

## “Rahab and the Spies”

*Joshua 2:1–14; Matthew 1:5-6a; Hebrews 11:31*

### ***Courage and strength can be legendary***

In this series, we’ve been talking about courage. The courage Joseph displayed in his forgiveness of his brothers and the bravery shown by Joshua and Caleb in standing up to the crowd, urging them to trust God. Today, we turn to the story of a very brave woman who lived in Jericho



### ***The stuff of legend***

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

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<sup>1</sup> YHWH is the English translation of God’s name as revealed to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3). The Israelites came to embrace the name as so holy that they would not say it. Thus, when they came upon the name, YHWH, in their Scriptures, they would say, *Adonai*, the Hebrew word for “Lord.” English translations respect that tradition by rendering YHWH as LORD (always in the small caps to differentiate it from the word “Lord.”).

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. 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 God.

### ***Rahab's Faith & Works***

James, the NT writer, was the halfbrother of Jesus. James's primary purpose in writing is to persuade believers that their works (or deeds) are completely bound up with their faith. In his commentary on the book of Joshua in *The New Interpreters' Bible*, Robert Coote reflects on the juxtaposition of Rahab's faith and her works (or deeds) by New Testament writers:

“Rahab is mentioned twice in the New Testament. In Hebrews 11:31, Rahab becomes one in the train of forebears who survived or prospered by faith, and in James she is a model of those who are ‘justified by works and not by faith alone’ (James 2:24). The partial contrast between these two texts (Hebrews expounds on faith, while James advocates works) points up inevitable partiality of interpretation, even for New Testament writers dealing with the Scriptures.

Nevertheless, these texts also complement each other. Brief though they are, both attribute to Rahab the same faith marked by the same work: safeguarding the Israelite spies. Thus in concert they articulate the familiar biblical theme that ‘faith without works is dead’ (James 2:17, 26). From this biblical perspective, the figure of Rahab reminds the interpreter that faith may be expounded in terms not only of doctrine, but also of lives lived. Moreover, the lives of the faithful include not only deeds performed, but also perseverance and patience maintained in the face of adversity. To be faithful is both to do and to endure, and the vector of a person's faith manifests itself through both.”