

“More Than Conquerers— Tales of Transformation”

Joshua 2:1–14; Acts 7:59–8:1; Acts 9:1–19

Who doesn't love a good story of transformation? This week we turn to the apostle Paul and, just to show the expansiveness of God's grace, the story of Rahab, way back in the book of Joshua. But first, Paul, or should I say Saul?

What's in a name?

Paul's transformation story can be confusing to those new to it simply because Luke refers to him by two names: Saul and Paul. In Acts, the apostle is referred to as Saul before his encounter with Christ and by Paul after his conversion. Saul, then Paul. Same fellow – just the Hebrew version of his name and the Greek version. Why the change by Luke? Because using “Paul” after the man comes to faith in Christ is a way of signifying that he will be the apostle to the Gentiles – to the Greco-Roman world.

Saul/Paul's conversion story is dramatic and not only because of his meeting Jesus on the road to Damascus. It is dramatic and powerful because Saul was a zealous and violent persecutor of Jesus' followers in the first years after Jesus' return to the Father. Luke tells us that Saul held the cloaks of those who stoned Stephen to death and that Saul was like a beast, tearing through the community of believers. Indeed, Saul was on the way to Damascus to round up believers when he was met by the risen Christ, who asked him, “Why do you persecute me?” N. T. Wright reflects on Paul's experience while making his way to Damascus:

He [Saul] was on his way to act for the glory of God, the glory which he believed was being besmirched by these crazy followers of Jesus. He needed to keep that glory firmly before his eyes, to make sure his zeal was properly fired up and rightly directed. To that end, shall we suppose, he had been in prayer and meditation, trying to envisage the divine throne-chariot [of Ezekiel]. He had gazed with the eyes of his heart on the angels. He had stared at the wheels as they flashed to and fro. He had longed to be able to raise his eyes from the angels and the wheels to the chariot itself, and then (would it be possible? he must have wondered; would he be allowed?) to the figure which sat on the chariot, flaming with fire, surrounded by brilliant light. Imagine his excitement as, in the depth of devout meditation, he saw with the eyes of his heart, so real that it seemed as though he was seeing it with his ordinary physical eyes, and then so real that he realized he was seeing it with his physical eyes, the form, the fire, the blazing light, and—the face!

And the face was the face of Jesus of Nazareth.

Suddenly Saul's world turned upside down and inside out. Terror, ruin, shame, awe, horror, glory and terror again swept over him. Years later he would write of seeing ‘the glory of God in the face of Jesus the Messiah’ (2 Corinthians 4:6), and though, to show that this was something he shared with all Christians, he described it as God shining ‘in our hearts’, elsewhere he makes it clear that his own ‘seeing’ was unique, a seeing, like Stephen in his death, which involved the coming together of heaven and earth, earthly eyes seeing heavenly reality. ‘Am I not an apostle?’ he wrote to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 9:1). ‘Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?’¹

Jesus asked Saul why he was harassing him and telling him to go into the city where he would be told what to do. For the next three days, Saul was unable to see and refused food and drink. But then, a disciple named Ananias came to see him, sent there by Jesus.

Even though Ananias had been sent to Saul by Jesus, the believers were understandably fearful of Saul. Not long before he had been tearing through the Christian communities like a wild beast. In Acts 9, Luke tells us only a bit about Saul, now Paul, making a new life among the Christians. What must it have been like for him as he tried to learn and to live as a believer, as one of those he had pursued? How lonely it must have been for this Pharisee, particularly in those first



¹ Wright, N.T. *Acts for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-12* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2008), 140.

years after his encounter with Jesus. In all, it was about fifteen years from his conversion on the road to Damascus to his first missionary journey. Those years are largely opaque to us, but there must have been some lonely times for Paul.

In his letters, Paul would frankly admit his own guilt in waging war on the Christians. He understood better than anyone what the power of the Holy Spirit could accomplish in a person, even one like himself. When God called him, Paul had to turn his back on his old life. And when he began traveling across the Mediterranean proclaiming the *evangelion*, this good news about Jesus, he faced terrible abuse at the hands of his fellow Jews. He was beaten, stoned, whipped, and left for dead. Not once or twice, but numerous times. (In 2 Corinthians 11:22-27 Paul lists some of his treatment). The commitment asked of Paul and the grace poured out upon him was anything but cheap. In his commentary on Acts, John Stott writes:

The cause of Saul's conversion was grace, the sovereign grace of God. But sovereign grace is gradual grace and gentle grace. Gradually, and without violence, Jesus pricked Saul's mind and conscience with his goads [a prod used to move farm animals]. Then he revealed himself to him by the light and the voice, not in order to overwhelm him, but in such a way as to enable him to make a free response. Divine grace does not trample on human personality. Rather the reverse, for it enables human beings to be truly human. It is sin that imprisons; it is grace that liberates. The grace of God so frees us from the bondage of our pride, prejudice and self-centeredness, as to enable us to repent and believe. One can but magnify the grace of God that he should have had mercy on such a rabid bigot as Saul of Tarsus, and indeed on such proud, rebellious and wayward creatures as ourselves.

The transforming power of God

More than a millennium before Paul, God worked with great power in the life of a Canaanite woman in Jericho named Rahab. Here is her remarkable story.

It is amazing to see what one act of courage can do for a woman's reputation. When we meet Rahab, she is a common prostitute living in the city walls of Jericho. Yet, in Jewish legend, she came to be remembered as one of the four most beautiful women in all of human history. The story was told that she went on to become a righteous convert to the worship of the Lord God, that she eventually married Joshua, and even became the ancestor of eight great prophets, including Jeremiah. Matthew lists her in his genealogy of Jesus. In his New Testament letter, James lifts her up as an example of faith in action. And the writer of Hebrews includes her in the long lists of God's faithful. What was it about Rahab and her story that gave birth to such prominence and reverence among God's people? The basics of her story are pretty simple.

One day, two men arrive at her door. Whether they come as customers or not, we're not told. Rahab realizes that they are spies for the Israelites who are preparing to attack Jericho in their conquest of Canaan. She, like the rest of the city, has heard of these people and their god. She quickly decides to help the two men, in defiance of her own king. She hides the two men and then helps them escape from the city, but only after extracting a promise that she and her family will be spared by the Israelites when they take the city. The men tell her to hang a red cord in her window as a signal of the household to be spared. When Joshua enters the city, he keeps the promise made to Rahab (6:22-25).

The story is simple on the surface, but two important questions swirl around this story. First, why does Rahab take the risk of helping Joshua's spies? Second, why was this story preserved and then told in such detail in the book of Joshua?

A confession of faith

Why does she help? Rahab tells the spies that she has heard what the Lord has done for the Israelites. She knows that their god has given them the land. She knows about the flight from Egypt across the dried-up Red Sea. In short, she has heard about the mighty saving acts of YHWH (GOD) and decides to put her trust in this god rather in her own. She confesses her faith to the two men, "The Lord your God is indeed God in heaven above and on earth below." What does she really know about this Israelite god? Almost nothing, but it is enough for her to put her trust in the Lord. Rahab, this common prostitute, utters the words that God hopes all humanity would utter. She places her faith in a God she has hardly known. Too many people in our world think they must have all their questions fully answered before they can trust. They fail to grasp that their whole lives are built on inadequate information. There isn't much in life we can prove outside Euclidean geometry.

Acting on it

It is one thing to profess faith in God, the “God in heaven above and on earth below,” as Rahab puts it. It is another to act on it and yet another to risk one’s life, and that is surely what Rahab does in defying her king. In a word, she is transformed.

Perhaps this is why the story was preserved in such detail, why Rahab became the stuff of legend. We see in her a willingness to act on her faith, to risk it all, to get out of the boat—like Peter walking on the water toward Jesus. What she knows of the Lord God is only what she has heard. She knows nothing of the law given to Moses, nothing of the tabernacle and God’s presence. Yet, she was given faith sufficient to take extraordinary risks, even to betray her own people.

It’s no wonder that James commends her to us as someone whose actions have shown her faith. Rahab shows us what is possible from the seemingly simple act of trusting.

In the stories of Paul and Rahab we see God working in them and with them to transform them, so they might work for God’s purposes. And here’s the real treat, God does the same for you and me.