

## Faith Lessons from a Famous Prostitute

December 9th, 2012

Matthew 1:1-5, Joshua 2

*"<sup>1</sup>The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. <sup>2</sup>Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, <sup>3</sup>and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar...<sup>5</sup>and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, <sup>6</sup>and Jesse the father of David the king. And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah,"*

In these weeks of Advent, as we prepare to celebrate the birth of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, we're looking at His family tree, as Matthew records it at the beginning of his gospel. And if we were to conceive of the family tree of Jesus as a Christmas tree, we discover that it's a tree that is decorated with some broken ornaments. If you go into your basement to pull out a box of ornaments, open it up and find they're broken, you throw them out. But Jesus is not ashamed to have broken ornaments in His family tree.

And what we began to see last week is that this brokenness is seen in the ladies who are mentioned in the family tree of Jesus...the mothers of Jesus. And we saw from the very twisted story of Judah and Tamar that Jesus came for the wretched, shameful sinners. There's room in God's family for the worst of us. Today we look at the story of Rahab, found in Joshua 2. What do you know about Rahab? What is she remembered for? She's a prostitute. So we see here the same thing we saw last week: that no one is beyond the reach of the loving, merciful, healing, redeeming arms of the Lord Jesus Christ.

We could see that and celebrate that in each of these Advent sermons, but there is more that we can learn from Jesus' family tree than just this one point. I said last week that in seeing the people who Jesus came **from**, we get a glimpse of the sort of people who Jesus came **for**. And so we saw from Judah and Tamar's story that Jesus came for really broken, flawed, disgraced, people. And we could say the same

concerning Rahab...but is there more we can say about this particular broken ornament in Jesus' family tree?

And I believe there is. If the Old Testament is a prequel to the gospel, as we watch the prequel in Joshua 2, what would we be whispering about Rahab? What we'd be saying is that this woman is a model of, an example of, faith. Here is what is said about her in the two other places she is mentioned in the New Testament, besides Jesus' family tree:

*"<sup>31</sup>By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had given a friendly welcome to the spies."*

*"<sup>25</sup>And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? <sup>26</sup>For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead."*

So as we look backwards into the prequel, I think what we're to see as we examine the life of Rahab is what she teaches us about what it means to walk by faith. Jesus didn't just come for broken sinners, but for broken sinners *who believe in Him* (John 1:12-13). Faith is absolutely crucial in understanding who Jesus came for (Romans 3:26). So I'd like to consider Rahab's story and pull out two important lessons on faith: Rahab's faith was active, and Rahab's faith was a future-oriented hope grounded in God's past work.

## **From Tamar to Rahab**

Before we dig into those two points, let me just quickly move you along in the story from our text last week to this one in Joshua 2. Joseph's brothers' malice in selling their brother into slavery was actually God's providential way of preserving His people. Because once in Egypt, Joseph came to power by interpreting Pharaoh's dream about seven years of abundance followed by seven years of famine. Joseph's family moved to Egypt and were cared for there.

But when a new king arose in Egypt, who did not know of Joseph, he subjected the Jews to slavery. God heard the cries of His people and raised up Moses and through him delivered His people and made a name for Himself among all nations (Exodus 9:16). After a series of plagues, God delivers His people from Israel and promises to bring them into the land He had promised to Abraham 400 years earlier. But God's people rebel against Him in the wilderness, and God strikes them down and waits until that rebellious generation dies off before taking the next generation into the Promised Land.

As Joshua opens up, that unfaithful generation has passed off, and God has raised up Joshua to succeed Moses in leading the people, and is prepared to bring judgment on the evil inhabitants of that land and establish His people there. That brings us to Joshua 2, and the Canannite prostitute Rahab's example of great faith.

### **Faith is Active**

So first, we learn from Rahab that faith is active. Faith works. Faith is not just mental assent to some information about Jesus, which leaves our lives unchanged. Faith makes a demonstrable impact on what we do, so that when real faith is there, it leads to our doing things because of that faith. That is the lesson that James draws from Rahab's life:

*"<sup>25</sup>And in the same way (he's referred to Abraham as another example of this) was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? <sup>26</sup>For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead."*

So in Joshua 2 we see Rahab's faith in action: she welcomes the Jewish spies into her house, she hides them from the king's men, she lies to her countrymen and sends them on a wild goose chase, she lets the spies down through the window and directs them to safety, she ties the scarlet cord in her window as the spies commanded her. If we just had Joshua 2 -- and not the interpretation of her life in Hebrews 11 and

James 2 -- we might conclude that she was rewarded by God for her works. Since she did all these things, God saved her from the judgment that was coming on Jericho. But with the gospel in view, and seeing Joshua 2 as a prequel, our eyes are opened to the fact that her works were the fruit of faith in her life.

She was justified by works, not in the sense that her works made her right with God, but in the sense that her works proved (or demonstrated, or authenticated) that she was right with God by faith alone. And so this is the key lesson that we learn from Rahab's life: true faith is not just words, it's not just what truths we confess with our lips, it's a living reality in the depths of the soul that changes the way a person lives. If you want to see what a person really believes about God, you don't just listen to their statement of faith, but you watch how they live, because what you really believe about God gets revealed in the way you are living.

### **A Life that Can't Be Explained**

So here is one way that Rahab's life instructs us, and pushes us to examine ourselves. As it's been said for nearly 500 years now: "We are saved by faith alone, but the faith that saves is never alone." If your faith in Christ leaves you unchanged, you don't have saving faith. Obedience -- not *perfection*, but a new *direction* of thought and affections and behavior -- is the fruit that shows that the faith is alive. By taking an honest look at the way you are living, the choices you're making, the way you're spending your time and money, you can discover what you really believe about God, regardless of your words.

As I thought about Rahab's story, I was reminded of the story of William Borden. He lived in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, was a graduate of Yale University and was an heir to great wealth. After coming to faith under the ministry of RA Torrey, he rejected a life of ease and material prosperity in order to bring the gospel to Muslims in

Egypt. He gave hundreds of thousands of dollars to foreign missions, and after only four months in Egypt, contracted spinal meningitis and died at the age of 25. The epitaph on his grave reads, "Apart from faith in Christ, there is no explanation for such a life."

You might not be called to die on the missions field or commit treason against your country in the service of God, but every Christian is called to live in such a way that defies explanation, apart from faith in Jesus Christ. When faith in Jesus Christ produces obedience to Jesus Christ, those obedient lives make God look glorious. That's the only way we'll have the kind of impact on our communities that I long to see us have: by living our lives in such a way that people see that God is great. But that's not going to happen by us trying hard to be radical. It is, as it was for Rahab, the fruit of faith.

### **Looking Back for the Sake of the Future**

Now, where does this kind of radical, risk-taking faith come from? What can we do to feed our faith? I said that, secondly, we would see from Rahab's story that faith is a future-oriented hope grounded in God's past work. Let me explain what I mean by that. Faith trusts in God's future blessing, whether that future is this afternoon, or 10,000 years from now. Faith is, in the words of Hebrews 11, "the assurance of things hoped for". You don't hope for things that are past; you hope for things that are yet to come. And faith is a certainty, a rock-solid assurance, of something yet to come. For Rahab it was the coming judgment of God on her city.

But how did she come to believe in that? What gave birth to her future-oriented faith in the God of Israel? It was what she had heard about God's work in the past:

*<sup>9</sup>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. <sup>10</sup>**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."*

Rahab heard (just as God had said in Exodus 9:16) of God's past work, and that knowledge made her confident in God's future triumph over Jericho, which emboldened her to a radical "obedience of faith" (Romans 1:5) to align herself with Israel's God.

Her confidence in God's reliability in the future was grounded in the history of His past faithfulness. If you've ever conducted a job interview, or been in one, you know that what's at stake is the future. How will they do? Will they be hard-working, will they have integrity, will they work well with others? All this relates to the future. But in that job interview, you always talk about the past: previous jobs, family past, references. Why all this talk about the past if the issue now is the future? The answer is obvious: confidence in someone's future reliability is grounded in a history of past faithfulness.

That's the way faith in God works. Faith this afternoon, next week, in fifty years, is not a blind leap in the dark. It's built on our knowledge of God's past faithfulness. And for us, that faithfulness all culminates in Rahab's great great great grandson, Jesus Christ. Rahab's deliverance from judgment is a picture of our own. She was a wicked woman, in a land of wicked people. And she knew God's righteous judgment was coming. But she begged for mercy, and she received it, and the scarlet cord outside her window showed that she -- though every bit a sinner as the rest of the inhabitants of Jericho -- was a vessel of God's mercy, and she was spared from God's judgment.

### **Rahab's Salvation, and Ours**

Is that not your story too, redeemed sinners? One day, just as the trumpet sounded signaling God's judgment on Jericho, the trumpet will sound and the Lord Jesus will descend from heaven to judge the world in righteousness. And as Rahab stood outside the city gates, watching

the city and all that was in it burn (Joshua 6:24-25), having been spared by God's mercy, so you and I will be spared through faith like Rahab's, through faith in Rahab's distant descendent, Jesus Christ. Because He shed His blood for us, we are rescued from the coming judgment, *and this we know*, because God raised Him from the dead on the third day.

This past faithfulness of God is the foundation of faith today. Faith looks back and takes its stand on the demonstration of God's love for us in Christ's death, and then looks to the future and believes that God will therefore fulfill all His promises for us: "<sup>32</sup>He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" I fail so often to live this out, but this is what the fight of faith looks like; this is where the fight is fought. It is daily, hourly, calling to mind God's past faithfulness, especially His faithfulness in the gospel, and having that kindle fresh faith in God's future reliability. When our memory of God's past faithfulness is strong, the message is sent that God is supremely trustworthy in the future because of what He has done in the past.

As we prepare to celebrate Christmas in a few weeks, and as you're in the full rush of holiday craziness, let's not forget this crucial Christmas lesson. The incarnation of Christ is a precious reminder of God's faithfulness. May your celebration of Christmas be a loud declaration in the midst of today's uncertainties, frustrations, unfulfilled longings and disappointments, that God will be as gracious in the future as He's been in the past.