

SURPRISING FAITH

SERIES: LEARNING TO LIVE BY FAITH
By Steve Zeisler

Preachers sometimes find themselves at a worship-inspired impasse, a new awareness of God and a corresponding struggle with words. That was the case for the author of Hebrews. We've been working our way through Hebrews 11 with its stories of the faith of Old-Testament saints, and in verses 32-35a we realize the author has been caught up in something that he's struggling to express.

And what more shall I say? For time will fail me if I tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets, who by faith conquered kingdoms, performed acts of righteousness, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, from weakness were made strong, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received back their dead by resurrection....

These statements heaped one upon the other, each a remarkable testimony of the power and purpose of God, should inspire us. They should also raise questions. Do we expect to challenge wickedness and overturn injustice? Do we expect to alleviate suffering? Do we expect to speak truth in power and bring glory to God? Do we recognize that the God who did such things in generation after generation in the past is still the same God, and that we might be his instruments to tear down a stronghold, to shut the mouths of lions, to quench fire?

The list continues with more tales of courage, a further record of faithfulness to God. But beginning in verse 35b the tone is different. Instead of hearing of good outcomes, we are told of sorrowful and difficult outcomes. Yet these too are filled with honor to the Lord, giving him delight. Verses 35b-38:

“And others were tortured, not accepting their release, so that they might obtain a better resurrection; and others experienced mockings and scourgings, yes, also chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, they were put to death with the sword; they went about in sheepskins, in goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated (men of whom the world was not worthy), wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground.”

Immediately preceding the author's loss of proper language (“What more shall I say?”) and the list in verses 32-38, which ends Hebrews 11, there is a reference to the fall of Jericho, especially the faith of Rahab. In this message we'll consider Rahab's story—equal in heroism to the others, yet surprising in its details.

Hebrews 11:30-31:

By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been encircled for seven days. By faith Rahab the harlot did not perish along with those who were disobedient, after she had welcomed the spies in peace.

Hebrews 11 recalls Old-Testament history roughly in chronological order, starting with creation, followed by the stories of the first believers, then the stories of the patriarchs, the account of the sojourn in Egypt and subsequent slavery there, the Exodus from Egypt, and so on. In verses 30-31 the Israelites had come to the end of their wilderness wanderings. (They might have entered the Promised Land after only one year of wandering, but they refused to trust God, and consequently spent forty years in the wilderness.) A generation of them had died, and now finally they were on the shore of the Jordan River, about to go home to the land given to their forefathers, from which they had been separated for centuries.

Joshua, the leader whom God had appointed after Moses died, sent spies into the land to see what strongholds and obstacles they would face. The spies went into Jericho on a reconnaissance mission. Rahab welcomed them, hid them, and helped them escape. She asked that her family be spared when Jericho fell, as she knew it would.

Throughout Canaan people had heard the story of the Exodus and of the Red Sea parting. They had heard of the faithfulness and power of God, and how his people were coming home. Most of those who heard it resisted what they heard. In Jericho they pulled back into their stronghold in fear. Their fear led them to resist the purposes of God.

Rahab alone believed that God was good, and that she should submit to his plan. Here are her words to the spies: “We have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt....When we heard it, our hearts melted and no courage remained in any man any longer because of you; for the LORD your God, *He is God in heaven above and on earth beneath.*” (Joshua 2:10-11; italics mine.) Having heard of the events of the Exodus, her heart was filled with faith.

Let’s think about what we know of Rahab’s story, re-examine the evidence we find in Joshua and in the few references that are made to her in the New Testament.

Grace in a dark place

First, when you read the places where Rahab is mentioned in the Bible, there is repeated—over-repeated, I would suggest—reference to her profession. The first time the author of Joshua mentions her, she is “a harlot whose name was Rahab” (Joshua 2:1.) At the end of her story in Joshua 6, she is called “Rahab the harlot.” Once Joshua calls her “the harlot” without even using her name. In the New Testament she is mentioned in three places. One is here in Hebrews 11, where the writer of Hebrews calls her “Rahab the harlot.” One is in the book of James where James calls her “Rahab the harlot” (2:25). In only one place, Matthew’s genealogy of Jesus (Matthew 1:5), is she mentioned without reference to her profession. We’ll come back to that.

There must be some reason that in a story of such brevity we so frequently find our attention called to the subject’s profession. Now, prostitution can be different things in different cultures.

The events in this story happened well over three thousand years ago, and we don't know the precise conditions of that time and place. But in all cases prostitution is a hard life. We can be certain that the experiences Rahab had were extremely difficult. When greed and lust are combined and human bodies are commodities, hard hearts become a survival mechanism. Living this life, Rahab would have had every right to be angry with men and with the God who had allowed her life to be what it was. But she was not. The spies who came into the land ended up in her house, and she protected them and sent them on their way, because she trusted those who served God and hoped in his promises of events to come.

Second, in Joshua 2 and 6 we find repeated references to Rahab's family. She asked for one thing in return for saving the spies from death. She asked that they save her family. There is no record of any request for herself. Her family consisted of her father and brothers as well as her mother and sisters and others. Her father and brothers are mentioned repeatedly in the telling of her story. Now, this culture was patriarchal, as most of the Middle East is today. In such an environment men had the power, and therefore the responsibility to take care of the women in their families. But here we find Rahab as protector of her father and her brothers. She was their savior, the one who pleaded on their behalf, rather than they on hers. The text leaves many questions unanswered and invites us to reflect on them. How did she end up a prostitute instead of an honored daughter, sister, or wife? How did she retain sacrificial love for the men in her family who had not protected her from being used by others?

Some feminist observers point to this story as evidence of the Bible's support for male chauvinism, another story of men mistreating women and the despicability of religion. But in the final analysis the text makes the opposite point. This is a story of grace.

At the end of Joshua 6 it says that Rahab and her family were joined to the children of Israel. They became part of the nation and its future—a simple end to the story. But if you're willing to look further you'll discover what happened to Rahab when she joined the children of Israel. God gave her a husband, a man named Salmon. And she had at least one son, named Boaz. The story of Boaz in the book of Ruth is one of the most remarkable and wonderful stories in the Bible. He stands out for a number of reasons in the darkest period of Israel's history, the time of the judges. His primary greatness was his care for women in need. He married Ruth, who was an outsider, and he cared for Naomi. He had instincts that were unusual in his time and place, perhaps because of who his mother was, and because she taught him to see people with her heart of compassion.

Further, Boaz was the great-grandfather of David, Israel's great king, who would ultimately be the forefather of Messiah, who will rule forever. I mentioned that we see Rahab's name in Jesus' genealogy in Matthew 1. Few women are named there, but she is one of them. And there she is not Rahab the harlot, but Rahab the foremother of Christ. In the long run, Rahab's story is a story of grace. It's the story of how God changed the world, tearing down the stronghold of Jericho in the near term, tearing down the gates of hell in the end.

Every generation should be able to tell of the work of God among them. We ought to have stories of what God is doing in people we know, people like us, who step into opportunities, see open doors and go through them. God has never chosen the best and the brightest, all-stars who

were simply destined for greatness. Only in God's eyes was a Canaanite prostitute a candidate to change the world. We too are ordinary people whom few would tab for greatness. What are our stories? What is God doing in us?

Conquering kingdoms, performing acts of righteousness—do we miss open doors to such acts of faith? Is it because we're too dazzled by thirty-year-old multibillionaires, or entertained into a stupor? Does the tyranny of the urgent drown out God's voice in our experience? Are we so aware of our inadequacies that risk seems impossible?

I want to go back to Rahab's story and pull out four lessons to help us think, question ourselves, and ask for God's help.

Believing, hoping, acting, caring

First of all, Rahab believed the information she had about God. When the Exodus occurred, the Egyptian armies charged into the midst of the sea and were drowned. God's rescue of his enslaved people hardened their hearts to resistance, and they were destroyed. The children of Israel went through the sea, but they did not trust God as a result; their hearts, too, were hardened, and a generation of them died in the wilderness. Those in Jericho heard the story of the Exodus, and their hearts melted in fear, but it inclined them to pull back behind their walls and resist God. When Rahab heard the story of the miracle of the Exodus, of the love of God for his people, of his commitment to a future for them—all the same information that everybody else had—it changed her. She assumed she should worship this God, rather than harden her heart against him. So when the opportunity came to act on it, she was ready.

We have in the Scriptures a great deal more information than Rahab had. We have truth about God that we can hear and believe and be changed by, so that when we are called to speak up, to be generous, to "fight the good fight," we're ready to act, because we already have the habit of believing what God has said. It's difficult if we wait till a crisis arises to start thumbing through the Bible looking for something to believe. God may answer our prayers then as well, but it is much wiser to "have ears to hear" this day and every day.

Second, Rahab didn't let a hard life harden her to God's extended hand. We don't know how much of her life she chose. We could infer that other people contributed to making her life hard. But she didn't let the difficult world she lived in define her.

Worship elevates us. When we worship God freely, from the heart, and with other people, we are saying we belong to him. How can we be the weak and ruined person that our circumstances might suggest if we enter freely into the presence of the living God and worship? As we worship, we redefine ourselves, believe better things about ourselves.

Third, Rahab took action. When the opportunity came, she stepped forward. That's one of the things that James is particularly impressed with (2:25). She didn't just talk a good game, she acted on the opportunity.

Most of us get so used to procrastination that when the Lord says to us, “Speak a word of kindness,” “Take a risk for my sake,” “Get out of your comfort zone,” or “Deal with the rut you’re in,” we can’t respond. Or perhaps we’re so used to thinking in terms of the five-year plan, the big goals, the sequence of steps we’ve planned for exactly what every day is going to consist of for the rest of our lives, that we can’t adjust to different ideas. But Rahab saw a chance to participate in something great, and she took it.

Fourth, Rahab’s story teaches us a great lesson: she committed herself to the salvation of others, and God saved her. She never said to the spies, “Please remember me when you come back.” She said, “Please save my family.” God heard her, and he rescued her along with her family. The surest way to find ourselves in the comforting arms of God is to be less concerned about ourselves than we are about others, want the best for others so that God can give the best to us.

Does God still quench fires? Does he still tear down strongholds? Does he still turn back wickedness? Does he still take up people like us as his instruments to make a difference in the world? Are we inclined to participate? If a door opened in front of us, would we walk through it? I invite you to ask those questions in prayer.

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