

Lesson 3

Rahab and the Spies

Joshua 2

Introduction

Joshua 2 opens with the first action of Israel in its offensive against Canaan. Joshua's determined to send two men across the Jordan and spy on the land, *especially Jericho*, 2.1. Jericho⁹ was the first target and Joshua as the nation's military leader needed to know what he was about to face. The text specifies that it was he that directed the spies to *go* and *scout*. Any good military leader who is about to go on the offensive will deem the dispatching of scouts as essential business. His actions here simply demonstrate his foresight and planning expertise. What happens here in no way conflicts with the events of Joshua 6, and his decision does not indicate a lack of faith in the promises of God. If anything, what Joshua does here is only strengthen his credentials as a leader and commander of the army of Israel.

What the spies ultimately learned from the mission is unknown. They were able to return home and report to Joshua that the people of *the land* were terrified of Israel:

They told Joshua, "The Lord has handed over the entire land to us. Everyone who lives in the land is also panicking because of us," Joshua 2.24.

The obvious heroine of the chapter is Rahab. Rahab's name means "insolence" or "fierceness." It is believed that the "ra" part of her name comes from Egyptian idolatry. "Ra" was the sun god. She lived in the walled city of Jericho, which was around five miles from the Jordan river. The city was well supplied with water and was in a fertile plain just east of a barren mountain range. Joshua 2.15 says that Rahab lived inside the wall of the city, and the record says the house had a roof area, as well as a window facing the outside. She and her entire family lived in the same dwelling place, 2.13; 6.23.

Not only is Rahab mentioned here in Joshua, but the New Testament speaks of her as well:

- Matthew includes her in the genealogy of Jesus, Matthew 1.5.
- She is mentioned in connection with heroic faith in Hebrews 11.31.
- James mentions her as having been justified through works, James 2.25.

Before her life of faith, she had some character issues to contend with as she worked as a prostitute and lied to hide the spies. What can we learn about Rahab? How did a Canaanite woman, with a terrible past, wind up in the genealogy of Christ? How did she find herself in the heroes of faith section of Hebrews 11? How can she be an inspiration to us today? What can we learn about her life?

Before we answer these questions, we need to examine the Biblical story where she is introduced to us: Joshua 2.

2.1-7: The Spies Enter Jericho

There is really no transition between the end of chapter 1 and the beginning of chapter 2. The chapter does open by identifying Joshua as the son of Nun, indicating a new section of the story.¹⁰ Using *Acacia Grove*,¹¹ as a base camp, Joshua instructs two spies to investigate their enemy. Without hesitation, they head out on the mission.

The two spies would have crossed a swollen Jordan river and made the five-mile trek into the city. Upon arriving the men decide to stay at the house of a prostitute, thinking they would have a good chance to escape detection by going to a place frequented by men. For whatever reason, the men were quickly identified as Israelites and word was sent to the king. He wasted no time in dispatching men to her house and demanded she bring out the men who had come to her house. She had hidden them on the roof of her house and then convinced the king's men that the men had already left and urged them to chase after them. The soldiers heeded her advice, launched a search all the way back to the Jordan, and the city closed the gates with haste, fearing an imminent attack.

As this section closes, it is important to understand just how precarious the situation was for the spies. They were completely relying on Rahab's protection. Trapped within the city walls with no apparent means of escape, Rahab had the power to betray them at any moment, leading to their certain capture. The urgency of their situation was heightened by knowing that the king's men could return at any time, possibly realizing the spies were still inside Jericho. With the city gate sealed, their escape seemed impossible, setting the stage for Rahab's critical intervention. Her actions in providing an alternative means of escape were pivotal to their successful evasion and escape from the city, highlighting her vital role in their mission's success.

2.8-22: A Covenant is Made

2.8-14: Rahab's confession and request

Now with the soldiers having been dispatched in search of the two spies, Rahab heads back to the roof of her house to have a conversation with her guests. Her confession (v. 9-13) is one of the longest uninterrupted statements by a woman in the entire Bible. Rahab's conversation with the spies is marked by remarkable perception and concludes with an extraordinary plea.

She recounts the story of Israel and acknowledges God's role in their history. Rahab recognizes that Canaan has been divinely promised to Israel and is familiar with the nation's exodus from Egypt, its miraculous passage through the Red Sea, and its decisive victories in Transjordan. Speaking with conviction, Rahab declares her belief in God's supreme authority over all of heaven and earth. She then unexpectedly betrays her own people by providing the scouts with critical information: the entire region is aware of and intimidated by the Israelites' impending invasion, 2.8-10.

We are not told how Rahab came to possess this knowledge or why she chose to take such a daring leap of faith. What stands out is her unexpected credibility and her bold proclamation of faith, which seems surprising coming from a Canaanite woman of disreputable status. Yet, she emerges as a figure of remarkable composure and resourcefulness.

Not only did Rahab have faith in God's mighty power, but she evidently also trusted in His compassion. So, she makes an astonishing request: she implores the spies to show the same loyalty and protection to her family that she has shown them. With a clear grasp of Israel's strategy and the divine support behind it, she seeks a guarantee of safety for herself and her relatives. Her plea is striking not only because it reveals her intimate understanding of the situation but also because she is the first to speak confidently of Jericho's defeat as an assured event, staking her and her family's future on this certainty. Provided that she kept their mission secret, the two spies solemnly promised that Israel would act with "covenant loyalty and faithfulness," meaning they would uphold their agreement with Rahab, 2.12-14.

2.15-22: Escape from Jericho

Rahab's home was situated atop the city wall of bustling Jericho. When the spies made their escape by descending from her window with a rope, they found themselves immediately outside the city's defenses. Rahab advised them to flee west to the mountains riddled with caves,¹² suggesting they hide there for three days to evade pursuers before safely returning to their camp east of the Jordan River, 2.15–16.

As they prepared to depart, the spies reiterated the terms of the oath that ensured Rahab and her household's safety. The oath would only hold if specific conditions were met.

1. Rahab was to hang "this cord"—the very one they used for escape—made of brightly colored scarlet thread, from her window as a clear signal during the impending conflict (the spies were presuming a battle would ensue for Jericho's conquest).
2. Rahab was charged with the responsibility of bringing her family into her home, as the spies' promise of protection extended only to those within its walls.
3. The requirement of keeping their mission a secret was emphasized once more. Rahab consented to all these terms and displayed the scarlet cord in her window, seemingly doing so that very night, 2.17–21.

The men heeded Rahab's advice. They stayed three days in the *hill country*, and though one may assume a careful search on the part of Jericho's men they were not found, 2.22.

2.23-24: The Spies Report

The spies then descend and cross the Jordan River, a risky endeavor given the conditions at the time (see 3.15), and report back to Joshua, recounting all that had transpired. The information relayed to Joshua highlights the most critical thematic aspect of this chapter. It reaffirms the Lord's promise that He has delivered *the entire land* into their hands (as seen in 1.33, 6, 11; 2.9) and underscores the heightened state of fear among the Canaanite population. Ultimately, the intelligence that Joshua seeks and obtains comes from an unexpected informant. Deep within hostile territory, an undeniable reality is uncovered: God is actively at work in Canaan. This revelation prompts a further question: Will Israel act on this insight? The events of the next chapter supply us with the answer to that question.

What's In This for Us?

What are some lessons we can take away by observing the life of Rahab?

Rahab had a heart impacted by truth

Her statement in Joshua 2.9-11 is worth reading again,

“I know that the LORD has given you this land and that the terror of you has fallen on us, and everyone who lives in the land is panicking because of 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 Sihon and Og, the two Amorite kings you completely destroyed across the Jordan. When we heard this, we lost heart, and everyone’s courage failed because of you, for the LORD your God is God in heaven above and on earth below.

She was convinced by the evidence. She knew God was God. But not only did she know and understand the evidence, her heart was willing to submit to the evidence. Her faithful obedience saved her. The principles communicated in Romans 6.17 and Hebrews 5.8-9 ring forever true.

Rahab moved with conviction

In 2.17-18, Rahab hung a scarlet cord from her window until Israel returned. Everyone would have seen it. Her extended family would have had to be there when the city was conquered. What would have happened had one of them leaked information to the authorities? Add to this, what happened when Israel approached. When they got there, they simply marched around the city for six days. Rahab would not have known the plan. She would not have known that on the seventh day the walls would fall. What if she gave up?

Obviously, she didn’t. Her faith prompted her to go the distance, under the most trying and stressful circumstances. Her confidence in God led to bold action.

God can save the worst of sinners

Rahab’s lifestyle before her association with the Israelites is one of those that were described as a grave sin. Harlotry was used as an example to portray the unfaithfulness of Israel and under the law it was punishable by death. But, in our story we see a wonderful example of God’s grace. When Rahab moved by faith and obeyed God she was saved.

Often the worst of sinners make the best Christians! We cannot underestimate the power of the gospel. It has the power to fully change who we are. While some might think that a harlot, such as Rahab, would be an unlikely example of how to become a strong Christian, it’s proof that God will save the worst of the worst - if they will humbly submit to Him.

What About Rahab’s Lie?

There are many explanations that run the spectrum. Some explain Rahab’s actions and argue that *lying is acceptable in certain situations*. Others say, *sometimes we must choose the lesser of two evils*. Still others say *sometimes we must choose the greater of two goods*.

What are some important things to remember as we think about Rahab’s actions?¹

¹ For a more detailed explanation, see the excellent article by Eric Lyons in *Reason & Revelation Magazine*: Lyons, Eric. “Did God Approve of Rahab’s Lie?” *Reason & Revelation*, Volume 37, No 7, July 2017.

First, know that scripture's approval of righteous deeds by individuals should not be taken as an endorsement of all their actions. Even notable figures like Noah, Abraham, and Moses had moments of disobedience. Every person has the potential to be faithful despite their sins and imperfections. The apostle Peter, despite his flaws, was chosen to preach the gospel.

We should also consider the depravity of Canaanite culture, of which Rahab was a part. The Canaanites engaged in abominable customs and idolatry. Rahab's profession as a harlot and her dishonesty should be placed in the context of this sinful culture.

At the time of Israel's invasion, Rahab was entering into a transition from a pagan lifestyle to embracing the one true God and His ways. She believed in the Lord's power and demonstrated courage by aiding Israelite spies and shielding them from capture. Hers, like everyone's, is an imperfect faith. Rahab's evolving faith deserves recognition and praise.

Rahab's story should not be misinterpreted as a justification to lie. Rather, we should recount her life to highlight the supremacy of Jehovah over the false gods of the world and to encourage God's followers to move in boldness, trusting the Lord.

Conclusion

As we close our exploration of Joshua 2, we reflect on a chapter that marks the first strategic step in Israel's campaign against Canaan. Joshua, exemplifying thoughtful leadership, sends two men to survey Jericho, the first obstacle in Israel's path. This reconnaissance is not an act of doubt but a testament to Joshua's meticulous planning and prior military experience.

What the spies learn from their mission is a testament to God's power at work. They return with news that instills confidence in Israel's ranks, declaring God's hand over the land and the fear that grips its inhabitants. The chapter's standout figure is Rahab—a woman of unlikely background but of remarkable faith and action. Her name, despite its possible ties to foreign idolatry and sexual perversion, becomes synonymous with bravery and faith in the living God.

Rahab's inclusion in the genealogy of Jesus, her commendation for faith in Hebrews, and her example of justified action in James, all signal her significance. Her past as a prostitute and her lie to protect the spies raise questions, yet her story is one of redemption and transformation. Through her, we learn of God's grace that reaches even the most marginalized and brings them into His redemptive story.

As the chapter unfolds, Rahab's boldness emerges. She secures a covenant with the spies, ensuring her family's safety through the impending battle. The scarlet cord becomes a symbol of her faith and God's faithfulness. The chapter concludes with the spies safely returning across the swollen Jordan, bringing back a report that encourages and motivates the Israelite camp to action.

What then can we take from Rahab's story? Her life teaches us that faith can be found in unexpected places. It reminds us that truth can touch any heart, leading to faithful obedience. Rahab's conviction moves her to risk everything, and her story stands as a powerful example that God's grace is boundless, extending salvation to all who seek Him.

As we consider Rahab's lie, it's crucial to remember that the Bible's portrayal of her faith isn't an endorsement of deception. Instead, it highlights the complexity of human morality and God's ability to work through our imperfections. Rahab's story is not about her lie; it's about her journey from the fringes to the heart of God's story—a journey marked by a growing faith in the true God.

Rahab's story of transformation inspires us to trust in God's perfect plan, to act courageously in the face of uncertainty, and to believe that no one is beyond the reach of God's redeeming love. Let us, like Rahab, move with conviction and lay hold of the grace offered to us through faith in God.

For Class Interaction and Discussion

Brief Outline of the Lesson:

1. Introduction to Joshua's Strategic Planning
2. The Mission of the Spies
 - Their Encounter with Rahab
 - Rahab's Bold Faith and the Covenant with the Spies
 - Rahab's Role in the Israelite Victory
3. The Ethical Dilemma of Rahab's Lie
4. Rahab in the New Testament and Her Legacy

Thought Questions for Discussion

1. How does Joshua's decision to send spies complement his faith in God's promises?
2. In what ways does Rahab's background and social status make her actions more remarkable?
3. How does Rahab's confession of faith in Joshua 2:9-11 challenge our understanding of who can be used by God?
4. What do you think motivated Rahab to help the Israelite spies and seek their protection?
5. How does the symbol of the scarlet cord represent Rahab's faith and God's faithfulness?
6. How do we reconcile Rahab's lie with her commendation for faith in the New Testament?
7. How does Rahab's inclusion in Jesus' genealogy reflect the grace and mercy of God?
8. What lessons can we learn from Rahab's transformation from a life of sin to one of faith?
9. How can Rahab's story inspire us to act courageously in our own lives?

10. In what ways does Rahab's story change your perspective on the reach of God's redemptive plan?

Group Activities

Character Study: Break into small groups and have each group discuss Rahab's character traits and how they relate to her actions in Joshua 2.

Genealogy Mapping: In small groups, work together on creating a visual genealogy that includes Rahab and leads to Jesus, showing God's redemptive work through history.

Debate: Stage a friendly debate on the moral implications of Rahab's deception, discussing the nuances of ethical decisions in dire circumstances.

Final Encouraging Word

As we reflect on Rahab's story, let us be encouraged by her unwavering faith in the face of great risk. Her life is a powerful testament to God's grace, which is available to all, regardless of past or present circumstances. Just like the scarlet cord that signified safety and promise, may we hold fast to our faith in God, trusting in His perfect plan and timing. Let Rahab's legacy inspire you to live boldly for God, confident that He can use you in mighty ways to fulfill His purposes. Go forth with courage, knowing that you are part of God's grand story of redemption.

⁹ The name "Jericho" may be connected to the ancient name of the Canaanite moon god. The city is one of the oldest cities in the world. See Elwell, Walter A., and Barry J. Beitzel. "Jericho." *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988, p. 1119.

¹⁰ Typically, the text refers to him simply as "Joshua" a total of 138 times. The more formal "Joshua son of Nun" appears only ten times, and notably, in half of these instances, the full designation acts as a marker for the next section. The use of Joshua's full name as chapter 2 opens indicates we are entering into a new part of the story. See Howard, David M., Jr. *Joshua*. Vol. 5 of *The New American Commentary*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998, p. 97.

¹¹ a.k.a., Shittim, located in the plains of Moab around 10 miles east of Jericho on the other side of the Jordan. This is probably the same location identified in Numbers 33.49, where Israel had sinned with Baal-peor, Numbers 25.1. Its exact location is unknown, but many today suggest it is in what is now called Tell el-Hammam or another place identified as Tell-el-Kefrain.

¹² Woudstra suggests this place is Jebel Qarantal, a prominent mountaintop northwest of Jericho, identified by the Crusaders as the scene of Jesus' temptation. This area is full of crevices and caves and would thus provide a likely hiding place.