

Surprised by Grace



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: Josh. 2:1–21, Num. 14:1–12, Heb. 11:31, Exod. 12:13, Joshua 9, Neh. 7:25.

Memory Text: “By faith the harlot Rahab did not perish with those who did not believe, when she had received the spies with peace” (*Hebrews 11:31, NKJV*).

Why did I do this again?” Perhaps we all have uttered these words. After all, not only history repeats itself but so does humanity in general and we ourselves in particular. How often we repeat the same mistakes!

Israel has a second chance of entering the Promised Land, and Joshua takes this mission seriously. The first step is to have a clear understanding of what Joshua and the Israelites face. Joshua sends out two spies to bring him valuable information about the land: its defense system, military preparedness, water supplies, and the attitude of the population in the face of an invading force.

One would think that God’s promise of giving the land to the Israelites did not require any effort from them. Yet, the assurance of divine support does not override human responsibility. Israel stands at the border of Canaan for a second time. Expectations run high, but the last time Israel was at the border and had the same task, it resulted in an abysmal failure.

This week, we will explore two of the most fascinating stories of the book of Joshua and discover their relevance to our faith today. God’s grace has infinite possibilities to surprise us.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, October 11.

Second Chance

Read Joshua 2:1, along with Numbers 13:1, 2, 25–28, 33; and Numbers 14:1–12. Why would Joshua start the mission of conquering the Promised Land by sending out spies?

The place from which the two spies are sent out, Acacia Grove (*Josh. 2:1, NKJV*), is called Shittim in the Hebrew text, and it reminds us of two negative episodes of Israel's history.

The first is another spy story (*see Numbers 13*) featuring the same essential elements: the commissioning of the spies, the secret incursion of the spies into enemy territory, the return of the spies, the report of the spies on their findings, and the decision to act based on the report.

The other incident at Shittim represents one of the most defiant, idolatrous violations of the covenant by the Israelites, when, at the instigation of Balaam, they committed a debauchery with the Moabite women and worshiped their gods (*Num. 25:1–3, Num. 31:16*). In this context, the name Shittim creates an extraordinary tension as to the outcome of the whole story. Will it be another failure on the border of the Promised Land? Or will it lead to the long-awaited fulfillment of the ancient promise?

Read John 18:16–18, 25–27, and John 21:15–19. What parallels do you discover between the second chance given to Israel as a nation and to Peter as a person?

God is a God of second chances (and more!). The Bible calls the second chance (and more!) “grace.” Grace is simply receiving what we don’t deserve. The teaching of the Bible is replete with the concept of grace (*compare with Rom. 5:2, Eph. 2:8, Rom. 11:6*). God graciously offers everyone the possibility of a fresh start (*Titus 2:11–14*). Peter himself experienced this grace and urged the church to grow in grace (*2 Pet. 3:18*). And the news gets even better: we get much more than a second chance, don’t we? (Where would we be if we didn’t?)

Think about the experience of the Israelites when they were given a second chance to enter Canaan and about the grace extended to Peter after he denied his Lord. What should these incidents teach us about how we should extend grace to those who need it?

Value in Unexpected Places

Read Joshua 2:2–11, Hebrews 11:31, and James 2:25. What do these texts tell us about Rahab?

Central to Rahab's story is the lie told to protect the spies. In considering her lie, we have to realize that she was embedded in a society that was extremely sinful, which finally led to God's decision to judge that society (*Gen. 15:16, Deut. 9:5, Lev. 18:25–28*). While it is true that the New Testament commends her faith, a careful analysis of the New Testament references to Rahab's act reveals that none endorse everything about her, and none validate her lie.

Hebrews 11:31 confirms her faith in casting her lot with the spies instead of choosing to hold on to a corrupt culture. James 2:25 commends her offer of lodging to the two Israelite spies and for giving them directions on how to return by a safe route. In the middle of a decadent, corrupt culture and Rahab's own sinful lifestyle, God, in His grace, saw a spark of faith through which He could save her. God used what was good in Rahab—which was manifest faith in Him and in her choice to belong to His people—but never commended everything she did. God valued Rahab for her exceptional courage, for her brave faith, for being an agent of salvation, and for choosing Israel's God.

After seeing what was happening, she declared, “‘For the LORD your God, He is God in heaven above and on earth beneath’” (*Josh. 2:11, NKJV*). It's significant to hear a Canaanite woman acknowledging that Yahweh is the only God, especially on a roof where, in her pagan religion, prayers were usually offered to what they believed were celestial deities.

The expression of Rahab is previously found only in the context of God's exclusive right to receive worship (*Exod. 20:4, Deut. 4:39, Deut. 5:8*). Her words bear witness to a premeditated, conscientious choice to acknowledge that the God of the Israelites is the only true deity. Her confession demonstrates her understanding of the close relationship between God's sovereignty and the judgment under which Jericho is doomed.

Her moral choice recognizes that, in light of Yahweh's judgment, there were only two possibilities: to continue in rebellion against Him and be annihilated, or to choose to surrender in faith. By choosing the God of the Israelites, Rahab became an example of what could have been the destiny of all the inhabitants of Jericho had they turned to Israel's God for mercy.

What does this story teach us about how God must have our ultimate allegiance?

New Allegiance

Read Joshua 2:12–21 and Exodus 12:13, 22, 23. How do the texts in Exodus help you understand the agreement between the spies and Rahab?

Rahab's deal is very clear: life for life and kindness for kindness. The word *chesed* (*Josh. 2:12*), “loving-kindness,” has a richness of meaning that is difficult to express in one word in other languages. It refers primarily to covenantal loyalty, but it also carries the notion of faithfulness, mercy, benevolence, and kindness.

The words of Rahab also are reminiscent of Deuteronomy 7:12, where Yahweh Himself swore to keep His *chesed* toward Israel. “‘Then it shall come to pass, because you listen to these judgments, and keep and do them, that the LORD your God will keep with you the covenant and the mercy [*chesed*] which He swore to your fathers’” (*Deut. 7:12, NKJV*).

Interestingly enough, the same chapter (*Deuteronomy 7*) prescribes the ban (*cherem*) on the Canaanites. Here is Rahab, a Canaanite who is under the ban, and yet she claims, by her emerging faith, the promises that were given to the Israelites. As a result, she is saved.

The first image that inevitably comes to mind related to the conversation of the spies with Rahab is the Passover at the Exodus. There, in order for the Israelites to be protected, they had to stay inside their homes and mark the doorposts and lintels of their houses with the blood of the sacrificial lamb.

“‘Now the blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you are. And when I see the blood, I will pass over you; and the plague shall not be on you to destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt’” (*Exod. 12:13, NKJV; see also Exod. 12:22, 23*).

“By obedience the people were to give evidence of their faith. So all who hope to be saved by the merits of the blood of Christ should realize that they themselves have something to do in securing their salvation. While it is Christ only that can redeem us from the penalty of transgression, we are to turn from sin to obedience. Man is to be saved by faith, not by works; yet his faith must be shown by his works.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 279.

In that case, the blood was a sign that saved them from the destroying angel of God. As God spared the lives of the Israelites during the last plague in Egypt, the Israelites were to save Rahab and her family when destruction reached Jericho.

**What powerful gospel message can we find in these two stories?
What gospel lessons can we take from them?**

Conflicting Values

Read Joshua 9:1–20. What are the similarities and differences between the story of Rahab and that of the Gibeonites? Why are they meaningful?

This chapter of Joshua starts by informing us that the Canaanite kings who usually ruled over small city-states decided to create a coalition against the Israelites. By contrast, the inhabitants of Gibeon decided to establish a covenant with Israel.

In order to trick the Israelites into making a covenant with them, the Gibeonites resort to the scheme of being ambassadors from a foreign country. According to Deuteronomy 20:10–18, God made a distinction between the Canaanites and people who lived outside the Promised Land.

The word translated as “craftily” or “cunningly” can be used with a positive meaning, denoting prudence and wisdom (*Prov. 1:4; Prov. 8:5, 12*), or negatively, implying criminal intent (*Exod. 21:14, 1 Sam. 23:22, Ps. 83:3*). In the case of the Gibeonites, behind their treacherous action lies a less-destructive intent of self-preservation.

The speech of the Gibeonites is strikingly similar to that of Rahab. Both acknowledge the power of Israel’s God, and both acknowledge that Israel’s success is not simply a human feat. In contrast to other Canaanites, they do not rebel against Yahweh’s plan to grant the land to the Israelites, and they admit that the Lord Himself is driving these nations out before Israel. The news of the deliverance from Egypt, and the victories over Sihon and Og, prompt both Rahab and the Gibeonites to seek an alliance with the Israelites. However, instead of fully acknowledging their willingness to surrender to the God of Israel, as Rahab does, the Gibeonites resort to a subterfuge.

The law of Moses made provisions for learning the will of God in such cases as this (*Num. 27:16–21*). Joshua should have inquired for the will of the Lord and avoided the deception of the Gibeonites.

The fundamental duty of a theocratic leader, and of any Christian leader, is to seek God’s will (*1 Chron. 28:9, 2 Chron. 15:2, 2 Chron. 18:4, 2 Chron. 20:4*). By neglecting it, the Israelites were compelled either to violate the fundamental conditions of conquering the land or to break an oath made in the name of the Lord, which was equally binding.

How often have you found yourself struggling between what appears to be two conflicting biblical values?

Surprising Grace

Read Joshua 9:21–27. How did Joshua's solution combine justice with grace?

Even if the people of Israel had wanted to attack the Gibeonites, they would not have been allowed to pursue it because of the oath sworn by the rulers of the congregation. The Israelite leaders acted according to the principle that an oath, as long as it does not involve wrongdoing or criminal intent (*Judg. 11:29–40*), is binding, even if it leads to one's personal hurt.

In the Old Testament, being prudent before making an oath and the keeping of one's oath are seen as virtues of the pious (*Ps. 15:4; Ps. 24:4; Eccl. 5:2, 6*). Because the oath was made in the name of the Lord, the God of Israel, the leaders could not change it.

With the solemn oath taken by the leaders of Israel, the destiny of Israel was indissolubly linked to that of the Gibeonites. In fact, through their designation as woodcutters and water carriers for the house of God (*Josh. 9:23*), the Gibeonites became part and parcel of Israel's worshiping community. Joshua's answer, in contrast to the verdict of the rulers of Israel, which decreed servitude for "all the congregation" (*Josh. 9:21, NKJV*), transformed the curse into a potential blessing for the Gibeonites (*compare with 2 Sam. 6:11*).

The subsequent history of Gibeon testifies to the high religious privileges the city enjoyed, as well as to their loyalty to God's people. The vow taken by Israel remained in place down through generations, so that when the Israelites returned from the Babylonian captivity, the Gibeonites were among those who helped rebuild Jerusalem (*Neh. 7:25*). Their actions will have eternally positive consequences but only because of God's grace.

What might have happened had the Gibeonites disclosed their identity and requested mercy as Rahab did? We don't know, but we cannot rule out the possibility that even a consultation of God's will could have resulted in an exemption of the Gibeonites from destruction. God's ultimate purpose is not to punish sinners but to see them repent and to grant them His mercy (*compare with Ezek. 18:23 and Ezek. 33:11*). The subterfuge of the Gibeonites has to be perceived as an appeal to God's mercy, to His kind and just character. It was the Canaanites' refusal to repent and their defiance of God's purposes that led to the decision for their annihilation (*Gen. 15:16*). God honored the recognition of His supremacy by the Gibeonites, as well as their desire for peace rather than rebellion, and their willingness to give up idolatry and to worship the only true God.

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “Crossing the Jordan,” pp. 482, 483, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*.

After this story of Rahab and the spies, the rest of the Old Testament is silent about her until she emerges again in the genealogy of Jesus. It is stated that she became the wife of Salmon (from the tribe of Judah), the mother of Boaz, and the mother-in-law of another remarkable woman mentioned in the same genealogy: Ruth (*Matt. 1:5; compare with Ruth 4:13, 21*). Through her faith in God, the prostitute of Jericho, condemned to total destruction, becomes a significant link in the royal line of David and a progenitor of the Messiah. This is what God is able to accomplish through faith, even if it might be only the size of a mustard seed (*Matt. 17:20, Luke 17:6*).

“And her [Rahab’s] conversion was not an isolated case of God’s mercy toward idolaters who acknowledged His divine authority. In the midst of the land a numerous people—the Gibeonites—renounced their heathenism and united with Israel, sharing in the blessings of the covenant.

“No distinction on account of nationality, race, or caste, is recognized by God. He is the Maker of all mankind. All men are of one family by creation, and all are one through redemption. Christ came to demolish every wall of partition, to throw open every compartment of the temple courts, that every soul may have free access to God. His love is so broad, so deep, so full, that it penetrates everywhere. It lifts out of Satan’s influence those who have been deluded by his deceptions, and places them within reach of the throne of God, the throne encircled by the rainbow of promise. In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, bond nor free.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, pp. 369, 370.

Discussion Questions:

- ① Discuss the whole question of “second chances” (and more) and how we are to extend them to others. At the same time, how can we also be careful not to abuse this concept? Think, for example, about a woman in an abusive relationship, in which she is counseled to keep going back (“grace”), only in some cases for the abuse to continue? How do we find the right balance here?
- ② Discuss Rahab as a model of faith. How can we appreciate the openness of people to God, even if their lifestyle is far from the biblical ideal? How is it possible to appreciate their faith while not condoning some of their practices?
- ③ Joshua managed to combine justice and grace in a practical way in order to solve the predicament caused by the deceit of the Gibeonites and through his own negligence in not consulting the Lord. Think of a situation in your life that requires both justice and grace. What are some practical ways of merging the two?