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Joshua #3

### Sermon Summary #3

#### Two Spies and a Shady Lady Joshua 2:1-24

Whenever we talk about great men of the Bible, names such as Abraham, Moses, David, Peter, and Paul immediately come to mind. Whenever we talk about great women, I think of Sarah, Ruth, Esther, Mary, and Martha. Perhaps the time has come to add one name to this list of famous females: Rahab!

Many might balk at my suggestion, given what we know of Rahab's occupation: she was a *prostitute*. How, then, dare I suggest that she be included in the same breath with such righteous women as Ruth and Mary? The answer is found in Joshua 2.

Jericho was a formidable obstacle to the conquest of Canaan. It was a walled city in an open valley and was ably defended by a vicious and violent people called the Amorites.

So Joshua dispatched two spies to obtain information on how best to attack the city. They disguised themselves, not very successfully as we'll soon discover, and approached with great caution. Since the Jordan River was at flood stage, they probably traveled to the north where the fords were easier, then turned southwest to enter Jericho from the west side.

Joshua's decision to send only two spies was no doubt due to his personal experience 38 years before. You may recall that he and Caleb were among the 12 spies Moses sent into Canaan to scout out the land and its people. Perhaps recalling the near disaster that came when 10 of them brought back a negative report, he selects two men of whom he is confident.

Some have wondered why Joshua sent spies in the first place. After all, if God has already assured Joshua of certain victory and if Joshua is truly a man of faith who banks on the truth of God's word, what need is there to send in spies to search out the land? Some have found in this a profound lapse on Joshua's part, a failure of faith. No!

The sovereignty of God and the certainty of his promises coming to pass do not negate the importance of wisdom and prudence on our part. Just because God has decreed that something will certainly occur does not mean we are free to act like fools and throw caution to the wind. Joshua knows that God wants him to take advantage of ordinary means to achieve extraordinary ends. In other words, Joshua clearly doesn't expect God to simply hand over the land and all its inhabitants in one fell swoop, without strategic planning or battle or any human involvement at all. Joshua is simply acting with wisdom and preparation, confident that if he will utilize every means available to him that God will fulfill his promise as stated.

Think of it this way. According to Psalm 139, every day that you will live on this earth has already been written down in God's book before you were even born. "In your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them" (v. 16). I believe that with all my heart. But that doesn't mean I will no longer look both ways before crossing a busy street! That doesn't mean I will neglect my health or jump out of an airplane without a parachute! God expects us to use our minds and common sense and take careful and strategic steps to achieve the goals that lie before us.

Rahab was a prostitute, a harlot. Twice in the NT (Heb. 11:31; James 2:25) she is called a "prostitute." It's entirely possible she was one of the countless sacred prostitutes who served at the Canaanite fertility shrines. Her house was probably an inn or tavern, a popular gathering place that would likely prove to be a great place to gather information about the city. Some argue that it was, in fact, a brothel. In any case, it would have been frequented by traveling merchants, out-of-town visitors to Jericho, and countless others. It was a great place to get lost in the crowd, to disappear, undetected, in a sea of strange faces.

The argument has been put forth by a few, but only a few, that the spies went to Rahab's home or place of business to seek out a sexual encounter with her. They point to the words translated "came into" or "entered" and "lodged/stayed there" in v. 1, which elsewhere in the OT are used to describe sexual intercourse. However, when these words are used for sexual activity there are other grammatical features present which are decidedly absent here in Joshua 2:1.

We don't know how it happened, but their cover was exposed. Someone learned of their identity and purpose in Jericho and immediately reported it to the king (v. 2), who demanded that Rahab bring them out into the open (v. 3).

Rahab proceeds to tell one heck of a story. To put it bluntly, it's all a fib, a lie, a complete fabrication on her part designed to deceive the king and the soldiers he had sent to capture the spies (vv. 4-7).

It's rather strange that the soldiers would so quickly believe Rahab's story and never bother to search her house! Perhaps we should simply attribute this to divine providence or to God's decision to blind their eyes and dull their minds. It's hard not to think of the first Star Wars episode: "These aren't the spies you're looking for. You don't need to search this house." A better and more spiritual analogy would be the experience of Brother Andrew who regularly smuggled Bibles into Iron Curtain countries before the fall of communism. He would leave Bibles sitting openly in the back seat of his car. The soldiers regularly looked, but evidently saw nothing!

Rahab's lie was actually comprised of several: (1) she said she didn't know they were Israelites ("I did not know where they were from"); (2) she said they had already gone; and (3) she said she didn't know where they could be found; and (4) she misled the soldiers into thinking that if they quickly pursued them, they would easily be caught.

We have to pause here and address the complicated question of whether or not Rahab was justified in "lying" as she did. Some simply point out that we need to distinguish between what the Bible *reports* and what it *recommends*, or between what it *records* and what it *requires*. This is the difference between "descriptive" texts and "prescriptive" texts. A good example of this is found in the book of Job, where the words of his "counselors" are reported and recorded but are by no means approved or endorsed. Their theology was bad and their counsel was misguided. So perhaps we should simply take this as another example of the Bible recording her actions but not necessarily approving them.

Before we go any farther let's be sure we take note of the importance the Bible places on truth-telling.

"You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor" (Exod. 20:16).

Satan is "a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44).

Ananias and Sapphira were judged because they "lied to the Holy Spirit" (Acts 5:3).

"Do not lie to one another" (Col. 3:9a).

"Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another" (Eph. 4:25).

Among those consigned to the eternal lake of fire are "all liars" (Rev. 21:8) as well as "everyone who loves and practices falsehood" (Rev. 22:15).

Needless to say, this is a matter of great importance for the ethical conduct of every believer. So, how do we address the matter of Rahab's "lies"? In her case, it appears that two absolute moral principles have come into conflict: (1) it is wrong to tell a lie; (2) it is essential that we protect human life.

Typically, people align themselves with one of three possible positions:

(1) *Conflicting absolutism* or "*the lesser of two evils*" approach – According to this view, sometimes two or more absolute principles will conflict and there is simply no way to avoid sinning. One must choose the lesser of two evils. In this case, lying is a sin, but it is *less evil* than allowing the spies to be killed. So, Rahab was wrong to lie,

but she would also have been wrong to tell the truth. It was impossible for her to avoid sinning so she simply chose the lesser of two evils and should throw herself on the mercy of God.

(2) *Hierarchicalism* or “*graded absolutism*” – On this view there is an ordered hierarchy of moral values in which some have priority over others. When one cannot avoid making a choice, one should choose the higher of the two. In doing so, the other choice is no longer regarded as sinful. Rahab was exempt from telling the truth in order to save the lives of the two Israeli spies. She communicated a series of falsehoods, but did not sin in doing so.

(3) *Non-conflicting absolutism* – This is the view which says that it only seems or appears to be the case that two moral absolutes conflict. In reality, they don’t. In such situations, there will always be a third way or another option that does not entail committing a sin. In Rahab’s case, she should not have lied but should have trusted God to provide for her a way to protect the spies that didn’t involve sinning. On this view, Rahab was right to have hidden the spies, but she should then have refused to respond to the king or to have answered the question concerning their whereabouts. She could have said, “Come in my house and look around,” all the while praying that God would conceal their location from those searching for them.

I tentatively embrace view (2).

We must remember that communication of truth or falsehood can also be non-verbal, through our conduct or actions. So, for example:

Is it ethical for a Christian to post a “Beware of the Dog” sign on your fence or door to deter a burglar, even when you don’t own a dog?

Is it ethical for a Christian to give the impression that one is at home by leaving on the lights, again to frighten off would-be intruders or thieves?

Is it ethical for a woman, when attacked by a rapist, to fake a heart attack or to pretend to faint or to call out to her husband as if he were close by when in fact he is not?

Were the Allies in WWII justified in deceiving Hitler concerning the location of the Normandy invasion?

Is it ethical for the police to operate radar in unmarked cars?

Is it ethical for the police to conduct undercover, plain-clothes investigations which by definition demand that they deceive people concerning their identity and intent?

Is it ethical for those in the military to wear camouflage uniforms in order to mislead their enemies concerning their location?

Let’s add to these examples the biblical case of *the Hebrew midwives*, who misled Pharaoh when he demanded that they kill any new born male babies:

“But the midwives feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but let the male children live. So the king of Egypt called the midwives and said to them, ‘Why have you done this, and let the male children live?’ The midwives said to Pharaoh, ‘Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women, for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them.’ So God dealt well with the midwives. And the people multiplied and grew very strong. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families” (Exod. 1:17-21).

When it comes to Rahab, we must reckon with two references to her in the NT:

“By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had given a friendly welcome to the spies” (Heb. 11:31).

In James 2:25 the author cites Rahab as an example of someone whose works proved the reality of her faith, “when she received the messengers [the spies] and sent them out by another way.”

Rahab is praised for welcoming the spies into her home and for sending them out safely and away from the men who sought their lives. This was accomplished through verbal deceit. How could the NT authors speak of her in this way, praising her faith, if they believed her guilty of the sin of lying? How could they praise her for a goal she attained through illicit and unethical means?

My point is this: There are occasions when deception is morally permissible. Not all falsehoods are lies. *A lie is an intentional falsehood which violates someone’s right to know the truth.* But there are instances in which men *forfeit* their right to know the truth. *A lie is the intentional declaration or communication of a falsehood designed to deceive someone who has a moral and legal right to know the truth. A lie is the telling of an untruth to someone to whom we are morally and legally obligated to speak the truth.*

And there do appear to be instances when we are not under obligation to tell a person the truth: in times of war, on those occasions when someone has criminal intent, or when a person’s life is at stake. Because of his intent to break into my home and steal what does not belong to him, a thief has forfeited his right to know whether or not I’m in the house. By their unjustified aggression, enemies of the state forfeit the right to know the way in which our military forces intend to defeat them. Etc.

**This does not mean we should become careless or flippant when it comes to telling the truth.** God forbid! We are people of the Truth. We must be people of integrity, honesty, forthrightness, and purity. To everyone who is morally and legally entitled to hear the truth, we must tell it. But were the soldiers sent by the king of Jericho entitled to know where Rahab had hid the spies, given the fact that their intent was to kill them? In my opinion, No.

We return now to Joshua 2, picking up the narrative with vv. 8-11.

The Canaanites were polytheists and worshiped a variety of gods. Yet Rahab affirms that Yahweh alone is God and rules over all! When she said, “the Lord your God, he is God,” she is saying, in no uncertain terms, he is the **only** God. Clearly Rahab was saying this for a reason other than merely to save her skin and that of her family. She was saying, “Our people worship dozens of gods; but your God alone is the one true God!”

Also, her words, “in the heavens above and on the earth beneath,” are used only three other times in the OT, all in contexts that affirm Yahweh’s exclusive claim to sovereignty (see Ex. 20:4; Deut. 4:39; 5:8). It’s stunning that this Canaanite woman not only knows Israel’s God by name, Yahweh, but also knows his plans for her homeland!

*How did Rahab come by this knowledge?* Perhaps she picked up bits and pieces of what God had done from traveling customers. She evidently had heard of the exodus out of Egypt, some of the miracles, perhaps even of the giving of the Ten Commandments. Did she notice a difference in the Jewish spies, perhaps from the fact that, unlike most others, they were not there for immoral purposes?

Some are also befuddled by vv. 12-21 and the agreement that is reached between Rahab and the spies. They point out that God had clearly forbidden his people from making any sort of treaty with the Canaanites (see Deut. 7:1-5 and 20:16-18). Yes, but Rahab’s confession of faith is the way we know she had *ceased to be a Canaanite* and had chosen to unite herself with the Israelites and the one true God.

That the spies kept their end of the bargain and made certain that Rahab and her family were preserved alive is proven from Joshua 6:17, 22-25 . . .

“And the city and all that is within it shall be devoted to the LORD for destruction. Only Rahab the prostitute and all who are with her in her house shall live, because she hid the messengers whom we sent. . . . [T]o the two men who had spied out the land, Joshua said, ‘Go into the prostitute’s house and bring out from there the woman and all who belong to her, as you swore to her.’ So the young men who had been spies went in and brought out Rahab and her father and mother and brothers and all who belonged to her. And they brought all her relatives and put them outside the camp of Israel. And they burned the city with fire, and everything in it. Only the silver and gold, and the vessels of bronze and of iron, they put into the

treasury of the house of the LORD. But Rahab the prostitute and her father's household and all who belonged to her, Joshua saved alive. And she has lived in Israel to this day, because she hid the messengers whom Joshua sent to spy out Jericho" (Joshua 6:17, 22-25).

And what of the "*scarlet cord*" that she placed in the window of her home to indicate the place of those who were to be spared? Was it a symbol or type of the shed blood of Christ? Probably not, as there is no reference to this anywhere else in the OT or in the NT.

However, there may be some spiritual significance in the scarlet cord, as is seen from two similar instances in the OT.

(1) The same words are used in Genesis 38:28-30 where Tamar is said to have tied a scarlet cord around the wrist of one of her twin sons, Zerah, who in fact was one of the ancestors of Jesus (Mt. 1:3). Tamar and Rahab are linked as being two of the four foreign women listed in the genealogy of Jesus. Both Tamar and Rahab were prostitutes, and both were in possession of a scarlet cord that served to secure their place in the genealogy of our Lord.

(2) There may be a connection with the Passover in Exodus 12. The Israelites were protected in their homes if the blood of the lamb was painted on their doorposts. Likewise, the scarlet cord at the home of Rahab was the sign that God's judgment would pass over that household.

Conclusion:

The greatest lesson for us in this remarkable story isn't whether or not it is ever permissible to lie. The most important thing for us to see is that ***God's saving grace can extend beyond the borders of Israel, into the depths of the worst of human sin and depravity, and save even the most vile of sinners!***

Consider what Paul said of the Gentiles during the time of the OT: (1) they were "separated from Christ," (2) "alienated from the commonwealth of Israel," (3) "strangers to the covenants of promise," (4) "having no hope," and (5) were "without God in the world" (Eph. 2:12). All this was true of Rahab before the arrival of the spies in her home.

What we see in Joshua 2 is that even before the coming of Christ, God's saving grace extended into the Gentile world to redeem the worst of sinners!

Reflect on everything that Rahab had going against her as an outsider. (1) She was a Canaanite, a Gentile by birth, a foreigner to the covenants of promise. (2) She was a woman in a man's world; vulnerable and without rights; unmarried and childless. (3) She was a prostitute, hence a social outcast (possibly a madam running her own brothel). (4) She was a polytheist, a worshiper of countless worthless and lifeless idols. Yet she is saved!

How, then, should we look upon and treat "outsiders" like Rahab?

(1) We must recognize that God works in mysterious ways that we can't always fathom. Clearly he had revealed himself to Rahab apart from the expected means. What she knew about Yahweh would have been useless had it not been for the Holy Spirit giving her eyes to see and a heart broken with repentance.

(2) We must work hard at getting past first impressions. Rahab would likely have proven offensive to the eyes and the moral convictions of the spies. Their instinctive reaction would have been to distance themselves from someone so immoral and pagan, yet they saw in her the evidence of God's Spirit at work.

(3) Be open to the possibility that such folk have not yet arrived at their final spiritual destination but are in fact somewhere on the way in their spiritual journey. It would be all too easy to conclude that God had altogether abandoned a woman like Rahab; all too easy to write her off as a reprobate for whom there was no hope. We must never conclude that someone is utterly beyond the possibility of salvation.

(4) It's easy for us to conclude that someone like Rahab was "too far gone," that her chronic immorality had thoroughly blinded her to the beauty of God. Reflect on the effect in her soul of repeated sexual encounters with total strangers. If we had known Rahab and were familiar with her lifestyle and her religious beliefs, would you and I have ever bothered to take the risk and invest the time to speak to her of redemption and forgiveness and the grace of God?

Yet God was at work in her heart. Long before the 2 Israeli spies showed up, God was sovereignly softening her heart, speaking to her, revealing himself to her mind and spirit, awakening her to his existence and power and holiness.

Regardless of what your life has been up until this very moment, regardless of how far you have strayed, or how deep you've immersed yourself in immorality and rebellion and selfish self-indulgence, the Lord God of Israel, the one true God, calls upon you to come to him. He redeemed a harlot like Rahab and orchestrated history in such a way that Jesus himself descended directly from her. Rahab was the great, great, grandmother of King David, from whom Jesus descended according to the flesh.

Amazing grace indeed!