

Rahab and the Spies

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

3rd in a four-week series

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Joshua 2:1–14 (CEB)

Joshua, Nun's son, secretly sent two men as spies from Shittim. He said, "Go. Look over the land, especially Jericho." They set out and entered the house of a prostitute named Rahab. They bedded down there.

²Someone told the king of Jericho, "Men from the Israelites have come here tonight to spy on the land."

³So the king of Jericho sent word to Rahab: "Send out the men who came to you, the ones who came to your house, because they have come to spy on the entire land."

⁴But the woman had taken the two men and hidden them. Then she said, "Of course the men came to me. But I didn't know where they were from." ⁵The men left when it was time to close the gate at dark, but I don't know where the men went. Hurry! Chase after them! You might catch up with them." ⁶But she had taken them up to the roof and hidden them under the flax stalks that she had laid out on the roof. ⁷The men from Jericho chased after them in the direction of the Jordan up to the fords. As soon as those chasing them went out, the gate was shut behind them.

⁸Before the spies bedded down, Rahab went up to them on the roof. ⁹She said to the men, "I know that the LORD has given you the land. Terror over you has overwhelmed us. The entire population of the land has melted down in fear because of you. ¹⁰We have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Reed Sea in front of you when you left Egypt. We have also heard what you did to Sihon and Og, the two kings of the Amorites on the other side of the Jordan. You utterly wiped them out. ¹¹We heard this and our hearts turned to water. Because of you, people can no longer work up their courage. This is because the LORD your God is God in heaven above and on earth below. ¹²Now, I have been loyal to you. So pledge to me by the LORD that you in turn will deal loyally with my family. Give me a sign of good faith. ¹³Spare the lives of my father, mother, brothers, and sisters, along with everything they own. Rescue us from death."

¹⁴The men said to her, "We swear by our own lives to secure yours. If you don't reveal our mission, we will deal loyally and faithfully with you when the LORD gives us the land."

Matthew 1:5-6a (CEB)

⁵Salmon was the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab.

Boaz was the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth.

Obed was the father of Jesse.

Jesse was the father of David the king.

Hebrews 11:31 (CEB)

³¹By faith Rahab the prostitute wasn't killed with the disobedient because she welcomed the spies in peace.

Courage and strength can be legendary.

In this series, we've been talking about courage. The courage Joseph displayed in his forgiveness of his brothers and the bravery shown by Joshua and Caleb in standing up to the crowd, urging them to trust God. Today, we turn to the story of a very brave woman who lived in Jericho

The stuff of legend

It is amazing to see what one act of courage can do for a woman's reputation. When we meet Rahab, she is a common prostitute living in the city walls of Jericho. Yet, in Jewish legend, she came to be remembered as one of the four most beautiful women in all of human history. The story was told that she went on to become a righteous convert to the worship of the Lord God, that she eventually married Joshua, and even became the ancestor of eight great prophets, including Jeremiah. Matthew lists her in his genealogy of Jesus. In his New Testament letter, James lifts her up as an example of

faith in action. And the writer of Hebrews includes her in the long lists of God's faithful. What was it about Rahab and her story that gave birth to such prominence and reverence among God's people? The basics of her story are pretty simple.

One day, two men arrive at her door. Whether they come as customers or not, we're not told. Rahab realizes that they are spies for the Israelites who are preparing to attack

Rahab's Faith & Works

James, the NT writer, was the half-brother of Jesus. James's primary purpose in writing is to persuade believers that their works (or deeds) are completely bound up with their faith. In his commentary on the book of Joshua in *The New Interpreters' Bible*, Robert Coote reflects on the juxtaposition of Rahab's faith and her works (or deeds) by New Testament writers:

"Rahab is mentioned twice in the New Testament. In Hebrews 11:31, Rahab becomes one in the train of forebears who survived or prospered by faith, and in James she is a model of those who are 'justified by works and not by faith alone' (James 2:24). The partial contrast between these two texts (Hebrews expounds on faith, while James advocates works) points up inevitable partiality of interpretation, even for New Testament writers dealing with the Scriptures.

Nevertheless, these texts also complement each other. Brief though they are, both attribute to Rahab the same faith marked by the same work: safeguarding the Israelite spies. Thus in concert they articulate the familiar biblical theme that 'faith without works is dead' (James 2:17, 26). From this biblical perspective, the figure of Rahab reminds the interpreter that faith may be expounded in terms not only of doctrine, but also of lives lived. Moreover, the lives of the faithful include not only deeds performed, but also perseverance and patience maintained in the face of adversity. To be faithful is both to do and to endure, and the vector of a person's faith manifests itself through both."

Jericho in their conquest of Canaan. She, like the rest of the city, has heard of these people and their god. She quickly decides to help the two men, in defiance of her own king. She hides the two men and then helps them escape from the city, but only after extracting a promise that she and her family will be spared by the Israelites when they take the city. The men tell her to hang a red cord in her window as a signal of the household to be spared. When Joshua enters the city, he keeps the promise made to Rahab (6:22-25).

The story is simple on the surface, but two important questions swirl around this story. First, why does Rahab take the risk of helping Joshua's spies? Second, why was this story preserved and then told in such detail in the book of Joshua?

A confession of faith

Why does she help? Rahab tells the spies that she has heard what the Lord has done for the Israelites. She knows that their god has given them the land. She knows about the flight from Egypt across the dried-up Red Sea. In short, she has heard about the mighty saving acts of YHWH¹ and decides to put her trust in this god rather in her own. She confesses her faith to the two men, "The Lord your God is indeed God in heaven above and on earth below."

What does she really know about this Israelite god? Almost nothing, but it is enough for her to put her trust in the Lord. Rahab, this common prostitute, utters the words that God hopes all humanity would utter. She places her faith in a God she has hardly known. Too many people in our world think they must

have all their questions fully answered before they can trust. They fail to grasp that their whole lives are built on inadequate information. There isn't much in life we can prove outside Euclidean geometry.

¹YHWH is the English translation of God's name as revealed to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3). The Israelites came to embrace the name as so holy that they would not say it. Thus, when they came upon the name, YHWH, in their Scriptures, they would say, *Adonai*, the Hebrew word for "Lord." English translations respect that tradition by rendering YHWH as LORD (always in the small caps to differentiate it from the word "Lord.").

Acting on it

It is one thing to profess faith in God, the “God in heaven above and on earth below,” as Rahab puts it. It is another to act on it and yet another to risk one’s life, and that is surely what Rahab does in defying her king.

Perhaps this is why the story was preserved in such detail, why Rahab became the stuff of legend. We see in her a willingness to act on her faith, to risk it all, to get out of the boat. What she knows of the Lord God is only what she has heard. She knows nothing of the law given to Moses, nothing of the tabernacle and God’s presence. Yet, she was given faith sufficient to take extraordinary risks, even to betray her own people.

It’s no wonder that James commends her to us as someone whose actions have shown her faith. Rahab shows us what is possible from the seemingly simple act of trusting.

The Book of Joshua’s Place in the Bible and the Church’s Theology

(adapted slightly from Jerome F. D. Creach’s commentary in the *Interpretation* series)

Rahab’s story is one of many in the book of Joshua, which tells the story of the Israelites’ conquest of Canaan under God’s leadership. It is the bloodiest book of the Bible and recounts many instances of what seems a lot like genocide to present-day readers. Creach offers us some reflections on this challenging and controversial book.

The book of Joshua is one of the Bible’s greatest testimonies to the mighty acts of God on behalf of Israel. It reports how the Lord gave Israel the land of Canaan (Josh. 1–12) and allotted it as an inheritance (Josh. 13–19), to fulfill the promises made to Abraham (Gen. 12:7; 15:12–16). This story, along with the book’s concluding call to faithfulness (Josh. 23–24), is pivotal to the theology and literature of the Old Testament. Joshua promotes obedience to the Law, Genesis–Deuteronomy, which it follows. Indeed, Joshua’s opening emphasis on torah obedience (Josh. 1:7–8) establishes the Pentateuch as the primary authority for Israel’s life in Canaan and as the basis for the writing prophets’ (Isaiah through Malachi) evaluation of Israelite society.

In light of Joshua’s central place in the Old Testament story and in the biblical canon, it is not surprising that the book has been a rich theological resource for the church. Traditionally, the Christian community has seen Joshua as foundational for basic doctrines such as election, predestination, and divine grace.

The church has also found in Joshua a deep well from which to draw its typological expression of the faith. Early Christians saw as significant that Joshua’s Hebrew name, *Yeshua* (meaning “The Lord Saves”) is written as *Iēsous* (Jesus) in Greek. Joshua’s attempt to give the Israelites rest from their enemies (Josh. 1:13, 15; cf. 21:44) came to be seen as a model of Jesus’ provision of rest from the power of sin (Heb. 4:1–11). In this scheme, Canaan, the land promised to Israel’s patriarchs and possessed through Joshua, symbolizes the heavenly reward of those who follow Jesus. The Jordan, which Israel crossed en route to conquering the land, became a code name for the passage into the next life.

But despite the obvious importance of Joshua in the Old Testament and the traditional place it has held in the Christian community, the book has fallen out of favor with some believers, particularly in the modern period. The problem with Joshua is that it advocates, and says that God dictates, the destruction of all the Canaanites as part of the conquest of the land. This feature of the book seems an approval of what modern people would call “war crimes. . . .

To those who share this view, Joshua represents the worst impulses of humankind, dressed up as an expression of the divine will. As a result of such opinions, some Christians reject Joshua because they think it primitive and brutal, promoting a violent god who is surely different from the Father of Jesus Christ. But perhaps a majority of those who are uncomfortable with Joshua simply ignore it, thus letting the book languish in a kind of scriptural ghetto from which its voice is seldom heard. The revised lectionary gives evidence that this may be the most popular solution to the problem of the book’s contents. It includes only a paucity of selections from Joshua, with no story of battle represented. But the avoidance of Joshua fails to recognize how indispensable the book is to the larger biblical account. Indeed, the story contained in the book is referred to or quoted directly in fourteen other biblical texts. The contemporary community of faith is impoverished theologically when it fails to attend to Joshua. This book, with all its objectionable contents, presents a portrait of God and God’s demands on God’s people that the modern church particularly needs to hear.

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Afternoon Class

A study of the book of Exodus

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC." We will soon begin the book of Exodus

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

A study of Ephesians

Meeting on-line at 12:00 noon Tuesday on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC".

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like, wear your pj's.-- we're on-line now so who'd even know. Have a Bible handy.

Both classes are now recorded and are available each week in my new podcast at scottengle.podbean.com. They are also available on Apple podcasts. Search by my name, "Scott Engle".

Scott's Sunday Class

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

Current series: *Seven Books that Rocked the Church*. This week: Joseph Campbell's *Hero with a Thousand Faces*

Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott's YouTube channel. Search for "Scott Engle." These videos are posted as soon as possible after class.