



CHURCH of
the SAVIOUR

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“Marvel: Rahab”

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Joshua 2:1-7 (CEB)

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The last two weeks, our hero stories have come from the Book of Judges. For today, we rewind the story of God’s people a few generations to the Book of Joshua. To set the stage: the Israelites have been delivered from captivity in Egypt but have been wandering in the wilderness for 40 years. Now they are on the cusp of entering the Promised Land, camped just east of the Jordan River. Moses, the one who led the people out of captivity, received the law, and instructed the people, has died. Joshua has succeeded him, and it falls on him now to lead the people into their new home and to conquest over the people of Canaan.

But before they take their first steps across the Jordan River, Joshua sends ahead two spies to scout out the land. They enter the Canaanite city of Jericho and make their way to the house of Rahab, a prostitute living along the outside wall of the city, to gather information. Our minds are likely starting to raise some moral questions about this person and why the spies went there. But there is more to the story than first appears, especially to us who are seeing the story through our modern lens. We’ll come back to that in a bit.

The king of Jericho, who functioned more like a local warlord than the way we typically think of a king, learned that strange men had entered Rahab’s home and that they were likely spies. He, of course, had his own scouts and spies, even in his own land, and he knew that the Israelites were camped nearby. Already having heard of their exploits and victories, he was on high alert for an attack. So, he sent men to Rahab’s home to capture the spies.

But Rahab was one step ahead of them. She had hidden the two men on the roof under some flax stalks she had laid out to dry. When the men from the king arrived, they demanded she hand over the spies.

“Spies? You know, there *were* two men who were here earlier. But when it started to grow dark, they left to make sure they were out of the city before the gates were closed. I’m not sure where they went, but they didn’t leave that long ago. If you hurry, you might catch up with them.”

The king’s guard believed her story and set out in pursuit, heading east toward the river, and searching out the valley. After they had left and the coast was clear, Rahab went up to the roof as it grew dark and spoke to the spies.

“I know that our land has been given to you by the Lord. We’ve all heard about your incredible journey, how the Red Sea was dried up before you so you could cross over, then closed up again to drown the Egyptian army. We’ve heard what you did to the Amorites who opposed you, how you destroyed their armies, and we know that we don’t stand a chance. Our hearts are melting with fear. Your God is truly God.

“But since I’ve protected you, I ask for your protection in return. When you attack the city, spare my life and my family’s lives.”

The Israelite spies knew what a predicament they were in; Rahab had already shielded them once, but they weren’t out of the woods yet. “Our lives for yours. Help us escape and we’ll make sure you live through the siege. When the attack comes, gather your family, and keep them all in this house. Tie a red cord in the window, and our soldiers will know to leave you alone.”

They remain hidden under the stalks on the roof until well after dark in the middle of the night. Rahab instructs them to go to the hill country, the opposite way from where she had sent the king’s guard. Then she ties a rope and lowers them through an opening in the outer wall so they can escape. They hide out in the hills for a few days, then return to Joshua and give their report. *The land is ripe for the taking.* The invasion is a go. Joshua orders the army to prepare and plans for the crossing of the river and the entry into Canaan.

There’s more to that story, too, including prayer and planning, rituals, and symbolic actions, a clever but unexpected strategy. You’ll find it in chapters three through six of the Book of Joshua, the sixth book in the Bible, right after Deuteronomy. It’s a good read.

Eventually, the Israelite army reached the city of Jericho, where *Joshua fit the battle, and the walls came a-tumblin’ down.* Rahab had tied the red cord in the window as instructed, and she and her family were brought safely

out, while the rest of the inhabitants of the city were all killed, and the city burned to the ground. Rahab and her family lived among the Israelites, and scripture says that their descendants remained part of Israel from that time on.

Like all our Biblical marvels, the account of Rahab and the conquest of Jericho is a great story. But should we consider her a hero? I mean, she's a prostitute who betrayed her own people by harboring spies, then saved her own skin. Nothing particularly heroic about that.

But there's more here than meets the eye. As I said earlier, we are conditioned when we hear the word *prostitute* to see Rahab as an unsavory character who made poor moral choices, certainly not the kind of person to emulate. But it's helpful to know that she wouldn't necessarily have been seen that way in the ancient world – not that being a prostitute was considered a noble profession, but it didn't carry the same stigma that it does today. There were two primary reasons one might resort to prostitution: one was cultic practice associated with temple rituals. That's not who Rahab was – there's a different Hebrew word for that. The other reason was because of poverty and indebtedness. When people owed a significant debt, they often became trapped in an economic system from which they couldn't escape. (Some things never change.) There were few options. Indentured servitude and prostitution were ways to pay against the debt. And even then, while you might eke out a living, you were unlikely to ever get out of debt or live a free life.

Rahab was a survivor. She had already saved her family once by becoming a prostitute, bringing in enough income to keep a roof over their heads and food on the table. But it's unlikely that they enjoyed any more status in Jericho than that. They would have been poor, marginalized in society, and unable to fully participate in civic life. So, when Rahab hid the Israelite spies, she wasn't so much betraying her own people as choosing to act against the system that left her, and her family trapped in poverty. She saw in the Israelites a way out, a chance to save her family once again.

As for the spies, we aren't told that they visit Rahab for recreation. They were poor themselves, homeless migrants with no wealth, no property, no status. They were seeking information that would help them in their conquest of a land that had been promised to them but was not yet theirs. They might have seen in Rahab's family a certain kinship in status. They certainly knew that a brothel was a good place to get information, a place of secrets that drew people from all walks of life. And they were right – Rahab knew the things people were saying, the utter lack of confidence in defending the city against attack, and she knew how to hide people who didn't want to be found.

In many ways, Rahab's story continues the narrative of liberation that began in Exodus. She recounted the story of God's people being saved from captivity and the crossing of the Red Sea. She knew that God had guided the Israelites to a new home, the land promised to them. Even tying the red cord in her window is reminiscent of the blood painted above the doors of the Hebrew people on the night of Passover, a symbol that saved their firstborn from death and led to their liberation. Rahab saw in the Israelite people and the God they served a chance at freedom and new life for herself and her family. She put her trust in God and put her life in the hands of the men who came from God's people. She became part of the story of deliverance.

Rahab's name appears three times in the Christian New Testament. One is in the Letter to the Hebrews where she is listed among those who are commended for their faith, lifted up as examples of what it means to be faithful even when we can't see the outcome. Another is in the Letter of James, where she is commended for her good works. James makes the point that what one believes is not more important than faithful action. Even Rahab, though a Canaanite, acted faithfully for God and God's people.

The other place Rahab appears is in a rather surprising location – in the genealogy of Jesus, presented in the first chapter of Matthew's Gospel. She is one of four women named in the line of descendants from Abraham through David to Jesus, though men's names constitute the line of succession. The other women in the list are Tamar, who posed as a prostitute to expose Judah's unjust actions and call him to account; Ruth, another outsider who stayed with her mother-in-law and her people to create a better life; and Bathsheba, who is only referred to as Uriah's wife to emphasize King David's egregious behavior. Matthew wants us to know these women – and their stories – so we understand that God can use the most unlikely people to accomplish God's work. They were all part of the family tree of Jesus, God's Son who would redeem the world – not just the Jews, the chosen people, but *everyone*. Here's the point: *what seems unlikely and out of place for us is precisely the way God chooses to work, lifting up the lowly and the outcast, not incidentally, but as central to God's plan of salvation.*

When the Israelite spies arrived at Rahab's doorstep, she had a choice to make. She could let them in or send them on their way. She could listen to what they had to say and then report them to the authorities. She could choose

not to take sides at all, denying any knowledge of who they were or what they planned to do. Even after the king's men had been deceived, she could have chosen to act differently.

Her choices had serious ramifications. If she gave them up, she would be supporting a system that had failed her and kept her and her family in poverty, maybe receiving a small reward for her actions. If she chose not to get involved at all, nothing would change, and she would remain in that system. But by choosing to help them, she put her faith in the God of liberation, the God who stands with the outcast and the downtrodden, the God who delivers.

Rahab took a big risk. What if she'd been found out? What if someone else saw the spies on the roof or the rope dangling out the window? What if the spies didn't keep their word? What if the soldiers got caught up in the attack and paid no attention to the red cord or never even knew what it meant? Rahab took a risk that God and God's people could be trusted that a better life awaited her, that hope was more valuable than mere existence.

What choices do we face? Compared to Rahab, we aren't asked to risk much to practice our faith. Maybe to be left out of an invitation to a party here and there or seen by others as "religious types" or "Jesus freaks." Maybe our risk is putting our trust in promises offered in an ancient text and a faith handed down through generations instead of the free market or the American dream. We risk being in relationship with people who don't look like us or think like us or vote like us, people who might ask something of us or challenge us to think differently and believe more deeply. Maybe the risk we take is to invest less in ourselves and our image and our comfort and more in God's hope and the kingdom we pray to come every time we worship. Will we settle for the life the world can offer us, being simply a product of our own choices, finding our place in the pecking order of society? Or will we step out in faith to follow a God who stands with those society forgets, a God who brings freedom and liberation and hope, a God whose vision is always greater than what we can see or even imagine?

Thank God for Rahab, truly a marvel of faith. May we see her not simply as a morally questionable figure, a curiosity in an interesting story, but as a woman of faithful action who played a central role in God's story of liberation and our story of faith. And may her witness give us courage to act in faith when we have a choice to make. Amen.