

...FOR THOSE SEEKING THE EMPOWERING PRESENCE OF THE *Holy Spirit*

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Saint Rahab

by Paul Anderson

It's possible to be marred by the past but not marked. Yesterday need not define today. Take Rahab, for example. Hebrews and James introduce her to us as "the prostitute Rahab." And yet heaven knows her as a heroine, not a harlot. Maybe you've wondered about your reputation. If so, read on.

Four women are mentioned early in Matthew's genealogy: Tamar, Ruth, Bathsheba, and Rahab. They bring a different history into the family tree than the woman at the end of the line, all tied together by a scarlet cord. Tamar conceived a child by her father-in-law. Ruth came from Moab, a country excluded from the assembly of the Lord. Bathsheba committed adultery with David. Rahab, however, ranks as the most unlikely suspect for reference in this holy genealogy on two counts: first, like Ruth, she was not a Jew, and second, she earned her living by illegitimate means.

Spies were sent on two occasions to scout out the Promised Land. On the first, twelve leaders were chosen, one from each tribe, and sent from Kadesh Barnea to "see what the land is like and whether the people who live there are strong or weak, few or many" (Numbers 13:18). When they returned, only two gave positive reports. The other ten "ministered" discouragement: "The people are stronger and taller than we are; the cities are large, with walls up to the sky" (Deuteronomy 1:28). They could have been speaking about Jericho, the first walled city they would need to take. The result: their generation died in the desert, and the men who gave the bad report were struck down by God.

Forty years later, this time on the east side of the Jordan, only two were sent. They went secretly without their nation knowing, and they were told by General Joshua, one of the original spies but now carrying a significant upgrade, "Go, look over the land, especially Jericho" (Joshua 2:1), so, unlike the previous mission, a specific site was referenced. We know the names of the twelve earlier spies, but we do not know the names of these two. We do, however, know the name of a counter-spy, the main hero of this espionage ring, the woman who daringly received them into her hole-in-the-wall home. Rahab, along with her parents, siblings and families (an extended family of between twelve and thirty), resided (strategically for the spies) in the wall they were sent to survey, and now they were sitting inside of it.

Rahab was given a chance to turn them in when the king of Jericho (city states had their own government) was given a report of their presence. Instead, she hid them from local interrogators and gave powerful testimony to their destiny. She told them what one might expect to hear from the captain of an invading army. This testimony came, however, from a Canaanite, from a culture with despicable religious practices and from one who kept food on the table by selling her body to men who secretly knocked at her door.

Rahab knew intuitively that these men came with loftier business. When she said, "Come in," she was inviting the God of Israel into her future. In one word of reception she was renouncing her city, about to be destroyed by the most bizarre military strategy in the history of war, renouncing her vocation and her gods, and she was stepping into her destiny, which would give her honorable mention for all time in the Book of all books.

No other woman is singled out in the Hebrews Hall of Faith. We are told that "by faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those

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who were disobedient" (Hebrews 11:31). She didn't hide the spies because of the hope of a payback or some kind of reckless abandon because her life was already in shambles—she did it according to the Word of God "by faith." Someone had spoken deep conviction into her heart, so the arrival of two men for God-appointed assignment reassured her of truth.

Then two pages later in my Bible Rahab is mentioned again, this time by James. Abraham towers above all other biblical witnesses to the righteousness that comes by faith. So we are not surprised when James chooses him as his object lesson number one, writing, "Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?" (James 2:21). The name "Abraham" comes up seventy-four times in the New Testament, second only to Moses.

What does surprise us is that James continues, "In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction?" (v. 25). Just as the writer of Hebrews had hundreds of heroes to choose from and picked Rahab as an example of faith, so James had the Old Testament landscape before him and drew from the same story. They both observed something remarkable about this woman. Neither one hid her vocation; it seemed to go right with the name. Rahab's faith brought her and her household under the protection of the living God, and we will meet her in heaven. And she joined the royal line of famous ancestors that ended in the birth of Jesus Christ.

So what did Rahab say to those two unnamed spies, confident in their mission but perhaps fearful of being found out? They might have discussed their last thoughts before retiring on the top of a wall that would not be standing for long: "Sure hope that harlot lady doesn't squeal. She could make herself a real hero by turning us in. I wonder if she really thought we were here for her normal business. Maybe it's all part of a plot. But it did seem that the Lord led us here and that she was moved to take us in."

Then Rahab comes up to the roof and interrupts their thoughts with some of her own. We read, "Before the spies lay down for the night, she went up on the roof and said to them, "I know..." She didn't start out, "It seems to me," or "It wouldn't be hard to imagine," but, "I know." Faith had been born in her heart. "I know that the LORD..." Rahab uses the name of the God of Israel, the name given to Moses when he asked the One behind the burning bush His name, the God who was, who is, and who is to come..." *I know that the LORD has given this land to you and that a great fear of you has fallen on*

us, so that all who live in this country are melting in fear because of you" (Joshua 2:9). She was basically reversing what ten spies had reported when they returned from the same land. They had experienced all the miracles of the Exodus, and yet they surrendered to fear. She had only heard the stories float up the desert, and faith blossomed in her fertile heart. We are reminded of another Canaanite lady, one who would not be rebuffed when ignored and insulted, one who refused to take 'no' for an answer, one to whom Jesus said, "Woman, you have great faith!" (Matthew 15:28).

Woman, you have great faith.

Matthew 15:28

Rahab went on, "We have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt," summarizing her report by adding, "For the LORD your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below" (v. 11). She had been brought to a place of solid assurance in the God of Israel.

Rahab was a prostitute, not an evangelist and not an Israelite. She was living in the wrong place with the wrong people doing the wrong thing—but because of God she was in the right place at the right time, and God revealed Himself to her. Rahab, who had perhaps just quieted any fears the spies may have had, now shows her true heart, a kindness for her extended family. When we hear the phrase "Rahab the prostitute," we might think, "Too bad. She had a sexual addiction. Her life went sour. Poor decisions." Maybe, but not likely. Most prostitutes, in the twenty-first century at least, are never given the chance to try the real thing before they are forced by human trafficking to submit to a horrendous alternative. The average age to begin in the sex industry today is age twelve. Who knows what happened to Rahab or how she became involved in prostitution? One thing we can say confidently, she didn't say to her mom at age eight, "When I grow up, I want to be a prostitute." Harlots have hearts, and all of them are broken hearts. When healed, they too can become God's agents of mercy and healing. Let's not assume that because we read "Rahab the prostitute," we are speaking about a sinister, selfish woman, because if we do, we are wrong.

Rahab said to the spies, "Please swear to me by the LORD that you will show kindness to my family, because I have shown kindness to you" (v. 12). The spies gave her two conditions. The scarlet rope that she used to let the men out through a hole in the wall was to be hanging there when they returned with the army. And all her family was to remain inside, the same requirement when the angel of death visited Egypt and killed the firstborn. The red

blood on the door marked their destiny. This time it was a cord, but it served the same purpose.

Picture the army walking around this fortified city on the seventh day. The inhabitants of Jericho no doubt had stayed inside the walls of the city all week, only peering out through cracks in the wall at the strange warriors. Terrified and confused by the unlikely military plan, they watch the final day as the troops make seven laps around instead of one, followed by the sounding of trumpets and shouting of the army.

Then the real noise began. Walls that had stood for centuries began to implode from the inside out rather than from external pressure, more like an earthquake than a tornado. As they toppled in, only one portion of the wall remained. If you looked closely at one hole in the wall, the same hole that allowed two spies to escape only days before, a scarlet rope could be seen hanging out. The extended family inside must have heard the catastrophic sounds, perhaps huddled in fear against the cold interior wall. But strangely, marvelously, and according to the promise of the men who visited less than a month before, when the noise stopped, they were still breathing—and their part of the wall alone was left standing. Can you see it? What an astounding miracle! All things are possible to those who believe—and Rahab dared to believe.

Joshua told the two spies to bring the family out. The postscript: *“And she lives among the Israelites to this day”* (Joshua 6:25). She was not likely called “Rahab the prostitute.” She was Rahab the hero, Rahab the woman of faith. She had more to do with the success of the campaign than the two spies or than any soldier of Israel.

Did Rahab ever have a normal family? We are told in the genealogy of Jesus that a woman named Rahab (scholars say most likely the same woman) was the mother of Boaz, the wealthy landowner who married another “outsider,” a woman from Moab, from a country whose citizens were cursed from ever standing in the presence of the Lord. And yet Ruth not only stood in the company of the Lord and His people; she was the great-grandmother of the most prominent Israelite of them all—King David, making Rahab the great-great-grandmother. What a destiny for a God-forsaken Moabite woman. And what a destiny for a prostitute. The mercy of her son Boaz no doubt reflected the kindness in her own heart, and her name is placed in the line that issued forth in the Son of God.

Had you lived in Jericho at the time of the invasion by Israel, you probably would not have chosen Rahab for the “most likely to succeed” award. But God did. How

easily we can miss God’s appointments if we see the fruit but not the root. Behind the apparent hardness of a vocational whore was a remarkable openness to God that welcomed the people of God—and God Himself.

To Rahab’s great credit, she sent the city police on a wild goose chase, skillfully hid the spies at personal and family risk, made terms for the protection of her extended family, managed to let the spies out through her wall window and told them how to avoid being caught, and all this after being convinced by the rumors of Israel’s God that He was the true and living LORD.

One other woman is named in Matthew’s genealogy, more famous than Rahab. Her name was Mary, born fifteen centuries later, a Jew, not a naturalized citizen, a virgin, not a woman with multiple partners. She was visited not by spies but by a heavenly guest. She was asked to believe an incredible mystery. It took great faith, but she, too, surrendered to a higher plan in the well-known words, *“Let it be to me as you have said.”* Elizabeth a few weeks later praised her for trusting the messenger in a way that her own husband had not: *“Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!”* (Luke 1:45). This young woman made hard and good choices, and God used her in a singular way. All who want to walk the narrow road of righteousness can use her as a model for living by faith. And those who have crossed the line can find hope in knowing that God is in the salvage business and that the power of forgiveness also brings power to live in a way that makes heaven glad. You may be marred by your past—but you are not identified by it. Let the scarlet cord mark you as it marked our Canaanite friend—Saint Rahab.

