

SINNERS & SAINTS

Rahab

Joshua 2

Layne Lebo

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I'm beginning this morning with what may be the most boring start to a sermon you've ever heard. I'll read Matthew 1:1–5.

This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham: Abraham was the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob, Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, Judah the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar, Perez the father of Hezron, Hezron the father of Ram, Ram the father of Amminadab, Amminadab the father of Nahshon, Nahshon the father of Salmon, Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was **Rahab**. – Matthew 1:1-5

Genealogies can be boring, but you only need to pay attention to the last name: Rahab. She is the Bible character we're exploring today. In addition to appearing in Jesus' genealogy, she's mentioned two other times in the New Testament. In Hebrews chapter 11, the Bible's "Hall of Faith," we read, "By faith the prostitute **Rahab**, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient" (Hebrews 11:31). And then in James chapter 2, we're given a little more information about her. "In the same way, 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 2:25).

Some of you are no doubt familiar with Rahab's story, but if you're not familiar with her, I hope your interest is piqued. I'll read you the full account from Joshua chapter 2. Before I read that, I want to give you a bit of background. Moses (the man Cody preached about two weeks ago), who led the Israelites out of Egypt, had just died, and Joshua was handpicked by God as Moses' successor. All that separated Joshua and the Israelites from the Promised Land of Canaan was the Jordan River. Joshua challenged the Israelites to embrace courage and faith in God, because they were going to face significant opposition from the native people living in

Canaan. God began the conquest of the Promised Land by stopping the flow of the Jordan River so the Israelites could cross on dry land, just as He'd done for Moses and their ancestors at the Red Sea. I'll pick up the story by beginning to read at verse 1 of Joshua chapter 2.

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.

² The king of Jericho was told, "Look, some of the Israelites have come here tonight to spy out the land." ³ 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."

⁴ 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." ⁵ At dusk, when it was time to close the city gate, they left. I don't know which way they went. Go after them quickly. You may catch up with them." ⁶ (But she had taken them up to the roof and hidden them under the stalks of flax she had laid out on the roof.) ⁷ So the men set out in pursuit of the 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.

⁸ Before the spies lay down for the night, she went up on the roof ⁹ and said to them, "I know that the LORD has given you this land 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. ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ When we heard of it, our hearts melted in fear and everyone's courage failed because of you, for the LORD your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below.

¹² "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 ¹³ 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."

¹⁴ “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.”

¹⁵ So she let them down by a rope through the window, for the house she lived in was part of the city wall. ¹⁶ She said to them, “Go to the hills so the pursuers will not find you. Hide yourselves there three days until they return, and then go on your way.”

¹⁷ Now the men had said to her, “This oath you made us swear will not be binding on us ¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ If any of them go outside your house into the street, their blood will be on their own heads; we will not be responsible. As for those who are in the house with you, their blood will be on our head if a hand is laid on them. ²⁰ But if you tell what we are doing, we will be released from the oath you made us swear.”

²¹ “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.

²² When they left, they went into the hills and stayed there three days, until the pursuers had searched all along the road and returned without finding them. ²³ Then the two men started back. They went down out of the hills, forded the river and came to Joshua son of Nun and told him everything that had happened to them. ²⁴ They said to Joshua, “The LORD has surely given the whole land into our hands; all the people are melting in fear because of us.” – Joshua 2:1-24

Before I read the conclusion of Rahab’s story from Joshua chapter 6, I want us to take note of Rahab’s faith. All the residents of Jericho had heard of the prowess of the Israelites in defeating nations between Egypt and Canaan, but Rahab didn’t just observe the Israelites’ success: she translated her observations into belief in God. Listen again to what Rahab said to the spies.

“I know that the LORD has given you this land 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. ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ When we heard of it, our hearts melted in fear and everyone’s courage failed because of you, for the LORD your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below.

At first glance, we might dismiss Rahab’s faith as simply self-preservation—she didn’t want to be killed by the Israelites—but what about all the other people in Jericho? If they had the same faith and understanding Rahab had, they too could have been saved. What was it that caused this woman to believe and put her own life at risk in support of God’s people? We’re not given the answer to those questions. We just know Rahab believed God was behind the Israelites’ success. She said, “I know that the Lord has given you this land...” and “for the Lord your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below.”

Here’s the conclusion of Rahab’s story from Joshua 6:22–24.

²² 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.” ²³ So the young men who had done the spying went in and brought out Rahab, her father and mother, her brothers and sisters and all who belonged to her. They brought out her entire family and put them in a place outside the camp of Israel.

²⁴ 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. – Joshua 6:22-24

Rahab followed through on the spies’ instruction. She gathered her family in her house, and she placed a red cord out the window. Many of you probably remember the story of God instructing the Israelites to march around the city each day for six consecutive days. On the seventh day, they marched around Jericho seven times, and at the conclusion of the seventh

trip around the city, the walls of the great city collapsed. As the Israelites were conquering Jericho, Rahab's home was identified, and she and her family were saved.

As we reflect on Rahab's story, a couple of things jump out at us. First, though she was a foreigner in a city God was going to destroy as his people claimed the Promised Land, and she had a sketchy occupation, God used Rahab to support the Israelites' conquest of Jericho (and protected her family in the process). Admittedly, in the Old Testament there is a lot of violence, bloodshed and killing that's hard for us to see through our current lens and reconcile with a loving Heavenly Father. But amidst the violence and killing we read about in the Old Testament, God's love, grace and mercy also shines through. God was intent on establishing his people, the Israelites, as a holy people set apart for Him from the wickedness, idolatry and godlessness of the people who inhabited the Promised Land prior to the arrival of Joshua, his armies and all the people. However, even after the exodus from Egypt, we learn that some of the Egyptians who placed their faith in God were spared and joined the Israelites, and there were other foreigners along the way who, like Rahab, apparently placed their faith in God and their lives were spared.

I think it's important to acknowledge the difficulty some of the stories in the Old Testament present to us, because they can be a stumbling block to accepting God's love, forgiveness and grace. How can a God of love and grace kill people who don't place their faith in Him? Isn't there inconsistency between Jesus' talk about peace, love and forgiveness, and the prominence of God's wrath and anger in the Old Testament? Those are difficult questions that people much smarter than me have struggled to answer for centuries.

I was talking with my father-in-law on the 4th of July at their house in Shippensburg before dinner. My father-in-law is retired now, but he was a pastor for more than 40 years. I'm not sure how the topic came up, but he was talking about how difficult it can be to make sense of some of the things that are recorded in the Old Testament. Then he said, "When I have doubts and unanswered questions, I focus on Jesus, because He is the perfect representation of God's nature and character." My father-in-law is right. Listen to the Apostle Paul's words in his letter to the 1st Century Church at Colossae. I'd like to read this passage from The Message paraphrase.

We look at this Son and see the God who cannot be seen. We look at this Son and see God's original purpose in everything created. For everything, absolutely everything, above and below, visible and invisible, rank after rank after rank of angels—everything got started in him and finds its purpose in him. He was there before any of it came into existence and holds it all together right up to this moment. And when it comes to the church, he organizes and holds it together, like a head does a body.

He was supreme in the beginning and—leading the resurrection parade—he is supreme in the end. From beginning to end he's there, towering far above everything, everyone. So spacious is he, so expansive, that everything of God finds its proper place in him without crowding. Not only that, but all the broken and dislocated pieces of the universe—people and things, animals and atoms—get properly fixed and fit together in vibrant harmonies, all because of his death, his blood that poured down from the cross.
– Colossians 1:15-20

What I'm sharing about the nature of God as it's seen in Jesus is kind of an aside to Rahab's story, but it's important, because understanding the nature of God is central to our faith. When we read portions of the Scripture, particularly in the Old Testament, that are hard to comprehend and lead us to question God's goodness, focus on Jesus, the one the author to Hebrews calls "the author and perfecter of our faith."

Going back to Rahab's story—and this is the part of her story I want to make sure we don't miss—Rahab is listed in the Bible in Jesus' genealogy as an ancestor of Jesus, and then she shows up in the Bible's Hall of Faith in Hebrews chapter 11 along with people like Moses, Abraham, Joseph as one of the heroes of our faith. Did you catch that? Rahab is listed as an ancestor of Jesus in spite of the fact that she had three strikes against her in the day in which she lived.

- 1) She was a foreigner, a non-Jew—strike 1
- 2) She was a woman, and women in that culture had almost no rights and were primarily viewed as the property of men—strike 2

- 3) And worst of all, she was a prostitute. At places in Scripture, she is euphemistically called an “inn keeper,” but it’s generally accepted that she made her living by selling herself to men—strike 3

In spite of three big strikes against her, God chose Rahab not only to save his people but then to apparently marry an Israelite and become part of Jesus the Messiah’s family line.

Our summer sermon series is titled “Sinners and Saints.” I noted in my weekly Communique newsletter several weeks ago that Grantham BIC Church is currently preaching a sermon series called “Saints and Sinners.” The amazing thing is that neither their pastor, David Flowers, who is a friend of mine, nor I knew the other was preaching this series. We joked over lunch together several weeks ago that it must say something about us that he chose to begin their series title with “saints,” and I chose to begin with “sinners.” I’m not really trying to argue for the rightness of our placement, but each of us is a sinner prior to becoming a saint by God’s grace, and this is very evident in the life of Rahab—a foreign, woman, prostitute who was selected by God to assist the Israelites in their initial battle in the Promised Land and who later became an ancestor of Jesus.

The message is clear for each of us. If God, by his grace, can save Rahab, He can save you and me no matter what we’ve done. And if God can use someone like Rahab to partner with Him in accomplishing his purposes, He can surely use us. Talk about God’s love, grace, mercy and forgiveness is prevalent, but we all struggle at times to accept that we’re good enough for God to love and accept, and we all question whether God can really use us in spite of our shortcomings, flaws and sins. Listen to these words that are familiar to many of us from Romans chapter 3: “This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe... for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus” (Romans 3:22-24).

If you’re here today and you’ve never taken the step of inviting Jesus into your life—accepting that, in spite of your sin and failures, God’s grace and forgiveness is available to you—I invite you to receive Him this morning. And if you are a child of Jesus but struggle to accept God can use you to do his work because of your shortcomings or inadequacies, know that God can use any of us. In the words of Tyler Staton, “We’re saints, not because of any good we’ve done,

but because God has chosen to demonstrate his goodness through us.” If you identify with either of the examples I just gave, I invite you to step toward Jesus this morning. Go to one of our prayer partners and allow someone to pray with you. Rahab’s story communicates a clear message of God’s love and grace that’s available to each of us.