

The Faith of Rahab

Intro: She is one of the intriguing characters of the OT. She was a woman with “past”; but a woman who through faith secured for herself a much brighter future. We’ve read about her this week, a Canaanite woman named Rahab.

Rahab was a woman who never outlived her past. Three times in the OT narrative and twice in the NT she is designated “Rahab the harlot”. Some commentators have sought to clean up her reputation by suggesting that she was an “inn keeper” (including Josephus and some of the rabbis). However the NT word for Rahab is “porne”, the common NT word for a sexually immoral woman. Yet in spite of her sordid background, she serves as a great example of faith. Notice with me three things about this woman:

How Rahab helped the spies

Rahab plays an important role in the story of the conquest of Canaan. Joshua had sent out two spies to scout out the city of Jericho and its environs. Being unfamiliar to the Israelites, it was helpful to have some reconnaissance before attempting the invasion of a fortified city like Jericho.

The spies of course would have apparently been quite recognizable by the people of Jericho. The ancient city was not terribly large and two strangers would have stuck out like sore thumbs. So they went into the city under the cover of darkness and made their way to a place where they would have been least likely to be detected. But even so, word got out that there were two Hebrews in town and that they had gone to the house of Rahab.

The king sent messengers to her, commanding that she reveal the whereabouts of the men. Rahab courageously defied the king’s order, having already hidden the men beneath the piles of flax drying on her roof. (Undesigned coincidence: flax was harvested in the spring of the year before the wheat harvest.)

In addition, in order to avoid further search of her property she suggested that the men had already left the city suggesting that they had taken the road that passes through the city gate.

Later in the evening she approach the men on the roof, this time asking that the spies save her and her family when the Israelites invaded the city. The spies agreed and gave her the conditions of her protection and then with her assistance and advice for safety were lowered outside the wall.

Helping the spies was a good thing, but in so doing Rahab did something even greater!

How Rahab demonstrated faith

It is interesting that Rahab is mentioned twice in the NT as a woman of faith. And it is also interesting to notice the contexts in which she is used to illustrate two different aspects of faith. Consider first the words of the Hebrew writer:

By faith Rahab the harlot did not perish along with those who were disobedient, after she had welcomed the spies in peace. (Hebrews 11:31)

The Hebrew writer uses Rahab to illustrate a particular concept of faith he has been developing in the chapter.

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. (Hebrews 11:1)

Rahab had evidence to support her belief that God was a great and awesome God. She gives a profound expression of faith in Josh. 2:8-11:

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. And 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 2:8-11)

But in this faith, Rahab demonstrated the aspect of faith the Hebrew writer is illustrating, that aspect that embraces what is “not seen” but is “hoped for”. What Rahab could not “see” and what she “hoped for” was her deliverance when the city of Jericho fell. And she received it because of her faith.

Rahab’s faith is also mentioned by the apostle James:

And in the same way was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works, when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? (Jas. 2:25)

James was stressing a different aspect of faith from the Hebrew writer. He was stressing the importance of action as the manifestation of saving faith.

For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead. (James 2:26)

Rahab “believed” that God was going to destroy Jericho (cf. Josh. 2:8); yet she did more than just “believe”. She let her faith “work”. Some people may question Rahab’s actions, but no one can question her faith. She not only protected the spies from capture, she guided them so as to avoid capture, and finally in faith requested the lives of herself and her family. It is interesting of course that James out of all the OT characters available to him uses both Abraham and Rahab to illustrate this aspect of faith. Why did James choose these two characters?

One was a Hebrew; one was Gentile.

One was a man; one was a woman.

One was a man of lifelong faith; the other was a person of recent faith.

One might have been remembered as the epitome of righteous character in his age. The other might have been remembered as anything but righteous.

Yet both received the blessing of God! Both demonstrated the same kind of faith—the kind that “works”.

How Rahab was rewarded

Though not all of Rahab's actions were honorable, the Lord honored her faith. She had laid it all on the line at a critical moment. She had risked her life to protect two of God's people. God rewarded her faith:

She saved the lives of the two spies.

She saved the lives of her family. When the Israelites conquered Jericho, Rahab and her family were protected from the death and came upon every other inhabitant of the city.

She lived among the Israelite people (Josh. 6:25)

She married an Israelite man named Salmon.

She became an ancestor of Jesus Christ Himself!

and to Salmon was born Boaz by Rahab; and to Boaz was born

Obed by Ruth; and to Obed, Jesse; (Matthew 1:5)

And it is reasonable to conclude on the basis of the NT statements that she by the grace of God will be in heaven.

Conclusion: Rahab's story serves as an example of faith. It is heartening to know that whatever your past may be, there can always be a better future. For Rahab that difference came when she turned to God in faith; and so it is for all of us. The day we acknowledge the greatness of God and seek Him and His blessing will be the greatest day of our life. It will be for us, like Rahab, a life with many, and maybe even surprising, blessings.

Like the Hebrew writers says, we must have the faith that embraces the unseen and hopes for it! For us, that unseen thing is God's forgiveness and the blessings of faith in Him including eternal life. But we cannot receive those things until we, like James says, have a faith that works. If you are not a Christian, let your faith work by obeying the terms of the gospel (repent, confess, and be baptized).