

## **Rahab Redeemed**

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Joshua 2

Many years ago one of our members opened a used goods store called “Second Time Around.” For the Israelites this was the 2<sup>nd</sup> time around. Forty years earlier God had brought them out of Egypt to the border of Canaan and promised them success in conquering it. But they weren’t ready. Maybe their faith muscles had grown flabby in 400 years of captivity. Ten of the twelve spies Moses sent to survey the land made a negative report so the people rebelled and said “let’s just go back to Egypt.” They didn’t go back to Egypt but God said “Alright then, take another lap.” So they spent the next 40 years wandering in the desert and learning to trust God. Now they have another chance under Joshua. They are camped on the east side of the Jordan River with the Promised Land a few hundred feet away. We will read this chapter in sections as the story unfolds, with comments between them and then look at its lessons.

Verse 1: As Moses had done, Joshua sends spies, but only two this time. This was not to determine whether or not to go into Canaan, but how best to do it. Joshua is especially eager to learn about Jericho because it’s a fortified, walled city with its own water supply from strong springs. It looks impregnable. He also wants to know the state of mind of the people of Canaan; are they confident or nervous, eager for a fight or fearful? The spies enter Jericho and find their way to the house of a prostitute named Rahab. There have been some suggestions that she was simply an innkeeper, but the Greek word used to describe her in the book of Hebrews and the book of James leaves no doubt that she was a prostitute. Since the gods of Canaan were themselves hardly paragons of virtue, prostitution didn’t carry the moral weight that it did for Israel.

Verses 2-3: The major cities of Canaan were small kingdoms ruled by local “kings.” The king of Jericho hears a report that Israelite spies are in the city and are at Rahab’s house, so he sends a message to Rahab to give them up. Rahab has a choice. Though she does not know it, she is poised to play a key role in redemptive history. Could Joshua and his army conquer Canaan without her? Yes, but this is not a fairy tale; God isn’t going to wave a magic wand to make it happen. Human agents play crucial roles. Rahab was at a crossroads.

Verses 4-7: The die is cast. Rahab decides at great risk to herself and her family to hide the spies and then to lie to the king’s messengers, and to compound the lie by sending the searchers out of the city. They assumed the spies had gone down the road that led to where the Jordan River was only about 3 feet deep, so they went that direction. As soon as they went out the city gate was shut. The spies couldn’t get out and the searchers couldn’t get back in until morning.

Verses 8-11: We could title this section “Rahab’s testimony.” First, she says to the men, “I know that the Lord has given this land to you and that a great fear of you has fallen on us...all who live in this country are melting with fear because of you.” “We have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt and when we heard, our hearts melted and everyone’s courage failed because of you.” Then she makes a confession of faith: “The Lord your God is God of heaven above and on the earth below,” words similar to the opening of the Apostles Creed: “I believe in God the Father Almighty maker of heaven and earth...” She turns her back on the gods of Canaan and puts her faith in Yahweh, though she has only “heard” about this God. Then she negotiates.

Verses 12-13: There is no mention of a husband or children but she pleads for her extended family to be spared. She asks for an oath and a sign. She and her family would become the first Gentiles to be included in Israel in this new chapter of its history.

Verses 14-16: The spies swear an oath and promise deliverance. Since the city gate is shut she lets them down by a rope and tells them to go into the hills west of Jericho, an area riddled with caves. “Hide yourselves there 3 days until the search party returns and then go on your way.”

Verses 17-21: The writer backtracks for more detail: “Now the men had said to her...” The scarlet rope would be like the blood of the Passover lamb on the door that marked the homes of the Israelites in Egypt when the angel of death passed through the land. A two-sided covenant is made: The spies: “Put your family in this house and they will be spared; if not, they will be destroyed. Rahab: “Agreed, let it be as you say...” She tied the scarlet cord in the window.

Verses 22-24: The spies hide in the hills and then go back over the Jordan to report to Joshua. Rahab's testimony reinforced God's command. It was just as Joshua had hoped to hear: "The Lord has surely given the whole land into our hands; all the people are melting with fear because of us." Chapter 6 tells what happened when Jericho fell after that dramatic 7-day march around the city: Joshua 6: 22-23.

Now let's step back and consider what this remarkable story has to say to us. I want to lift out and explore two lessons. The first is this: Never underestimate God. That's what Israel had done the first time they came to the border of Canaan. The land seemed too hostile, its cities too fortified, its people too big. The spies said, "The land we explored devours those living in it. All the people we saw there are of great size... We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them" (Numbers 13:31-32). How could that ragtag bunch even consider marching into what seemed like a death trap? And they were right; they were far too weak to do it. But God wasn't. Their problem wasn't a faulty view of themselves but a faulty view of God. They underestimated God, the God who had brought them out of Egypt, who had parted the sea and destroyed the Egyptian army, who had given them manna to eat for 40 years, the God who had made the heavens and earth, the God who "brings princes to naught and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing" (Isaiah 40:21).

It would happen again when Israel was in Babylon. How could God's people maintain hope when they've been carried off to a foreign land and their beloved Jerusalem has been sacked? How? By not underestimating God! "Do you not know; have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom" (Isaiah 40:28). Underestimating God is a human habit. The complexities of life, the enormity of its challenges, the power of evil, the persistence of sin, including our own, can make us feel like grasshoppers, and even lead us to wonder if God is really up to the task of putting things right. But the problem is not that our troubles are too big but, as Bible translator J.B. Phillips put it in the title of his classic book, *Your God is Too Small*. Never underestimate God whose power is unlimited, whose promises never fail and whose purposes will be accomplished, inscrutable though they may be.

But also never underestimate the means God uses to accomplish his purposes. Who would have predicted that God would use a prostitute as a key player in the conquest of the land he had promised to Abraham centuries earlier? Yet, isn't that just like God? Abraham worshipped pagan gods when God called him and was old and childless when God promised descendants as numerous as the stars. His grandson Jacob was a deceiver and a thief, yet God chose to be known as "the God of Jacob." David committed adultery and then murder to cover it up. Mary was a simple, teen-aged peasant girl. Jesus was a carpenter's assistant. He was crucified as a criminal. Peter denied that he even knew him. Saul (Paul) was a terrorist, hell bent on killing followers of Christ. No wonder, years after his conversion Paul would write, "God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things, and the things that are not, to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him." Never underestimate how He can use you!

Here's a second lesson in the story of Rahab: Never underestimate faith. Hebrews 11 is a famous chapter on faith that begins with a definition: "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for; and certain of what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for." Then, grouped together with the likes of Abel and Enoch, Noah and Abraham and Moses is Rahab: "By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient." Rahab believed in a God she had never seen and only heard about, more or less by rumor. But on the strength of what she heard she traded in her belief in the pagan gods of Canaan for trust in the God of Israel.

And she didn't just believe; she acted on her belief. That's why the Apostle James lifts her up as an example. He says, "Was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction?" (James 2:24-25). It might be argued that Rahab's faith was merely pragmatic, that she saw which way the wind was blowing and hoisted her sails to catch it. Was it perfect faith? No, but never underestimate faith, even if it's the size of a mustard seed. In his book, *Small Faith, Great God* theologian N.T. Wright points out what matters is not so much faith itself as what it is faith in. "Faith is like a window, which exists not for its own sake but so that we may see something through it." Through the window of her faith Rahab saw the distant outlines of the God of Israel: "The Lord your God is

God in heaven above and on the earth below.” It may have been mustard seed size but it was enough for God to spare her and her family and to make her an ancestor of Jesus! (Matthew 1:5).

I think it’s safe to say that Mary and Joseph told Jesus stories about his ancestor, including Rahab. Maybe that story was always in the back of his mind as he moved among the common people of his day, including prostitutes, looking for the faintest glimmer of faith and rejoicing when he saw it. The late Rev. Dante Venegas, who was a pastor at the Madison Square CRC here in GR for 18 years, came out of a life of addiction and conviction for various crimes in New York City. A major milestone in his journey out of that life and into ministry was a prayer he prayed in a Bronx County Jail in 1964. His prayer began, “To Whom It May Concern,” then he went on to confess his sins and ask for forgiveness. God honored that prayer and Dante’s life began to change as the Holy Spirit took control. In Mark 9 there’s a story of a desperate man who asked Jesus to heal his convulsive son. He said to Jesus, “If you can do anything, take pity on him and help us.” Jesus said, “ ‘If you can’?” “Everything is possible for one who believes.” The father answered, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief.” His son was healed.

Rahab didn’t have a Bible; she never heard her parents tell stories about Noah or Abraham or Jacob or Moses. She didn’t know theology. All she knew was what she had heard, that the God of Israel had done great things for his people who now were camped just 5 miles away, poised to invade her land. She herself had never seen anything this God had done but she took the leap of faith and God caught her.

If you are tempted to despair because it seems that your enemies are camped just 5 miles away and closing in. The world looks hopeless. Your circumstances are dismal. Sometimes you feel like a grasshopper. Remember the words of Jesus to his disciples on the darkest night they’d ever known, the night before his crucifixion: “In this world you will have trouble, but take heart! I have overcome the world.” The next day he died. But three days later he rose again! Never underestimate God!

Prayer: “Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work in us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen” (Ephesians 3:20-21)

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