

HOW SHALL WE STUDY OUR OLD TESTAMENTS? - Part seven

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NEVER FORGET OUR GOD IS MERCIFUL

Joshua 2:1-24 - "And Joshua the son of Nun sent two men secretly from Shittim as spies, saying, "Go, view the land, especially Jericho." And they went and came into the house of a prostitute whose name was Rahab and lodged there. [2] And it was told to the king of Jericho, "Behold, men of Israel have come here tonight to search out the land." [3] Then the king of Jericho sent to Rahab, saying, "Bring out the men who have come to you, who entered your house, for they have come to search out all the land." [4] But the woman had taken the two men and hidden them. And she said, "True, the men came to me, but I did not know where they were from. [5] And when the gate was about to be closed at dark, the men went out. I do not know where the men went. Pursue them quickly, for you will overtake them." [6] But she had brought them up to the roof and hid them with the stalks of flax that she had laid in order on the roof. [7] So the men pursued after them on the way to the Jordan as far as the fords. And the gate was shut as soon as the pursuers had gone out. [8] Before the men lay down, she came up to them on the roof [9] and said to the men, "I know that the Lord has given you the land, and that the fear of you has fallen upon us, and that all the inhabitants of the land melt away before you. [10] 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 devoted to destruction. [11] And as soon as we heard it, our hearts melted, and there was no spirit left in any man because of you, for the Lord your God, he is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath. [12] Now then, please swear to me by the Lord that, as I have dealt kindly with you, you also will deal kindly with my father's house, and give me a sure sign [13] that you will save alive my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, and all who belong to them, and deliver our lives from death."

[14] “And the men said to her, “Our life for yours even to death! If you do not tell this business of ours, then when the Lord gives us the land we will deal kindly and faithfully with you.” [15] Then she let them down by a rope through the window, for her house was built into the city wall, so that she lived in the wall. [16] And she said to them, “Go into the hills, or the pursuers will encounter you, and hide there three days until the pursuers have returned. Then afterward you may go your way.” [17] The men said to her, “We will be guiltless with respect to this oath of yours that you have made us swear. [18] Behold, when we come into the land, you shall tie this scarlet cord in the window through which you let us down, and you shall gather into your house your father and mother, your brothers, and all your father's household. [19] Then if anyone goes out of the doors of your house into the street, his blood shall be on his own head, and we shall be guiltless. But if a hand is laid on anyone who is with you in the house, his blood shall be on our head. [20] But if you tell this business of ours, then we shall be guiltless with respect to your oath that you have made us swear.” [21] And she said, “According to your words, so be it.” Then she sent them away, and they departed. And she tied the scarlet cord in the window. [22] They departed and went into the hills and remained there three days until the pursuers returned, and the pursuers searched all along the way and found nothing. [23] Then the two men returned. They came down from the hills and passed over and came to Joshua the son of Nun, and they told him all that had happened to them. [24] And they said to Joshua, “Truly the Lord has given all the land into our hands. And also, all the inhabitants of the land melt away because of us.”

I wanted to finish our study of **three ingredients to a fruitful life** before backing up and studying Joshua chapter two. Both the **mercy of God** and the **faith of Rahab** sparkle in this wonderful account. We **always** need to ponder deeply the mercy of God. And the New Testament **tells** us we need to grasp the nature of Rahab's faith. So we're on good ground in our study today.

1) **THE GOD OF THE OLD TESTAMENT IS WONDROUSLY MERCIFUL**

This is confusing to many people. They see the battles and the bloodshed. And they see these frequently coming by direct command from God. How can it be said that such a God is **merciful**? The confusion comes from a poor understanding of the terms. The God of the Bible **is** merciful - merciful beyond telling. But the God of the Bible is **not** tolerant. And those two words are not the same in meaning.

By **tolerant** our world has come to mean morally lax and bending. The concept behind the word **tolerance**, when the term is applied to God, is a relative **indifference** to that which is against His character. But the God of the Bible is **never** morally indifferent. He judges and punishes sin with unbending sternness and precision.

Yet God *is merciful*. By merciful we mean when people **acknowledge** their real moral guilt, when they confess God's absolute moral authority and their failure and refusal to **obey** Him, He - for no logical reason whatsoever other than His own loving grace and provision in Christ Jesus - **pardons** sinners. We can't **earn** such forgiveness. We can never **attain** to God's righteous standards. So, if we're to be forgiven at all, it's the result of blazing, magnificent **mercy**.

When you look under the surface of this chapter you find there is only one reason the events portrayed take place at all. Think about it. We know something these two spies didn't know as they were checking out the city of Jericho. Jericho isn't going to be taken by military power or might. We know all the soldiers will have to do is walk in a circle and blow ram's horns. God Himself will knock the walls down.

Knowing this makes the **battle** simple but the **reason** for this chapter less obvious. **Why** must the soldiers **spy out** walls they will never have to raise a finger to topple. Of course, we all understand that at least as far as the text states Joshua has no **knowledge** of the fact there will be no battle. Fair enough. Joshua sends in the spies because he **thinks** he needs to plan a military attack. That much is easy.

But what about **God**? He has His hand on things behind the scene. What is **He** doing with these two spies? And there's really only one good answer to that question. Whatever Joshua thinks he's doing with this military investigation, God is on a **rescue mission**. God is reaching out in mercy and grace in at least **two ways**:

- a) **First, God sees the heart of Rahab and wants to protect her and her family.** Eventually the soldiers will come soaring over the fallen walls. Hand to hand combat will rage. But wait. Imagine. Before the city is flattened in judgement, God knows there is **one immoral woman** whose heart is ready to respond to Him.

Those two soldiers don't know that's why they're on their way to Jericho. But **God** knows. He is supernaturally involved in this whole situation. Remember, just because **they** don't know what's happening, doesn't mean **God** doesn't know what He's doing. God wants to reveal His mercy. God wants to save Rahab and her family. That's the only real purpose for the visit of those spies.

This exhibition of divine mercy probably shouldn't surprise us. We know God said He would have spared the wicked city of **Sodom** if only ten righteous people had been found there. And that's the number that got posted only because Abraham quit **counting** and **praying** - **Genesis 18:32** - "Then he said, 'Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak again but this once. Suppose ten are found there.' He answered, "For the sake of ten I will not destroy it.'" And then Abraham stops asking.

Don't listen to the bad press about God. The simple fact is we have no idea how much He loves to show mercy to bad people. If we remembered this we'd pray for them and believe for them far more than we do.

After all, what **makes** Abraham have the nerve to ask God to save the most immoral city of its day just because there might have been ten good people living in it? And why does God go along with such praying? It's because Abraham knows God's heart that he prays as he does. He knows God's heart beats to reach out to people in mercy.

There's one **hooker** in Jericho. Her life's been all messed up. She probably gave up on her future a long time ago. We have no idea what circumstances forced her into the life she's living. But God knows. He knows she's willing to reach out with nothing but hope and trust. And because she is, God has two spies stop at **her** house. Before judgment comes she hears and she believes. Mercy comes into her house and heart.

Peter reinforces this same trait in God's big heart - **2 Peter 3:9** - **"The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance."**

Peter addresses certain Christians who were starting to wonder out loud why Jesus hadn't yet returned. What was taking so long? Peter's striking explanation is He'd come back right now except for one thing. He's wanting sinners to have a little more time to repent and turn to Him for **mercy**.

God's mercy, properly understood, explains almost everything else about what He does. If you're here today and you've never committed your life to Jesus Christ as your Lord, do you know that He's waiting for you? **You're** the reason He hasn't returned. That's how much He cares about you.

Later on we'll see Israel's march around Jericho. Again, there's something strange in the account. Why bother marching around the walls for six days? Why not have the walls tumble on the very first outing? The text is silent. Could it be God giving time for people to open their eyes and turn to Him?

I said there were **two** ways in which God was reaching out in mercy through Rahab. The second has to do with you and me:

- b) ***God would use the example of Rahab to strengthen our own confidence in His mercy when we reach out to others.***

Intercession brings its own particular burden. It comes with a heavy **weight** attached. Most of the people for whom we earnestly pray seem to have something working **against** their embracing God's mercy in Christ Jesus. Most intercession is praying **uphill**.

That's why we have the story of Rahab propped up before us. Use it to deepen hope and expectancy. Use it to trace God's **restless inventiveness** in finding and reaching those with **any** degree of openness to mercy and grace.

Consider Rahab once again. Think about her when you are losing hope in prayer. She's immersed in a pagan religion. She is probably an **Amorite**. Her people were sworn enemies of Jehovah God. She never had the chance to see a Bible. She was totally immersed in an immoral life style, pronounced punishable by death in the Old Testament. She never had a believing friend come within miles of her. She was void of the influences that inspire hope for redemption.

Honestly, what hope would you have given her to come to know the true God? What would be the odds her name would be forever inscribed in Holy Scripture as a model of faith!

Whenever you pray, and for **whomever** you pray, remember God delights to **magnify His grace**. He looks for ways to put it on display. He just loves to use people like Rahab as His way of showing no situation is hopeless. His **reach** is as vast as His **touch** is loving.

The apostle Paul loved to rethink this precious truth - 1 Corinthians 1:26-29 - "For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. [27] But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; [28] God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, [29] so that no human being might boast in the presence of God."

There's so much evidence for standing on God's power to reach the undeserving:

1 Corinthians 6:9-11 - "Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, [10] nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. [11] And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God."

Beautiful words! And so God loves to *magnify His mercy*. But this chapter also reveals something about the *faith* of Rahab:

2) **THIS OLD TESTAMENT CHARACTER REVEALS SOME OF THE CHIEF TRAITS OF NEW TESTAMENT FAITH**

Look at what the writer of Hebrews said: **Hebrews 11:30-31** - "By **faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been encircled for seven days. [31] By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had given a friendly welcome to the spies."**

That's a very concise snapshot of the longer account in today's text. The nature of her faith is spelled out in these words:

Joshua 2:8-13 - "Before the men lay down, she came up to them on the roof [9] and said to the men, "I know that the Lord has given you the land, and that the fear of you has fallen upon us, and that all the inhabitants of the land melt away before you. [10] 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 devoted to destruction. [11] And as soon as we heard it, our hearts melted, and there was no spirit left in any man because of you, for the Lord your God, he is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath. [12] Now then, please swear to me by the Lord that, as I have dealt kindly with you, you also will deal kindly with my father's house, and give me a sure sign [13] that you will save alive my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, and all who belong to them, and deliver our lives from death."

Perhaps we can see her faith best if we compare Rahab's response with *two other groups of people*:

- a) ***Consider the Israelites who wandered forty years in the wilderness.*** A whole generation perished because of their unbelief in God's ability to give them the promised land.

But before they lost their ***lives*** they lost their ***faith***. Remember, these wanderers had plenty of ***first-hand evidence*** of the reality of God's care and power. They had ***crossed the Red Sea***, watching the waters miraculously split open with Moses. They had ***received manna from heaven*** every morning. They had ***received water from a solid rock***. They had ***received the law of God from the mountain***. They had been ***led by a cloud of His divine presence*** and a ***pillar of visible fire at night***.

Yet somehow their hearts were not deeply reached. They saw the signs but lost trust in the One to whom they pointed. They weren't drawn into permanent trust in God. They ***saw*** these things. They certainly ***believed*** in them. They knew ***God was working on their behalf***. We read on several occasions that they ***thanked God for His goodness***. But they were never ***changed to follow God totally***.

But there's more to think about. Compare Rahab with a ***second*** group of people:

- b) ***Compare Rahab's response with the other citizens of Jericho.*** We need to do this because the text says ***all*** the people of Jericho heard of the power of God among the Israelites. It says ***_all*** their hearts melted in fear - **Joshua 2:9-11** - ***"...[Rahab] said to the men, "I know that the Lord has given you the land, and that the fear of you has fallen upon us, and that all the inhabitants of the land melt away before you. [10] 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 devoted to destruction. [11] And as soon as we heard it, our hearts melted, and there was no spirit left in any man because of you, for the Lord your God, he is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath."***

Rahab tells the spies ***all*** the people had heard of God's might. They heard the same news Rahab heard. They were ***awestruck***. They believed that the message was true. That's the part that terrified them. But that was all they experienced from what they heard. It was purely a ***natural*** response. They didn't reach out to God. They didn't ***take*** the news of God as an ***opportunity*** the way Rahab did.

Now as then there are many people who hear God's Word on that same surface level. They are ***moved*** by it. They ***agree*** with it. They may even experience the ***prick of their own conscience***. They are momentarily ***troubled***. They may even make some outward show of being emotionally agitated by what they hear. But they show no permanent change of heart and mind.

Rahab's response is different. She takes the truth up into her heart. She doesn't just see these ***events***. She sees ***God*** in them. She takes stock of what she hears. She may be the only one in Jericho who does, but she will place her trust in this God of Israel. She reaches out for her family and loved ones.

Here's what I see in Rahab's faith. ***First, she is willing to separate herself from her own people who wouldn't follow her in repentance.*** She will turn to the true God in faith even if nobody else in Jericho does. ***Second, she takes the promises of God and puts them under her life as its foundation - "....! know that the Lord has given you the land, and that the fear of you has fallen upon us, and that all the inhabitants of the land melt away before you"(2:9).***

There's more. ***Third, she risks anything and everything to honor the people and ways of God*** - "But the woman had taken the two men and hidden them. And she said, "True, the men came to me, but I did not know where they were from. [5] And when the gate was about to be closed at dark, the men went out. I do not know where the men went. Pursue them quickly, for you will overtake them." [6] But she had brought them up to the roof and hid them with the stalks of flax that she had laid in order on the roof. [7] So the men pursued after them on the way to the Jordan as far as the fords. And the gate was shut as soon as the pursuers had gone out"(2:4-7).

Fourth, she refuses to allow her past to stand in the way of her future. This is beautiful. How easy it would have been for her to feel she had sunk too low. What use could God have for her now? But she stands on God's mercy and protection. The writer of Hebrews gives her praise.

Don't make the mistake of thinking Rahab was rescued because of her ***works***. She didn't ***earn*** anything from God. These four traits ***reveal*** genuine faith. They don't ***replace*** it. These works show Rahab's faith was living, not dead. And God, who delights in showing mercy, blessed her for it.