

“When the Lord Gives Us the Land.”

The seventy-second in a series: “I Will be Your God and You Will Be My People.”

Texts: Joshua 2:1-24; Hebrews 11:29-31

Redemptive history is a term we use often at Christ Reformed. It simply refers to the fact that the Bible is the historical account of Jesus Christ saving his people from their sins. Throughout this history of redemption, we encounter some very interesting people. In our text this time—Joshua, chapter 2—we have the account of a woman who is a notorious sinner, yet who appears in the genealogy of Jesus, someone who is commended in the New Testament as a model of both great faith and godly deeds. Her story begins in Joshua 2 with the account of two spies sent by Joshua, who enter a tavern in Jericho to gather information on their enemies. The tavern’s owner (who happens to be a prostitute) helps the spies at the risk of her own life, even lying to the authorities to protect the spies whom she is hiding in her house. The woman then helps the spies leave and enter the city, even leaving a secret signal—the famous scarlet cord—in her window. Remarkably, this Canaanite prostitute happens to be the first convert in Canaan to Israel’s God. Her name is Rahab and she is both a prostitute and an ancestor of Jesus.

As we continue our series on the Book of Joshua, we now come to the fascinating story of Rahab, a Canaanite woman who has heard about YHWH and believes that Israel’s God will give to Israel that land he has promised to his people. In this chapter, the focus shifts away from Joshua and the Israelites—who were still on the plains of Moab and who were preparing to cross over the River Jordan to possess the land—to the Canaanites and what was going on in the city of Jericho, before the Israelites take the city. This chapter serves as an important bridge to chapter 6, where we find the account of Jericho’s capture.

There are other interesting comparisons in this chapter. We have the favorable comparison between Joshua as the strong and courageous leader of Israel and Rahab, who is likewise very courageous and who will be the first of her people to come to faith in YHWH. Then there is the contrast between Rahab’s faithfulness and Israel’s unfaithfulness as seen in Achan’s sin, the theme of chapter 7.¹ All and all, this is an interesting and important section of Joshua and many of themes found here will reappear throughout the literature of western civilization—a lady with a past who becomes a heroine. This is an important episode in Israel’s history, and a dramatic and compelling story in its own right.

As we turn to our text in Joshua 2, we see that the blessings of the covenant of grace which God made with Abraham are already beginning to overflow to the Gentile nations, including the pagan Canaanites, as some in Jericho believe YHWH’s promise.

Wise commander that he was, Joshua realizes the importance of good military intelligence. And so during the three days it would take for the people of Israel to get ready to march (as described in chapter 1), Joshua uses the time to gather information on the city of Jericho just across the river. Thus we read in verse 1, “*And Joshua the son of Nun sent two men secretly from Shittim as spies, saying, ‘Go, view the land, especially Jericho.’*” While it was Joshua’s intention to send out these spies secretly, as we will see, somehow the king of Jericho knew that at least two men were in his city, spying for Israel. Some have been apt to speculate that these spies were not very stealthy and bungled things, but the more

¹ See the discussions in Hess, *Joshua*, 80-81; and Howard, *Joshua*, 97.

likely reason the king of Jericho knew they were in the city is because it was common knowledge that the Israelites were camped just across the river and were preparing to invade the city. It is likely that the Canaanites had spies (or scouts) of their own, who were watching the Israelites closely. When these two spies left Shittim, they were probably observed crossing over the river and entering Jericho.

While it seems remarkable, the people of Jericho knew full well that the Israelites were going to cross over the river and lay siege to their city, *because* Israel's God had promised his people the land. We don't know how, but God's promise to Israel was also common knowledge to the people of Jericho, who had heard about Israel's military victories over the two Amorite kings, Og and Bashan. In any case, the two spies were to cross into Canaan and reconnoiter the land, and especially the city of Jericho. This information would be vital to Joshua before the Israelites crossed the river.

These two spies made their way to a local tavern inside the city of Jericho where they could glean all kinds of information about the city and the people who dwelt there. According to verse 2, "*and they went and came into the house of a prostitute whose name was Rahab and lodged there.*" There is no hint anywhere in the narrative that the two spies took avail of Rahab's services—the law of God forbids such a thing. The account indicates that Rahab's home was not a brothel, but was more likely an inn or a tavern which put people up over night, provided a meal, as well as other services, if so desired. No doubt, there would be travelers present in such a place who would give Joshua's spies information about the roads and the entrances into the city. The spies could easily glean information from other guests, and gather first-hand information about how many men were guarding each entrance and so on. More importantly, two spies could easily hide out in such a location because these places were filled with "outsiders" and they could easily "get lost."² Apparently, the spies did not succeed and were "found."

As we learn in the last part of verse 2, "*And it was told to the king of Jericho, 'Behold, men of Israel have come here tonight to search out the land.'*" We never do learn the name of the king of Jericho, but we are told that he became aware that Joshua's two spies had entered the city and had gone to Rahab's home. He also knew that their mission was to search the entire area in preparation for an attack upon the city. As I mentioned, most likely the spies had been spotted crossing over from Shittim and had been tailed. It had been reported to the king that they were now hiding in Rahab's tavern. The king knowing the presence of spies meant an imminent attack, took action according to verses 3-4. "*Then the king of Jericho sent to Rahab, saying, 'Bring out the men who have come to you, who entered your house, for they have come to search out all the land.' But the woman had taken the two men and hidden them.*"

It is clear from what happens later that Raab recognized these two men as Israeli spies and that she welcomed them into her home. When the king sent emissaries who demanded that these two men be turned over to him, Rahab now faced a very stark choice. If she turned these two men over to the king, she would likely be rewarded—it also may have been that she would not have been punished for allowing them into her tavern. If she hid them, she'd be committing treason against Jericho and its king. But Raab had already heard of YHWH's favor upon Israel, and she knew that the supposedly invincible city would fall because YHWH was with Israel. We don't know how Rahab knew this, only that she did. At some point, before the spies arrived, Raab had become a believer in YHWH. When the spies arrive at her tavern, she welcomed them. What is more, she risks everything (including her life) to hide them.

² Francis Schaeffer, *Joshua and the Flow of Biblical History*, in the Complete Works of Francis Schaeffer, Vol 2 (Westchester, Crossway Books, 1982), 203.

Her own personal courage becomes clear in the last half of verse 4-6. *“And she said—to the kings men—‘True, the men came to me, but I did not know where they were from. And when the gate was about to be closed at dark, the men went out. I do not know where the men went. Pursue them quickly, for you will overtake them.’ But she had brought them up to the roof and hid them with the stalks of flax that she had laid in order on the roof.”* Not only had Rahab believed in YHWH, but she willingly hid these men in her home and then told a bald-face lie to the king’s men.

That fact that Rahab lied to further God’s purposes has long been fuel for debate among Christian ethicists. The question her actions raise is simply this: “is it ever OK to lie to further the purposes of God?” Some have answered that question by noting that this was a “lessor of evils” choice. In a fallen and sinful world, there are times when none of the choices before us are good ones and we must decide to do that which is the least sinful. In this case, lying to hide the spies is the lessor evil, with the greater evil being to turn over the spies to the king of Jericho who would have killed them. Others have argued for what is called “hierarchicalism,” in which there are a hierarchy of ethical absolutes, so when situations like this arise, Christians must choose the greater good. In those cases where God’s commands seem to conflict with one another, one should chose the greater good, which supercedes the lessor good. So, in this case the greater good was to lie to the king’s men to save the spies. This means that Rahab did not actually sin, because the greater good was to save their lives (and possibly her own). A third view is called “non-conflicting absolutes.” This view argues that God’s commands cannot be set aside even when they seem to conflict. Christians should know that God’s commands really don’t conflict—despite appearances to the contrary—and it is the Christian’s ethical duty is to find some way to act properly without violating any commandment.

The hierarchical view clearly has the most problems because it argues that God’s clear commands can be set aside under certain situations. This often becomes a kind of “situation ethic” in which the end justifies the means. In fact, Paul expressly condemns this approach to ethics when he writes in Romans 3:7-8, *“But if through my lie God’s truth abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner? And why not do evil that good may come?—as some people slanderously charge us with saying. Their condemnation is just.”* The “lessor of evils choice” takes sin seriously, but seems to ignore passages like 1 Corinthians 10:13, *“no temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.”*

This makes the third view—non-conflicting absolutes—the one most faithful to the biblical data. But its critics say it is naive and unjustly (or unrealistically) requires Christians to look for ways around desperate situations such as that Rahab faced, when the king’s men suddenly show up at her door and ask about the spies. But the fact is God both condemns lying and requires the protection of life. When asked, Rahab could have said nothing, or invited the king’s men in to look around—on the assumption that the spies were so well hidden they would not to be found. And even if they were found, not even the martyrdom of the spies and Rahab could have stayed God’s hand, or thwarted his purposes. Some, who hold this view, have argued that war constitutes a special case and that enemy combatants forfeit the right to truth.³ Perhaps the best answer to this problem is Calvin’s . . .

As to [Rahab’s] falsehood, we must admit that though it was done for a good purpose, it was not free from fault. For those who hold what is called a dutiful lie, do not sufficiently consider how

³ See the very helpful summation of these issues in; Howard, *Joshua*, 106-112.

precious truth is in the sight of God. Therefore, although our purpose, be to assist our brethren, to consult for their safety and relieve them, it never can be lawful to lie, because that cannot be right which is contrary to the nature of God. And God is truth. And still the act of Rahab is not devoid of the praise of virtue, although it was not spotlessly pure. For it often happens that while the saints study to hold the right path, they deviate into circuitous courses.⁴

In any case, as a result of Rahab's actions, the spies are safe and she is commended for her action in two New Testament passages. The first is found in our New Testament lesson this morning, Hebrews 11:29-31. *"By faith the people crossed the Red Sea as if on dry land, but the Egyptians, when they attempted to do the same, were drowned. By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been encircled for seven days. By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had given a friendly welcome to the spies."* Here we learn that Rahab was delivered from the judgment to fall upon Jericho because she knew that YHWH was the true and living God, and that she believed God's promise to give his people the land.

And then in James 2:24-25, we read, *"You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. And 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?"* Here, the question is, "why did Rahab hide the spies and act to protect them?" Because she believed in YHWH. James' point is that saving faith (which trusts in God), is a living and vital faith which acts accordingly. The point is that while Rahab lied—a sin—she believed God's promise and then she acted as she did because as she was studying the right path, she took a circuitous route (as Calvin so aptly puts it). The New Testament commends her for both her faith and her deeds. In many ways then Rahab becomes an example to all of us.

As we read in verse 7, Rahab's lie had the desired effect. *"So the men pursued after [spies] on the way to the Jordan as far as the fords. And the gate was shut as soon as the pursuers had gone out."* The good news is that the king's men took off in hot pursuit of the spies. The bad news is that the gate was closed and the two spies were now trapped inside the city. Rahab now approaches them with an earnest request, in which we learn the nature of her faith in YHWH. *"Before the men lay down, she came up to them on the roof and said to the men, 'I know that the LORD has given you the land, and that the fear of you has fallen upon us, and that all the inhabitants of the land melt away before you. For 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 devoted to destruction. And as soon as we heard it, our hearts melted, and there was no spirit left in any man because of you, for the LORD your God, he is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath. Now then, please swear to me by the LORD that, as I have dealt kindly with you, you also will deal kindly with my father's house, and give me a sure sign that you will save alive my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, and all who belong to them, and deliver our lives from death.'"*

These are truly remarkable words. Rahab knows all about the Israelites and God's care of them as they left Egypt and journeyed through the wilderness. She boldly confesses to the spies that she believes that YHWH is the true and living God who created all things and who is present with his people. She also knows that YHWH has given the land of Canaan to Israel. She admits that the Canaanites have lived in fear of that day when the people of God would finally come and possess that which was rightfully theirs—the land YHWH had given them. This is exactly what Moses had foretold in his "song" in Exodus

⁴ Calvin, Commentaries on the Book of Joshua, 47.

15:15-16, given right after the Israelites crossed through the Red Sea on dry ground. Proclaims Moses, *“now are the chiefs of Edom dismayed; trembling seizes the leaders of Moab; all the inhabitants of Canaan have melted away. Terror and dread fall upon them; because of the greatness of your arm, they are still as a stone, till your people, O LORD, pass by, till the people pass by whom you have purchased.”* Rahab recounts to the spies that this is exactly what happened in Jericho—the people are afraid of Israel, because they are afraid of Israel’s God.

Rahab pleads with the spies ensure that her family (her father’s house) will be spared when YHWH leads the Israelites to victory over Jericho. She has risked her life to hide these men. Surely, Joshua and the Israelites will spare her and her family. Indeed, in verse 14, the spies assure her that this will be the case. *“And the men said to her, ‘Our life for yours even to death! If you do not tell this business of ours, then when the LORD gives us the land we will deal kindly and faithfully with you.’”* We later learn on in Joshua 6:17, that Joshua issued the following command. *“And the city and all that is within it shall be devoted to the LORD for destruction. Only Rahab the prostitute and all who are with her in her house shall live, because she hid the messengers whom we sent.”* We will also read in Joshua 6 of her rescue. It was likely that Rahab as a believer in YHWH, lived in the land and married a Jew, explaining her inclusion in the ancestry of Jesus. Unsupported Jewish tradition speaks of her great beauty and implies that she ended up marrying Joshua so as to become the ancestor of Jeremiah.⁵

The spies are trapped within the city and it will take extraordinary means to help them escape so as to report back to Joshua. As we read in verse 15, *“Then she let them down by a rope through the window, for her house was built into the city wall, so that she lived in the wall.”* In many fortified cities of the day, walls were erected on top preexisting buildings. Rahab’s house was high enough up that she had a roof (or even a crawl space) where she could hide the spies out of sight. But the window of her home opened through the wall to the outside, and since it was impossible for the spies to leave by the gate, they could escape out Rahab’s window by climbing down using a rope.

But before she helps them escape, Rahab wants to make sure the spies don’t get caught by the king’s soldiers. *“And she said to them, ‘Go into the hills, or the pursuers will encounter you, and hide there three days until the pursuers have returned. Then afterward you may go your way.’”* Going into the hills would take the spies in the opposite direction from which they had entered the city. The king’s men had departed in the opposite direction. In reply to her request to be delivered, *“the men said to her, ‘We will be guiltless with respect to this oath of yours that you have made us swear.’”* The terms are simple. If Rahab keeps up her part of the bargain, she will be spared.

To make sure that everyone is on the same page, the two spies now go over the conditions with Rahab as recounted in verses 18-20. *“Behold, when we come into the land, you shall tie this scarlet cord in the window through which you let us down, and you shall gather into your house your father and mother, your brothers, and all your father’s household. Then if anyone goes out of the doors of your house into the street, his blood shall be on his own head, and we shall be guiltless. But if a hand is laid on anyone who is with you in the house, his blood shall be on our head. But if you tell this business of ours, then we shall be guiltless with respect to your oath that you have made us swear.”* Rahab agreed to these terms and sends the spies away to safety as recounted in verses 21-23. *“And she said, ‘According to your words, so be it.’ Then she sent them away, and they departed. And she tied the scarlet cord in the window. They departed and went into the hills and remained there three days until the pursuers*

⁵ ISBE.

returned, and the pursuers searched all along the way and found nothing.”

Many Christians from the earliest days of the church have argued that the scarlet cord is a type of Christ’s shed blood. While there’s no doubt that there is a scarlet cord of redemption running throughout all of Scripture, I’m not so sure that’s what is going on here in Joshua, since no New Testament passage makes any connection between Rahab’s scarlet cord and the work of Christ.⁶ What we can say, however, is that once Rahab puts the scarlet cord in her window—just as in the Passover—all who enter her home and who stay there will be protected from the destruction that is coming upon the city. The spies have promised that Rahab and her family will be spared, Rahab will keep her word, and Joshua will honor the agreement when Israel captures the city.

Meanwhile, in verses 23-24, we learn that the spies returned to Joshua with vital intelligence about the city and the morale of its inhabitants. *“Then the two men returned. They came down from the hills and passed over and came to Joshua the son of Nun, and they told him all that had happened to them. And they said to Joshua, ‘Truly the LORD has given all the land into our hands. And also, all the inhabitants of the land melt away because of us.’”* If the Israelites lacked faith that they could take Canaan nearly forty-years before, this report that the spies brought back to Joshua should build their confidence. The Canaanites are terrified of Israel’s God and they knew that the land was YHWH’s to give to his people. Rather than face the Israelites as an organized people, the Canaanites would just melt away and Israel will win victory after victory. It would all go just as YHWH promised Moses and Joshua that it would.

As we conclude then, what can we say by way of summation? Now that Israel is camped on the plains of Moab, it is no longer a question of *if* the Lord will give them the land, but *when*. Having been in Jericho, the spies can report with great enthusiasm, *truly the LORD has given all the land into our hands*. Even more, YHWH’s covenant promise and Moses’ prophecy after the Israelites crossed the Red Sea is coming to pass. *All the inhabitants of the land melt away because of us*. Israel has become a great nation, because YHWH has led them to victories over Pharaoh’s chariots, the Amelkites, the Amonites and now they were just across the Jordan from Jericho. The people of Jericho knew all about the greatness of YHWH, and they were terrified.

And in the middle of it all is a Canaanite prostitute, who has heard of all that YHWH has done and who believes that YHWH is the creator of all things and that he can spare her and her family from the wrath which is to come upon Jericho. While we see the land promise about to be realized when Israel enters Canaan, we are also witnessing the blessings of the covenant of grace spill over onto elect Canaanites such as Rahab and her family. God saves sinners through the blood of Jesus—even Canaanite prostitutes. He did so then, he does so now. God even chose Rahab to be an ancestor of the very same Savior (Jesus Christ) to whom she now looks to save her and her family. Because Rahab believed YHWH’s promise to give Israel the land and deliver her and her family from the day of wrath, she was justified through faith and her sins were forgiven. And because she believed God’s promise to save her, she took action and hid the spies at the risk of her own life. Indeed, all those who enter her home with the scarlet thread in the window will be saved from the judgment to come. And these people will add their “amens” to the covenant promise soon to be realized when “the Lord gives us the land.” And they will dwell in the land of promise, recipients of God’s covenant favor and blessing, looking forward to the coming of the Messiah, our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

⁶ See the helpful discussion in; Howard, Joshua, 115-116.