

Rahab: The Transforming Power of Grace

Matthew 1.1-5a; Joshua 2; 6.22-25; Heb. 11.31; James 2.25

Tamar, the first woman listed in the genealogy of Jesus, played the role of a prostitute *one time*. Rahab, the second woman listed, ran a brothel! Have we gone from bad to worse? No. God's just showing us what's possible when a life is touched by grace.

Faith and Grace on Display

- Rahab's Faith (Joshua 2)

- God's Grace (Josh. 6; Heb. 11.31; Jas. 2.25)
 - A life transformed in time

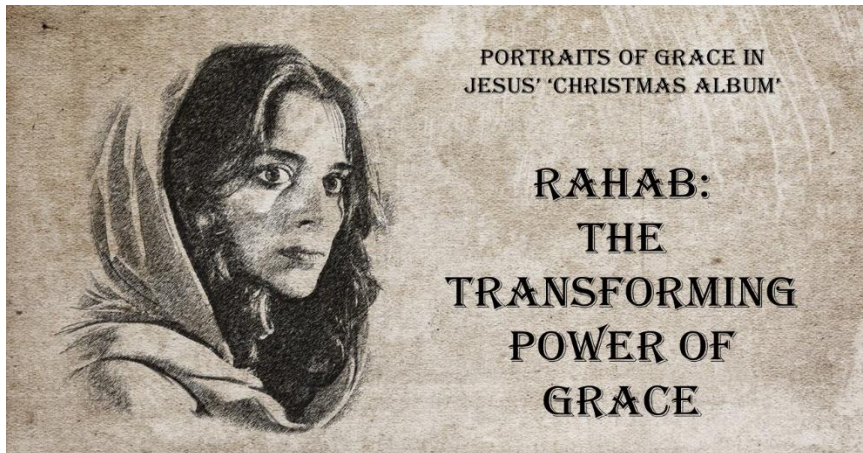
 - A life enshrined in history

For This Jesus Was Born

- He came in a lowly way, for those who are lowly

- He came not for the righteous, but for sinners

- He transforms all who believe in Him

Matthew 1.1-5a

The record of 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, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers. Judah was the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, Perez was the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Ram. Ram was the father of Amminadab, Amminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon. Salmon was the father of Boaz by Rahab...

Last week we began our look into the women listed in the genealogy of Jesus Christ. In their records of the birth of Jesus, both Matthew and Luke include give genealogical lists of Jesus' lineage, but only Matthew lists the women.

The first woman listed, Tamar, earned her place in the line of the Messiah by playing the role of a prostitute and giving birth to Judah's son Perez. Being known for such a scandalous act hardly makes her a likely candidate for such an honored position, but if you thought Tamar was improbable, the second woman listed, Rahab, is even more startling. Tamar played the role of a prostitute one time; Rahab owned a brothel in Jericho!

But I'm getting ahead of myself. To understand the story of Rahab, you need to start 40 years earlier. I'm sure you know the events well. After 400 years' slavery in the land of Egypt, Moses led Israel to freedom in the Exodus. God miraculously delivered them from the Egyptian army by parting the Red Sea. At Mt. Sinai, God gave Moses the Ten Commandments. God then led the nation north to Kadesh-Barnea, an area 50 miles southwest of the Dead

Sea, for them to launch their conquest of the land of the Promised Land of Canaan. Everything was set to go and Moses sent spies into the land. But when they returned, disaster! *The cities are too strong, and there are giants in the land!* Filled with fear, the people refused to go into the land! So God said – in effect, “Fine! Since you don’t trust Me, you will die in the wilderness.” For forty years, a generation wandered and died in the desert.

But near the end of 40 years, Moses once again began to prepare the nation for the conquest of the Promised Land. He led them up the east side of the Dead Sea this time. Forty years had taught them a lot; now, they were ready to trust God to give them victory. As they traveled north, they went up against Sihon king of the Ammorites, and defeated him. They went further north and defeated Og king of Bashan. Then they doubled back and defeated the Midianites. As our story opens, the nation is camped at Acacia Grove (the Hebrew name “Shittim”), on the east side of the Jordan River, across from the city of Jericho. It’s time for Israel to enter the Promised Land. That’s where the story of Rahab begins.

We pick up the narrative in Joshua 2.1.

Joshua 2.1

Then Joshua secretly sent out two spies from the Israelite camp at Acacia Grove. He instructed them, “Scout out the land on the other side of the Jordan River, especially around Jericho.” So the two men set out and came to the house of a prostitute named Rahab and stayed there that night. (NLT)

There are a few things you should know about Jericho. It wasn’t huge – in fact, no more than a mile-and-a-half or so around, but what it lacked in size it made up for in stature. It had two walls, the outer one so thick people had their homes and businesses in it. The Canaanites living in Jericho knew Israel was there, but their faith was in their impregnable walls. No army could get past them! Jericho, like many Canaanite cities, was a city-state; that is, it had its own king, and its own military. The inhabitants of Jericho trusted in their king, their army, and their walls to protect them.

And what about Rahab? The only thing we’re told is that she was a prostitute – the Hebrew term used tells us that she wasn’t a temple prostitute, but a common harlot. And this suggests some other probable truths about Rahab: *It is likely that she was a widow, and this was the only way she could support her family, which was probably poor. Both her profession and her economic standing suggests that she was shunned and looked down on in society. But on the other hand, she had chutzpah – she had courage to think for herself, and was a shrewd businesswoman. Her home was part of the outer wall of the city, where travelers passed by, and she expanded her ‘business’ into an inn where travelers would spend the night. And as our story unfolds, two other things become clear: She was a woman of faith, and a woman of action.*

What happened is this: Joshua sent two men across the Jordan River, to enter Jericho incognito and see if it had any defensive weaknesses. Rahab’s brothel was a busy place; the spies thought they could avoid detection there, but they were wrong: Their arrival had been observed by

an informant. Jericho wasn't a large city, so it would be hard to hide. The king was told that two Israelites had come into the city, and were seen going into Rahab's hotel. He quickly sent sergeants to arrest them.

Meanwhile, Rahab had also noticed the two men, and she knew they were not Canaanites. She frequently interacted with foreigners, and recognized them as Israelites. Then she did something dangerous. She anticipated the king's agents would come, told the spies of the danger, and hid them in a secret place on her roof. When the king's men came and told her to bring out the men, she said they had left just before the city gates were shut at dark, but if they hurried, they could catch them. She sent them on a wild goose chase. She was collaborating with the enemy, protecting the Jewish spies from certain death.

But that wasn't all she did. Her second act was to go to the two spies, and confess her faith in the God of Israel. Her words in verses 9-11 explain why she did what she did, and are an amazing testimony of faith:

"I know the Lord has given you this land," she told them. "We are all afraid of you. Everyone in the land is living in terror. For we have heard how the Lord made a dry path for you through the Red Sea when you left Egypt. And we know what you did to Sihon and Og, the two Amorite kings east of the Jordan River, whose people you completely destroyed. No wonder our hearts have melted in fear! No one has the courage to fight after hearing such things. For the Lord your God is the supreme God of the heavens above and the earth below."

There are two things to note here: Rahab didn't have any special revelation. God delivering Israel from slavery in Egypt through the Red Sea, and giving them victory over the armies on the other side of the Jordan, was known in Jericho. *The evidence that Israel's God was God of the universe was something everyone could see. But while others ignored it, Rahab took it to heart. She had come to believe in the God of Israel.* She was persuaded that 'the Lord your God is the supreme God of the heavens above and the earth below.' She didn't know a lot, but what she knew, she responded to in simple faith. Her faith, feeble though it may have been, prompted her to act.

Rahab's third act reflected her faith in God as well. She believed that Jericho would fall, and asked the spies to pledge to save her life and the lives of her family when they came against Jericho. She advised them to hide in the hill country for three days before returning to their camp, then let them down the outer wall of the city with a scarlet rope. The spies instructed her to hang the scarlet rope out her window, and if she did, she and her family's lives would be spared.

In point of fact, everything Rahab did reflected her faith in a God she knew very little about – she had only heard of Israel's victories. This woman grew up immersed in the idolatrous Canaanite culture. But her heart, perhaps as a result of experiencing the hardships of widowhood and the humiliation of being a prostitute, longed to know the true God. When she heard of the supernatural things that happened to the Israelites, she was persuaded that their God was the true God, and she believed in Him.

We need to pause here a moment and state the obvious: It isn't how much you know that determines whether or not you are saved. It's how you respond to what you know. *There is plenty of evidence for the existence of God!* The Psalmist writes that *'the heavens declare the glory of God'* (Ps. 19.1ff). Paul writes that *'God has made Himself known...His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature have been clearly seen since the creation of the world'* (Rom. 1.19-20).

We live in a world that looks at the galaxies and says it all just happened with a big bang and chance. Scientists look at the complexity of life and say it all evolved from a single cell by chance. Philosophers ignore the deep longings of the human heart for fulfillment and purpose, and say that life has no meaning – we're just 'space dust' blowing through time. Scripture replies: *The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God'* (Ps. 14.1).

The rest of Rahab's story – well, it's nothing short of an incredible transformation, from Canaanite prostitute to a hero of faith, in the line of the Jewish Messiah!

The Israelites defeated Jericho in one of the best-known stories in the Bible. Even Veggie Tales retold it! The impenetrable walls fell down, but the portion of the wall where Rahab's house was survived. As did Rahab and her family. Rahab married a nobleman from the tribe of Judah named Salmon – Jewish tradition says he was one of the spies she hid. And together they had a son, named Boaz, who grew up to be a good and godly man – but that's another story, for next week.

And how has history treated Rahab? Amazingly, she is enshrined in the 'Hall of Faith' in the NT in Hebrews 11. Her profession in Jericho is not hidden: *By faith Rahab the harlot did not perish along with those who were disobedient, after she had welcomed the spies in peace* (Heb. 11.31). And in his practical epistle, James points to her as an example of faith that showed itself in action: *In the same way, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way?* (James 2.25) And of course, she is one of the four women listed in the genealogy of Jesus.

There are many interesting aspects to the story of Rahab, but this morning – in this Christmas season – we want to focus only on this: How does Rahab fit into the story of Christmas? How does her appearance in Jesus' Christmas album reflect God's purpose in sending His Son Jesus to this world? I think it's best summed up in one word: Transformation. That's what Jesus came to do.

- Jesus came in a lowly way, for those who are lowly

One of the most disarming things about Christmas is the manger scene. Everything about it shouts vulnerable and destitute. What could be weaker than a little baby? What could be less sanitary than a cattle stall? Even those who 'celebrated' the birth, shepherds, were outcasts, looked on with derision. The contrast between heavenly angels and a field of sheep outside Bethlehem is crazy. Yet that is what God chose for the arrival of the King of kings and Lord of lords to this earth. He could have done it in halls of power, but He didn't.

And the starting point for God's grace to Rahab was about as low as you could go: A prostitute in a doomed Canaanite city. But her faith in God transformed her life.

- Jesus came not for the righteous, but for sinners

It isn't just that she was humble, either. The real scandal of Rahab is that she was a sinner. For some Christians in church history, Rahab just doesn't fit. The Church Father Gregory of Nazianzus wondered how Rahab could really be saved. Calvin was uncomfortable with her 'supposed faith.' But Scripture has no problem with it.

During His earthly ministry, Jesus sometimes 'hung out' with the riff raff of society – 'sinners and tax collectors.' The scribes and Pharisees thought this was inappropriate for a religious leader. In Mark 2.17, Jesus says to them: "It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick; I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners." I like the way the New Living Translation puts it: "Healthy people don't need a doctor – sick people do. I have come to call *not those* who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners."

Scripture never hides Rahab's sin. In fact, she is known as "Rahab the harlot." Rahab didn't go through a twelve-step program to fix her life. She needed a new life. She didn't need reformation; she needed regeneration! She believed in God, and it was her faith *alone* in God *alone* that transformed her.

- Jesus transforms all who believe in Him

When Jesus was born, He began a journey through life to the cross. There at the cross He *willingly* shed His blood in payment for our sins. The Bible says that *He paid for our sins, and not ours only, but for the sins of the whole world* (1 John 2.2). That means He paid for all my sins, and all your sins.

When the angel appeared to Joseph before Jesus was born, he told Joseph, *Call the baby's name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins* (Matt. 1.21). Not their mistakes, not their poverty, not their problems, but their sins.

God's purpose for the spies visiting Jericho wasn't just to get military information. There was a sinful woman there whose life God wanted to transform. Rahab is a 'picture in Jesus' Christmas album' of salvation from sin.

That salvation is still available this Christmas. You won't find it on a Black Friday or Cyber Monday sale. Madison Avenue isn't interested, because it's free. Jesus paid the full price. You receive it by believing in Jesus.

Believe in Jesus today, and let Him transform your life!



God's purpose for the visit of the spies to Jericho included more than securing military information. A sinful woman was there whom God in His grace purposed to spare from the judgment soon to fall on the city. So the Lord, moving in a mysterious way, brought together two secret agents of the army of Israel and a harlot of Canaan who would become a proselyte to the God of Israel. (*BKC*, 1:330)