

# AN UNLIKELY ANCESTOR

## *JOSHUA---THE ADVENTURE AND VICTORY OF FAITH*

by Doug Goins

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God promised Abraham three things when he entered Canaan, centuries before the events recorded in the book of Joshua. In Genesis 12 God promised Abraham (then called Abram) that he would give him the land of Canaan. He promised that he would establish Abraham's descendants in that land. And he promised that he would make Abraham a spiritual blessing to all the world. Six hundred eighty-five years later God called Joshua to lead the nation of Israel in claiming the land that God had given them, fulfilling the first promise. That is the primary emphasis of the book of Joshua.

But our story in chapter 2 focuses more on the third promise, God's concern for the whole world, Jews and Gentiles alike. Our story is centered on one Canaanite woman named Rahab. The average Israelite in Joshua's day probably gave little thought to this episode, yet God chose to give it great importance in his word.

Remember, although God had given Israel the land of Canaan, it still had to be taken by force with God's sovereign help. Joshua began that warfare the way any good commander would, by getting information about the enemy. He sent two spies to determine the situation in the enemy camp. In the process, these young men encountered an unexpected and very unlikely ally—a prostitute who would become a model of twentieth-century faith for those of us who believe in Jesus Christ. Joshua 2:1-24:

**And Joshua the son of Nun sent two men secretly from Shittim as spies, saying, "Go, view the land, especially Jericho." And they went, and came into the house of a harlot whose name was Rahab, and lodged there. And it was told the king of Jericho, "Behold, certain men of Israel have come here tonight to search out the land." Then the king of Jericho sent to Rahab, saying, "Bring forth the men that have come to you, who entered your house; for they have come to search out all the land." But the woman had taken the two men and hidden them; and she said, "True, men came to me, but I did not know where they came from; and when the gate was to be closed, at dark, the men went out; where the men went I do not know; pursue them quickly, for you will overtake them." But she had brought them up to the roof, and hid them with the stalks of flax which she had laid in order on the roof. So the men pursued after them on the way to the Jordan as far as the fords; and as soon as the pursuers had gone out, the gate was shut.**

**Before they lay down, she came up to them on the roof, and said to the men, "I know that the LORD has given you the land, and that the fear of you has fallen upon us, and that all the inhabitants of the land melt away before you. For we have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites that were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you utterly destroyed. And as soon as we heard it, our hearts melted, and there was no courage left in any man, because of you; for the LORD your God is he who is God in heaven above and on earth beneath. Now then, swear to me by the LORD that as I have dealt kindly with you, you also will deal kindly with my father's house, and give me a sure sign, and save alive my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, and all who belong to them, and deliver our lives from death." And the men said to her, "Our life for yours! If you do not tell this business of ours, then we will deal kindly and faithfully with you when the LORD gives us the land."**

**Then she let them down by a rope through the window, for her house was built into the city wall, so that she dwelt in the wall. And she said to them, "Go into the hills, lest the pursuers meet you; and hide yourselves there three days, until the pursuers have returned; then afterward you may go your way." The men said to her, "We will be**

guiltless with respect to this oath of yours which you have made us swear. Behold, when we come into the land, you shall bind this scarlet cord in the window through which you let us down; and you shall gather into your house your father and mother, your brothers, and all your father's household. If any one goes out of the doors of your house into the street, his blood shall be upon his head, and we shall be guiltless; but if a hand is laid upon any one who is with you in the house, his blood shall be on our head. But if you tell this business of ours, then we shall be guiltless with respect to your oath which you have made us swear." And she said, "According to your words, so be it." Then she sent them away, and they departed; and she bound the scarlet cord in the window.

They departed, and went into the hills, and remained there three days, until the pursuers returned; for the pursuers had made search all along the way and found nothing. Then the two men came down again from the hills, and passed over and came to Joshua the son of Nun; and they told him all that had befallen them. And they said to Joshua, "Truly the LORD has given all the land into our hands; and moreover all the inhabitants of the land are fainthearted because of us."

The nation Israel is camped at Shittim several miles from Jericho, across the Jordan River. Joshua needs information on Jericho's defenses, so he sends two soldiers into the city as spies. They establish their base of operations in the house of a prostitute. There they can maintain anonymity while gathering military intelligence.

Jericho's king hears of the presence of Israelites spies and sends soldiers to Rahab's house, demanding that she produce the intruders. Rahab hid the spies on her roof and pointed the king's men toward the Jordan River.

Like the rest of Jericho's population Rahab is alarmed at the presence of this nation she can see across the Jordan. As soon as the king's soldiers are gone she goes up to the roof and expresses her fear of the future to the Israelite spies.

But in addition to the fear, Rahab voices her own affirmation of faith in the God of Israel. She calls him "the LORD," *Yahweh* God-not a Canaanite name for God, but the covenant name that the Hebrew people used for their personal God. This God is determined, she says, to give the land to the Hebrews. And she has heard the rumors that have been circulating for forty years about how the Red Sea dried up before the people when God miraculously delivered them from Egypt and how God took them through the wilderness; and she has heard the more recent news about the military victories over the Amorite kings Og and Sihon, whose forces were wiped out and their cities leveled. Look at what she says in verse 11: "And [in light of all that] as soon as we heard it, our hearts melted, and there was no courage left in any man, because of you; for the LORD your God is he who is God in heaven above and on earth beneath." This powerful confession of God's absolute sovereignty suggests that Rahab isn't just gripped by fear, but deep inside she has a growing spiritual sensitivity to the supernatural God at work through all of these events.

In verses 12-13 Rahab begs the men for a promise of safety for her and for her entire family as repayment for having hidden them from the authorities: "Now then, swear to me by the LORD that as I have dealt kindly [this word is a form of *hesed* -loyal love, covenant loyalty, or faithfulness] with you, you also will deal kindly with my father's house, and give me a sure sign, and save alive my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, and all who belong to them, and deliver our lives from death." She is asking the spies to save them from the judgment on the city that is to come, which she is convinced will be the death of everyone in Jericho. The spies promise to grant this request.

It's interesting how the Israelite armies that advanced were to know which house was hers. The location of that house in or on the city wall would make it easy for the spies to escape and also for the house to be recognized by the advancing army. For about 250 years biblical critics claimed that this story was mythological, or at best historical fiction, because there was no evidence that there were houses built into city walls in the ancient near east. But the excavations in Jericho after the turn of the century showed that the city was surrounded by double walls with twelve feet between them. And they found evidence that simple houses were built on top of timbers that were spread between the two walls. These were like poor squatter's houses sitting on top of the city wall.

Rahab lowers the men by a rope through the window and points them toward the hills to the west. It's interesting that this prostitute is giving these spies instructions in intelligence work. She says, "Don't go back east toward the river; that's where they're looking for you. Go west and hide for three days in the hills until the Jericho security forces have returned from looking for you. Then you can make your way east and swim across the river back to the camp."

The spies promise to honor her request for family protection if she and her family promise to keep their visit a secret. They point to a bright red rope in her house and tell her to hang it across her window as a sign for the attacking Israelite army. They promise that any of her family members who remain in her house during the assault on Jericho will be safe, but if they go outside the house or if they tell anyone about the espionage, then the spies and the Israelite army will no longer be bound by this commitment they are making to Rahab and her family.

So the young spies leave, following her instructions precisely. And when they return to camp, the sum total of the intelligence report that they deliver to Joshua after three days in the land (the text tells us that both the going out and the coming back were done in secret) is in verse 24: "Truly the LORD has given all the land into our hands; and moreover all the inhabitants of the land are fainthearted because of us." Remember how God encouraged Joshua through his own word, the words of the people, and the words of the leaders in chapter one. Now God is encouraging Joshua through a Canaanite prostitute's words, which these spies bring back to him.

After the defeat of Jericho, the first act of the two spies will be to rescue Rahab and her entire family before the city is razed and destroyed by fire. The conclusion to this story is told in 6:22-23: "And Joshua said to the two men who had spied out the land, 'Go into the harlot's house, and bring out from it the woman, and all who belong to her, as you swore to her.' So the young men who had been spies went in, and brought out Rahab, and her father and mother and brothers and all who belonged to her; and they brought all her kindred, and set them outside the camp of Israel." What an amazing story!

There are two themes in this narrative that I want to develop. First, over and over again throughout history God chooses very plain or nondescript people and exalts them, draws them to himself, and then honors them with ministry responsibility. Rahab is an amazing example of this. Second, God holds Rahab up on display as a model of saving faith. She exhibits amazing character qualities that commend themselves to God, and then he commends her to us in the New Testament.

I am grateful to John Huffman for these observational emphases in his commentary, *Joshua, Mastering The Old Testament*. Word Publishing, 1986, pp. 57-66.

To develop the first theme, there are three things about Rahab that speak to the disadvantage from which she comes, the prejudice with which she lives, and the disability that she has to overcome.

First, Rahab is a Canaanite. Canaanites are hated as a people by virtually every culture and nation that surrounds them in this period. The Egyptians and Hittites write against them, and the Ugaritic culture looks down on them because of their degenerate culture and debased religion. We know from the Scriptures that God has already placed the peoples of Canaan under his moral judgment. After waiting 685 years, giving them every opportunity to turn to him, speaking truth and extending grace and mercy to them, he sees that their iniquity is full; the evil has filled itself up. It is time for judgment to fall. Over and over in the Old Testament, we find references to the wickedness of the Canaanites.

But Rahab is one Canaanite who is not labeled wicked. She is freed from bondage to Canaanite debauchery by crossing over and joining the movement of the kingdom of God. We're going to find later in Scripture that she and her family become part of Israel.

Rahab's second disadvantage is that she is a woman. Canaanite culture has a depraved, debased view of women. The reliefs and sculptures that we find show women as nothing more than sex objects and offspring-bearers. That attitude of sinful male chauvinism has been demonstrated in every society throughout human history. You may have heard the first-century prayer of the Jewish rabbis: "I thank my God that I was

not born a woman." Today in many parts of the world women are legally second-class citizens who don't have the right to vote. In many cultures, women are still chattel, property to be owned; and girls are still killed at birth. We're all too well aware of the tragedy of domestic violence against women in our own country. In a fallen, sinful world, being a woman is a disadvantage. Some things haven't changed since the Canaanite culture.

But God chooses to make this fascinating woman Rahab his servant, to honor her, and to focus on her.

Rahab's third disadvantage is that she is a prostitute. Most likely Rahab and her family lived in poverty. The bundles of flax that were laid out on the roof to dry will be used to weave linen. It suggests that her family lives by agriculture outside the walls of Jericho. Rahab's house on the outer wall serves as a place for her family to stay when they're in the city. Probably out of economic necessity, Rahab herself earns a living as a prostitute. And like prostitutes in all cultures, she is marginalized by society. In our day, as then, this profession is tolerated generally because of male sexual demands. But these women go entirely without recognition; they are non-entities in Jericho society, just as prostitutes are today in every country around the world.

But again, God loves to turn things upside-down. He chooses the most unexpected people to work with. He specializes in social outcasts. Remember, Jesus will be criticized for his involvement with publicans and sinners-those who are looked down upon because of lifestyle choices they have made.

Rahab was a female Canaanite prostitute with all the attendant prejudice and disadvantage. But God chose this unlikely woman as His own. John Hamlin says of her, "Rahab was a paradigm of hope, showing that the old idols, the old corrupt ways of the past, could be given up.....The contrast between Rahab at the bottom of the social scale and the king and nobles of Jericho at the top illustrates well what Jesus said: 'Harlots go into the kingdom of God before you.' (Matt. 21:31)" - footnote 1 - E. John Hamlin, *Inheriting the Land*. Wm. B Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Mich., 1983, pp. 16-17.

The second theme in this narrative is how God holds Rahab up as a worthwhile model of saving faith in God. Rahab demonstrates five amazing character qualities.

First, she is faithful to whatever glimmers of truth she does see. All the citizens of Jericho have heard of Israel and the God of Israel, of how God is saving them powerfully. The result in all of them is fear, but Rahab is the only one in that city who chooses not to be paralyzed by fear. In her own embryonic way she is prepared to ask questions like, "Who are these people? Their God must be supremely powerful." Rahab's questions are a starting point for her faith. She is open to truth. She is looking for something better in life. And God brings two spies into her life who aren't interested in her services as a prostitute. So her question is, "What kind of a God is it that these men serve? They live lives like this! He might be a God who could bring me a new moral framework for life, a new identity." So Rahab is a seeker of truth, and God always honors that kind of openness. The Scriptures assure us that if we seek with all our hearts, we'll find the Lord, or more accurately, he'll find us. Jesus says, "...Seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you" (Matthew 7:7).

Second, Rahab is willing to make a difficult choice. She is available immediately to do the courageous thing, putting her own life at risk in hiding the spies. She makes a bold choice to somehow trust this God whom the spies represent. In so doing, she changes her whole future as well as her family's.

The issue of my own availability to God struck me in wrestling with this over the last couple of weeks. I know so much more than Rahab did about God's providential care and his identity as God in heaven above and on earth below. If I'm going to take him seriously and follow him, it always means making choices, taking action, being available. Are we as willing to obey him as Rahab was without knowing all the answers? She didn't know much of anything about his character, about his ways, or what the future might hold. The upward call of God in Christ Jesus always challenges us to make clear-cut decisions for Christ-not for expediency's sake, not for personal advantage, but for the sake of Jesus Christ.

Third, Rahab is willing to join a new spiritual family, the nation of Israel. The red rope she hung over her window pictured the blood smeared above the doors of the Jews who were delivered out of Egypt on the

Exodus. It was a symbol of redemption out of bondage. In the years of worshipping in the wilderness to follow, they learned about the significance of the blood of the sacrifice, about its atoning for sin, about the ordinance of the Passover. Rahab's bright red rope has in its color a meaning that is a type of Christ as well. It anticipates the blood of Jesus Christ shed on the cross, atoning for the sins of the world, including those of each of us today who accept his sacrifice on our behalf. That includes Rahab's sins. She is a work in process. Hanging that rope is not only a signal to the army of Israel, but also a sign that she believes in their God, a God, with whom she will grow into intimate relationship as her glorious new future unfolds.

The scriptures tell us that this God to whom she entrusted her life took what was broken and inconsequential and put it together in such a way that she and her family become honored members of the Jewish nation. After the conquest of Canaan, Rahab was married to a tribal leader of the nation, a prince of the tribe of Judah whose name is Salmon. Matthew 1:5,6 in the genealogy of Jesus Christ, lists "...Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of David the king." Rahab became so much more than a prostitute saved by grace. She was an unusually wonderful mother of Boaz, who married Ruth. She was the great-great grandmother of King David. She was a direct ancestor of Joseph, the husband of Mary, to whom Jesus was born.

Can you think of a more unlikely ancestor for our Messiah? The reality is that if you're Jewish by race, she may be a physical ancestor of yours. And if you're a believer in Jesus Christ, no matter what your racial background, then Rahab is one of your spiritual ancestors. We're in her family line because she was willing to join a new family.

The fourth quality of Rahab is that in joining a new family, she remains loyal to her own Canaanite family. That's an amazing thing. She loves them, and convinces them to trust this God of Israel with whom she has begun a relationship. And in asking them to trust her, she assumes responsibility for the fact that they might give away the secret and betray her, and her life as well as theirs might be at risk. God will honor that loyalty to her family by saving them all.

It struck me that her family must see a difference in her life to make her believable to them, or they wouldn't trust and wait for the Israelites to show up. Christ calls us to the same loving loyalty to our non-Christian family members. They deserve to know of our faith in Him. His life in us will make us increasingly unselfish toward them.

The fifth quality of Rahab, and perhaps the most powerful for us, is that she has tough faith that is held up as a model by New Testament writers. She is a woman of tenacity. She has exercised saving faith in the true and living God, and her life is changed. In verse 21 we see that as soon as the spies go out, she immediately hangs the cord in the window. We don't know how long it hangs there—perhaps days of waiting, hoping, watching, trusting. It is a public statement of trusting in God.

Rahab illustrates the new life we can have in Christ Jesus. Her life is an example of the miraculous process described for us in Ephesians 2:1-10 of, having once been dead, being made alive by God's great mercy and power. It's clear from the Scriptures that Rahab is saved through the shed blood of Jesus Christ, because Jesus was the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world. Her sins were covered and forgiven by his sacrificial work on the cross. To echo Colossians 1:13, Rahab passed from the dominion of darkness to the kingdom of God's own dear Son.

Two New Testament books mention Rahab, Hebrews and James. Hebrews makes a tremendous statement about her, comparing her to other heroes of faith. She is one of only two women listed in the hall of fame in Hebrews 11. Sarah, the wife of Abraham, is mentioned as a woman of faith, and then it says of Rahab, "By faith Rahab the harlot did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had given friendly welcome to the spies" (11:31). Hebrews 11:6 says, "And without faith it is impossible to please him. For whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him." That describes the saving faith of Rahab. She was surrounded by unbelieving Canaanites, and yet she stood alone in faith.

James 2:21, 25 mentions two people who demonstrate a living, spiritual faith—the man Abraham and the

woman Rahab. They are the only two people mentioned: "Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he offered his son Isaac upon the altar?...And in the same way was not also Rahab the harlot justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out another way?" The issue of works means that faith is demonstrated, expressed, or exhibited. What they believed spiritually, they each acted on in the choices they made. Abraham demonstrated his faith at tremendous cost, but he was willing to trust God and offer his son. Rahab, as well, had a faith that had teeth to it, structure and strength. She stood alone against the entire culture that surrounded her. Until Jericho fell she had to stand for the unseen spiritual realities against the seen physical realities. She had to make a choice to trust the God of Israel whom she couldn't see, against the king of Jericho and the armies and the fortifications of that great city that she could see. By her faith, Rahab the harlot was deemed righteous.

The two great themes of this story are true for us personally and practically. The first theme is that God chooses to work through very ordinary and very unlikely people. He chose to work through Rahab, a Canaanite, a woman, a dishonest prostitute, a non-entity. God continues to work that way as he always has. The apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1:27-29, "...But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God." Whenever you see that phrase "but God," it means that God loves to turn things upside-down, to change impossible situations such as disadvantage and bias.

If you feel keenly your own foolishness and weakness and baseness, if you feel despised, like a non-entity, like one of those "things that are not," remember Rahab. God knew who she was and God chose her. She responded in faith and God exalted her. She became like a diamond set against the darkness of her time. God loves to take unlikely people and do amazing things with them. And if you feel disadvantaged, a victim of prejudice because of race, gender, or physical disabilities, God knows you. God will take your life and do something tremendous with it.

The second theme is that God chose Rahab as a wonderful model of saving faith. She is an example of what God has done throughout human history, calling all kinds of people to himself, especially people like Rahab who are struggling with guilt and broken dreams and hopelessness. Those are the people who make up the church of Jesus Christ. People have been brought out of those despairing circumstances. The apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6:9-11a: "Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither the immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor robbers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you." Peninsula Bible Church is a church full of people whom God has found and saved out of those destructive lifestyles and patterns. In some cases, he is still in the process of bringing about the transformation of life. Paul continues, "But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit of our God." (1 Corinthians 6:11b.) If this hasn't happened in your life yet, you can be washed clean from sin that weighs you down and gives you a guilt-ridden conscience. You can know the same washing, you can be covered by the blood of Jesus as Rahab was and as all believers in Jesus are. You can know his sanctifying work.

Part of the story we have seen is the wonderful way that God gradually changed Rahab, lifted her up, and gave her a place of honor in the history of his people. That is the process of sanctification for all of us. She was justified; she was placed into a new, right relationship with God and with his people. She could function as a healthy, whole person. She was declared righteous. If you don't know that yet, there is no reason you can't know it. You can make the same confession of faith and start the same process that Rahab entered into. If you believe you are forgiven and a part of the redeemed community, but you live with regret, overwhelmed with guilt about your past, let the life and transformation of Rahab encourage and strengthen you. God loves to turn bad things around and conform people to his own image.

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