

Mother Christmas: Rahab

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If you're just joining us, we're glad that you're here. This is the second Sunday of the Advent season; Advent is the time of year when we, as Christians, look back and look forward simultaneously. We look back and recall the Lord's first coming—as the Lamb of God, the Sacrifice for our sin. And, at the same time, we look forward to his second coming—as the conquering King and just Judge of the entire universe. That's Advent (and the Bible) in a nutshell.

This year we're commemorating Advent by focusing on five unlikely women whom God uses to bring about our salvation. Last week we looked at Genesis 38 and Tamar—a cursed woman whom the Lord was pleased to use to reverse the curse of sin and death. This week we'll be looking at Joshua 2 and Rahab—a prostitute whose faith God uses to lead Israel into the Promised Land.

Let's read this passage then we'll pray for our time studying it.

Joshua 2:1-4, 8-15, 22-24

Then Joshua son of Nun secretly sent two spies from Shittim. “Go, look over the land,” he said, “especially Jericho.” So they went and entered the house of a prostitute named Rahab and stayed there.

²The king of Jericho was told, “Look, some of the Israelites have come here tonight to spy out the land.” ³So the king of Jericho sent this message to Rahab: “Bring out the men who came to you and entered your house, because they have come to spy out the whole land.”

⁴But the woman had taken the two men and hidden them. She said, “Yes, the men came to me, but I did not know where they had come from.

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⁸Before the spies lay down for the night, she went up on the roof ⁹and said to them, “I know that the Lord has given you this land 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. ¹⁰We 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. ¹¹When we heard of

it, our hearts melted in fear and everyone's courage failed because of you, for the Lord your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below.

¹²“Now then, please swear to me by the Lord that you will show kindness to my family, because I have shown kindness to you. Give me a sure sign ¹³that you will spare the lives of my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, and all who belong to them—and that you will save us from death.”

¹⁴“Our lives for your lives!” the men assured her. “If you don't tell what we are doing, we will treat you kindly and faithfully when the Lord gives us the land.”

¹⁵ So she let them down by a rope through the window, for the house she lived in was part of the city wall. ¹⁶ She said to them, “Go to the hills so the pursuers will not find you. Hide yourselves there three days until they return, and then go on your way.”

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²² When they left, they went into the hills and stayed there three days, until the pursuers had searched all along the road and returned without finding them. ²³ Then the two men started back. They went down out of the hills, forded the river and came to Joshua son of Nun and told him everything that had happened to them. ²⁴ They said to Joshua, “The Lord has surely given the whole land into our hands; all the people are melting in fear because of us.”

As you read this passage, you are supposed to feel tension at different points of the narrative. I want us to focus on just two of those tensions as we study this text. We need to feel those tensions. (1st) We should feel a narrative tension when Joshua sends two men to spy-out Jericho. A little context will show us why that's the case. (2nd) We should feel a tension when we consider our heroine. Rahab is not the kind of hero you'd expect. So, we need to feel these two tensions and see what the Lord wants to teach us through them.

1. The spies.

If you've ever watched a scary movie, then you'll appreciate this commercial. It's one of my all-time favorites.

[Characters in horror movies make bad decisions. That's just what they do.](#)

- “Why can’t we just get in the running car?”
- “Are you crazy!”

When you watch a horror movie, it’s often times incredibly difficult to keep from audibly reprimanding characters for their bad decisions. They are predictable. (They’re so predictable, in fact, that a whole new genre of comedy has been created which simply plays such clichéd, bad decisions for laughs.)

Friends, we should feel somewhat like this when we start reading today’s text, even if we only read the first verse of it. We should question Joshua’s decision.

Then Joshua son of Nun secretly sent two spies from Shittim. “Go, look over the land,” he said, “especially Jericho.” (v. 1).

If you were an Israelite sitting by a campfire listening to some great storyteller recount the events of the Exodus from Egypt, you would have certainly been tempted to audibly yell-out at this point in the narrative—*“Are you crazy! Don’t send spies! Spies are a terrible idea, Joshua!”*

You see, the entire nation of Israel had been stranded in the desert for 40-years up to this point, *because* they sent spies into the land. Twelve spies went into Canaan and ten of them came back faithless and afraid. And, their doubts and fears spread throughout Israel. *Their sins were contagious.* So much so that a whole generation of Israelites were barred by God from entering the Promised Land.

Do you see the tension? Do you feel that tension now? Don’t miss it.

If someone in a scary movie runs into a dark, mist-ridden cemetery for refuge, then you can be pretty sure something bad is about to happen. That’s the expectation. If, however, it doesn’t happen, then you’d wonder why. You’d want to know why. What’s changed? What’s different? What’s the point?

These are good questions to ask of this text because when the spies come-back from Canaan and Jericho, they are not faithless and afraid as those other ten spies—40-years beforehand—had been. Rather, these two spies are full of faith and courage. They come-back to Joshua and tell him that:

The Lord has surely given the whole land into our hands; all the people are melting in fear because of us (v. 24).

Why? What's changed? What's the difference? What have these spies found that the other spies didn't? The short answer is the encouraging grace of their God—his provision and counsel at just the right time. The answer...*is Rahab*.

Let me show you how this works by drawing three contrasts between the first and second spy missions. Notice how each of these contrasts highlights God's grace for his people *through* Rahab. She's our heroine.

Contrast One: Power

- Forty-years earlier, ten of the spies came-back to the Israelites with stories about the insurmountable power of those who lived in the Promised Land. They said, "*We can't attack those people; they are stronger than we are. ...All the people we saw there are of great size. ...We seemed like grasshoppers...to them*" (Numbers 13:31-33).
- When the spies encounter Rahab, she couldn't care less about the power of men, whether Canaanite or Israelite. She's in awe of Yahweh's power. She focuses their attention on his power. (*God's grace!*)

Contrast Two: Fear

- Forty-years earlier, the ten spies (remember that these were military men) came-back afraid and disheartened, *because* they imagined taking the land was up to them; and, they imagined that their enemies were fearless.
- Yet, when God leads the two to Rahab, she paints a more accurate picture of the Canaanites. She tells them that all of the people "*are melting in fear because of you*" (v. 9). In fact, Rahab tells them she "knows" that the land is being given to them by Yahweh. *Take courage*, she says. (*God's grace!*)

Contrast Three: Faith

- Forty-years earlier, the spies (and all of Israel) had witnessed the provision of the Lord, most prominently in miracles. Think about what they had seen: the ten plagues on Egypt, the parting of the seas, as-well-as the receiving and eating of bread from heaven—manna in the desert. This is the context out of which their doubts emerged.

- But now, God provides Rahab. She didn't see any of these great miracles, but she has heard of and believes in them. She reminds the spies of them and adds her testimony—*“for the Lord your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below”* (v. 11). *Trust him*, she says. (*God's grace!*)

Friends, the Lord—in his providence—brought these two spies to the house of a prostitute for an encouraging lesson. Through her, God reminds these two men to rely on his power, to take courage in his purposes, and to trust in his provisions. He reminds them that he is God and that there is no other (Isaiah 45:51). *It's an act of grace to them*. These men hadn't done anything to deserve this encouraging lesson but received it nonetheless.

They received God's unlikely heroine! Isn't it just like our Lord to choose “what is lowly and despised in the world” to humble the proud (1 Corinthians 1:28)? Isn't her saving of the spies a lot like our salvation worked through a lowly carpenter from a tiny, backwater town? Not what you would expect.

Praise the Lord for his mysterious graciousness and his unlikely saviors!

Well, let's move briefly to our second tension.

2. The heroine.

Oh, the problems she's caused! The debates she's stirred up! What do we do with her? With her profession? With her lies? With all of her messy imperfections? What do we do with this unlikely heroine, Rahab?

Some scholars look at Rahab's deceptions and condemn her lying as wrong. They usually go-on to suggest a better course of action—some course without lying. Perhaps, they say, she could have hidden the spies and refused to answer questions; or, perhaps, she should have hidden them and invited the soldiers to search her home while praying that God would keep them from finding the spies.¹

Other scholars defend her lies as contextually justifiable. Their argument runs along these lines—Rahab lived under an unjust regime in a time of war. In this way, she's something like Oskar Schindler who hid Jews from the Nazis; or, something

¹ See Walter Kaiser, *Hard Sayings of the Bible: Was Rahab Right to Lie?*, 181.

like the Hebrew midwives who hid male babies from Pharaoh. Thus, Rahab's lies are actually acts of defiance in the name of greater justice.²

I'm not making these arguments up. You can go check my manuscript online. There, I have provided footnotes that will lead you to excellent biblical scholarship from godly scholars who make these very arguments about Rahab.

But, friends, I think this misses the point. Rahab isn't supposed to be a black and white character. She's not to be a heroine who always makes the right decisions, nor is she to be an example of someone who really screws it up. Is lying wrong? Sure it is. Is it sometimes understandable and maybe even justifiable. Certainly it is. *Yet*, that isn't the point of this text. It's not a textbook on ethics. We're not to look at Rahab as some great moral or immoral example.

(After all, she's a pagan prostitute who has never been taught Yahweh's laws. Why would we expect her to behave as if she had?)

This whole conversation or debate over Rahab makes me very uncomfortable because it is precisely the type of conversation which tends to undermine the gospel. It's the kind of conversation that focuses too much on the weight of human actions and humans as good or bad examples. You know, WWRD—What would Rahab do? Or, WWDD—What would David do? (Or, insert your favorite Bible character here.) Friends, this is dangerous, anti-gospel stuff.

Last Tuesday, I was able to have lunch with a few other Free Church pastors, and our conversation turned to what we were each preaching. One said he was going through the life of David with his congregation. And, he mentioned how dark it gets at the end of his life. There is, of course, his adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband Uriah. But, then, close to the end of David's life, he makes all kinds of mistakes. It's a big mess at the end.

We all agreed that that was true. Then, someone said—“And David's as good as it gets, when it comes to biblical heroes.”

Now, that's preaching the gospel!

² See Jerram Barrs, *Through His Eyes: God's Perspective on Women in the Bible*, 93-94.

As you already know, Rahab finds herself into the genealogy of the Messiah—Jesus of Nazareth. After all of these events, she becomes part of the covenant people of God. And, she's not just a side note but someone who's honored in Hebrew history as a heroine, even as a model. Yet, none of this has to do with her own righteousness. None of the honor has to do with whether or not Rahab was justified in telling lies to Canaanite soldiers. That's not what makes her a hero or model.

Rather, friends, she's honored for placing her faith in God (Hebrews 11:31). Her righteous actions don't save her. Instead, her faith in the Lord of righteousness and salvation saves her. This is the gospel. Not that you and I can earn our salvation, but that God has earned it for us; and, when we trust in his Savior—Jesus Christ—he welcomes us, though we are *spiritual* liars and prostitutes just like Rahab.

This is the good news that set the angels to singing some 2000-years-ago—our righteousness has come in the person of Jesus Christ. Amen.