

Who was Rahab in the Bible?

In the book of Joshua, we are introduced to one of the most thought-provoking and astonishing heroines of the Old Testament. Rahab, the prostitute of the Canaanite city of Jericho, ultimately is noteworthy for her great faith and for her place in the lineage of Jesus Christ. But a closer examination of the life of this remarkable Gentile woman can lead to deeper insights into God's plan for His church and His dealing with individual believers in grace and mercy.

Rahab's story is found in Joshua 2-6. This passage describes the conquest of the fortified city of Jericho by the Israelites. In its day, Jericho was the most important Canaanite fortress city in the Jordan Valley. It was a stronghold directly in the path of the advancing Israelites, who had just crossed the Jordan River (Joshua 3:1-17). Before entering the land west of the Jordan, Joshua sent two spies to look over the land. The king of Jericho heard that two Israelite spies were within his city and ordered them to be brought out to him. Rahab, the woman with whom the spies were staying, protected them by hiding them on her roof. She told them how the citizens of Jericho had been fearful of the Israelites ever since they defeated the Egyptians via the Red Sea miracle (some 40 years prior). She agreed to help them escape, provided that she and her family were spared in the upcoming battle. The spies agreed to her request, giving her three conditions to be met: 1) she must distinguish her house from the others by hanging a scarlet rope out of the window so the Israelites would know which home to spare; 2) her family must be inside the house during the battle; and 3) she must not later turn on the spies.

Safely escaping the city, the two spies returned to Joshua and reported that the "whole land was melting with fear." The Israelites crossed the Jordan into Canaan where they

laid siege to the city of Jericho. The city was completely destroyed, and every man, woman, and child in it was killed. Only Rahab and her family were spared. Ultimately, Rahab married Salmon, an Israelite from the tribe of Judah. Her son was Boaz, the husband of Ruth. Joseph, the legal father of Jesus, is her direct descendant.

Rahab was a young Canaanite prostitute and as such not a very likely candidate for a heroine of the faith. Jericho was one of the principal seats of idol worship, being especially devoted to Ashtaroath, the goddess of the moon. Here was centered all that was the vilest and most degrading in the religion of the Canaanites. Many Bible commentators, eager to remove the stigma of the designation “harlot” from one included in the genealogy of Christ (Matthew 1:5), have described Rahab as a hostess or tavern keeper. But scriptural usage of the Hebrew word *zanah* (Leviticus 21:7-14; Deuteronomy 23:18; Judges 11:1; 1 Kings 3:16) and the authority of the apostles (Hebrews 11:31; James 2:25), establish the credibility for use of the word “harlot.”

It is clear that Rahab was perceptive, intelligent and well informed. Rahab identified the spies for what they were, hid them, and had a plausible story ready with which to deceive the king’s agents. Rahab didn’t deny that she had entertained the men. She says that they left at dusk when it would be difficult for anyone to be sure of clearly seeing anything. The agents did not dare to risk stopping to search Rahab’s house because, if they did, the spies might get away. Finally, the Canaanite prostitute gives the two Israelites excellent advice. She tells them to hide in the hills for three days before attempting to cross the Jordan.

Spiritually, Rahab was not in an ideal circumstance to come to faith in the one true God, the God of Israel. She was a citizen of a wicked city that was under God’s

condemnation. Rahab was part of a corrupt, depraved, pagan culture. She had not benefited from the godly leadership of Moses or Joshua. However, Rahab had one asset—she had heard from the many men she came into contact with that the Israelites were to be feared. She heard the stories of their escape from Egypt, the crossing of the Red Sea, the wanderings in the wilderness, and their recent victory over the Amorites. She learned enough to reach the correct, saving conclusion: "For the Lord your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below" (Joshua 2:11). It is this change of heart, this faith—coupled with the actions prompted by faith—that saved her and her family.

It is often said that Rahab, while being a true historical person, also serves as a symbolic foreshadowing or "type" of the church and Gentile believers. She was, in fact, the first recorded Gentile convert. There are many ways in which Rahab depicts the church. First, she was part of a pagan world system, a prostitute, who by her conversion was enabled to become a legitimate bride. In like fashion, Israel was the first chosen people of God, but they were set aside temporarily so the Gentiles could be brought into the kingdom of God, and the church is now considered the bride of Christ (Romans 11; Ephesians 5:25-27). Second, Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was saved because of her faith in "God in heaven above and on the earth below" (Hebrews 11:31). Likewise, Christians are saved through faith in Jesus Christ. "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God" (Ephesians 2:8).

Third, although Rahab and Christians are saved by an act of grace through faith, true faith requires and is exemplified by action (James 2). Rahab had to put the scarlet cord out of the window. Christians must accept Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord and then go on to live in a manner that verifies that our faith is real. Fourth, Rahab could have

indicated the location of her home in any number of ways. But the only way that she could be spared was to follow the directions given to her by the Israelite spies. The world tells us that there are many ways to God and salvation, all equally valid. But the Bible tells us, concerning Jesus Christ, that "salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). Fifth, Rahab's faith enabled her to turn away from her culture, her people, and her religion and to the Lord. Commitment to a true faith in God may necessitate setting priorities that are contrary to those of the world, as we are exhorted to do in Romans 12:2.

Finally, once we come to Christ, our pasts no longer matter. The slate is wiped clean for all who believe and accept the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross on our behalf. Rahab was no longer viewed as an unclean prostitute, but as one worthy by grace to be part of the lineage of our Lord Jesus Christ. Just as she was grafted into the line of Christ, so we become children of God and partakers in His inheritance (Romans 11). We find in the life of Rahab the inspiring story of all sinners who have been saved by grace. In her story, we learn of the amazing grace of God that can save even the worst of sinners and bring them into an abundant life in Christ Jesus.