

God's Promise and the Prostitute

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[0 : 00] Well, a man was walking along a narrow path, not paying attention much to where he was going. Suddenly he slipped over and off the edge of a cliff.

But as he fell, he grabbed a branch growing out of the side of the hill. Now, realizing that he couldn't hang on for long, he called out for help. Is anybody up there? He yelled.

And a voice replied, yes, I'm here. Hey, who's that? The man asked. It's God, replied the voice. Oh, God, please help me, exclaimed the man.

And God replied, well, do you trust me? Oh, yes, completely, said the man. Well, good, said God, let go of the branch. What? said the man.

God repeated, I said, let go of the branch. After a long pause, the man said, is anyone else up there? Now, it's just a silly little story, but it makes the point that if we really trust or have faith or believe, it's the same thing.

[1 : 06] If we have a genuine trust in God, it will show itself in action. Or put differently, our actions often demonstrate what we really believe. And as we come to chapter two tonight, we'll see all sorts of actions.

Some actions will demonstrate a firm faith, but other actions will suggest a lack of faith. Which really brings us to verse one and point one, two ambiguous or suspect actions.

So have a look at your Bibles, and you really, really need your Bibles open tonight, because we're going to work our way through. So it'll be good for you to follow along. So verse one. Then Joshua, son of Nun, secretly sent two spies from Shittim.

Go, that's how you pronounce it, by the way, Shittim. And we'll get that out of the way. Go, look over the land, he said, especially Jericho. So they went and entered the house of a prostitute named Rahab and stayed there.

And now last week, we saw God give Joshua two promises. The first one was in chapter one, verse three, that God will give the land to Israel. And the second promise was in chapter one, verse five and nine, that God will be with Joshua.

[2 : 22] And both promises went together. God will give the land to them by being with Joshua, enabling him to win, watching over him and so on. And so in light of those two promises, we also saw that Joshua was to be strong and courageous.

In fact, he was told that three times, wasn't he? Be strong and courageous. In other words, trust God, no matter how daunting the task appeared. And Joshua did at first glance, didn't he?

Chapter one, verse 10, he told the people to get ready because in three days they would attack and take the land or begin to take the land. But then we come to chapter two, verse one.

And no sooner has Joshua told the people to get ready for battle that he then sends two spies to check out the land and especially the city of Jericho, which was the first city that they would have to defeat.

Now, this simply might be wise military strategy. In fact, almost every Bible commentator I've read says this. They say Joshua is simply responding to God's command to take the land in a wise military fashion, doing a bit of reconnaissance work, recon work.

[3 : 34] And what's more, didn't Moses do the same thing when Israel was at this point 40 years earlier? Didn't Moses send spies into the promised land? And so isn't Joshua just doing what Moses had done?

In fact, Joshua was one of those spies that Moses had sent 40 years earlier. But here's the thing. Back then, God actually told Moses to send the spies.

But here it's Joshua. Back then, it didn't go so well. So why does Joshua think it will make any difference here? And back then, God told Moses to select 12 spies, a leader from each tribe so that

all of Israel was to be represented.

But here, Joshua sends just two spies. And we're told in chapter six were young men, not leaders of tribes. Back then, all of Israel knew about the plan.

But here, verse one, Joshua sends them secretly. It all feels like he's just confidently and publicly ordered the people to get ready for battle in an act of faith.

[4 : 38] But then starts to doubt and so secretly sends a couple of spies so others don't see his wavering faith. Or at least it's an ambiguous action, is it not?

And so are Joshua's actions, those that suggest a wavering faith perhaps, what are they going to do with God's promises? Either way, Joshua acts without God's counsel, sending two young men who lacked leadership in their tribes and maturity, it would seem.

Because what's the first place the men go to? Verse one, a prostitute's house. Now, again, some Bible scholars argue that this is a good place to find out information, since pagan men would visit there and talk.

And so perhaps Rahab had lots of information, military information. Others say the house was more like a tavern where visitors could come and go so that the spies could hide there without being detected as Israelites.

But again, the thing is, they are recognized as Israelites in the very next verse. And the language the narrator uses is literally, they entered into the house and laid down, which is very suggestive, isn't it?

[5 : 50] In fact, it's the same language that's used elsewhere in the Old Testament that means exactly what you think it might mean. What's more, the place that Israel is camping in verse one, Shittim, is the very place where Israel had prostituted themselves with the women of Moab not that long ago, Numbers 25.

And so again, these actions are dubious, aren't they? Ambiguous at best. And my point is, after such a promising chapter one, the very next verse in chapter two kind of casts a shadow over it all. The actions in chapter two, verse one, as I said, are ambiguous at best. And I think actually dodgy in reality. Either way, they don't really demonstrate a great deal of faith.

And so these suspect actions create tension for us readers. Because we know what happened last time when Israel was at the edge of the promised land. When Israel did not trust God's promises back then.

Do you remember what happened? Go back into the wilderness, 40 years. So could this happen again? That's the tension that these ambiguous actions create for us.

[7 : 02] Well, the next lot of actions we meet are unexpected actions. Point two, verse two. The king of Jericho was told, look, some men, some of the Israelites have come here in the night to spy out the land.

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.

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. 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. But she had taken them up to the roof and hidden them under the stalks of flax that 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.

[8 : 03] Now here there are two unexpected actions, I think, here. The first is that of the king's men. Now, would they really have taken the word of a prostitute without searching the house?

I mean, the king knows the men are there. He's got it from other sources. He knows that they've been there. And yet the guards take Rahab's word without even checking. And they obey Rahab and leave the city on her word.

And as soon as they leave, the gates are shut for the night so the guards are not coming back until at least morning. Now, maybe the guards are just really trusting people.

Or maybe they know Rahab to be a noble person. Or maybe they were just so fearful of Israel's God and the pending invasion that they were not thinking straight. Either way, it feels like someone else is at work to remove this search party so quickly and so easily.

It feels like someone greater is ensuring his promise of land is fulfilled. Even the very fact that flax, which I'm told is scarce, Rahab had just so happened to have enough flax on the roof to hide two

full-grown men.

[9 : 22] The second unexpected action is that of Rahab herself. As she lies to the king's men, which is as good as lying to the king himself. In other words, she seemed to risk her very life for the lives of an invading nation.

It's an unexpected thing to do. I mean, who knows? It's quite possible she may have earned a reward if she doctored these spies. So why doesn't she?

Why does she hide them instead in this unexpected turn of events? Well, this brings us to verse 8 and point 3, an unambiguous faith.

Have a look at verse 8. 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 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 Shion and Og, the two kings of the Amorites east of the Jordan, whom you completely destroyed.

[10 : 38] 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.

You see, everyone in Jericho has heard about God and how the God of the Israelites have led them out of Egypt, how the God of the Israelites parted the Red Sea so that Israel could walk on dry ground, how God enabled them to defeat the kings of the Amorites who opposed them.

And so a great fear has seized them all. But it's only Rahab who seems to know what this means.

Notice verse 8. She says, I know that the Lord has given this land to Israel.

In other words, she knows that fighting is useless, unlike the others in Jericho whose hearts may have melted, yes, but they're still going to fight nonetheless.

They may still win, they think. What's more, Rahab not only believes Israel's God will give them the land, she also believes that Israel's God is the God of gods.

[11 : 51] Verse 11. More powerful than the Egyptian gods or even her own gods. And so certain of this is she that she hides the spies.

You see, her actions demonstrate what she really believes, don't they? She has an unambiguous faith that Israel's God is the God in heaven above and on the earth below.

Her actions demonstrate an unambiguous or certain faith in this. And I think they stand in direct contrast to Joshua's somewhat ambiguous actions, which suggest a lack of faith.

More of that in a moment. But for now, Rahab's firm faith in God as the God of heaven and earth, not only leads her to risk her life in hiding the spies and lying to the king, but also leads her to beg for salvation.

Do you see verse 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 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, she says.

[13 : 06] You see, Rahab believes in the supremacy of Israel's God, so much so that she begs them to swear by this God, the Lord. She uses the personal name for God and asks them to swear by this God that she will be saved from death and her family along with her.

And now some people worry at this point that she will be saved because of what she did, you know, by her work of hiding the spies. But it's her faith that stands behind her actions, which saves her.

And so she asks them to swear an oath, which will act as a sign that she will be saved. But how will the spies respond? What will they say? Verse 14.

They say, 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.

Now, no doubt the spies are still a bit worried about their own skin, but they swear, that's the sign, they make an oath, that if Rahab aligns herself with God and his promise of this land to Israel, then her faith will save her.

[14 : 18] Her faith will be proved genuine and it will save her. And we know Rahab is saved because when the wall of Jericho collapses, the part of the wall where her house was, was kept safe.

And Joshua then spared her life. So on the slide there in chapter 6, verse 25, this is what we read. Joshua spared Rahab the prostitute with her family and all who belonged to her because she hid

the men Joshua had sent as spies to Jericho.

And she lives among the Israelites to this day. You see, her faith was demonstrated in action in the hiding of spies and the aligning of herself with God and his promises and his people.

And it saved her life and the lives of her family. And it's this same faith that continues to cause her to act for God and his people. So in verse 15, we read this.

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 that the pursuers will not find you.

[15 : 23] Hide yourselves there three days until they return and then go on your way, she says.

Now, at first glance, this might sound a bit confusing because in verse 8, the spies were just getting ready for bed.

And now they're climbing down the wall with a rope. But I suspect what happened was that they did get some sleep. And now it's the early hours of the morning, perhaps just before light. And Rahab lowers them down the wall.

But before she does so, the men give her more instructions. You see verse 17? The men said to her, this oath you made us swear to you will not be binding unless when we enter the land, you have tied this scarlet or red cord in the window through which you let us down.

And unless you have brought your father and mother, your brothers and sisters and all your family into your house. If any of them go outside your house onto 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. But if you tell what we are doing, we will release, be released from the oath you made us swear.

[16 : 35] Agreed, she replied. Let it be as you say. Rahab again expresses her faith in action. And the men actually call on her family to express faith in action by believing Rahab and gathering in her house when the time comes.

But here Rahab's faith in action is expressed by tying a blood-colored cord in the window. And then lowering the spies down the wall.

And the narrator then summarizes the spies' movements in verses 22 to 23 before letting them speak again. And when they do speak and give their report to General Joshua, I wonder what piece of strategic information they've gleaned.

What details of enemy defenses have they got? What kind of weaknesses does the wall have?

What weapons does the enemy possess? Well, verse 24 hears their report.

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.

[17 : 41] It's not your usual military report, is it? In other words, the spies affirm God's promises back in chapter 1, verse 3, that the Lord will give. In fact, it says, they say the Lord has given the whole land into their hands.

It's past tense. It's as good as done. It's a certainty. And the people in the land try as they might to fight. They're not going to win. In fact, their hearts are melting with fear.

And verse 24, that's their whole recon report. There's no mention of numbers of fighting men or weapons. In fact, the spies don't even check out the rest of the land like Joshua actually told them to do back in verse 1.

Why don't they check out the rest of the land? Because they've heard all they've needed to hear.

And now they've finally understood what Rahab already understood.

That the Lord has surely given the land into their hands. That's Joshua chapter 2. So what are we to make of all this? Point 4 on your outlines.

[18 : 46] Well, there's four things here. First, we are reminded that God is the God. In Rahab's words, the Lord is God in heaven above and on earth below.

He is to be feared just as Rahab feared him. He is to be honored and respected. In fact, the word fear comes up several times in this passage. One of my pet hates these days is that almost every show on TV and almost every kid at school or uni takes God's name in vain.

Have you ever noticed that? In fact, they've now got an acronym for it. OMG. It's just so commonplace. But our God is no Mickey Mouse kind of God. That we should take him for granted. Or treat him with irreverence. Or ignore him with indifference. He is the God of heaven above and the earth beneath. And so it is right that he should be respected.

Feared. Because of who he is. When our kids were younger, I remember pulling up at a set of traffic lights with the kids in the back. And then a police car pulled up beside us.

[19 : 57] And I said, oh, look, kids, a police car. And one of my girls turned her head to the window and went, pfft, the police officer. And I very quickly said, don't do that, don't do that.

Look straight to the front. Look straight to the front. And then I tried to get out of there as quickly as I could when the light was green. Have you ever tried to escape from the police quickly without looking like you're trying to escape?

I mean, that sounds really bad for a pastor to say. Have you ever tried to escape from the police? But do you know what I mean? Like, I was fearful because of who they were. How much more so God?

He is God of heaven above and earth below. He ought to be feared. He ought to be respected. And he has every right, therefore, to judge those who don't. And yet at the same time, he's also a God who loves to save those who believe.

This is the second lesson for us from this chapter. Rahab is a prostitute. And so it would have been regarded as unimportant in the hierarchy of the world. And yet because she has faith in God, she was saved.

[21 : 06] Her faith meant, led her to take refuge in the house with the red cord, remember. And for us today, we are saved by having faith in Jesus and taking refuge in him whose red blood paid for our sin.

And so, quite simply, have you put your trust in Jesus? Do you believe in him? Do you have faith in him?

It is the only way to be saved from the judgment we all deserve for not treating God as God of heaven above and earth beneath. And thirdly, for us who do believe, we have to remember that God keeps his promises like we started the series last week.

That's what we see God doing again in this chapter as well. How? Well, by working behind the scenes to get rid of the search party so quickly and easily, do you remember? But mainly by working through Rahab, who knows, verse 9, that God has given this land to them.

And whose report in verse 24 encourages Joshua and the Israelites to move forward. It's like when my wife promises to cook my favorite meal, roast lamb.

[22 : 19] And we've had a busy week and so it might not look like she'll be able to keep her promise to me. But then when I get to see the lamb in the baking dish and the vegetables all cut up, I know the promise is about to be fulfilled.

So also here, God uses Rahab and her faith and her words about the people's hearts to encourage Joshua, to help Joshua know that this promise is about to be fulfilled. That God will keep it.

But it's not just the promise of the land here that God is keeping. It's also the promise of blessing. Does anyone remember the three big promises that God made to Abraham last week? This is a crowd participation moment here.

It's a tennis shot. Do you remember the tennis shot? Anyone? Land. Lob. Land was the first one of Lob. And what's the second one? O for offspring and B for blessing.

Yeah. And we see the blessing part of the promise here as well. Because God promised blessing through Abraham to the nations. To people from the nations like Rahab.

[23 : 25] So on the next slide from Galatians 3, this is how Paul puts it. It says, You see, God's promise to bring blessing to all nations through Abraham is happening here in chapter 2.

As Rahab, through faith, enjoys the blessing of becoming part of God's people and living with those people to this day.

In fact, she even becomes part of the family line that leads to Jesus himself. If you read the genealogy in Matthew chapter 1. The point is, we again see that God is a God who works to keep his promises.

And so fourthly and finally, will we then live like those who believe his promises? Will we demonstrate our faith in God by our actions? This is really the big point from the chapter and the main reason for including it.

You see, you could actually skip chapter 2 completely and you wouldn't actually notice. Chapter 1 ends with Joshua preparing for battle in three days' time.

[24 : 42] And chapter 3 begins with them moving to the edge of the Jordan River to attack in three days' time. And so you could skip over chapter 2 and not even realize it was missing. So why does

the narrator include it?

I mean, he could have included all sorts of things, but why does he include this? Well, because it shows Joshua and us how we are to respond to God's promises. You see, the whole chapter is really a contrast between Joshua and Rahab.

They are the only two people, only two characters who are named in the chapter apart from God. They are the ones who both send the spies, Joshua in verse 1 and Rahab in verse 21.

They both hear about God and his promises, Joshua directly and Rahab indirectly. And yet, it is not Joshua the general who clearly demonstrates his faith by his actions.

It's Rahab the prostitute who demonstrates her faith by her actions. Rahab is really the hero of the chapter and provides a contrast with Joshua to show us what it means to be strong and courageous.

[25 : 44] What it means to live out faith in God. That's the very point that the New Testament picks up. So on the next slide, we read in Hebrews chapter 11.

By faith, the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient. Or, again, so highlighting her faith. And next slide, James, our reading tonight.

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? As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.

And the point of both these New Testament passages is that genuine faith will show itself in action. And so can I ask, do our actions demonstrate we really believe that Jesus is our Lord and Savior? You know, if we really believe he's the Lord, then we will live with him as our Lord, won't we? We'll demonstrate it by the way we live. So take two families from my old church and you tell me which one demonstrates that they live by faith.

[26 : 50] The first family organized their child's birthday party on a Sunday morning during church time and invited other kids from the church to come. Why? Well, because sport was on Saturday.

That's one family. Another family from the same church were leaving to go on holidays with their non-Christian parents. They were all set to leave on Sunday again. But this family decided to go to church first and then leave afterwards, even though it meant arriving in the dark with overtired kids and to the annoyance of their non-Christian parents.

And which family do you think was living out their faith in action? Well, take another guy at our church here who has a pretty high-powered job in the city. One night recently, he was told he needed to have a Skype conference with some people in the U.S. and in New Zealand.

It was a Tuesday night, I think. But he said to his boss, no, I can't do that night. And his boss pressured him and said, well, you need to. Why can't you do it? And he said, I have a church engagement that I need to go to.

He didn't give in to pressure from his boss. He wasn't willing to miss Bible study or whatever it was. Another guy I heard about, he was tempted with pornography. And so he would always work on his computer in a public spot in the house and never in his room alone because he believed that Jesus was his Lord.

[28 : 07] And so he wanted to act like it. Take a friend of ours, Christian girl who would love to have a boyfriend and get married. And in fact, she did meet someone a couple of years ago who was interested in her and bought her flowers and, you know, romanced her a bit, rang her up and so on.

And she liked him, but he was not a Christian. And she knew that being with him might mean he would inadvertently or perhaps even deliberately lead her away from Christ.

And so she ended the relationship with tears, I might add. It was hard to do. But you see, she believed that Jesus is her Lord and she believed God's promises that his grace is sufficient.

And that whatever loss she suffered now in this life would be more than made up for in the life to come. And she's still single today. Or finally, a lady from my last church called Beryl, a lovely lady, whom I went to visit one time because she had just broken a hip and had a hip replacement.

And while she was in hospital, she lost her childhood friend whom she'd grown up with. And so I went to see her to see how she was going. And when I asked, she said, I'm rejoicing in the Lord.

[29 : 25] It wasn't really the response I was expecting. I said, what do you mean? She said, well, it's hard and I'm sad. But God has promised me heaven.

And so I'm rejoicing in the Lord. I said, well, that's so encouraging of you to say that. Not many people can live that out. And then she added these words. I want to quote them to you. What good is it to say that we believe but not live like it? Her words. Well, let me close with a story. Some of you may have heard before.

I can't remember. But it's about a man in a crowd who gathered at Niagara Falls on the 30th of June, 1859. Because this man had promised to walk across Niagara Falls on a 330-metre high rope.

His name, Charles Blondin. And on the next slide is a picture of him. I might have shown this before. I can't remember. But Blondin not only walked the tightrope. He also balanced a chair on the tightrope and then stood up on that chair.

[30 : 24] He crossed the falls in a potato sack with a wheelbarrow and even on stilts. Can you believe it? And one time he took a small portable cooker onto the tightrope and cooked a meal while balancing above the falls.

Cooked a meal out there. A year later, the crowds gathered again because Blondin had promised to carry someone across the falls on his back. Everyone was buzzing with excitement. And he called out to the crowd.

Do you want to see me carry someone across the falls? And the crowd yelled back, yes. He called out again. Do you believe that I can do it? And the crowd called back, yes. Then he cried out again. Well, who will volunteer?

And the crowd was silent. They said they believed. But no one was willing to go on his back. You see, their actions actually showed a lack of faith.

Except his assistant, who did go on his back, like on the next slide. I think there is on the back. You see, we are to live out our faith in action. Show our faith to be genuine by the way that we live.

[31 : 26] We are to have a Rahab sort of faith in Jesus as our Lord and Savior. And in God and his promises to us. And so may we live like we believe.

Let's pray. Now, gracious Heavenly Father, we do thank you for this reminder tonight from your word. Lord, that faith saves us, but that we are also to live out that faith in action.

And this is not always easy to do. And so we pray that you would help us to do it. Help us to be people that live like we believe. We ask it in Jesus' name.

Amen.