

Joshua 2: Rahab The Harlot

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In Deuteronomy 7:2, Moses commanded Joshua and Israel to completely wipe out the Canaanites, "you shall utterly destroy them". Before the army of Israel crossed the Jordan River, Joshua sent two spies to scout out the first fortified city in Canaan--Jericho. The walled city of Jericho was the key fortress of the Jordan River Valley. It guarded the passes into the central highlands of Canaan, so it had to be taken first. These two spies were not exactly James Bond material. They were immediately spotted and identified as Jews. The spies come off as buffoons as do the soldiers of Jericho who were searching for them. Only Rahab who operated the local house of ill repute comes off as a hero. Amazingly she also just happens to be the only believer in the God of Israel that lives in Jericho. She appears to have everything against her, but somehow she believes in the one true God and by the providence of God she emerges as a sinful woman who was repentant and ready to be saved, and God in His grace would spare her and her family. Later in Joshua 6:25 we learn that Rahab the harlot became a Jewish proselyte and married a man named Salmon of the tribe of Judah, and one of her descendants would be King David. She is listed in the genealogy of Christ.

Since the Bible says that there is just one way to be saved, the question is often asked, "What about those who have never heard?" Rahab is a great example of someone who seemingly couldn't be saved--she was a Gentile in an evil idolatrous city, she was an Amorite the worst of all the Canaanite tribes, and she was a prostitute. Yet she alone with her family was saved out of Jericho. She clearly was a believer in the God of Israel even though her faith was risky and costly. Imagine the peer pressure of your entire home town being against you. She had very little knowledge of God, but she did have a "childlike faith", and God has promised that all who seek Him shall find Him (Jer.29:13, 2 Chron.15:4). She is one of many Bible stories that are examples of the sovereignty of God in evangelism. Out of all the people there, God sent the spies to her house. Both Hebrews 11:31 and James 2:25 confirm her saving faith in God, and both passages refer to her as Rahab the harlot, meaning that she had been a despicable sinner but by the grace of God she was saved and forgiven. This sounds like someone I know--me. Why name Rahab and not the spies who are anonymous? Because the story is not really about them, it's about her. What about those who have never heard? I think God sent those spies to her because He knew her heart. Based on God's plan to completely destroy Jericho, the spy mission was unnecessary, so God sent the spies there to save Rahab, who had believed in the God of Israel. Even though Moses had directed Israel to wipe out the Canaanites, God intervened to save anyone who would believe in Him.

The Secret Recon Mission

In Joshua 2:1-3, we read that Joshua secretly sent two spies into Jericho to check it out. It looks like Joshua learned his lesson from Kadesh Barnea in Numbers 14 when the spies came back with an unfavorable report so the people of Israel balked and refused to go in. The two spies went directly to the local brothel in Jericho. Let's give them the benefit of the doubt and say they went there because it was a place where men gathered and you could get all the latest news, because they did find out that everyone in Jericho was very scared of Israel. Their disguises must have been really bad because they were immediately spotted, reported to the King, and he dispatched soldiers to Rahab's place to arrest them. I imagine they wore those Groucho Marx glasses with fake mustaches. Rahab also knew who they were, and to everyone's surprise she hid them, and lied to the soldiers saying "They went thatta way". She hid the Jews on the roof under the stalks of flax that were drying there. Everyone in the story comes off like the three stooges except Rahab. The spies are easily detected, followed and are helpless. The soldiers are easily fooled and go on a wild goose chase.

Theologians like to engage in an interesting debate about Rahab--"Was Rahab wrong to lie? Are lies acceptable to God?" I have read at least five positions---1. Lies are acceptable in war. 2. Lies are acceptable when used for the right reason, 3. God cannot lie so His people should not either, 4. Rahab was a Canaanite to whom lying was a norm, 5. The lie of Rahab was honestly recorded but not approved by God. All sinners lie, and they begin to change only after conversion. I personally am fascinated by this because the New Testament passages of Hebrews 11:31 and James 2:25 both commend her faith and good works in protecting the Jewish spies. What I do know is that God is absolutely holy, and God cannot lie, so it appears that He has patience with the lies of sinful humanity if their intentions are good. The good news for her is that she risked her life because she believed in the God of Israel, so God forgave her and saved her out of Jericho.

The Good News for Israel

In Joshua 2:8-11, we see from Rahab's report that the conquest is assured because the inhabitants of Jericho are utterly demoralized, "melting in fear" just as God had said in Deut. 2:25, "I will begin to put the dread and fear of you upon the peoples...when they hear the report of you they shall tremble". It looks like God had prepared the Canaanites to lose. We also see here the belief and faith of Rahab that set her apart from everyone else in Jericho, she said "the Lord your God He alone is God in heaven above and on the earth below". Rahab lived in a culture that believed in many gods of every part of nature, every vocation, and every area of life, but she had forsaken all the Canaanite gods, and believed only in the one true God. As proof of her belief she risked her life and later repented of prostitution, embraced God's law and became a part of God's people.

The Pact of the Scarlet Cord

In Joshua 2:12-21, Rahab and the spies of Israel made a loyalty oath to treat each other with faithful love. She had hidden and protected the spies, and she would help them escape, and in return the army of Israel would spare her life and the lives of her family. Their immediate agreement reveals that what separated Israel and Canaan was religious values and not ethnic race. Her part was to put a scarlet cord hanging from her window so that her house would be marked to spare all the inhabitants within. The door of her house would be the door to safety from God's coming judgment. If this reminds you of the Exodus 12:7 story where Moses told the Hebrews to put the blood on their doors so the angel of death would pass them by, you are in good company. As a guarantee of certainty, the spies told Rahab that if any Jew violated the agreement "his blood shall be on our head if a hand is laid on your people", thus they were taking responsibility. The spies were lowered by a rope through a window of Rahab's house outside the city wall, so her house was part of the city wall.

All in Jericho would die except Rahab and her family. Was the killing of all the Canaanites fair? The story of Rahab reveals that anyone who sides with God may be spared, and anyone seeking God will find Him.

Remarkable Reversal of Fortune

After the conquest, Rahab became the wife of Salmon and the mother of Boaz who married Ruth of Ruth 4:21, and according to the genealogy of Christ found in Matthew 1:2-6, Boaz and Ruth were the parents of Obed and he was the father of Jesse who was the father of David the king, and of course Jesus the Messiah was a descendant of David. Therefore, by the mysterious ways of God, we see a remarkable reversal of fortune that a Canaanite prostitute condemned to die with all the rest of Jericho, ended up a member of the prestigious royal line of King David and an ancestor of Christ. Only by the grace of God are we all saved!

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