Joshua 2:1-24 *Legendary: Rahab: The Scarlett Cord*

Today is the second week in our summer series called “Legendary.” We are taking a look at some Old Testament heroes that we sometimes overlook. Today’s story is the story of Rahab. It’s a longer story, so we need to just jump right into it.

***Spies Like Us***

Rahab’s story is told in Joshua 2. We start with **verse 1:**

1Then Joshua son of Nun secretly sent two spies from Shittim. ‘Go, look over the land,’ he said, ‘especially Jericho.’

Let me catch you up on where we are in the Biblical story. Last week we talked about Moses and the people of Israel escaping Egypt while the chariots and armies of Pharaoh were drowned in the sea. We called it the Red Sea Rescue. Now we’ve jumped 40 years ahead. Moses and the people have stopped at Mt. Sinai to receive the 10 commandments, and then wandered aimlessly in the wilderness for 40 years after their spies reported that the people living in the Promised Land were too big and too scary for them to defeat.

Now Moses has passed the mantle of leadership to Joshua, and it is up to Joshua to lead the people to take possession of the land that God has guaranteed as their inheritance.

And the first thing he is going to have to do is deal with Jericho. Jericho was a fortress city that guarded the entrance into the Promised Land. It was a big city for that time, sitting on about 9 to 10 acres of land, and surrounded by a formidable, 15 foot thick wall.

Defeating Jericho is not going to be a simple task. So Joshua sends in two spies to do a little reconnaissance and check the mood of the people inside the city. The rest **of verse 1:**

So they went and entered the house of a prostitute named Rahab and stayed there.

Here is our introduction to Rahab. And it is not flattering. In fact, by my count there are 8 direct references to Rahab by name in the pages of scripture, and 5 of them make mention of the fact that she is a prostitute. Rahab the Prostitute. It’s almost like it’s her last name. Even long after she stops that particular line of work, that’s still how she is referred to.

If you have you NIV Bible open, you’ll notice a footnote that says this word could also be translated as “innkeeper.” Probably, both are right in some sense. The home of a single woman, in Canaanite culture, where men were allowed to stay overnight. It’s not the line of work most women aspire to, it’s probably not something she was doing by choice, but that’s what she was.

Now, you might be wondering: why did these Jewish spies go to the house of a prostitute? This detail is meant to raise your eyebrow. But you have to understand that a walled city like Jericho would open its gates in the morning and any number of people would come in to do business. When the sun set, the gate was closed, and any strangers lurking about the city would be looked upon with suspicion. But strangers who spent the night at Rahab’s house of hospitality were less likely to raise alarm.

At any rate, the spies failed in their efforts to blend in. **Verse 2:**

2The king of Jericho was told, ‘Look! Some of the Israelites have come here tonight to spy out the land.’

It was no surprise to the people of Jericho that the Israelites were just across the Jordan river. It’s pretty hard to hide 2 million people. But now someone has figured out that Israelites are inside the city gates. **Verse 3:**

3So 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.’

Naturally, the king assumes the men are staying at Rahab’s. Now she has a chance to shine! She can get public recognition from the king and be a hero among her people. She can collect the reward money. All she has to do is lead the authorities to the two spies and watch them hauled away in chains.

But that’s not what she does. As it turns out—some might say, as luck would have it—these two spies have found the one person in Jericho who is sympathetic to Israel. Only, we don’t believe in luck, do we? **Verses 4-7:**

4But 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. 5At dusk, when it was time to close the city gate, the men left. I don't know which way they went. Go after them quickly. You may catch up with them.’ 6(But she had taken them up to the roof and hidden them under the stalks of flax she had laid out on the roof.) 7So the men set out in pursuit of the spies on the road that leads to the fords of the Jordan [East of Jericho], and as soon as the pursuers had gone out, the gate was shut.”

Instead of siding with her own people, Rahab makes the decision to help the spies. She switches her allegiance and sends the king’s men on a wild goose chase.

Now, there is no getting around the fact that Rahab lied. If you ever take a Christian ethics course, or get into a discussion of whether or not it is ever o.k. to tell a lie, Rahab is bound to come up.

Obviously, God delights in the truth. He even included lying--“bearing false witness”-- in His top ten list of things not to do. And yet, it seems that Rahab is being praised for what she did here. There certainly doesn’t appear to be any other way these spies could have been protected.

Similarly, when Pharaoh ordered all the Jewish boys be thrown into the Nile, Moses’ parents and the midwives had to practice deception in order to save him. I’d guess we would all agree it would be better to lie to Nazi soldiers about the presence of fugitive Jews hiding in your attic rather than to hand them over to the concentration camps.

That’s not to say that ethics are always situational. My guess is that there are very few moments when someone’s life is at stake unless we tell a lie, or where a law is so evil that we have to resort to dishonesty to oppose it; but if we were in such a situation I think it is clear that such a deception would be O.K. God rates human life ahead of telling the truth to thugs.

***The LORD Your God is God in Heaven***

At any rate, the spies have avoided the authorities, but they are still trapped in the city. And you can imagine that they’re still quite scared. They have no idea why Rahab has done what she has done. So she explains. **Verses 8-9:**

8Before the spies lay down for the night, she went up on the roof 9and said to them, ‘I know that the LORD has given this land to you 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.

Rahab knows a great deal about Israel’s history and God’s plans for Israel’s future. She talks about their occupation of the land as if it is accomplished fact. And she is quite candid that the people of Jericho are melting with fear. **Verse 10:**

10We 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 Sihon and Og, the two kings of the Amorites east of the Jordan, whom you completely destroyed.

God has been very clear that the people of Canaan are to be completely destroyed. Way back in Genesis 15 when He was talking to Abraham—that’s over 400 years ago—God predicted that the sins of the Amorites would lead to their destruction. In Deuteronomy, Moses is very clear that when the Israelites enter the promised land they are not “to leave alive anything that breathes.” (Deut. 20:16-18)

Now that sounds awfully bloodthirsty, but we have to understand this is the righteous judgment of God. The Bible doesn’t say a lot about Canaanite sin leading up to this point, but we get plenty of examples of their sinful ways later in the story (because the Israelites fail to keep God’s command); and it is clear that they are far from God. They are thoroughly wicked, and God has decreed that they will be destroyed.

So Rahab, because of the people she belongs to, is destined for death.

And yet, **verse 11:**

11When we heard of it, our hearts melted and everyone's courage failed because of you, for the LORD your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below.

This is the highpoint of the story. This is Rahab’s confession of faith. The Israelite spies never expected they would hear a Canaanite declare the LORD is God in heaven above and on the earth below.

Forget about Baal, Ashteroth, Chemosh, Molech and the other gods of the Canaanites. Rahab has heard the stories about Israel walking through the Red Sea, she’s seen what they’ve done to the kings beyond the river, she’s seen them camped on the banks of the Jordan, and she’s convinced: “The LORD your God is God in heaven and on the earth below.”

Rahab is a believer. She has faith. And her faith is working itself out in deeds as she helps these men escape danger. But she wants to be saved too. **Verses 12-13**:

12Now 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 13that 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.’

The word for kindness here is the Hebrew word *hesed*, literally “loving-kindness”, one of the Old Testament’s favorite words for describing God’s love. I talked about *hesed* a few weeks ago at the end of Psalm 23: “Surely your goodness and love (*hesed*) will follow me all the days of my life.”

Here, Rahab is using it to set up a reciprocal relationship. She’s done them a solid favor, can they do one for her in return?

***The Scarlet Cord***

I don’t think these men had to think about this one for very long. **Verses 14-16:**

14‘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.’ 15So she let them down by a rope through the window, for the house she lived in was part of the city wall. 16Now she had said to them, ‘Go to the hills so the pursuers will not find you. Hide yourselves there three days until they return, and then go on your way.’

Archaeological excavations of ancient Jericho have found evidence that there were homes built into the wall. Again, it is a lucky break for the spies that their accomplice just happens to live in one of these homes and can get them out of the city without having to go through the gate. Only, we don’t believe in luck.

The hill country is found to the west of Jericho. Just a few moments earlier she sent the authorities to the fords of the Jordan, which lies in precisely the opposite direction. But before they go, they have some conditions for her to keep. Three ways for her to demonstrate that her faith is genuine. **Verse 17-20:**

17The men said to her, ‘This oath you made us swear will not be binding on us 18unless, 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. 19If anyone goes outside your house into the street, his blood will be on his own head; we will not be responsible. As for anyone who is in the house with you, his blood will be on our head if a hand is laid on him. 20But if you tell what we are doing, we will be released from the oath you made us swear.’

The conditions, in reverse order, are that 1)she and her family keep secret what the Israelites are doing; 2)that she and her family are all inside the house (anybody outside the house when the invasion begins will be fair game); and 3)that she takes a red cord and ties it from the same window she has just lowered the spies from.

The Bible says nothing about the symbolism of this cord. Clearly, the spies have in mind something that will be bright and visible when the troops are storming the walls (these guys don’t know yet that God has a unique method of demolition planned for Jericho’s defenses).

But it doesn’t take too much imagination to see the similarities between a red cord hung from a window and the blood of the Passover lamb that the Israelites were instructed to paint on their doorframes. When the Angel of Death passed through Egypt in the 10th plague, it was the red on the doorframes that spared the Israelites. Now, when the destruction of Jericho comes, it is the red on the window frame that is going to protect Rahab.

And, of course, it doesn’t take much to make the connection from the blood of the lamb to the blood of Jesus.

At any rate, it is the faith that Rahab expresses through obedience that is going to determine if she survives the coming attack or not. **Verse 21:**

21‘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.

***The Rest of the Story***

We have to wait 4 more chapters before we get the end of the story.

If you like classic VeggieTales, you know God came up with an interesting plan for getting past the walls of Jericho. After a miraculous crossing of the Jordan that echoed the journey through the Red Sea, God told Joshua to organize a marching band and throw a parade. For seven days they were to march with the ark of the covenant around the city of Jericho while blowing on their trumpets. On the seventh day they marched around the city seven times, and after the seventh circuit they blew their trumpets while all the people shouted.

And of course, when they shouted, the walls came tumbling down.

Once the walls came down every man charged in with swords in hand and executed the LORD’s judgment on the people of Jericho. Only Rahab and her family were spared. The Bible doesn’t give a physical description, but I imagine all of the wall in heaps save for one narrow tower—the part with Rahab’s apartment—still standing with a red cord fluttering in the wind.

**Joshua 6:22-23:**

22Joshua said to the two men who had spied out the land, “Go into the prostitute’s house and bring her out and all her belong to her, in accordance with your oath to her.23So the young men who had done the spying went in and brought out Rahab, her father and mother and brothers and all who belonged to her. They brought out her entire family and put them in a place outside the camp of Israel.

It is a story of salvation in the midst of judgment. A story of grace in the middle of destruction.

The rescue of Rahab is an example of what God would have done for others also. The king and the other citizens of Jericho had all the same information she had. They could have turned to God and asked for mercy, just as she did. But they didn’t. The fear that drove her to confess her faith in God led them into stubborn rebellion.

Of all the people in Jericho, only Rahab had faith.

It’s a great story. It has all the makings of an action movie: the men hidden under stalks of flax, the men escaping through the window, the heroine tying a scarlet cord as a symbol that only she and the spies understand. Rahab is an exciting hero from the Old Testament

But what does it mean for us today? What is the take-home lesson? Are we just supposed to imitate Rahab? Is it a lesson in situational ethics, telling us when it is O.K. to stretch the truth? Or is there something more important in Joshua 2?

One of the things I need to be careful of as I tell these stories of Old Testament Heroes is that I don’t give the impression that there are just moral lessons to be learned from these characters. We call them heroes, but we need to always remember the main hero in the Bible is God. The main lessons to be learned are always about who the Lord is. And so I would like to suggest there are 4 things we can learn about God in Joshua 2 that are very applicable to us today. 4 things we can learn about the God of Rahab’s rescue, and they all begin with “S”.

**#1. THE GOD OF RAHAB’S RESCUE IS SOVEREIGN.**

When you think about it, what are the chances of the two spies meeting up, in about one day, with the one person in all of Jericho who has come to believe that the LORD is the one true God and is willing and able to rescue them from the king’s men? Then, as we said, how likely is it that this one person would also have a home that shares a window with the city wall?

What are the chances? Do you think it “just so happened” that they connected with Rahab?

Nothing “just so happens.” God is sovereign.

Now, the Lord would have been just as sovereign had He allowed the men to die. He’s in charge, not us. But when He wants to do something, including getting timely information to Joshua, rescuing these men, and rescuing Rahab and her family, nothing can stop Him from accomplishing His will.

The LORD is sovereign.

I know that some of us in this room today need to hear that. All of us need to hear it regularly, but of some of us are going through difficulties right now that you can’t see your way out of. There doesn’t seem to be any hope.

You feel like you’re trapped in a foreign city and your enemy knows where you are.

God is sovereign. God, if you are a Christian, is your Father! And He is sovereignly working out every single detail of your life (including the painful and confusing details) to His glory and your good.

Take heart.

**#2. THE GOD OF RAHAB’S RESCUE IS SCARY.**

One of the themes of this chapter is fear of the LORD. The people of Jericho are quaking in their boots because of the LORD. Rahab says it in **verse 9**:

‘I know that the LORD has given this land to you 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.’

Then she says it again in verse 10, and verse 11, and the spies say it in verse 24. “The people are melting in fear because of us.” Reports have reached Jericho about the Red Sea Crossing 40 years ago and more recent Israelite victories against Sihon and Og. There is fear about what kind of God these Israelites are serving.

Somebody said to me this week: “Rahab only put her faith in God because she was scared. She did it to save her own skin.” But that’s kind of the point, isn’t it?

Rahab had a choice, as did everyone else in Jericho. She could believe that the God of Israel was real and strong and that He would carry through on His plans to destroy her city; or she could believe that the gods worshipped by her people would protect her and the city.

Remember, she could have turned the spies in and been a hero among her own people. But what good would that have done her if the LORD still destroyed her city? She chose to fear the LORD, to believe He was the True God, and threw her lot in with Israel.

That’s what it means to fear the LORD. It’s not that God wants us to live under the threat of his displeasure. It’s not that He wants to motivate us to behave for fear that we will be punished.

But if you believe that God is the One True God, then that needs to come with a healthy dose of respect for His rules and His judgement.

God is scary.

He is powerful.

He is Holy.

He is just.

He will deal with sin.

Everybody in Jericho had a choice. They could persist in unbelief and rebellion against God and face a day of reckoning, or they could believe that the God of Israel was the One True God and trust in Him. Only Rahab made that choice, and she was sheltered from God’s wrath.

Likewise, we have that same choice. We can persist in unbelief and rebellion against God and face a day of reckoning, or we can believe that the God of the Bible is the One True God and trust in Him. If we do trust in Him, we too will be sheltered (in Jesus) from God’s wrath.

**#3. THE GOD OF RAHAB’S RESCUE IS SURPRISING!**

And by that, I mean: surprisingly, shockingly gracious!

Who would have ever thought that Rahab would be saved?

She was a pagan.
She was a Canaanite.
She worshiped other gods.
She was a prostitute and all of what that means.
She lived in a wicked city that was destined for destruction.

Who would have ever guessed that this woman would be the instrument God used to save these spies? And more than that, that she would believe in the One True God?

Because that’s what happened. Rahab’s story is a story of faith. **Verse 11** is her declaration of trust in God:

11When we heard of it, our hearts melted and everyone's courage failed because of you, for the LORD your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below.

“For the LORD your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below.” That’s her declaration of faith. And then she followed through with her actions. The book of James says that faith is shown through deeds, and one of the illustrations it points to is Rahab (James 2:25-26). By helping the spies she showed her commitment to God.

God is surprisingly gracious to Rahab. In fact, there’s one more interesting note to her story:

Apparently, upon settling in with the Israelites, Rahab gave up her former profession and married a good Hebrew boy named Salmon. This Salmon is referred to in other places in scripture as the son of the captain of the tribe of Judah at the time. We don’t know for sure—the Bible doesn’t say—but it is possible that he was one of the two unnamed spies.

At any rate, they had a baby boy, who they named Boaz. Eventually Boaz married a woman named Ruth, and had a son named Obed. Eventually Obed had a son he named Jesse. And eventually Jesse had a son, his youngest, whom he named David.

The next time Rahab’s name appears in scripture after Joshua chapter 6 it is in the most surprising of places: it’s in the book of **Matthew, chapter 1,** in the genealogy of Jesus. As it turns out, the prostitute becomes a princess. She has a place in the most important family tree in history.

This is a story of grace. You and I would have looked at Rahab and said “Yuck.” A Canaanite prostitute. A pagan sinner.

But that’s not what the Lord saw. He saw more that sexual sinner. He saw a daughter of faith.

He saw someone that He wanted to redeem. He saw someone that He wanted to use. He saw someone that He wanted to rescue. He saw someone that He wanted to save.

Now, you might be someone right now that thinks that you are outside of the limits of God’s grace. The soundtrack is playing in your head. The story has been told all about you. You’re too far gone. Too messed up. Too spent and worthless and without hope.

The story of Rahab is here to tell you: No, you’re not. You’re not too far gone. You’re not too messed up. You’ll never be too spent or worthless or without hope to be beyond God.

No matter what story is told about you, no matter what story you tell about yourself, you are never beyond the love of God. Even the worst of sinners can put their faith in God. By faith, God’s grace is available to anyone and everyone.

So put your faith in Him. Like Rahab, come to him as the LORD in heaven above and on the earth below.

**#4. THE GOD OF RAHAB’S RESCUE IS SURE.**

**Verse 24,** the spies report to Joshua:

“The LORD has surely given the whole land into our hands...”

He is faithful. The good news is that God always keeps His promises.

Everything He promised is as sure to be as it is said.

Isn’t that good news?

We can take His promises to the bank for cash every single time.

Because He’s Sovereign. No detail is outside of His grasp.
And He’s Scary. He is the One True God.
And He’s Surprising. You never really know what He’s going to do next–especially who He is going to save.
And when you trust Him, you know that He is SURE.

So, trust Him. Obey Him. Like Rahab, put your faith in Him, transfer all of your allegiance to Him, and let that guide your actions, so that you have both faith and deeds.