

Rahab: The Unexpected Saviour

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[0 : 00] If you want to get your Bibles, and it's from the 1st to the 24th verse. So it's Joshua 2, 1 to 24, Rahab and the spies.

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.

The king of Jericho was told, look, some of the Israelites have come here tonight to spy out the land. So the king of Jericho sent his 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. 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'd come from. At dusk when it was time to close the city gate, they left.

[1 : 14] I don't know which way they went. Go after them quickly. You may catch up with them. But she had taken them up to the roof and hidden them under the stalks of flax she had laid out on the roof.

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, the gate was shut. Before the spies laid down for the night, she went up on the roof 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.

We've 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 Sion and Og, the two kings of the Amorites east of the Jordan, whom you completely destroyed.

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 and above and on the earth below. Now then, please swear to me by the Lord that you will show kindness to my family, because I've shown kindness to you.

Give me a sure sign 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.

[2 : 44] Our lives for your lives, the men assured her. If you don't tell what we're doing, we will treat you kindly and faithfully when the Lord gives us the land. So she let them down by a rope through the window, for the house she lived in was part of the city wall.

She said to them, Go to the hills so the pursuers will not find you. Hide yourselves there for three days until they return, and then go on your way. Now the men said to her, This oath you made to swear will not be binding on us, 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, if any of them go outside your house into the street, their blood will be on their own hands.

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. But if you tell what we're doing, we will be released from the earth.

You made us swear. 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. 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.

[4 : 16] 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.

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. Thanks be to God.

Let's just pray for Emily. Father, we want to give this time to you now, and pray especially for Emily, as she brings her words from you to us.

And we pray your blessing to everyone who hears these words as well. In Jesus' name, amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Hello, everyone. As Ann said, my name's Emily. I'm a member of the congregation here at Turnhill Baptist Church, and it is my very great privilege to speak to you about the story of Rahab, whose amazing story Julia read for us. It's found in the book of Joshua, and I've been given a brilliant title by the leadership team, Rahab, the Unexpected Saviour, and I love this title because, as we're going to find out, Rahab both saves the spies and is saved by them, and I think who saves whom is a very important theme or question of this passage, and Rahab is in some ways unexpected in that she is the type of character who is overlooked by society, but her story fits into the story of God's salvation told throughout history, both the salvation of the Israelites as he brings them into the promised land, and his ultimate salvation plan through the death of his son. She is in some ways unexpected, and yet her story is no surprise to God. I first fell in love with Rahab's story through this book,

[6 : 46] The Lineage of Grace by Francine Rivers. Has anyone read it? No, I've sorted your summer reading. At the time, I discovered this book. I was living with two friends in Clapham, and we shared a love of historical fiction, and we discovered this brilliant book, which we decided was a sub-genre of historical biblical fiction. It takes the biblical stories of five women, Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, and Mary, five women in the bloodline of Christ, and it fills in the details of their story. And the lineage of grace takes its inspiration from the genealogy of the Messiah, which we find right at the start of Matthew's gospel. It's often read at Christmas time.

So right at the beginning of Matthew's gospel, he includes this genealogy, and genealogies were written really to establish pedigree. They were a list of one's male Jewish ancestors. And Matthew wants to show that Jesus fulfills the Old Testament prophecies by showing that Jesus is in the line of both Judah and David. But typically, I find in Matthew's gospel, there's a twist in the tale, maybe something we don't see when we first look at it. And in this genealogy, Matthew inserts in the expected list of Jewish men, five women, and one of these women is Rahab. Another is her future daughter-in-law, Ruth.

One is Tamar, whose story is referenced through Rahab, through the inclusion of the scarlet cord. There's also Bathsheba, who's not named. And later on, of course, there is Mary, the mother of Jesus.

Because the genealogy passes down the male line, these women aren't born into Jesus's family. They become a part of it. So who is this woman, Rahab, who is so important as to be mentioned by Matthew in the genealogy of Jesus? Well, we learn three things initially about Rahab. One is she is a non-Jewish woman. She's a Canaanite. And that is significant because she is outside God's covenant with the Israelites at the start of this story. She is an inhabitant of the city of Jericho. And this is a city that is totally under God's condemnation. We know how this story ends with the sounding of the horns and the crumbling of the walls, and everyone in this city will be destroyed. And we also learn that she is working as a prostitute. So she is a vulnerable woman, exploited, abused by her people, and possibly shunned by her own community. In verse 15, we learn that she lives in a house which is part of the city wall, symbolizing that her position is precarious and vulnerable to attack.

So Rahab's inclusion in the story of the Israelites is on one hand, I think, unexpected. And then on the other hand, she strikes me in her vulnerability as exactly the type of person that God would choose to save. So what does she do that is so special?

[10 : 31] She is mentioned by both Paul and James. Paul calls our attention to the faith of Rahab by including her in his hall of faith in Hebrews 11. By faith, the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient. James calls our attention to Rahab's actions, was not even Rahab, the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in different directions. So is Rahab saved because of what she does? I don't think that's the answer. I think her actions are important because they tell us something about how God is at work. Her actions are inspired by God. And it's very important, I think, in this passage. It's quite really a short story. There are not many details.

And I think it's important that when we have details in a story like this, we pay attention to them. So what exactly does Rahab do?

So one of the things she does is she hides the spies underneath the stalks of flax on her roof. I went down a bit of a rabbit hole looking up references to flax in the Bible, and I realised there are many references because flax was a key crop in biblical times.

It is used to produce a textile fibre used to make linen. So in Deuteronomy, the Israelites are forbidden by God to make clothing that combines both linen and cotton. You need to keep them separate. The wife in Proverbs 31 works with her hands to make clothing from flax. And it made me think about some of the biblical examples of covering with cloth material, covering with other types of material as well. God covers Adam and Eve in garments made from fig leaves in Genesis. Rachel covers Jacob with animal skin so he can claim Esau's birthright. And Boaz, Rahab's son, will spread the corner of his garment over Ruth to ensure her protection. So in covering the spies with flax, I think Rahab is telling a story of salvation that will run right through the Old Testament, because the covering refers to God's covenant promise to God's covenant promise that he will save and protect his people.

My favourite verse for this is Ezekiel 16 verse 8. God says this to Israel, Later I passed by and when I looked at you and saw that you were old enough for love, I spread the corner of my garment over you and covered your naked body. I gave you my solemn oath and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Sovereign Lord, and you became mine. So the covering of flax referencing God's covenant.

[14 : 02] Rahab also enables the escape of the Israelite spy. She lets a rope out of her window and down the city wall to facilitate their escape. It's one of the high drama moments of the story. And then she counsels them to wait. Verse 16, she says, Go to the hills so that the pursuers will not find you. Hide yourselves there three days until they return and then go on your way. What do we think when we hear three days?

A long time. So we might think Jesus rose from the dead on the third day. I think that's the thing that we might think about. I wonder if the people hearing this story told at the time might have thought of Abraham going to sacrifice Isaac on the third day. Or God telling Moses that he will appear on Mount Sinai on the third day.

Also in this series, we're going to hear about Jonah, who spent three days in the belly of a fish. So I think three days also symbolizes new life, salvation, rescue.

So God uses Rahab in the salvation plan of the Israelites. And her acts help Joshua take the city of Jericho and help the Israelites enter the promised land. And God uses this Canaanite outsider, an inhabitant of a fallen city, to tell the story of his salvation.

So what do we know about Rahab's faith? The spies have been staying with her for a night, but there is no evidence for them teaching or persuading her of the Israelites' cause. But we do have this extraordinary speech in verse 9.

[16:06] It reminds me a bit of Ruth's declaration of loyalty to her mother-in-law and Mary's song of praise in Luke's gospel. It feels like it comes from a place deep within, and it is inspired by God.

And in it, we see that Rahab both sees the power of God, and also that she is worried that she is on the losing side. When we heard of it, our hearts sank, and everyone's courage failed because of you.

For the Lord your God is the Lord of heaven above and earth below. Rahab sees the power of God, and she believes that he has the power to save her.

Sorry, that's the verse. So the key question I had when I was reading this passage is, is it enough?

Is Rahab saved from the city of Jericho because she can execute a rescue plan? Or do the references to God's salvation story tell us something else?

[17:24] And I think that they tell us that Rahab's story is a story of grace. I think Rahab knows this as well, because when she has this negotiation with the spies, she asks for something that I wasn't really expecting when I first read it.

She asks for kindness. She doesn't ask for a fair deal. She says, And it feels like an extraordinary thing for a prostitute to ask of a soldier.

And the spies agree, but they explain to Rahab that her rescue is absolutely conditional on hanging a red cord, the scarlet cord from her window.

The oath you made us swear will not be binding on us 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 this house.

And I think it's interesting that nothing else is given a colour, the scarlet cord. And I wonder if God doesn't want us to miss the significance of it.

[18:50] It feels a bit like someone has underlined this with a red biro. So what does the scarlet cord represent in Rahab's story? A few things came to mind when I thought about it.

I think it reminds us of the blood of the Passover lamb that the Israelites smear over their doorframe so their angel of death will pass over them.

It's a symbol that Rahab in this city is protected. She's under the protection of God's people and everyone in the same house is protected with her. It made me think of the pathway that Israelites take through the Red Sea.

The red cord is also the means of escape. It's how she's going to get out of the city. And Rahab references how the Israelites escaped through the Red Sea when she makes that statement, that declaration of faith to the spies.

I think maybe it also signifies Rahab's unexpected inclusion in the bloodline of Jesus. And that's because in Tamar's story in Genesis 38, there is also a scarlet cord which is used to mark the firstborn son amongst Tamar and Judah's twin boys.

[20 : 17] And then finally, I think it refers to the redemptive blood of Jesus. So it prefigures that story. So I don't think Rahab is saved by her words or actions alone.

She is saved by grace. And I think this is evidenced by Rahab's whole family being saved with her. They haven't done the actions.

They perhaps don't have the faith, but the Rahab extends to her whole family. Tim Keller, who died a few weeks ago, said, it is not the strength of your faith that saves you, but the object of your faith.

It is God that saves us. We don't save ourselves. So Rahab's story is a reminder that there is nothing we have done which puts us out of the reach of God's grace.

There is nothing in our past life. Our faith and actions are important. But when God throws down the lifeline of grace, the best thing we can do is recognize it and grab hold of it.

[21 : 30] Hold on for dear life. Rahab's life depends on the red cord of grace. And so do all of ours. Maybe we feel like we have an understanding of who God is.

Maybe we come to church and serve other people. But unless we have salvation, unless we know that God has saved us, unless we hold on tight to that above all else, then maybe we are still waiting in a condemned city.

So I imagine Rahab holding on tight to her salvation as she climbs through the window and scales the city walls.

And we know in chapter six that she makes it. Joshua spared Rahab the prostitute with her family and all who belong to her.

And she lives among the Israelites to this day. And she lives among the Israelites to this day. Rahab is not just saved by the Israelites.

[22 : 44] She is welcomed by them and brought into their community. She finds somewhere here to belong, to expand her family, to have and raise children.

And we find out eventually that through this she becomes part of the bloodline of Jesus. So we leave Rahab there with her happy ending for a few moments and turn our attention back to the spies.

So the spies promise to treat Rahab kindly and faithfully. And the spies make this oath to Rahab. Our lives for your lives.

Look straightforward at first. But when I thought about it, I thought what they're saying is this female Gentile prostitute's life is as equal value as the life of a male Israelite soldier.

And even standing here in Herne Hill in the 21st century, I still think this is deeply challenging. Do we think of these lives as equal in our own society today?

[23 : 59] And when I thought about it, I thought there's only one place where this statement makes sense. And that is in God's kingdom. So have you met any Rahabs this week?

Where are they in your lives? The people who the world thinks are not worthy, who are often treated unkindly, who are betrayed and not treated fairly.

When people seem like outsiders who don't belong in our communities, do we welcome them or do we shun them? When people come to seek Jesus with lives that are messy, do we condemn them or welcome them into God's family?

There haven't been many opportunities for me to give personal examples this morning, having never escaped a besieged city myself.

But I'm going to share just one as I finish. And it's about an unexpected person in our lives who over the years has really challenged us in this area.

[25 : 10] His name is Dennis, and I'm sharing this story with his permission. So Rob met Dennis about 12 years ago at the Ex-Offenders Ministry at our old church.

He was homeless at the time and Rob felt that God wanted us to invite him for Christmas. And I think we felt that we could help Dennis by providing him with the consistency and stability of family life.

And he comes for dinner with us every Monday. And after dinner, we watch a Netflix documentary. We eat one of Dennis's top five flavors of Haagen-Dazs ice cream on the sofa.

And before he leaves, we pray together. And every week for 12 years, Dennis prays for our children. When they were babies, he prayed for them to sleep well.

And more recent years, he prays for the development of their faith. He not only prays for them on Mondays, he believes that God has called him to pray for our children. Sorry, I'm quite emotional saying this.

[26 : 14] He prays for them throughout the week. So 12 years of praying is a lot of prayer. It's a lot of prayer. I don't know if there is anyone in my life who prays for our children with the dedication that Dennis prays for them.

And last year, actually, one of the girls had to do a banding test for secondary school. It wasn't like a selection thing, but we hadn't wanted to do any assessments. And Rob went to drop her off in this school hall with about 300 other children, all nervously clutching their pencils.

And Rob said he felt like he had totally abandoned them when he walked out. And he called Dennis and he said, please, will you pray for her? And Dennis said he would. But two minutes later, he called us back and said, I was praying and God just spoke to me and said I could stop praying because he said he's got it.

So my question is, did we save Dennis or did he save us? Or is God simply working out his salvation plan as he weaves the stories of our lives together?

Because if it wasn't for the kingdom of God, I would never be friends with Dennis and he would never be friends with me. And God has been weaving the unexpected people into his story ever since the days of Tamar and Rahab and Ruth.

[27 : 37] It is never an accident. So the ways of God may be unexpected to us, but they are perfectly worked out in God's story of salvation.

So the messages that I've drawn from Rahab's story are this. Depend only on God's grace. Don't depend on your faith or your actions.

Depend only on God's grace because that is the thing that will save you. Hold on fast to your salvation. Hold on tightly to it. And keep your eyes and hearts open for the unexpected people who will come into our lives and transform them.

For it is only with these people that God will build his kingdom among us. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.