

Joshua 2:1-24 Rahab and the Spies

Review and Introduction

When we first began our study of the book of Joshua, it was about six weeks ago. We made our way through the first chapter, and I think we got off to a fine start. But for the purpose of reminding those of you who were here but may have forgotten, as well as to include those who were not here on that auspicious occasion, let's begin by reviewing some of the general details about the book itself, and then reminding ourselves of the key events of that first chapter.

We determined that the book of Joshua takes as its historical subject the conquest and distribution of the promised land of Canaan, events that occurred from 1406-1399 BC. The book, itself, was written about that time by either Joshua or by another close to him. Recall that there are too many details in the text, as well as the fact that some of the narratives were written in the first person, for it to have been written by someone not actually involved in the events of the conquest.

The larger biblical context of the narrative is, of course, the Exodus. Following their captivity in Egypt, the Israelites had wandered for some forty years in the desert. That had not been the original design, but after their moral failure at Kadesh-Barnea, God's discipline was severe. But now they had another opportunity to enter Canaan. Once again they stood on the borders of the land of promise.

That land of promise is the deeper background of the book of Joshua. This land was given by the Lord in the original promise He made to Abram. We know the passages well.

"¹Go from your country,
And from your relatives
And from your father's house,
To the land which I will show you;
²And I will make you into a great nation,
And I will bless you,
And make your name great;
And you shall be a blessing;
³And 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 will be blessed"
(Genesis 12:1-3).

Canaan was that land which Abram had been shown and where his descendants had flourished until famine, and brotherly jealousy, drove them into slavery in Egypt. Four hundred years later, the miracles of the Exodus brought the people to the borders of Canaan, But they feared the people of the land more than they trusted the Lord, and thus they wandered for forty years. Now, again, they found themselves on the borders of the land of promise.

Recall also that, at the time of the arrival of the people of Israel in about 1400 BC, historical records indicate that it was a time where there was no major power supreme in the land of Canaan. Powerful kingdoms on the borders such as the Hittites or Assyrians had not yet reached their full potential, and as a result, Canaan was occupied by small city states nominally under the control of the very disinterested Pharaoh of Egypt.

Everything seemed ready. But it was at this time, though, that the great leader of the Israelites, Moses, had died. This, too, was part of God's sovereign plan, and the leadership of the people of Israel fell to God's chosen, Joshua. This was a delicate time of transition for the people of Israel. The impact of the death of Moses cannot be overstated, yet God commanded His people to continue with His plan of taking possession of the land of Canaan. And the man who would lead them was Joshua. Recall us talking about this being a wonderful reminder that God's plan goes forward despite changes in the people who carry out that plan.

Last time, we also took the opportunity to look at Joshua the man, as he had been revealed in Scripture up until his coming into the position of leadership. We saw him to be described as the servant of Moses, as Moses was the servant of God. He had been a confidant who had participated in, or been close to, the encounter of Moses with the Lord at Mount Sinai and at the temple of meeting. Scripture informed us that he had developed experience as a general leading Israel's armies. We also saw that though he had been personally appointed by God to be the next leader of the Israelites, he was humble, not needing to assert himself on every occasion.

As we went through the text of chapter one, what stood out was that Joshua had been given a very well-known exhortation. He was commanded to be strong and courageous. This statement was made four times in chapter one, and we learned that it had nothing to do with the conquest itself. After all it was the Lord Who would fight the battles, and Israel was guaranteed success as long as they followed the Lord.

Rather the point was to be strong and courageous in the midst of pagan peoples who would naturally lead the Israelites into temptation. Joshua was commanded by God to have the strength

and courage to lead the Israelites in obedience to the laws of God in a hostile environment. This is a challenge to which each of us can relate, I expect.

So, as we concluded the first chapter of the narrative, Joshua had taken command of the people of Israel, and he had gained the allegiance of all Israelites. Everything was ready for the conquest of the land of promise. Now, having looked at the perspective of Israel as they were about to enter Canaan, we will see that the second chapter of Joshua provides the perspective of the Canaanites at that same time. The people of Israel, all two million of them are across the river ready to invade. What were the people in the city of Jericho, immediately opposite them, thinking?

Joshua Sends the Spies

As Joshua planned his strategy, he "sent two men as spies secretly" (v. 1). In doing so, he was engaging in a common military strategy, one in which he himself had participated in some forty years ago. Certainly he remembered that occasion, and the failure of the other ten spies to agree with the assessment that he and Caleb had made. Their minority report placed faith in God rather than in appearances, but they were overruled, and forty years of wandering ensued.

I wonder if that is why Joshua sent only two spies into Jericho. Perhaps he did not want to concern himself with varied opinions as to whether or not the Israelites should invade. He simply wanted two men to give an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses that lay before his people. No doubt he also wanted to know the feeling inside the city, that is if the people were ready to fight to the last man, or if they were inclined to negotiate, or try some trickery. As we said, the sending of spies was a common, and prudent, practice at the time. Without modern technologies, it was the only way to gain intelligence about your enemy.

Though the spies were commanded to "view the land, especially Jericho" (v. 1), it is interesting that there is no record of their doing so, nor do they report any detailed summary of their findings to Joshua when they return. Nor did Joshua make use of any such information in his attack on Jericho. The battle for Jericho will take a very different, and unusual form. Indeed, it is clear that, as we will see, whatever Joshua's purpose may have been in sending the spies, God will use them to save Rahab and her family, and to encourage His own people with the report they will bring when they return. It is wonderful to consider that God uses our feeble plans to accomplish His divine will.

The Encounter with Rahab

Taking on their assignment, the men made their way across the Jordan River. From later in the narrative we can tell that they arrived in Jericho near dusk. They would likely have entered through the city gate, perhaps blending in with the crowds that would have been coming and going. Scripture informs us that they "entered the house of a prostitute" (v. 2). This might seem odd at first glance, and perhaps a not very auspicious beginning, but this was likely some kind of inn.

In fact, this would be a natural place to mingle and find out information. It would also be an easy place to blend in, since it was likely visited mainly by men. Since, as we will see, it was an inn located at the city walls, it also was likely visited by those not living in Jericho. There is archaeological evidence from the time period, though not at Jericho of course, that reveals establishments like this located on or near the city walls that served as a respite for royal messengers, merchants, and other travelers.

However, being a public place, word quickly got back to the local ruler that there were outsiders there, and that they had come with malicious intent. "Behold, men of Israel have come here tonight to spy out the land" (v. 2) someone reported. We do not know if the men gave themselves away by the questions they asked, or if there was some other reason, but they were discovered. Word spread, the king came to hear of it, and his response was immediate.

"The king of Jericho sent word to Rahab, saying, 'Bring out the men who have come to you, who have entered your house, for they have come to spy out all the land'" (v. 3). The king of the city sent his agents with the command to Rahab, apparently the owner of the establishment, to bring out the men. Rahab must have had some sense that things had gone wrong for she had already taken steps to hide the men in her establishment.

She then fabricated a story to buy her, and the spies, some time. "But the woman had taken the two men and hidden them, and she said, "Yes, the men came to me, but I did not know where they were from. ⁵It came about, when it was time to shut the gate at dark, that the men went out; I do not know where the men went. Pursue them quickly, for you will overtake them" (v. 4-5).

It is interesting that the original agents take Rahab for her word and do not search the house. Perhaps she was a woman of some importance in Jericho, and her story seemed likely. After all, in an inn that also served as a brothel men would often be seen coming and going. But her ruse was effective. The messengers from the king accepted her story and this gave her time to hide the men more securely on her roof.

That Rahab "had taken the two men and hidden them" (v. 4) is the first demonstration of her allegiance. We see that her loyalty has changed. As the narrative continues, we will see more of the reasons for this change, but here we must appreciate the choice she is making. Rahab is intentionally deceiving her king by aiding those who plan to attack and destroy the city. If caught, she would certainly be executed. There could be no mitigating factors. Rahab had chosen to risk her life, and very likely the lives of her family, to help these Israelite spies.

The tension of the narrative increases as the king's messengers arrive, listen to Rahab's explanation and then leave to pursue the spies. All seems to be working according to Rahab's plan, but then the gate was shut (v. 7). As we said, the spies had arrived near the end of the day and now, though they were safe for the moment, they were trapped inside Jericho. City walls were closed at nightfall and guards stood watch. Certainly they had been alerted to the unwanted visitors. Thus, leaving by the city gate was no longer an option. Now, Rahab must devise an alternate means of getting the men out.

A Confession of Faith

Next we come to the heart of the narrative, and it merits being quoted in its entirety. Rahab explains the reasons for her actions.

"⁹I know that the Lord has given you the land, and that the terror of you has fallen on us, and that all the inhabitants of the land have despaired because of you. ¹⁰For 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 the two kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you utterly destroyed. ¹¹When we heard these reports, our hearts melted and no courage remained in anyone any longer because of you; for the Lord your God, He is God in heaven above and on earth below" (v. 9-11).

This is a true confession, given in contrast to her previous deceit. Why did Rahab lie? She now fears the Lord. She has changed allegiances. She answers not to the petty king of Jericho or to pagan deities, but to the Lord God of Israel. Also, let's point out that the writer is not interested in quibbling about whether Rahab was wrong in lying. The most important thing in this chapter is her confession of faith. This does not mean that the writer, or God, approved of her lie. Just because the Bible records something does not mean it approves of it. Jacob had two wives, for example. The writer is simply not interested in the ethical implications of the lie at this time since something far more important is happening.

The fear of the Lord had fallen on those in Jericho. This was what God had promised His people.

²³For My angel will go before you and bring you into the land of the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites; and I will completely destroy them. ²⁴You shall not worship their gods, nor serve them, nor do according to their deeds; but you shall utterly overthrow them and break their memorial stones in pieces. ²⁷I will send My terror ahead of you, and throw into confusion all the people among whom you come, and I will make all your enemies turn their backs to you" (Exodus 23:23-24, 27).

And those in Jericho had good reason to be afraid. The report of what God had done had spread across the land and had come to those in the city. Indeed, what those in Jericho had heard were the beginning and end of the Exodus across the desert. They had "heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt" and also "what you did to the two kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you utterly destroyed" (v. 10).

The narrative of the crossing of the Red Sea is known by us all. The accounts of the battles of the Israelites with Sihon, king of the Amorites, and Og king of Bashan, with whom we may be less well acquainted, are recounted in Numbers 21. Scripture tells us that the results of those conflicts were clear.

²⁴Then Israel struck him [Sihon] with the edge of the sword, and took possession of his land from the Arnon to the Jabbok, as far as the sons of Ammon; for the border of the sons of Ammon was Jazer. ²⁵Israel took all these cities, and Israel lived in all the cities of the Amorites, in Heshbon and in all her villages." (Numbers 21:24-25). "So they killed him [Og] and his sons and all his people, until there was no survivor left; and they took possession of his land" (Numbers 21:35).

In other words, all those in Jericho knew what was coming. And so "hearts melted, and no courage remained in any man any longer" (v. 11). This statement was a confirmation that Israel was on display to the nations. Indeed, it is God Who was on display. His power, His sovereignty, His wrath was evident to all who would see. God was working through these events to show the nations His glory. And, of all those in Jericho who were equally well-informed, it was Rahab, alone, that responded to that demonstration.

Rahab understood the fate of those who opposed God and His plans for His people. Her understanding was based on what she had heard about God. And so she acknowledged that "the Lord your God, he is God in heaven above and on earth beneath" (v. 11). In Old Testament terms,

this is a confession of faith, and a confession of faith is the means to salvation. That is how salvation works.

With her understanding of Who God is and what He has planned for Jericho, Rahab pleaded with the spies to save her and her family. ¹²"please swear to me by the Lord, since I have dealt kindly with you, that you also will deal kindly with my father's household, and give me a pledge of truth, ¹³and spare my father and my mother, and my brothers and my sisters, and all who belong to them, and save our lives from death" (v. 12-13). She offered their lives in exchange for hers and her family. Also, as an historical detail that validates the narrative of Scripture, the fact that Rahab thought in terms of clan rather than immediate family was indicative of familial relations in the ancient Near East.

This was a reasonable exchange in Rahab's eyes. She did not have to hide the men. She did not have to lie to the king's messengers. She did not have to send those searching for the spies on a wild good chase to buy time. She had shown kindness to the men, and now she asked that they pledge to reciprocate that kindness to her.

An Agreement Made

After Rahab's confession of faith and her offer of an arrangement to the spies, the attention of the narrative now returned to those spies, hiding quietly, and no doubt nervously, under the gatherings of flax on Rahab's roof. Rahab's speech had been made to them, and now they had to decide whether or not to accept the help of this Canaanite woman.

Scripture does not say that it took them very long to make their decision. Indeed, they probably had been thinking about their options while Rahab was dealing with the king's messengers. It was night, and they knew that the city gates would now be closed, so there was no escape that way. Perhaps they hoped to spend the night on Rahab's roof, and then make their way out of the city in the morning.

We cannot know what they were thinking, but Scripture does tell us of their decision. "The men said to her, 'Our life for yours if you do not tell this business of ours; and it shall come about when the Lord gives us the land that we will deal kindly and faithfully with you'" (v. 14). The spies demanded secrecy so that others in the city would not discover them.

But first we must recognize that the narrative, here, is not sequential. That is to say, the sequence of events that begin in verse 14 are not linear. The spies agree to work with Rahab (v. 14) and then

she "she let them down by a rope through the window" (v. 15). This was easy since, as Scripture explains "her house was on the city wall, so that she was living on the wall" (v. 15). But as the narrative continues, we see that the spies seem to be let down a second time by Rahab, "So she sent them away, and they departed; and she tied the scarlet cord in the window" (v. 21).

These two verses actually describe the same event. The conversation between Rahab and the two men that is found in verses 16-21 take place before the event in verse fifteen. If that were not the case, then we would have to imagine the two spies, standing outside the walls of Jericho, shouting up to an open window negotiating with Rahab. This would both be unnecessary, since they would already have been freed, and foolish since certainly people would hear their conversation and realize who the men were.

Having promised that they will spare Rahab and her family if they, in turn, are spared, Rahab gives them further instructions on how to make it back to their encampment safely. Familiar with the tactics of her own people, Rahab says, "Go to the hill country, so that the pursuers will not encounter you, and hide yourselves there for three days until the pursuers return. Then afterward you may go on your way" (v. 16). She knew that those pursuing the men would head along the main road to the river and guard any possible places where it may be crossed. If the spies stayed hidden for a few days, their pursuers would give up the chase and the men could return to their encampment safely.

Interestingly, the hill country to which the men likely went is likely Jebel Qarantal, a prominent mountain top northwest of Jericho. That means that the men would not have taken the most direct route back to the Israelite encampment in Shittim, which was east of the city. This shows the trust, or perhaps desperation, of the men as they headed even further into Canaanite territory before heading home. Also, in the Middle Ages, this mountain was thought to be the mountain of Jesus' temptation.

Having helped them overcome the two obstacles (the closed city gate and men guarding the river) they make the formal alliance. But there were some conditions. ¹⁷The men said to her, 'We shall be exempt from this oath to you which you have made us swear, ¹⁸unless, when we come into the land, you tie this cord of scarlet thread in the window through which you let us down, and gather into your house your father, your mother, your brothers, and all your father's household. ¹⁹And it shall come about that anyone who goes out of the doors of your house outside will have his blood on his own head, and we will be innocent; but anyone who is with you in the house, his blood will

be on our head if a hand is laid on him. ²⁰But if you tell this business of ours, then we shall be exempt from the oath which you have made us swear" (v. 17-20).

This entire conversation reflected the understanding by both Rahab and the spies that the city would be taken by force and destroyed. And so the men made three conditions. First, an identifying sign must be seen so the attacking Israelite army will know that the designated place is a place of sanctuary. We know, of course, how the attack will eventually go, but these men did not. They were expecting a typical siege with the resulting breaching of the walls and general mayhem within the city that would ensue. There is no way of knowing who in the Israelite army would come across the particular part of the city where Rahab and her family were hiding, so all must know the sign.

Interestingly, the scarlet cord may well have already been there, as something of an advertisement to her local business. That is why it might not have been noticed by agents of the king. The second condition was that Rahab must gather all of her family within the house. Anyone found in the open streets would be killed, without the spies having violated their oath. Finally, and most importantly for any of this to work, Rahab must not tell anyone. This was obviously in her interest as well, since if the spies did not return, there was no way she could ensure the safety of her family in the coming attack.

The Spies Return

Having made the agreement, a covenant which brought Rahab's family into Israelites society, and indeed into the line of the Messiah, Himself, the men "departed and came to the hill country, and remained there for three days" (v. 22). Rahab's ruse had worked, "the pursuers had searched for them all along the road, but had not found them" (v. 22). Safely, "the two men returned and came down from the hill country, and they crossed over and came to Joshua the son of Nun. Then they reported to him all that had happened to them" (v. 23).

No doubt their report was much longer and more detailed than the account recorded in Scripture. They certainly told of their encounter with Rahab, their escape, and, most importantly, the agreement they had made with her. For our purposes, Scripture condenses their report to "The Lord has indeed handed over to us all the land; furthermore, all the inhabitants of the land have despaired because of us" (v. 23).

In its essence, their report is a representation of Rahab's own words, "I know that the Lord has given you the land, and that the terror of you has fallen on us, and that all the inhabitants of the

land have despaired because of you" (v. 9). This report must have filled Joshua, and all the Israelites with joy and confidence. It seemed there was no obstacle to the conquest of Jericho.

Takeaways

We see in this narrative how God can use one person's faith to great effect for His Kingdom. Rahab, while perhaps a small business owner, was a woman in a man's society, of less than good repute, and of no political or military importance whatsoever. Yet, God used her to bring down the walls of Jericho. We cannot imagine what might have happened to the Israelites if the men had never returned or their heads had been sent back in a basket.

That is because all of this was God's plan from the beginning. It was His plan of salvation for Rahab and her family that was being worked out. And God's plan included far more than the immediate ensuing battle at Jericho. Rahab's example of faith became a symbol of faith to countless others. Consider these two examples from the New Testament, written more than fourteen hundred years later.

"By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had given a friendly welcome to the spies" (Hebrews 11:31).

"²⁴You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. ²⁵And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way?" (James 2:24-25).

This account serves as a powerful reminder of what one person's faith can do. We have no idea how God will use our moment-by-moment acts of faith and trust in Him. But let's strive to give Him as many opportunities to use our example of faith as we can.