

The Scarlet Thread

Scripture: Joshua 2:9–24

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The ancient city of Jericho was a hotbed of wicked Amorite culture. It was heavily fortified with imposing walls. It was also Israel's entry point into the Promised Land.

Conquest of Jericho was the necessary first phase of Israel's military campaign to claim the land God had promised to Abraham centuries earlier (Genesis 15:7–16). Joshua, Israel's general, sent spies to carry out a dangerous reconnaissance mission to study Jericho's defenses.

Fear Motivates Faith

That the spies would find refuge and protection within the city walls in the home of a prostitute named Rahab was an unexpected twist in God's providential design. She was even willing to hide the spies from city officials seeking their arrest. Rahab gave the spies an explicit testimony of the faith that motivated her:

I know that the Lord has given you the land, and that the terror of you has fallen on us, and that all the inhabitants of the land have melted away before you. For we have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you utterly destroyed. When we heard it, our hearts melted and no courage remained in any man any longer because of you; for the Lord your God, He is God in heaven above and on earth beneath. (Joshua 2:9–11)

Rahab's faith was accompanied by *fear* and there is nothing wrong with that—"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Psalm 111:10). In Rahab's case, fear motivated her faith. She had heard powerful evidence of the Lord's supremacy over Egypt. She understood that it was the Lord's might—not sheer military skill—that triumphed over fearsome Amorite kings across the river.

Hers was a healthy kind of fear. It convinced her that Israel's God was indeed the one true God. The psalmist wrote, "Men shall speak of the power of Your awesome acts, and I will tell of Your greatness" (Psalm 145:6). That is precisely the kind of testimony that brought Rahab to faith.

Faith Saves

The spies swore an oath to deal kindly with her when they conquered her city (Joshua 2:14). But they gave her one condition. She was to hang a scarlet thread from the window where she let them down. This would mark her house in the sight of all Israel, and anyone inside the house would be spared when the city was overthrown (Joshua 2:17–21).

The Hebrew word for “thread” in verse 18 is different from the word for “rope” in verse 15. This thread would have been a brightly colored band of woven material, used for decorative purposes. The color would make it easily visible from beneath the wall. Both its appearance and its function were reminiscent of the crimson sign of the blood sprinkled on the doorposts at the first Passover.

Many commentators believe the scarlet color is also a deliberate typological symbol for the blood of the true Passover Lamb. Perhaps it is. It certainly stands as a fitting symbol of Christ’s blood, which turns away the wrath of God.

From Rahab’s perspective, however, the significance of the scarlet thread was nothing arcane or mystical. It was a simple, expedient emblem suited to mark her window discreetly so that her house would be easily distinguishable from the rest of the houses in Jericho.

When the spies returned to Israel’s camp, their report was just what Joshua hoped to hear: “Surely the Lord has given all the land into our hands; moreover, all the inhabitants of the land have melted away because of us” (Joshua 2:24).

Israel’s miraculous victory over Jericho is a familiar account to most people. God purposefully intervened in a way that made clear to everyone in Canaan that He was fighting for Israel. He demolished the massive walls of Jericho without any military means whatsoever (Joshua 6:20). That is, all of the walls except for one part—Rahab and her house were spared. The “young men who had been spies went in and brought out Rahab, her father, her mother, her brothers, and all she had” (Joshua 6:23 NKJV).

A Trophy of Grace

Rahab is a beautiful example of the transforming power of faith. Although she had little knowledge of the truth, her heart was drawn to the God of Israel. She risked her life, abandoned her pagan culture, and brought her closest family members with her into the community of God’s people. Joshua would write, many years after the event, that “she has lived in the midst of Israel to this day” (Joshua 6:25).

After the account of Jericho’s destruction in Joshua 6, Rahab’s name is never again mentioned in the Old Testament.

When we *do* meet Rahab again in Scripture, it is in the New Testament. Her name is mentioned there three times. James 2:25 holds her up as an example of great faith demonstrated by action. She also holds a place of honor among those in Scripture’s great hall of faith (Hebrews 11:31). But the most amazing occurrence of her name in the New Testament is the very first time it appears, on the very first page, in the very first paragraph of the very first gospel.

Matthew began his account of Christ’s life with a lengthy genealogy tracing the entire lineage of Jesus from the time of Abraham. Matthew’s goal, of course, was to prove by Jesus’ pedigree that He qualified to be the promised Seed of Abraham, and that He is also rightful heir to the Davidic throne.

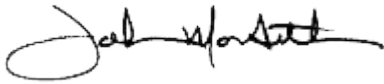
There, in the list of Jesus’ ancestors, we unexpectedly find Rahab’s name: “Salmon was the father of Boaz by Rahab, Boaz was the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse. Jesse was the father of David the king” (Matthew 1:5–6). It is there that Rahab takes her place in the scarlet thread

of redemption that runs throughout the Old Testament and leads to the Messiah.

It is highly unusual for women to be named in Hebrew genealogies at all. And Rahab's inclusion underscores how scandal colored so much of the messianic line.

The scandal motif in Christ's lineage was no accident. In His incarnation, Christ willingly "emptied Himself by assuming the form of a slave" (Philippians 2:7 HCSB). He *became* an outcast and a public disgrace, being made a curse on our behalf (Galatians 3:13). He remains even now "a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense" (1 Peter 2:8). Furthermore, the gospel message is a public scandal—mere foolishness and shame as far as those who perish are concerned. But to those who are saved, it is the power of God (1 Corinthians 1:18).

God placed the prostitute Rahab in His plan to bring His Son into the world. Rahab is extraordinary because she received extraordinary grace. There's no need to reinvent her past to try to make her seem less of a sinner. The disturbing fact about what she once *was* simply magnifies the glory of divine grace, which is what made her the extraordinary woman she *became*. That, after all, is the whole lesson of her life.



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

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