



HANGING BY A THREAD

By Judy Herminghaus

When I became the pastor to women at PBC about six years ago, I came across Liz Curtis Higgs' book *Really Bad Girls of the Bible*. On the cover was a sexy-looking petite Middle Eastern woman with veils and some pretty, sparkling things. I loved the title, and the author had a sense of humor, I could tell. I thought, "Here's a woman for me!" She must be a woman that understands us "bad girls." I was an angry child, adolescent, and young adult. I remember my first experience in church, when I was in kindergarten. My mother took me to Sunday school at Menlo Park Presbyterian Church, and I was so uproarious and rowdy my first couple of visits that they asked my mother not to bring me back unless she could control me a little more. It wasn't their fault; it was me. I went all the way through the rest of school talking back to teachers, being pretty uproarious in class, living a lot in the principal's office. That all seems funny to me now, but there were some really serious reasons why I was like that, and I want to share some of them with you.

When I grew up in the fifties, everybody had two kids, a dog, and a house with a garage. That seemed like the American dream. But I lived in an apartment with a single parent, my mother. I never met my father. I was a latchkey kid, so I raised myself to some degree. I was very, very angry that I didn't have a father in my life and that my mother had little time for me. That anger spilled out of me in all kinds of negative behavior.

When I was fifteen, my worst childhood fear came true—my mother passed away from cancer. I hoped and hoped that somehow my father would come and rescue me, even though I had never met him, because at that point if he didn't, I was an orphan. He didn't come. I would cry at night, asking God why this was happening to me and what was I going to do, but I really did not know if God was there or not. I was just desperate. God revealed himself to me through a small, quiet voice in my inner being, and from then on I knew that he was real and that he was good. But it took me fifteen more years to actually come to faith in Jesus Christ. During those fifteen years I remained angry at times and self-destructive, but I also harbored a hope in God that sustained me.

I was surprised to find out that Liz Curtis Higgs had a similar "God visit" at the lowest point in her life. She writes so beautifully of that time:

"Beth...would buy those pills when she woke up, but for the moment she was in no shape to drive.

"Instead, she would sleep.

"A little sleep now. A forever sleep soon.

"The sleep of the dead.

"Little did Beth know that while she planned her own unhappy ending, far above her someone was circling her

pit, waiting for the opportune moment. Waiting until she hit bottom. Waiting until she looked up. That time finally came when Beth realized where she was—buried deep in a pit—and how much she hated being there.

“On that sacred day, when nothing could be heard but Beth’s weeping in that grim and desolate place, a man lowered himself over the side. He eased down the walls of the pit—not in a hurry but not stalling either—giving Beth time to see him coming, to watch his descent and reflect on who he was.

“Finally he stood before her and breathed one syllable into the darkness. ‘Beth.’ *He knows my name.* Stunned, she merely nodded, squinting to see him better. His eyes were kind. ‘I came for you.’” (1)

“I came for you.” Those are the best words to hear in any language, and especially when you’re in a pit. That God would say them to us is too beautiful for words.

This is the God who came for a woman named Rahab whom we’re going to meet in Joshua 2 and 6. This is the God who looks at all our confusion, our lostness, our hopelessness and sin, when we’re just hanging on to life by a thread, and does not turn away, but waits for the perfect time to come and save us. He did it for Liz Curtis Higgs, for me, and for Rahab, a harlot in Jericho whom God saved at the most terrifying time in her life.

Let me tell you Rahab’s circumstances. God’s divine appointment with her took place at a time when he determined to fulfill a promise that he had made to Abraham, the father of Israel, almost seven hundred years earlier. God’s promise to Abraham is recorded in Genesis 12:1-3:

“Now the LORD said to Abraham,

‘Go forth from your country,

And from your relatives

And from your father’s house,

To the land which I will show you;

And I will make you a great nation,

And I will bless you,

And make your name great;

And so you shall be a blessing;

And I will bless those who bless you,

And the one who curses you I will curse.

And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

Now the day had come. Unfortunately for Rahab, she was on the opposite side of the blessing as it concerned the land: Israel was going to come and take this land of Canaan where she lived, and that meant destruction for the Canaanites.

The nation of Israel had come up to the border of Canaan one other time (Numbers 13-14). In that generation, twelve spies went out and reconnoitered Canaan, the Promised Land. They decided that it was a very beautiful land, but they were so terrified of the Canaanites, who were very heavily armed and whose city of Jericho was very heavily fortified, that they advised against going in to take the land. Israel didn't trust God and obey him. So he sent them into the wilderness for forty years, and that generation died off in the wilderness. What we have here is the next generation of Israelites now coming to take the Promised Land under a new leader, Joshua.

At this point in the story, if you were following along in the greater Israel narrative, you would be wondering whether Israel would be faithful enough this time to take the land. So it's shocking that the kind of faith that you would be looking for in Israel is demonstrated first by this woman named Rahab, a most unlikely sort, a Canaanite and a prostitute, in Joshua 2.

The faith God sees

Let's read Joshua 2:1-7:

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.

The king of Jericho was told, "Look! Some of the Israelites have come here tonight to spy out the land." So 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."

But 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. At dusk, when it was time to close the city gate, the men left. I don't know which way they went. Go after them quickly. You may catch up with them." (But she had taken them up to the roof and hidden them under the stalks of flax she had laid out on the roof.) So the men set out in pursuit of spies on the road that leads to the fords of the Jordan, and as soon as the pursuers had gone out, the gate was shut.

The most surprising thing here is that there is faith in Canaan, the most faithless place on earth! And we're shocked that it happens to be found in a prostitute, because nobody would think that in her unclean life she could have that kind of faith.

Another shocking thing in this account is that the spies of Israel went to a prostitute's home. What were they doing there? For forty years while Israel wandered in the wilderness, they had learned God's law. They had been repeatedly told to stay separated from the pagan nations around them so that they could be a pure and holy people for God. So what would make them go to a prostitute's house? Well, they were spies, and spies need to avoid getting caught. A bordello is the kind of place where men come and go frequently and travelers stay overnight, a place where perhaps it was less likely that these spies would be questioned. The other factor was that Rahab's house was built on the city wall. Jericho had high double walls going around it with twelve feet of space between the walls. Rahab's house was built on the beams bridging the two walls. So from her house there was a good view of Jericho from which to reconnoiter the whole place. Those are the practical reasons why spies might be at Rahab's house.

But the real reason for their visit was that God had a divine appointment with Rahab! Surely it was God who sent the two spies as his representatives to Rahab's home for his own purpose: he was going to save Rahab and her family. And through Rahab's demonstration of great faith in God, he was able to fulfill the promise that he made to Abraham, that through Abraham's faith, all the nations of the earth would be blessed. Rahab and her

family were the firstfruits in Canaan of that promise!

What a surprising person to exhibit such courageous faith! Rahab was all the wrong things. She was from the wrong people, the idolatrous Canaanites. She was the wrong gender, a female in a totally male world. And she was in the oldest and most shameful profession. And yet God sent his spies to her, because he knew something that no one else knew yet.

2 Chronicles 16:9 says something really special and applicable to this account: “The eyes of the LORD move to and fro throughout the earth that He may strongly support those whose heart is completely His” (NASB). God gazes back and forth from the invisible realms, watching for all those who are going to show faith in him. They are the most unlikely people. I can testify to that, because I’m one. God sees differently than we do, thank goodness. How often we see only the wreckage of a person. This story is showing us that God looks much deeper.

Recently I was in the beauty salon, and a woman came in and sat in the seat next to mine. She was a very old woman, but she had a blonde, shoulder-length wig on, and she was very heavily made up. She was wearing a lot of big jewelry, very tight pants, a very tight shirt, and very high heels. She was really very well put together, but my assessment was that she was trying too hard to be a young woman again. Now, there was a middle-aged woman in the chair on the other side of her, and she turned to this old woman, and said, “Oh, how nice. You bring all of your jewelry out, and you *wear* it! And you’re proud of it, because you just love beautiful things.” She said, “May I see your beautiful rings?” She had the woman show her all that, and then she said, “Tell me the stories behind them.” I was *so* humbled, because I was about to teach this passage, and I was going to tell you that God sees beyond the wreckage of a person, and then he showed me the way I was looking at this old woman. Teaching can be very illuminating. We can all do things like this, can’t we? But God doesn’t see like that. That kind woman in the salon showed me a bit of how God sees. She saw the other woman’s need and her beauty!

When God saw Rahab, he saw faith. And faith is always beautiful. Rahab proved her faith right away, because she did three things for the spies. She received them into her home, she hid them to protect them, and she lied to the king, demonstrating that her allegiance was not to the king of Jericho and to this world, but to the God and King of Israel. Already an outcast, she immediately became a traitor to her people, because she was hoping in God, hoping for something that she couldn’t yet see. The king’s men could have searched her home, and she could have been caught. Rahab had no assurance that that wouldn’t happen. She was taking a really big risk. And it’s true that every time we step out in faith, we take a risk, because that’s the definition of faith: you step out into territory you don’t know, trusting that God will deliver you.

When God came for Rahab, she was desperate. She knew her only hope lay in him, so she threw herself totally on his mercy. This is true faith, and we often demonstrate it in those times when we’re the most desperate and needy. You don’t need a lot of faith when life is going really well, when your kids are doing well in school, when your job is going great, when you’re a great success, when you’re healthy, wealthy, and wise. But you need a lot of faith when one of those pieces is taken away, don’t you? That’s when we really get challenged to exercise faith. Rahab was down so low, she knew it. So she could really grab hold of God and exercise faith.

How did Rahab come to have such faith in God, being a Canaanite? They worshiped all kinds of other gods. Verses 8-11 tell us.

Forty years of witness

Before the spies lay down for the night, she went up on the roof and said to them, “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. 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. 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. 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 that 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.”

Rahab makes some strong statements here. She says she *knows* that God is going to give the land to them. This word translated “know” means experiential, personal knowledge. It’s beyond just having information. It means believing that information deep within.

Four times in this passage Rahab uses God’s personal name, *Yahweh*, which God used only with his people Israel. (It’s translated “LORD” in your Bible.) That was the covenant name that God revealed to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:13-14). But somehow Rahab had heard of his real name, and decided that he was really the true and living God.

In verse 11 she makes another strong statement: “For the LORD your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below.” That’s the statement that God is looking for in all of his people of faith: “You are God, and nobody else is.” Jericho had so many gods—there was even a god of the fortress around the city. But Rahab says, “None of them are gods. *Yahweh* is the only God.”

Apparently all the people in Canaan had heard the stories of how God had parted the Red Sea (Exodus 14) and how he had defeated the kings of the Amorites (Numbers 21:21-35). God allowed Israel to be a witness outside the gates of Canaan for forty years, and for good reason—he wanted all of them to be saved, if possible (2 Peter 3:9). But there’s a choice involved. And it seems that the only response they had was fear. Only one Canaanite, Rahab, came up with faith. It’s pretty amazing.

I wonder if the reason she had great faith was that she was already such an outcast. She already knew she was in desperate need. And perhaps the other people didn’t. The Canaanites were wealthy. Perhaps they were holding on to some hope in their gods or their warriors or their conquests over the years. “I’ll just hold on to this really hard, and it will save me.” But Rahab had been in a pit, probably for a very long time. She recognized that no self-help, no cleaning up of her act, no alignment with forces of this earth would help her at all.

Actually, in some ways, a pit is a really good place to be. Those times when it feels really terrible to be here on earth suffering are actually great opportunities to know God better. So I have some questions for you: Are you aware of where you are in your faith? Are you able to see your need right now and admit it to God? Or are you holding something back, afraid that what you need, he’s not going to give you? If he doesn’t give it to you, are you afraid that you won’t have faith? Or are you still trying to rely on some self-help program to get you where you want to go? These are questions you have to ask every time something changes in your life. “What am I putting my faith in? Am I hoping in God, or am I hoping in my abilities, my health, my wealth?”

Rahab also did something remarkable that you will often see accompanying real faith, because real faith is not selfish, but wants to extend hope to other people: she asked if her family could be saved as well.

Our Thursday morning Bible study group is studying the Gospel of John, and we watched a little part of *St. John of the Cross*, a movie on the life of John that Dean Jones did years ago. In my day this actor used to be in very popular Disney movies like *The Love Bug* and *That Darn Cat*. You were always seeing his face. Then all of a sudden you didn’t see him. In our Bible study we started wondering what happened to him, and whether he was a man of faith himself. So one of the women looked him up on the internet and found that he had a really cool story.

“A born-again Christian since 1974, Jones founded the Christian Rescue Committee (CRC), an organization that helps provide a ‘way of escape to Jews, Christians, and others persecuted for their faith.’ Jones launched the ministry in 1998...he learned that there were more than 200 million Christians being persecuted throughout the world for their beliefs. ‘I couldn’t believe the numbers,’ he says. ‘I thought they were exaggerated.’ Since

then, the CRC has helped rescue over 50 Christians and Jews from prison around the world. A saved soul wants to extend salvation to others.” (2)

Some folks from PBC are part of a team ministering in Pakistan this week. Two of them are great friends of mine. I got emails from them in the last couple of days. One said, “It’s four o’clock in the morning, and I’m listening to the call to prayers, and I’m writing you an email because you know I’m *always* up at four.” That’s Candy Goins. (No one else I know would ever get up at four in the morning.) Candy said she had a greater fear of teaching than she did of the terrorists! That’s kind of funny, but she’s telling the truth. Candy is married to a pastor, Doug Goins, who teaches all the time, and she grew up the daughter of a pastor. So teaching wasn’t Candy’s thing; she let other people do that. And she does many other things wonderfully. But God called her to go to Pakistan with Doug and his team, and she went. And she’ll do a great job teaching. Teaching women in a country where there is persecution is not something that she ever thought she would do, but she’s going because she’s living for something greater.

My other friend who’s on the team is Carol Lind, the community life pastor here at PBC. I’ve known Carol for years. Carol always wanted to be a housewife and a mother, and grow beautiful flowers in her garden, and be left alone, because people were a little treacherous in her experience. This woman would never think of going to Pakistan! But she became a pastor, and now she’s giving hope to the hopeless in the persecuted church in Pakistan. That’s the kind of thing God will do with us if we want to live for something greater.

God will use us for things we could never imagine. It happens every day in this church. I hear of people raising their grandchildren, because they want them to be raised in the faith, and their children need help. I watch others work with those whose marriages are going bad, counseling and walking alongside them and encouraging them. Those are ways of living for something greater, too. In the church we all have a work to do. I want to encourage you that living for something greater is really enjoyable! We give out of the grace that we’ve received from God, not out of our ability, beauty, background, or whatever. When God saves us, he wants to use us so that others might be saved as well.

Hoping and waiting

Rahab has asked the spies to save her family and they give her a sign. Verses 14-21:

“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.”

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

The men said to her, “This oath you made us swear will not be binding on us unless, when we enter the land, you have tied this scarlet cord in the window through which you let us down, and unless you have brought your father and mother, your brothers and all your family into your house. If anyone goes outside your house into the street, his blood will be on his own head; we will not be responsible. As for anyone who is in the house with you, his blood will be on our head if a hand is laid on him. But if you tell what we are doing, we will be released from the oath you made us swear.”

“Agreed,” she replied. “Let it be as you say.” So she sent them away and they departed. And she tied the scarlet cord in the window.

So what does that red cord mean? Often in Scripture the color red is a picture of blood. The Hebrew word *tiqvah* translated here as “cord” is most commonly used in the Old Testament to mean hope. What I think this

means is that there is a red cord physically hanging in Rahab's window, but there is more to this scene than that. Rahab is hanging her hope in God in the window in the form of this red cord.

This scene is very reminiscent of Exodus 12, when God sent the plagues on Egypt so that Pharaoh would release the Israelites. The last and most fearsome plague on Egypt was the one that is commemorated in the Passover. Moses instructed the Hebrew people to smear the blood of a sacrificial lamb over their doorposts and lintels, because that night the angel of death was going to strike all the firstborn in Egypt, but would pass over the houses whose doors were covered by the blood.

In 1 Corinthians 5:7 Paul writes, "For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed" (NASB). John the Baptist's ministry was to declare this to the world. When he saw Jesus, he pointed to him and shouted, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29, NASB.) So the red cord in Rahab's window meant that death would not come to that household, and salvation for those inside was assured. It is a symbol to us of the blood of Jesus, which washes away our sin and frees us from the penalty for sin, which is death, and gives us eternal life in its place. Rahab's display of her red cord was the requirement for her to be saved. God's requirement for us to be saved, in this age, is that we believe in his Son Jesus Christ, whom he sent as the Passover Lamb, so that death would pass over our lives, and we would inherit eternal life.

For twenty-one days Rahab was able to keep that cord hanging in her window, and she was able to keep her family inside her house. I don't know how she did that. It doesn't say anywhere in the text that Rahab's family believed anything. But that was what she needed to do, and she did it.

Take a minute and consider that. When you think of that red cord, what is it that you need right now that only God can give you? What do you hope God will do for you?

Rahab hoped in God and hoped that death would pass over her. She must have wondered how God would bring that about. We wonder about the things that we hope for, don't we? If we're in Christ, our ultimate hope is fulfilled; we will live forever. But down here on this earth, we need to tell God a lot about the burdens we're carrying and about what we hope for, and let him answer our hope as he sees fit. Mostly he'll answer by giving us more of himself when we talk with him that way.

Rahab's story ends happily. The fall of Jericho is recorded in Joshua 6. God conquered Jericho in a very unusual way, as you probably know. God told Joshua, the leader of Israel, to tell the mighty warriors to form a parade. Behind them would march seven priests, each blowing a ram's horn. They were to march around Jericho once every day for six days, blowing the ram's horns but not speaking. So they did. Imagine what it was like to be Rahab and her family, inside their little house, hearing the trampling of the warrior's feet and the ram's horns. Everybody in Jericho was hiding, absolutely terrified. They didn't even come out to fight, they were so afraid. None of the normal means of conquering a city happened, because this was a *miraculous* conquering of Jericho. On the seventh day when they marched around the city, they marched around it six times, and on the seventh time around they shouted and the walls of Jericho fell down. Everything was decimated except for Rahab's house. Her little red cord was dangling in her window. We know this because she was saved.

Can you imagine what those days must have been like? There was debris everywhere, death all around. It must have been incredibly unpleasant. Yet Rahab and her family remained inside, and all were spared. After watching the coverage of 9/11, we have a better picture of what that debris and desolation must have looked like. It was total destruction. It must have been very hard.

The spies had to go in and bring Rahab and her family out, because even with all that action going on, they certainly never poked their heads out to take a look. What a work of faith it must have been for Rahab to keep her family in there!

Sadly, this is a picture of great contrasts, because nobody else in Jericho was saved. For almost seven hundred

years, God had held back his hand of judgment against Canaan. And for forty years he had given them a close-up and personal witness of who he was, just outside Canaan's borders. Yet in all that time, only Rahab the harlot turned to God and believed. The others hid in fear and perished. The choice we make to believe God, then, is what ultimately determines our future. As the apostle Paul says, loosely paraphrased, in so much of his writing (for instance, Romans 1:16-17), "Choose God—choose life!"

Let's read the end of the story.

God's total love and mercy

Joshua 6:22-25:

Joshua said to the two men who had spied out the land, "Go into the prostitute's house and bring her out and all who belong to her, in accordance with your oath to her." So the young men who had done the spying went in and brought out Rahab, her father and mother and brothers and all who belonged to her. They brought out her entire family and put them in a place outside the camp of Israel.

Then they burned the whole city and everything in it, but they put the silver and gold and the articles of bronze and iron into the treasury of the LORD's house. But Joshua spared Rahab the prostitute, with her family and all who belonged to her, because she hid the men Joshua had sent as spies to Jericho—and she lives among the Israelites to this day.

Rahab's story goes beyond that. She's a well-recorded character in Scripture. She's in Hebrews 11, the "Hall of Faith," along with only one other woman, Sarah, Abraham's wife, for being a woman of such great faith that she hid the spies at Jericho (Hebrews 11:31). She's also mentioned in James 2:25, along with Abraham himself, for the actions that proved her faith.

But Rahab is also remembered as a harlot in the New Testament. Now, if you go through Scripture very much, you notice that God changes people's names a lot. So you would think that he would change Rahab's name to something like Rahab the faithful, or Rahab the brave, but he doesn't. He tells you the brave thing she does, but he says she was a harlot. I find that intriguing, and I think it's very important that we remember it. What it's telling us is that God can save and use anybody for his purposes, no matter who they are, if they will yield in faith to him. Nobody is outside of his promise. He's showing us that he is able to include everybody in salvation.

I often hear people say, "I don't have a very dramatic testimony. I wasn't that bad. I was always kind of a good person." Well, God says that everyone who pursues their own way apart from God is committing harlotry (Jeremiah 3:1-2). We are made for God, and anything that gets in the way of our relationship with him is like cheating on a loving husband. The book of Hosea presents this truth wonderfully. Somewhere in all of us there is sinfulness that God wants to save us from. He sent his Son who died for that. So Rahab's story is very inclusive. If he can go so far as to save and use a person like Rahab, how much can he use you?

Is there anybody in your life whom you feel is beyond the grace of God? Or do you think that you're beyond the grace of God in some way, that you've done something that he can't forgive, redeem, or ultimately change? Rahab's story tells you otherwise.

Rahab ended up marrying a man named Salmon, and they lived among the Israelites. She was the mother of Boaz, who became the husband of a woman named Ruth. Their story is recorded in the book of Ruth. Rahab is in the lineage of Jesus Christ (Matthew 1:5). How much more redemption can there possibly be?

Rahab's story reminds me once again that God comes for us. Consider that Rahab's life demonstrates, as few

others do, how total are God's love and mercy for all people; and how he is able to do marvelous things with a heart that is yielded to him, no matter whose heart it is. God can do anything. It is he who saves prostitutes and sinners of all stripes, and gives them new life and a bright future in his Son.

Notes

1) Liz Curtis Higgs, *Really Bad Girls of the Bible*, © 2000, Waterbrook Press, Colorado Springs, CO. Pp. 5-6.

2) Cynthia Thomas, "'At Home' with Dean Jones," *Today's Christian*, January/February 2004. Internet: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/tc/2004/001/11.11.html>.

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Judy Herminghaus
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