

The Pagan Prostitute and the Promised Land

Scripture: Joshua 2:1–11

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After more than 500 years, God's promise of a land for His people was about to be realized. A new generation would receive the promise rejected by their parents and longed for by multiple generations before them.

Israel's arrival at the Jordan River (Joshua 1:2) brought them to the brink of their inheritance. But this inheritance would not be handed to them on a platter—they would have to fight for it. Across the river stood the towering city of Jericho.

Jericho was part of the Amorite kingdom, a grotesquely violent, totally depraved, thoroughly pagan culture. Amorites were so hell-bent on the pursuit of everything evil that God Himself had condemned them and ordered the Israelites to wipe them from the face of the earth (Deuteronomy 20:17). In fact, the Amorite culture had been completely and maliciously corrupt for so long (going back at least to the time of Abraham), that their evil lifestyle was the very reason God granted Abraham and his heirs the right to their land in the first place (Deuteronomy 18:12; 1 Kings 21:26).

The Lord promised Abraham that his descendants would take possession of the land as soon as the wickedness of the Amorites was complete (Genesis 15:16). That time had now come. The evil nation reached God's maximum tolerance level and Israel was God's instrument by which He would administer judgment.

Israel's invasion may have been imminent, but their first foray into the Promised Land was a covert operation. Joshua sent spies on a reconnaissance mission with the central aim of assessing Jericho's heavily fortified defenses. As the entry point into Canaan and the gateway to its interior, Jericho had to be Israel's initial target.

The spies needed to discretely go about their business, probably making measurements of the wall and recording details about the battlements and the landscape. They also needed accommodation in the city close enough to the wall for detailed observation and a rapid getaway. Furthermore, they needed a host who was not inclined to ask nosy questions concerning their origins nor alert the Jericho authorities to some strangers in their midst.

God providentially solved that complex equation with the most unlikely solution—a prostitute named Rahab who lived *in* the wall surrounding the city. "So they went and came into the house of a harlot whose name was Rahab, and lodged there" (Joshua 2:1). Thus Rahab is the very first person Scripture introduces us to in the Promised Land.

Here was an ideal situation for the spies. Both Rahab and her business were probably well-known in

Jericho. She would have opened her door to them without any questions about who they were. In her business, strict confidentiality was essential. She probably welcomed them and invited them inside quickly, just as she did all her clients.

The Israelite spies did not seek Rahab out to take advantage of her for immoral purposes. Perhaps that very thing is what first won them her trust. In sharp contrast to all the other men she encountered, they were not there to use her or abuse her. Presumably, they treated her with dignity and respect while they made their careful reconnaissance. No doubt they explained who they were, which meant they would have almost certainly told her something about their God.

Somehow, it appears, the presence of the spies was known almost as soon as they entered Rahab's house. Everyone in Jericho already knew that the entire Israelite nation was camped across the river, within walking distance. All of Jericho had heard about Israel's miraculous escape from Pharaoh across the Red Sea and the drowning of the entire Egyptian army (Joshua 2:10). The story of Israel's subsequent wandering in the wilderness was also well-known throughout the region. Rahab herself tells the spies that all the inhabitants of the land were fainthearted because of what they had heard about Israel and God's dealings with them. In Rahab's words, "When we heard it, our hearts melted and no courage remained in any man any longer because of you" (Joshua 2:11).

City officials had probably given strict orders to report anything suspicious to the king. The "king" functioned like a city mayor, but he had military control. Therefore, he was the one to be notified if intruders were spotted.

Perhaps someone from whom the spies had asked directions turned them in. Or maybe sentries near Rahab's house spotted them and recognized them as Israelites from their clothing. In any case, their presence was quickly reported to Jericho's king. The information he received included exact details about where the spies had gone, so the king sent messengers to search Rahab's house.

It is here where Rahab utterly surprises the reader. Remember, she made her living by selling herself for evil purposes. There was probably a handsome reward to be gained if she had turned in the spies. But she didn't. She *hid* them. She misdirected the officials and saved the lives of the two spies, even though this put her at considerable risk. Obviously, the king's representatives *knew* the spies had been in her home.

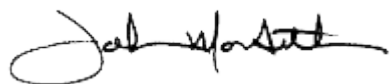
They would probably be back to ask questions if they couldn't find evidence that the men had left the city. She put her own life in jeopardy by protecting these strangers. It was a demonstration of her faith in the God of Israel over the Amorite authorities. Her sudden expression of faith was not only unexpected, it ran counter to every instinct that would normally motivate a woman like Rahab.

It was an unlikely confluence of forces for good. On the one hand, a lone pagan woman who profited from the debauchery of her culture. On the other hand, an entire nation of itinerant, lifelong refugees who had lived for the past forty years under the frown of God because of their parents' disobedience.

Jericho's defeat would be the first dramatic conquest in one of history's greatest military campaigns. And Rahab's newfound allegiance to the God of Israel was the first domino to fall.

Interestingly, Rahab's actions in protecting the spies involved the telling of a lie. That raises some

interesting theological questions that I will address in my next post.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John H. Stott". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and a long, sweeping underline.

(Adapted from [*Twelve Extraordinary Women*](#))

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