers; for him, no building of houses, no planting of vineyards, — nothing to tie him to this earth, nothing to even seem like a portion here. He awaited the time when an order of things would be established on earth, wholly of God. Till then he took the pilgrim's garb, and walked the pilgrim's path, and, above all, showed the pilgrim spirit. God was his portion, and he would take nothing in gift from the world, whether from the king of Sodom (Gen. 14: 17 *et seq.*), or from the sons of Heth (Gen. 23: 3 *et seq.*). He held to this principle equally in the day of his prosperity and in the day of his adversity. None but those who have trodden this path a little will know what I mean. Not to let the appetite for gain be whetted when the air rings with the shouts of success, nor to hanker after the getting of things for nothing when the atmosphere is heavy with the pressure of untoward circumstances. Such was Abraham's life; a life of magnificent nearness to God and of corresponding moral distance from those who surrounded him. His heart was attracted by things Divine, he lived in them and fed on them; he had his estimate of his environment formed in God's presence; there was nothing to attract *his* spirit in what attracted Lot, and certainly nothing to attract in the ways of the Canaanite and the Perizzite who were then in the land. So he went from place to place, and trained his son and grandson to do the same, a dweller in tabernacles.

Is Jonadab's spirit not the same? Was it for him a question of partial abstinence or of teetotalism? No, surely not. His refusal to take part in the pleasures of those around, and indeed to have any portion whatever in the land in the condition which then characterised it, was his protest against that condition. If Jehovah was rejected, and like a stranger in His own land and among His own professed people, so

would Jonadab be.

Thus far Jonadab and his sons. But what about ourselves and the times in which we live? Theoretically the hope of the Christian is laid up for him in heaven (Col 1: 5). It is when Christ, who is our life, shall appear, that we shall appear with Him in glory (Col. 3: 4). The order of things purposed by God will be ushered in at that time, and our part will be a heavenly part with Christ in glory. But somehow the truth has fallen in the street, the professing church suffers "that woman Jezebel" to exercise her baneful influence (Rev. 2: 3, and the majority of professing Christians seek a portion, and influence, pleasure and position, *here* where Christ was rejected, and where even now few regard His word. The *wine* of human recreation or enjoyment or indulgence exhilarates even Christians; the thousand and one hobbies and recreations, and entertainments of the world, seduce most from their loyalty to Christ, and hinder their spending and being spent for Him. Nay, I will go further. And I will say that the strongest and most successful testimony for Christ is not found usually with those who "buy houses, and plant vineyards" here; with those who join their building societies and possess their own property on this earth. The loosening influence of whole-hearted devotedness to Christ is plainly seen in Acts 4: 34, where "as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them." We can easily see that encumbrances are best got rid of. But in our day it is even more needed, if our testimony is to have a true ring. For we are surrounded by the Ahabs and the Jezebels in the Christian profession; all seek their own also, and not the things which are Jesus Christ's. The earth-dwellers are in our midst, they mind earthly things. I do not speak alone of *worldly* things, but *earthly*. The numbers of those who speak of a heavenly calling are great; the souls who are true to it, — can we say they are many? But the worldliness of the Christian profession as a whole, the unmistakable revolt against the authority of God's Word, the consequent disobedience to the simplest requirements of holiness and truth, the love of pleasures distancing the love of God, the settling down into things and affairs *here* — all these call loudly for a seed of Jonadab.

It is a joy to learn from Jeremiah 35: 19 that, "Thus saith the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel; Jonadab the son of Rechab shall not want a man to stand before Me for ever." So pleased was Jehovah with their obedience to their father, and their fidelity to their pilgrim principles, that He pledged His own Name to secure a succession of "sons of Jonadab" down to the end of time. The question for us is, are we among them? Do we seek after the intoxicating pleasures of this world which wine symbolises? Do we build houses, as though we were fixtures here? Are our hopes detained here by things we should gladly bundle to one side, if we thought the Lord were coming tomorrow? Oh, what need there is for intenseness in our spiritual life, to be *constrained* by the love of Christ! Do you know, I used to think it said "the love of Christ constrains us to live to Him"? That is not it. The love of Christ constrains us, *constrains us*, CONSTRAINS US! It holds us, sets the forces of Christian life in motion, never relaxes its hold, always exercises its gentle, happy pressure. It is this that leads us to choose the Abraham path and not the path of Lot. It is this that makes Jonadabs of us, makes association with the sickly and wicked condition of things around us impossible, and induces the simple pilgrim life in which the heart aims to be free from entanglement here, that it may be yet more willingly and more fully under the constraint of His love.