



## **BACK TO THE BIBLE SERIES: A Hope-Filled Christmas**

**By Pastor Bryan Clark**

**Message Title: The Prostitute: Rahab Pt. 1**

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Nobody gets up in the morning and says, “I think I’ll ruin my life today”. Yet, every day somebody does. One bad decision leads to another bad decision, that leads to another bad decision, and finally you wake up one morning, and you wonder, “How did this happen?” One day you had dreams, but life has killed the dreams, and you get up in the morning, and you wonder, “How did it become this?” I wonder if that’s how Rahab - Rahab the Prostitute - felt. Whenever I read the story of Rahab, I’m always wondering, who was it that used her, and abused her, and discarded her on the trash heap of life, where her only means of survival was to be the town prostitute? That’s the story we want to talk about. If you have a Bible, turn with us to Joshua Chapter Two.

Joshua is a great book—it’s a book of swords flashing and courage and taking the land. It’s very dramatic; it’s very exciting. In Joshua, Chapter 1, it opens with these words:

“Moses my servant is dead...”

If you’ve been reading the Bible from Genesis, you kind of pick up on this grand story of Moses, so those words are quite shocking. Now it’s a whole new chapter. The torch has been handed to Joshua. The Hebrew people have wandered for forty years in the wilderness, because they’re unwilling to trust God, but now that generation has died and this is a new day. Joshua is the leader and it’s a chance for the next generation to go in and take the Land of Promise. It’s all very exciting. The repetition in Chapter One to Joshua is, “Be strong and courageous; be strong and courageous!” God says it to him several times. We pick up then, the story, in Chapter 2:

Then Joshua the son of Nun sent two men as spies secretly from Shittim, saying, “Go, view the land, especially Jericho.” So, they went and came into the house of a harlot whose name was Rahab and lodged there. (\*NASB, Joshua 2:1)

Joshua sends two spies secretly. Now there’s a lot of discussion around why secretly? If you remember the story, Joshua was one of twelve spies that went into the land and spied it out forty years earlier, came back and two of the spies said, “We can take this land.” Ten of the spies said, “They’re too big; we can’t do it,” and they convinced the majority. The majority then chose not to follow God, and they wandered in the wilderness for forty years, and there they died. So maybe Joshua was thinking, “I don’t want that to happen again.” Nobody really knows, but he secretly sends spies to Jericho, in order to check it out. They would have had to cross the Jordan River at flood stage, which in itself was quite dangerous. They probably came down from the North and, if they followed the typical pattern, they

would have just simply walked into Jericho in the daylight. Jericho was a city that was about eight or nine acres. They have excavated the city today, and around the city were two walls, about fifteen feet apart. So, it's not a large area, but very fortified, and typical of a fortified city in that day. During the day, the gates would open, and people would come and go. It would have been packed with people, so nobody would have noticed a couple of visitors wandering through the gates, and just mixing with the crowd. That's probably what they did. Along the way they bumped into a prostitute—the town prostitute—by the name of Rahab.

Now it's interesting, when you read different commentators, they're constantly trying to soften the fact that she was a harlot—that she was a prostitute. In the Hebrew language the word harlot also could mean innkeeper, so they'll say, "Well she wasn't really a prostitute; she was an innkeeper." But that gets you nowhere, because everybody knows, in the ancient world, to be a harlot was to be an innkeeper, to be an innkeeper was to be a harlot. They were virtually synonymous; that's just the way it worked in these ancient cities. Also, when you go to the New Testament, the New Testament refers to her several times, always using the Greek word that can only mean prostitute. So, there's no question what she did to survive.

They meet her and they go back to her house. Now the writer is very careful to use terms that have no sexual overtones. There isn't even the slightest hint that that's what these spies were interested in. They simply were looking for a safe place to stay.

Verse 2:

It was told the king of Jericho, saying, "Behold, men from the sons of Israel have come here tonight to search out the land." And the king of Jericho sent word to Rahab saying, "Bring out the men who have come to you, who have entered your house, for they have come to search out all the land." But the woman had taken the two men and hidden them, and she said, "Yes, the men came to me, but I did not know where they were from. It came about, when it was time to shut the gate at dark, that the men went out; I do not know where the men went. Pursue them quickly, for you will overtake them." But she had brought them up to the roof and hidden them in the stalks of flax which she had laid in order on the roof. So, the men pursued them on the road to the Jordan to the fords; and as soon as those who were pursuing had gone out, they shut the gate. (Vs. 2-7)

Now in these ancient cities like Jericho, they were kind of a city-state where they were a law unto themselves. They were a government unto themselves, and most of these types of cities would have their own sitting king, which is the case in Jericho. The king figures out: somebody comes and says, "Hey, there's a couple of spies here from the Hebrew people and they've gone down to pay a little visit to Rahab." So, the word goes to the king, and the king sends his people to Rahab, and he wants the men. Rahab, then, just simply lies through her teeth, and tells the king's men, "They were here, but they've gone, and I don't know who they were, and I don't know where they went." And she sends them out to follow.

Meanwhile, the narrator tells us that actually that was just simply a lie. She had hidden them up on the roof in the midst of the flax, the stalks of flax. Basically, what that's talking about is: they would have taken these stalks and they would have soaked them in water for two or three weeks. Then they put them out into the sun and when they were dry, they basically were made into a linen cloth and sold. So, there would have been stacks of these on the roof and obviously, the two men hide in there.

Now interestingly enough, there's a lot of discussion around whether or not it was acceptable for Rahab to lie. In Christian circles, there are these debates that go on, referred to as situational ethics. Basically, are there times when it's okay to not tell the truth? And there are camps that say, "Yes," and there are camps that say, "No," and Rahab is one of the classic examples they argue about. I think when you're really looking at the text, that's not the point. She's not condemned for lying; it's not approved that she lied. It's just simply not the point of the text. The point of the text is: at that point, she had to make a decision. She either had to side with the Hebrew spies or she had to side with her king and her people. There was no middle ground. I think the role of that part of the text is to tell us, at that moment her life was at great risk. The moment those words came out of her mouth, her life was in jeopardy. If the king would have found the spies on the roof, both she and the spies would certainly have been put to death. So, there's a sense in the text, in which we must understand, that she literally risked everything to take a side and to choose to side with the Hebrew spies, and we're left wondering, "Why would she do that?"

The other part of that paragraph that, again, intensifies what's going on here, is twice there's the repetition of the words ...shut the gate. In the ancient world, in a city like Jericho, during the day you could come and go - and these spies at any point could have left the city - but once the gate is shut in the evening, not only can people not get in, people cannot get out. So, there's a repetition of the phrase that the gate was shut, as a way of saying, these spies were now completely in the hands of Rahab, the harlot. They had no hope of survival other than her, so it's building this tension of both the risk that she is taking, and the risk now that belongs to them.

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Verse 8:

Now before they lay down, she came up to them on the roof, and she said to the men, "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. Now therefore, please swear to me by the LORD, since I have dealt kindly with you, that you also will deal kindly with my father's household, and give me a pledge of truth, and spare my father and my mother and my brothers and my sisters with all who belong to them, and deliver our lives from death." So, the men said to her, "Our life for yours if you do not tell this

business of ours; and it shall come about when the LORD gives us the land that we will deal kindly and faithfully with you.” (Vs. 8-14)

Now we find out, out of the mouth of Rahab herself, why she made the decision she made. Understanding she had been raised in a pagan, idolatrous culture, she somewhere along the way had heard the stories of the Hebrew God. The two specifically that she mentions are: God’s delivering them through the parting of the Red Sea, and this great victory over the two Amorite kings—and you can read about that in Numbers, Chapter 14. What’s interesting is, what she says the effect of those stories was on her people. Going back forty years ago, ten of the spies said, “It’s a land flowing with milk and honey, but we can’t take it. They’re too big and they’re too strong.” Forty years later Rahab is saying, “Actually that’s not the case at all.” They had heard the stories of the Hebrew God; their hearts had melted. The courage had gone out of them; they had lost their will to fight. You get the clear sense that God had already prepared the ground. They could have easily taken the land, but they chose not to trust Him. Now we’re forty years later and Rahab is saying, “Hey, my people are scared to death of your God because of what we have heard.” Now, what she has concluded then, is that, “Your God is the God—the God of the Hebrew people is God.” Now for a woman who has grown up in a pagan, idolatrous culture, this is a remarkable witness of faith—that based on what she has heard, she has concluded the God of the Hebrews is God—to the extent that she was willing to risk her life for what she believed to be true. She chose to take the side of the two Hebrew spies, at the risk of her own life, because she believed with all her heart that their God is the God.

Now one of the remarkable features of this particular part of the text is the length of the statement that Rahab, the harlot, makes. When you read through the Old Testament, you find out that the dialogue coming out of a woman’s mouth is very rare and very short. This is one of the longest uninterrupted statements out of a woman’s mouth in the entire Old Testament. There’s no question at this point that Joshua, Chapter 2 is about this remarkable woman of faith, an idolatrous prostitute who figured out, “The God of the Hebrews is God, and I’m willing to stake my life on it.” That’s the feature of the text; that’s the point that’s being made. Now what she’s asking for in terms of an agreement, is what would be referred to as a hesed agreement. The word kindly there shows up several times and it’s a rather technical term. It shows up over two hundred fifty times in the Old Testament. And basically, the idea is this: “If I act kindly toward you, I’m asking for you to reciprocate and deal kindly with me.” In other words, the question is, “Will you enter into a hesed agreement?” So, when she says that, that’s what she’s asking for. So, when the two spies—and it’s worth noting, they don’t utter a word until this point in the text—these are the first words out of their mouth, and what they say is, “I agree. We’re entering into this hesed agreement. You were kind to us; we will be kind to you.” And that’s the promise that is made.

Verse 15:

Then she let them down by a rope through the window, for her house was on the city wall, so that she was living on the wall. She said to them, “Go to the hill country so that

the pursuers will not happen upon you, and hide yourselves there for three days, until the pursuers return. Then afterward you may go on your way.” The men said to her, “We shall be free from this oath to you which you have made us swear, unless, when we come into the land, you tie this cord of scarlet thread in the window through which you let us down, and gather to yourself into the house your father and your mother and your brothers and all your father’s household. It shall come about that anyone who goes out of the doors of your house into the street, his blood shall be on his own head, and we shall be free; but anyone who is with you in the house, his blood shall be on our head if a hand is laid on him. But if you tell this business of ours, then we shall be free from the oath which you have made us swear.” She said, “According to your words, so be it.” So, she sent them away, and they departed; and she tied the scarlet cord in the window. (Vs. 15-21)

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Cara: Bryan, we're calling this series A Hope-filled Christmas, not being confused with Hallmark specials by any stretch. This is the second prostitute we find in the line of Jesus.

Bryan: Yeah, it's pretty scandalous stuff. But then again, the Bible's full of stories that are real and they're raw and they're painful. And that's part of what we love about the Scriptures.

Cara: I have to say, I don't think this was anything they were drawn to. I mean, they're just surviving, right?

Bryan: They’re surviving. [Yeah.] Yup.

Arnie: So, Bryan, I think it's safe to say that Rahab didn't know a lot about theology, but she knew enough to have a simple faith, and God honors that, doesn't He?

Bryan: Absolutely. I mean, she responded to what she knew. She believed with all of her heart that the God of the Hebrews was the one true God. And I don't know that she knew much more than that, but she acted on that belief.

Cara: What I liked about it is, I always – it just reminded me- nonbelievers are listening all the time. Even when they pretend, they're not, right when they're pushing you away, they're still listening. Because the fact that Rahab believed, based on something that she had heard along the way, I thought was pretty interesting. She was willing to risk her life for what she believed was true.

Bryan: Yeah. I think that's a really important point. The stories of God's faithfulness, and His power, and these miracles we read in the Old Testament, they traveled throughout the region. And the pagan unbelieving nations heard of the God of the Hebrews. It does make me think about, you know, 40 years previous, the spies went into the land and convinced the people that the giants were too big. And then you read this story of 40 years later and realize that people were terrified. Rahab says their hearts melted when they heard the stories of Israel's God. They could have easily gone into the Land of Promise and God would have given them the victory.

Cara: It's kind of like Noah with the ark. It's like the door was open. They could've gone in.

Bryan: Absolutely. [Yeah.]

Arnie: Bryan, it strikes me then, instead of judging Rahab because she's a prostitute, the spies actually decided to rely on her. What do you think it was that caused them to trust her anyway?

Bryan: Yeah, so great question. I think part of it is prostitution was way more common than we experience it today, in a situation like this. But I would say it was a judgment call. You know, they believed that she believed, and everybody's life was at risk. There were serious ramifications to the decision to trust her.

Cara: So, we could learn something then from the spies' attitude towards Rahab.

Bryan: Yeah, God can use anyone to accomplish his purposes. It's a reminder. All people have value. Nobody's beyond God's reach, and we should never underestimate what God might want to do through anybody.

Arnie: Bryan, what is the hesed agreement? Is it something that exists today?

Bryan: Yeah, so hesed is a Hebrew word that means basically lovingkindness. So, a hesed agreement was a covenant, kind of like a contract, but more. So, a contract, we think of a contract and a couple of people sign it. A hesed agreement was driven by love. So, it's much more like a marriage covenant. It's about people that genuinely love each other, entering into an agreement for the good of the people involved.

Cara: I thought the history leading up to the story was really interesting. Moses sent 12 spies into Canaan, and the only two who agreed with God, that the Israelites could take the land, were Joshua and Caleb. And then years later, Joshua and Caleb are the only two left with the blessing to lead their people forward.

Bryan: Yeah, so the story's been a long time coming, but the story of Jericho and what happens there, is just a reminder that God had the battle won. God had it covered, if the previous generation would have just trusted him.

Arnie: Bryan, Christmas is the season of hope. What kind of hope does this story give us?

Bryan: I think this story is full of hope. God reaches anyone. God uses anyone. There's no battle too hard for God. We just have to trust him.