

Lesson Four

JOSHUA 2 AND 6:17-25

Rahab: Faith from an Unlikely Place

If you had been asked to draw up a list of candidates worthy to appear in the family tree of the Messiah, Rahab's name almost certainly would not have made the list. She is a Canaanite, born in a city marked for destruction. She is a woman, in a culture that rarely recorded women's stories. And she is a prostitute. The Bible does not soften this detail in either Joshua, Hebrews, or James. Her profession was the first thing anyone in Jericho would have told you about her.

And yet God put her at the very center of one of the most famous rescue stories in the Old Testament. He gave her a scarlet cord that would, centuries later, become a quiet visual rhyme for the blood of Christ. He wrote her into the family line of Jesus, as the great-great-grandmother of King David. He held her up in Hebrews 11 alongside Abraham and Moses as a hero of faith, and in James 2 as a model of faith that obeys. He turned the woman everyone would have written off into a woman the church would still be reading about thirty centuries later.

Rahab's story is what the gospel looks like when it walks. She is evidence that no one is too far outside for God to bring in. As you read Joshua 2 and 6:17 to 25 this week, look for the way faith shows up in surprising places, and watch what God does with it.

First impressions

Jericho is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world. Its walls, multiple feet thick, towered over the Jordan valley. The city sat between Israel's wilderness encampment and the Promised Land. For Joshua to lead the people across the Jordan, Jericho had to fall. The mighty wall city, the trained men in the king's house, the wider Canaanite alliance: every human factor was stacked against Israel. And yet inside one small house, on top of the wall, a woman was already trembling with belief.

1.
 - a. Read Joshua 2 and Joshua 6:17 to 25 before working through the questions. What strikes you about Rahab?
 - b. What does her story tell you about how God identifies the people of faith, and how He does not?

For Further Study: Rahab is named four times in the Bible outside Joshua: Matthew 1:5; Hebrews 11:31; James 2:25; and (in some translations) Psalm 87:4. Look up each. What is being said about her, and why?

Two spies and a quiet faith (2:1–7)

2. Joshua sends two spies into Jericho. Of all the places in the city they could have stopped, where do they end up (2:1)? Why might God have led them specifically there?

When the king's messengers come for the spies, Rahab hides them and tells a lie about their whereabouts (2:4 to 5). Bible students have wrestled with this lie for centuries. Notice carefully what Scripture does and does not commend. Hebrews 11:31 commends her faith. James 2:25 commends her work of receiving the spies and sending them out a different way. Neither passage explicitly commends the lie. The Bible is not afraid to tell us hard truths about its heroes. Rahab is a new believer with a flawed but real faith, in an impossible moment, and God honors what is honorable in her.

3. What does Rahab do in 2:4 to 6, and what does she risk by doing it?

For Thought and Discussion: Compare Rahab's situation with the Hebrew midwives in Exodus 1:15 to 21. How does Scripture treat the lives of innocents in the hands of unjust rulers? Where do you see the moral weight falling?

Rahab's confession (2:8–14)

Rahab's words in 2:9 to 11 are not the polite vocabulary of a polytheist trying to be diplomatic. She names the LORD by His covenant name (the Hebrew is YHWH), recites His mighty deeds at the Red Sea and against the Amorite kings, and confesses that this God "is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath." This is a remarkable creed for a woman who has never set foot outside Jericho. She has heard, and she has believed.

Study Skill, Following an Author's Repeated Words: Authors repeat words and phrases for a reason. Notice in Joshua 2 how often the word "land" is mentioned, how often Rahab uses the name LORD, and how often "all that you have" appears in the conversation between Rahab and the spies. Tracking these repeated words is one of the simplest, most powerful Bible study habits. Each time a word repeats, ask why this author is using it here.

4. a. Read 2:9 to 11 slowly. This is one of the great confessions of faith in the Old Testament. What does Rahab know about the God of Israel?

- b. How did she come to know it (2:10)?
 - c. Her neighbors in Jericho heard the same news and "melted away" in dread (2:11). Compare Hebrews 4:2. Why does the same news produce such different responses in human hearts?
- 5.
- a. What does Rahab ask the spies for in 2:12 to 13?
 - b. Notice who she asks them to spare. What does this tell you about her?

The scarlet cord (2:15–24)

The arrangement in 2:17 to 21 was not a magic charm. It was a visible sign of an obedient faith. Rahab had to do four things to be saved: believe what the spies said about coming destruction, tie the scarlet cord in her window, gather her family inside, and stay there. Faith was the inside of it; her obedient actions made the faith visible. Centuries later the apostle James will point to this very scene to ask the church a pointed question (James 2:25). Faith that does not act, says James, is not the kind of faith that saves.

6. Read 2:17 to 21. What sign do the spies give Rahab? What must she do with it, and what must her family do to be saved?

For Further Study: Compare the scarlet cord with the Passover blood in Exodus 12:7, 13, 22 to 23. In both cases, a visible sign on a doorway spared a household when judgment fell on the surrounding city. How does Hebrews 9:22 fit the same pattern? How does this consistent picture in Scripture help us see why Christ's blood, shed once for all, is the only sufficient covering for sin today (Hebrews 10:10 to 14)?

Optional Application: Is there someone in your family or circle who is, just now, outside the "house" of faith? Write down their name. Pray for them by name every day this week. Ask God to show you one concrete way to share the gospel with them, and one step you can take to invite them under the same covering of the blood of Christ that has covered you.

Salvation comes to her house (6:17–25)

7. Read Joshua 6:22 to 23. When Jericho falls, Rahab and everyone in her house are brought out alive. What does this say about how one woman's faith and obedience can carry her family into safety, even when the rest of her city perishes?

8. Joshua 6:25 ends with the words, "And she has lived in Israel to this day." Rahab, once Canaanite, prostitute, and foreigner, is now permanently part of God's people. What does this say about what God does with new converts? About what He calls His people to do with them?

Rahab in the New Testament

Three New Testament writers reach back to Rahab, and they make three different points about her. Matthew puts her in the family line of Christ (Matthew 1:5). The writer of Hebrews makes her a monument of faith (Hebrews 11:31). James makes her a monument of obedient action (James 2:25). All three together give us the whole truth about what it means to be saved.

9.
 - a. Look up Matthew 1:5. Whose mother is Rahab? Whose great-great-grandmother does that make her?
 - b. Why would Matthew make a point of including her name?

For Further Study: Matthew lists four (or five) women in Jesus' genealogy: Tamar (1:3), Rahab (1:5), Ruth (1:5), the wife of Uriah (Bathsheba, 1:6), and Mary (1:16). What do they have in common? What is Matthew quietly saying about Jesus' family, and about who Jesus came for?

10.
 - a. Read Hebrews 11:31. What specifically does the writer commend in Rahab?
 - b. Read James 2:25 right next to Hebrews 11:31. What does James commend?
 - c. How are the two commendations not in conflict? What does Rahab's story teach about the relationship between faith and obedience?

Study Skill, Letting James and Paul Speak Together: Some passages of Scripture seem to pull in different directions until we read them carefully. Paul writes in Romans 3:28 that a man is justified by faith apart from the works of the law. James writes in James 2:24 that a man is justified by works and not by faith only. Both are inspired and both are true. Paul is answering people who thought their obedience to the law of Moses earned God's favor. James is answering people who thought a merely mental faith, without action, was enough. The harmony is in passages like Galatians 5:6: "faith working through love." When two Scriptures seem to disagree, the answer is never to choose one and ignore the other. The answer is to keep reading until you see how both are true at the same time.

Your response

11.
 - a. Rahab teaches us that no past disqualifies a person from God's future. Is there anything in your past that you have been quietly letting disqualify you from full participation in God's family? Name it.
 - b. What does Rahab's place in the family line of Jesus say to that?
12. Rahab also teaches us that faith risks. She bet her life, and her family's lives, on a God she had only heard about. What risk of faith is God asking of you right now?
13. Write one specific way you will respond to what God has shown you in this lesson before next week's gathering.

For the group

Warm-up. Begin by asking each woman to share the strangest place she has ever lived or stayed overnight. (Light-hearted. Rahab's house was, after all, a strange place for two Hebrew spies to spend the night.)

Discussion. Rahab's story can be powerful for women who are still ashamed of their past. Move gently. Pay particular attention to questions 4 (her confession), 6 (the scarlet cord and the gospel), 9 (her place in the line of Jesus), and 11 (the past as disqualifier). Don't rush 11. Give space for women to name what God has already forgiven.

Wrap-up. Close by reading Matthew 1:1 to 17 aloud. Thank God for the kinds of names He chose to include in His Son's family tree, and for the ongoing welcome that family extends through the gospel (Romans 1:16) to every woman in the room.