

“YOU HAVE NOT PASSED THIS WAY BEFORE”

III. Rahab: The Scarlet Cord of Salvation

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Joshua 2

TEXT: *By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient.* (Heb 11:31)

INTRODUCTION

One of the great mysteries I've pondered as a pastor is, "Why is it that some people with an abundance of revelation and knowledge of the love and grace of God do so little with it and are fickle in their commitment, while others, with only a hint of such knowledge, grab hold of the tiny revelation they have and commit everything to following the Lord?"

In the first category (the abundance of revelation) we can think of the Children of Israel. Think of their spectacular deliverance from 400 years of bondage in Egypt through the awesome display of God's power in the ten plagues and splitting the Red Sea in two so they pass through on dry ground, and just as soon as they all are through, the waters close back up drowning Pharaoh's army that is in hot pursuit. They have a cloud to lead by day and a pillar of fire lighting their camp at night. But three days after the crossing of the Red Sea they were running out of water. Now, admittedly, that is a serious problem but, in light of what God has just been doing, don't you think they'd call upon the name of the Lord— surely God could provide water. But, what did they do?

So the people grumbled against Moses, saying, "What are we to drink?" (Ex 15:24)
And, God miraculously provided water by making a brackish body of water drinkable. Then, when they'd been on the journey 1½ months, they began running out of food. Do they pray and trust God to provide? Of course not.

In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the Lord's hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death." (Ex 16:2-3)

But, what does God do? He begins the daily provision of manna, "bread from heaven" and that evening, meat in the form of quail. And this is only the first 45 days of their journey after crossing the Red Sea. On and on it goes, grumbling and murmuring again and again during their desert journey. Don't you wonder how, in the midst of such revelation of the love, power, and grace of God they can be such malcontents and so lacking in any of the qualities of the life God wants us to live?

But then again, maybe some of us see our own hearts here. We have grown up in the church, in Christian homes and learned the truth about God, seen His awesome works displayed around us and experienced miraculous interventions. We've heard hundreds of sermons, are familiar with God's Word, and know the songs of Zion. Yet, when things go wrong— meaning they don't suit

us— what is our immediate response? Despair? Why me, why this, why now? Do we grumble? Do we try to fix blame? Or do we remember the goodness of the Lord and from that reservoir of grace known and experienced call afresh on His name?

In the second category, inspiring faith with only the tiniest glimpses of the glory of God, we have this morning's story— Rahab.

Before we read Joshua 2, remember the context from last week. Israel has completed their 40 year wilderness journey and is camped on the side of the Jordan opposite of the promised land that God is giving them. God has called Joshua to lead them in after the death of Moses. To Joshua's fear, God says,

Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.” (Josh 1:9)

Now, in three days they are to cross the Jordan and take possession “*of the land the Lord your God is giving you for your very own*” (1:11). During those three days, Joshua, like any good commander, decides to gather intelligence on the enemy sending two spies out. Not only is the river Jordan a problem, the first city on the other side is Jericho, a massive walled city. Let's read about this espionage, Joshua chapter 2.

JERICHO

Jericho is the oldest known, continuously occupied walled town on earth. It has been a walled city since at least 8,000 B.C. It was well supplied with strong springs making it an oasis, located 800 ft. below sea level. From ancient times it was known as “The City of Palm Trees.” The name Jericho probably means “moon city,” as a center of pagan worship of the moon god. While there have been many successive cities built on the site, the walls surrounding Jericho at this time may have been 20 ft. thick and up to 25 ft. high.

So, these two Israelite spies arrive in Jericho and stay at the house of a prostitute named Rahab. Some early sources refer to Rahab as an “innkeeper.” And, certainly it is likely in those days that both professions sometimes went together. But the designation “prostitute” for Rahab is verified by two New Testament writers, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit: Hebrews 11:31 and James 2:25. So it would be wrong to deny the immorality of her profession. Major cities in Canaan were in reality small kingdoms with a king over them. So here we have the king of Jericho receiving word that Israelite spies are at Rahab's place. Rooftops were often used as places for drying grain or, in this case, stalks of flax to be woven into linen. Rahab hid the spies under these stalks and then sent the king's men off on a wild goose chase.

RAHAB'S FAITH

Now, let's look at Rahab's confession of faith. She tells the spies whose life she has just saved at the risk of her own, Josh 2:9-11:

I know that the Lord has given this land to you and that a great fear of you has fallen on us, so that all who live in this country are melting in fear because of you. ¹⁰ We have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to Sihon and Og, the two kings of the Amorites east of the Jordan, whom you completely destroyed. ¹¹ When we heard of it, our hearts melted and

everyone's courage failed because of you, for the Lord your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below. [underlining for emphasis]

This is a pretty amazing confession. Rahab has pieced together stories and rumors of what has happened to the Israelites and arrived at faith conclusions. She understands the “great fear” and “hearts melted” and “courage failed” as signs that God is at work. And, she arrives at two conclusions:

1. *the Lord has given this land to you [Israel]*
2. *the Lord your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below.*

This is an awesome expression of faith given the little bits of information Rahab has received. The information she relays to the spies about the general feeling of fear is of course valuable knowledge that will encourage Joshua and Israel. But among all those whose hearts are “melting in fear,” apparently only Rahab has translated this into a reason to put her faith in the true God. She has listened to the stories, thought about them, and been open to new truth. And in that openness, perhaps pieced together with other things she’s heard about the God of Israel, He has led her to this understanding. God doesn’t need a lot to work with, does He? An open heart is where His Spirit begins His amazing work of grace.

Others in Jericho obviously must have the same information Rahab has. But only Rahab translates it into a revelation of the truth of the true God. Perhaps the others are trusting their fortress walls and soldiers to defend the city. They may be drawing false assurance from their formidable defense preparations. After all, what are the bows and arrows and slingshots of the Hebrews against 25 ft. walls? “Certainly our soldiers on top of the walls shooting down on them will have no problem stopping them.” I can imagine the pagan priests redoubling their calls upon the moon god with accompanying sacrifices to protect their city. Only Rahab has the humility and sensitivity that recognizes they are a city under judgment and appeals to the mercy of God through these spies.

Don’t you love the way Rahab seizes this brief opportunity to cast her lot with God’s people? And, it is not just her salvation she is concerned about, but her whole family as well. She is not embarrassed to bargain with them. She is risking her life for salvation for herself and her kinsmen. She is doing what she can in “welcoming the spies” that the later books of Hebrews and James commend as an act of faith and righteousness through which she is saved.

Sometimes it is only a moment we have to seize the opportunity that will change our lives for eternity. Remember the shy, embarrassed woman slipping through the crowd to touch the hem of Jesus’ garment for healing? Or how about blind Bartimaeus about 1400 years later in this same city of Jericho, when he hears Jesus is passing by, cries out, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me?” As the crowd tries to shut him up, he only cries out louder, with greater desperation. This is his moment and he will not let it pass without seizing the opportunity. Jesus will never pass his way again. Again and again, in the Gospels it is most often the hungry, the desperate, those who press in past the barriers who receive from Jesus.

As I think about those who, like Rahab, have done so much with only the smallest bit of knowledge of God but a heart filled with desire, I think of a woman I’ll call Wendy in a former

church. She remembers always having a desire for God. As a child, even at a preschool age, she'd get herself up on Sunday mornings and head off to a church, the Presbyterian, that was within walking distances all by herself to learn more about God. She had an insatiable hunger and as she learned to read studied the Bible and sought after God— she alone from her family. Because of her Christian witness, a man she met in college came into a personal relationship with Christ and later became her husband. She continued to pray for her three adult brothers to become Christians, and one by one, I saw them come to Christ. Her home is filled with the love and grace of God and her three children are all committed to Christ. As I think about her, getting up every Sunday morning all on her own to seek God and the fruit of that humble, sincere heart and all God has done in and through her, I am amazed.

And, we can need to thank God for our Sunday School and Blue Angel bus. We have some, like Wendy, getting themselves here. Don't ever underestimate what God can do, even with little or no support from home.

SAVING GRACE

Here also is a marvelous example of God's grace. Rahab may have been the only one willing to reach out to God for salvation in Jericho. But God recognizes that and will not destroy her along with the city. So, it is ultimately God's leading that brings the spies to Rahab so she can be saved.

Archaeological excavations of this site of Jericho reveal that walls often had houses built into them. So it is with Rahab's house. Evidently she was at the top of the wall, accounting for the roof for the flax to be dried on and also allowing for a window through the outer wall without compromising the defenses. Undercover of darkness, she lowers the spies with a rope from her window. The spies have left her with a scarlet cord to tie in the window at the time of attack to identify her house, so that all who are there with her will be saved. Rahab keeps a door open to the doomed community, providing a place of refuge within her walls. But her window looks out toward Israel and from it hangs the scarlet cord of faith that will provide their salvation— ultimately through Christ on the cross.

That scarlet cord reminds us of the blood the Israelites were to put over the doorposts of their houses to save their families from the death of the firstborn in the last plague on Egypt. That blood is a prefigure of the blood on the cross that saves us from death. Likewise, the early church viewed this blood-colored cord as a symbol of Christ's atonement.

What a wonderful picture this paints of God's saving grace. While the account in the Bible focuses primarily on Israel through whom the Messiah, the Christ will come for the salvation of the world, throughout the Old Testament there are glimpses that God has not left the rest of the human race without a witness. He loves everyone, not just Israel. He has perhaps even sent prophets to other nations as suggested in the story of Baalam, a prophet gone bad (Num. 22-24). While we aren't told most of those stories, I expect that a lot more is going on than we'd guess. God is never without a witness.

And here we have Rahab: a pagan prostitute, not an Israelite, the ultimate outsider, but her heart is open, seeking the truth. And God hears her heart's cry and saves her from the judgment of Jericho. But there's still more. God elevates her in an unbelievable way. She is included in the lineage of Jesus. Matthew in his genealogy, traced only through the men, makes four exceptions to show the surprising breadth of God's grace by including four women, one of whom is Rahab—*Boaz, whose mother was Rahab...* (Mtt. 1:5). Then, when the writer of Hebrews gives his great examples of faith in Hebrews 11, he mentions eight men as examples in how they showed faith, ending with the only woman to make the list, Rahab, in our text—

*By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies,
was not killed with those who were disobedient.* (Heb 11:31)

Then another six names are appended as “honorable mentions” (32).

God's love and the reach of His grace are incredible, as seen here. He has more ways than we can imagine in reaching the lost. Remember this is a God who created 300 kinds of hummingbirds and 500 varieties of bananas. Things won't always fit our neat formulas and expectations of how salvation comes. Rahab blows open the gates of grace and salvation for me. Her immorality and her lying to save the spies are not condoned by God— things are messy and not purely righteous— but in it all, God brings salvation beyond her wildest dreams, placing her as a key part of the family through which the salvation of the whole world will come— Jesus Christ, God's Son.

This should give hope to those of you who are concerned about family members and others you know who are not saved. While we must do all we can to bring them to Jesus, God's resources are not limited to us. In Rahab, we see that it doesn't take much truth for God to work with and bring salvation.

CONCLUSION

I recently read the new biography by Jonathan Aiken of John Newton's life, who wrote the hymn “Amazing Grace.” It is excellent. Most of us realize that John Newton lived a terribly immoral life involved in the slave trade. In a storm at sea when he was certain he'd perish, he cried out to God and began the journey of salvation. Yet he still continued in the cruel slave trade, captaining ships transporting slaves— though now treating them slightly more humanely, which was not saying much. Salvation is not always clean, clear, and simple. It can be quite messy in the rough and tumble of life and social issues, with those who are saved often disappointing us. But God continued to work in Newton's heart leading him to abandon the slave trade, study for the ministry, become a pastor, and ultimately become the one that kept William Wilberforce in Parliament, fighting to end slavery. Amazing grace! Again and again as I read, it was clear that it was really all God from beginning to end.

As a pastor, Newton had a passion to communicate truth simply in ways people would understand it and remember it. To that end, he often wrote hymns to go with his sermon, a controversial practice in the late 1700's when only the Psalms were generally sung in the Church of England. His signature hymn, “Amazing Grace” was written for his New Year's sermon in 1773 and is reflective of his wonder at God's saving him— “a slave-trading blasphemer.” On his

deathbed, in some of his last words, he said, “My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things: That I am a great sinner and that Christ is a great Savior.”

This could also be Rahab’s hymn this morning.