

Rahab: How Bad People Make Good with God

[Joshua 1:1-21, 6:22-25](#)

Unsung Heroes and Heroines of the Faith

Dr. Thomas A. Erickson

Sunday, September 28, 2003

On a recent trip to Pennsylvania, Carol and I met a woman who was tracing her family tree. Her great-grandfather Tessler had been a Lutheran minister in the area, and she had not only found the home he lived in, but also the building in which he established a home for boys in the 1920s. It was no longer a home for boys, but the current owners told her the rest of the story. Back in the fifties the Lutheran synod took over the ministry, moved it several miles away, and made it part of a large pool of social services which it then named for her great-grandfather: "The Tessler Lutheran Social Services of Butler County, Pennsylvania." Needless to say, she was thrilled and proud to learn about her great-grandfather's contributions to society.

But now imagine her reaction had she gone on to discover that her great-grandmother had been a prostitute, a liar, and a traitor to her nation. I have just described Rahab, the great-great-grandmother of King David. Don't you wonder how David must have felt when he discovered a prostitute in his family tree? Because, based on her behavior, most of us would agree that Rahab was a bad person. She was certainly not someone you would want living next door. She ran a brothel. When the police knocked on her door looking for the Hebrew spies, she lied and sent them off on a wild goose chase. She gave aid and comfort to the invading army. She turned her back on her own people and joined the enemy.

I have no doubt that Rahab had a lot of good in her as well. When I call her "a bad person" I do not deny that she kept a clean house, paid her bills on time, took in stray cats, and supported her parents in their old age. But in spite of all the good she may have done, Rahab has been an embarrassment to Bible readers for at least two thousand years. When Josephus wrote his twenty volume history of the Jews back in the first century, he substituted the word "innkeeper" for "harlot" when he wrote about Rahab. Some modern commentators suggest that Rahab was a cult prostitute who plied her trade in the temple of the Canaanite gods, as though that elevated her to a higher level of bad behavior. Still others say that Rahab told only a white lie when she claimed the spies had high-tailed it for home.

But all of that just so much spin, an attempt to justify her bad behavior. Just as we all attempt to justify ours. "Yes," someone may say, "I pushed the legal envelope, but I might have lost my job had I not followed orders." Or I say to myself, "Everyone else is doing it, so why can't I?" Or I read about a notorious criminal and say, "At least I'm not as bad as he is." But the fact remains that we all do bad things. Paul was right when he told the Roman Christians, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." And Isaiah correctly pegged the consequences: "Your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you."

So the question is not, "Am I a bad person?" because my conscience serves up ample evidence that, in spite of all the good I do, I am also envious and proud, critical and impatient, selfish and greedy. No, the question is, "How can a bad person (I, you) make good with God?"

If we take our cue from Rahab, the first part of the answer is quite simple: Rahab believed in the true God. She told the spies, "The Lord your God is indeed God in heaven above and on earth below." She had heard how the Hebrew God had rescued them from the most powerful super power the world had ever seen, how that God had guided them through a wilderness of sand and rock, how that God had defeated superior armies along the way, and how that God was about to conquer Canaan in their behalf. So she put her life in the hands of the Hebrew God. And the same God is eager that you should put your life in his hands. Have you sins that need forgiving? God says, "As far as the east is from the west, so will I remove your transgressions from you." Do you need power to deal with menacing problems? "When you walk through the fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior." Does the grave loom before you like a dead-end street? Jesus promises, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die."

I'm not asking you to take a shot in the dark or a leap of faith. Faith does not mean believing without any evidence. Rather, faith means resting in the sufficiency of the evidence. And there is, to my mind, more than sufficient evidence not only to believe in God but to believe that God is reaching out to us to forgive us, to affirm us, to empower us, to prepare an eternal home for us. I find that evidence preeminently in Jesus, in his faultless life, his sublime teachings, his atoning death and triumphant resurrection. Do you want to know what God is like? Jesus says, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father." Do you want to know what God thinks of your less than sterling behavior? Jesus says, "Friend, your sins are forgiven you." Do you want to know if there is a future for you? Jesus promises, "I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also."

I challenge you to study Jesus for yourself. Don't take my word for it. Don't rely on what some college professor said about Jesus in a course on comparative religions. Study Jesus for yourself and then decide whether the evidence is sufficient or not. Rahab looked at the evidence and found it sufficient to believe.

Then she behaved according to her beliefs. She hid the spies from the police. She lowered them out the window and gave them advice that saved their lives. Having come to believe in the true God, she behaved according to her beliefs.

The New Testament writer James argues, "Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead." That's another way of saying that belief in God without behavior for God is worthless. He then calls two witnesses to support his case. The first is Father Abraham. Who better could James have called to the witness stand than the great patriarch, the George Washington of the Hebrew nation. And who is the

other witness? Surely it will be one of the giants of the faith, Moses, or David, or Isaiah,. But listen: "Likewise, was not also Rahab the prostitute also justified by works when she welcomed the messengers and sent them out by another road?" (James 2: 25) Rahab behaved according to her beliefs, and James doesn't hesitate to link her with Abraham as a model of saving faith.

But the way, there is only one text in the Bible where Rahab is mentioned without her less than honorable label. In Joshua, Hebrews, and James, she is Rahab "the prostitute." But one text makes no mention of her sordid reputation, and that is in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus. For it turns out that Rahab is not only the great-great-grandmother of King David; she is also one of the great-great-grandmothers of our Savior Jesus Christ. And there, in the company of Jesus, she is simply "Rahab." That cannot be accidental. For the Scriptures promise that when we put ourselves in the company of Jesus, "the old has passed away, behold, the new has come."

What notorious names still cling to you like a ball and chain? What shame hovers over you like an albatross? It makes no difference how bad you've been. If, in the company of Jesus, Rahab was purged of her infamy, there is surely hope for you and me. If Rahab the prostitute became simply Rahab, our names too can be stripped of every pejorative label.

If you have never done so, join the company of Jesus. Because if Rahab the liar, Rahab the traitor, found her way into the family of Jesus, you can be sure there is room for you as well.