

Marching as to War: Rahab, a Scarlet Cord and a Lie

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Rahab, a Scarlet Cord and a Lie! Was it right or wrong? This is what many of you want to know! Was Rahab justified in telling this bald-faced lie or not? There's no way around it: it was a lie. Is this the Bible's answer to the question that Corrie ten Boom faced: you have hidden some Jews in the attic and the Nazis are at the door asking, "Do you have any Jews?" Do you say "Yes" and live with the fact that you turned them in and sealed their death for the rest of your life? Or, do you say "no!" and lie about it, because, well, God understands. Or is there some other option?

In 1804, a split occurred among the Baptists in Kentucky over whether it was right to tell lies to an Indian in order to spare a child's life. Some said, "No," and others said that if it was to spare someone's life, it was permissible. These latter folk were known as the Lying Baptists!

Well, was she right or wrong?

(It is sometimes asked along with the story of the Hebrew midwives who said that all the Hebrew women were giving birth *before* the midwives arrived and thus were unable to destroy the male children as they were born as the Pharaoh had requested. There is a textual issue with that passage that may well indicate that this was indeed the case and that these Hebrew midwives were not telling an untruth in order to save these children. See, Exodus 1:15-20, esp. verse 19).

Let's hold that question for a minute, shall we, because it will make sure you stay awake for this sermon (it's a very important question and one anyone of us could face if a robber or murderer broke into our home!), but also because, well, it's actually not the most important thing in this chapter. Asking *that* question first, is a bit like walking into Kroger this week and asking me "What did you see?" And what I saw was not the rutabagas, or the fish counter, or cheese products; not even the Valentine's Day cards. It was John Grisham's new novel and the thought that if I buy this for Rosemary, there'll be no housework done until it's read!

Why is this chapter here at all? I mean, it's not really germane to the story of the conquest. You could tear it out and the story would still make sense (apart from

the reference to Rahab in 6:25 when she and her household are spared in the destruction of Jericho in 6:17, 25). Actually, you'd have to tear out a little more than that! Because in Hebrews 11:31 and again in James 2:25 she is singled out as one of the great examples of faith in the Old Testament! And more than that, she appears in Matthew 1:5 in the genealogy of our Savior! (Actually Matthew is condensing things a little so as to make things a little more poetic, and in that list Rahab is Boaz' mother—the guy in Bethlehem who married Ruth and gave birth to Obed, David's grandfather! But that's probably not the case—Matthew has missed out a few generations). So you see, Rahab is an extraordinary woman. Her importance cannot be calculated. And more than she's both a harlot and a Gentile and an Ammorite AND a woman! Its Putting the Amazing Back into Grace. But I run ahead of myself!

I want us to see several things about Rahab's faith in this passage. I focus on *that*, rather than the lie, because that's what the New Testament does. She is a woman of faith.

1. Here is an Example of Faith

"By faith, the prostitute Rahab , because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient" (Heb. 11:31).

The story unfolds with these two men (spies) are in Jericho and they just "happen" to stay in this woman's house. That's needs a little explanation! Verse 1 may just be saying that Rahab was an innkeeper and that the spies didn't go there *because she was a prostitute!* People see them entering (they are strangers—everyone would know that) and some may well have already suspected that they are spies. And the king of Jericho (Canaan like many lands, had local chieftains and kings) asks Rahab to send out the men and well, she lies. She hides them and says they were here, they stayed awhile, and they've gone. Don't know where to, but they went that way!" And now, verse 7, "the gate was shut"—that's the city gate which was shut at night for protection. A bit like "gated" communities are today. The point is that the spies are on the wrong side of the gates! And she says to the men in verses 9-11 why she has done this!

Can you forget about the lie for a minute? Put it in the back of your minds! Leave it alone! We'll come back to it in a minute or two.

What she did was extraordinary! She hid them from these men and saved them from certain death or torture. Why? She didn't owe them anything and she knew that these men were spies representing a million people ready to come and take over the land. She acted as a traitor. Yes! A traitor! She put her own people, her family in danger. Think of how you feel about John Walker Lindt! He put the lives of Americans at risk.

She did it because she had heard about their God—the God of Israel. She had heard about the Red Sea drying up! (You know, if they had just paddled in the Sea of reeds, they wouldn't be talking about it in Canaan!). She had heard about the defeat of Og and Sihon, the two Ammorite kings. She believed in the coming judgment of Canaan and she identified with the people of God! And you might say, she was simply trying to save her own skin, that anyone could have seen they were doomed, and if so then why is she the only one who did this? No she did something extraordinary. She exercised faith. She put her own life at risk because she believed that God's word to these men was true. That's what faith is. Committing yourself to the word of God no matter what. Even if it costs you your life. You forsake everything for the sake of this word—this word of God.

Verses 12-13. It's one thing to hear about what God has done; it's another to appropriate that for oneself. What does she do? She begs for mercy! She wants to be spared the retribution. And she uses a word, "show kindness" (v.12) that she wants from these men and later the invading force of Israelites whenever they come. It's a word that would be found on the lips of godly men and women in the Old Testament whenever they think of what God has done for them in grace, in saving them from the just retribution that they deserve.

You know, there's not much to this statement of faith is there? It's not what you might call, a *Westminster Confession*-type explanation of the nature of salvation and saving grace. She wants to be saved from certain death. Not only for herself, but for her parents and extended family—everyone who apparently lived in that house.

She believed that there is mercy with God and that He may be feared.

You know, that's what faith, saving faith, is! It is a belief that even though God may be just in consigning us to flames of unending hell, if we call upon Him in the name of Jesus Christ, we shall be saved.

2. Here is an Example of Faith in the Most Unlikely Place!

It's like finding a diamond in your garbage bin. This is Jericho, in the land of Canaan. The Canaanites have been singled out for destruction by God. The iniquity of the Ammorites is full. This is an enormously sensitive ethical issue in the Old Testament: what right did the Jews have to occupy this piece of land and kill tens of thousands of the inhabitants in the process? We'll have occasion to look at that later as we follow the story, but for now we need to appreciate that as far as God is concerned, the Canaanites had forfeited the right to their land *and the right to live!* That may be difficult for us to understand, especially when we are not thinking the way the Bible does. If the holiness of God is not the lens through which we see the world, we see it in a way that God doesn't. And when God sees the world He sees something that has become corrupt. The world is a

fallen place, opposed to everything that is Gods. What the world (Canaan included) deserves is judgment.

Their conquest of Canaan was God's judgment! Back in Genesis 15, whenever God was promising the land to Abram, there were things that must first occur before it would be just for him and his seed to occupy this land. They would have to wait until "the iniquity of the Ammorites had reached its fullness." That time has now come. It is many centuries later. And Canaan is being judged in this way. We have to accept that as part of God's revelation. The Canaanites were "under the ban" — we will see that later, but one of the things that the Israelites were told is that they must confiscate any of the things they come across, no matter how valuable, as booty. We'll see in chapter 7 how Achan gets into trouble—deadly trouble—for doing that. Canaan is to be destroyed and occupied. We need to be very careful in justifying modern wars in that way, as though right was on our side and wrong on the part of our enemies. There is something unique about the Israelites at this stage of history and there is only one way to accept that and to agree with that and that is to believe God's own testimony to that effect in the Bible.

So it's all the more surprising that whenever Joshua sends these spies into Jericho (the first city of any great size as they cross the Jordan river from the west) that what they meet is a woman of extraordinary faith! It's totally unexpected. You are thinking of writing this great story and the first thing you mention is a woman, a Gentile and a harlot to boot! It's a bit like John's Gospel and the story is only starting and Jesus is walking north through Samaria and meets this "shady lady" by a well who engages him in a conversation that, well, is full of innuendo and double meanings. It's a diamond in the rough! We'd better underline her faith: look at verses 9-11.

I wish this was still missions week. Because what we have here is the way God intends to accomplish His purpose through Israel in saving the Gentile world. This is the Old Testament after all, and the first person we meet in this story is a Gentile who is a believer. In Jericho of all places! God had been working in this woman's heart, through the things that she had heard, and the things which these spies now confirmed to her, saving faith. Isn't that wonderful! It's like going to a yard sale and buying something for a few pennies and then discovering that it's worth a fortune! What it's saying to us is that before you get there, God has already been working! He has been preparing the way. He has been making it possible! That's the kind of God we have. He blazes a trail for us to follow in. We talk about pioneer missionaries and church planters, but God is the pioneer missionary. He is the church planter. I will build My church in the face of the gates of hell and the residents of hell will not be able to do one thing about it.

3. Here is an Example of a Faith that Works

"Was not Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction?" (Jam. 2:25)

Genuine faith shows itself in works! That's what James is saying. When she lets these men down and sends them off in the opposite direction to their pursuers, she is demonstrating her faith in deeds. She is showing to them that this is not a mere academic faith. She means what she says and here is proof of it.

True faith is always like that. Without works, faith is dead. It is a corpse.

James concludes, "faith without deeds is dead" - like the body without the spirit. A new book was published this week entitled *Lenin's Embalmers* by Ilya Zbarsky and Samuel Hutchinson (Harvill, Pounds 12.99). On January 21 1924 Lenin died and Stalin proposed that his body be preserved and put on display in a vast mausoleum in Red Square, Moscow. It has been kept under glass, embalmed and re-embalmed every 18 months for over 70 years. The chemically enhanced incorruptibility of the dead master served the Soviet masters well. During the Second World War the embalmers moved Lenin's body to Siberia so that the Nazis couldn't get it. A system that slaughtered and enslaved and exiled its own to poverties and gulags of the spirit and the intellect, and now skates on the thin ice of fiscal default, has managed to preserve, protect and defend, at all cost,s this grisly icon. Let his body be buried ! Let Russia be free of his ghastly legacy.

Only an utterly rotten system could need the help of a cadaver. A dead body is of no value. It is to be disposed of as soon as possible. A corpse is worthless. A dead body is the choice symbol of a faith that has no deeds. Lenin lies there in Red Square. He looks like a resting man, but he does nothing. He does not speak or move a muscle. That is faith without deeds: a corpse that constantly needs to be polished. You claim you are a believer, but where is the vitality? You state that Jesus is your Saviour? Then follow Him as Lord. A believer without any works is dead useless: he is a weight to be carried by a stumbling church.

You believe that Christ is the Lord of your life. Good! What do you do that you would not do if you did not believe it? You believe that Christ came to save sinners. That's wonderful. What effect does that have on your actions? What sympathy do you have with Christ's cause? What are you doing that men may know what Christ has done and endured for them? You believe in the judgment - from what sin does it restrain you? You believe you are saved —do you? Be honest with yourself, and ask yourself what difference it would make in your conduct if you ceased to believe it. How many things have you done, or left undone today because you respect God's authority? You say that you believe heaven is just beyond the veil of death. Does that belief give you patience to bear up under trials? Does your belief make you place a different value on worldly wealth and power from that held by the man who does not believe in heaven?".

Do our lips and lives agree? Is what we profess seen in our living? Paul tells us

that Christ's love for His church is displayed in a believing husband's love for his wife. Peter tells us that a wife's conduct before her unbelieving husband can be effective enough to win him, without the word. Don't claim that you know God unless your life begins to show it. Our works must vindicate our faith. Without them our faith is dead

4. Here is a Faith that is Assured

The scarlet cord! Before she lets them down (her house is adjoining the wall of the city) she tells them to go and hide for three days in the hills before going back to the Jordan and safety. And the men say to her, put a scarlet cord in the window so that when they come they will know which house to leave alone!

It was Clement of Rome in 95 a.d. who first suggested that this scarlet cord was allegorical of the blood of Christ! Is that what it means? No, of course not. But the house becomes a safe house in the midst of judgment. Like the Ark was in Noah's time. Like the cross is for sinners today.

I'm not saying there is a one-to-one correspondence here; but there is a remarkable simile. It is *like* the cross! When the invading forces saw this cord hanging from the window, the house and all its contents was spared. It became a 'no-go' area. The wrath could not be ignited on it. Just like it is whenever the cross covers us.

The terrors of law and of God/with me can have nothing to do/my Savior's obedience and blood/hide all my transgressions from view. Outside of this house, if she didn't bring her parents within it, there was no assurance to be given. But a word was given and kept! That so long as they sheltered beneath this symbol, they would be safe and secure.

There is none other name under heaven whereby we must be saved.

5. There is a Final Point

There is one final point I want to make. It is the question that has been nagging at our heels like a terrier snapping at UPS delivery man. Was she right to tell this lie?

There are many ways to answer this:

i. Some argue that this is a situation where two absolutes are in conflict: to spare life and to lie. They will argue that these two absolutes collide absolutely and there is no recourse in a fallen world other than to lie. That's the way this world is. You lie and then confess it and God forgives you, and there's no other way. It

may seem unfair but that is the way it is. It is what Lutherans especially argue. And a form of it has been made popular by Joseph Fletcher, known as "situational ethics."

ii. Others argue that absolutes have a gradation about them. Some are more important than others. And when two are in conflict you should obey the higher one. It a view known as "hierarchical ethics" and held and defended by the late Norman Geisler.

iii. And then there's a third view. It is called "non-conflicting ethics." Basically, it says that situations like these only appear to be so, when in reality there is a "third" way which we cannot see. It is the view held to by John Murray in his *Principles of Conduct* and Walter Kaiser, the contemporary Old Testament biblical theologian. It was the view of Augustine and Aquinas. Many Christians, like Augustine and Calvin, have condemned Rahab's deception. Her lie, even though told "for a good purpose," Calvin says, is "contrary to the nature of God." Similarly, Augustine praised the midwives and Rahab for "the benignity of their intention" but condemned them for "the iniquity of their invention." Perhaps Rahab could have said something different without actually lying and the outcome would have been the same. Perhaps. And in the cool light of day, it is what I believe.

So, my final point? It is a faith that stumbles. It is an imperfect faith. You may disagree with me—you will not be first! Get in line! But this is not an issue of orthodoxy. Its not one of those issues about which to fall out over. Let me explain, and as I do so, I am very conscious of doing so in a rational moment. It's so very easy for me to say what I am about to say from a pulpit, and then close my Bible and then go home. And we will sit down over some iced tea later on and chat about it and conjure up a thousand scenarios where this might be tested. It's one of those ethical conundrums that's guaranteed to be talked about. I realize that.

But what would you have done? No, what would / have done? Said something like,

"That question is a difficult one for me to answer because it puts me in an ethical conundrum of having to decide whether or not I am "hierarchical ethicist" or a "non-conflicting ethicist" and if you give me a few hours, and preferably a few days, I might be able to give an answer that in some way relieves my conscience from the guilt of having possibly given you the wrong answer"? Hardly!

I want to say, that if I had done what she did, I would feel very good indeed about myself, even if I had sinned. I can understand it when Luther talks about "sinning boldly"! I wish I had the courage to do that. To do what Corrie ten Boom did as it is recounted in *The Hiding Place*, whenever Jews had been secretly hidden in a corner of her bedroom on the third floor of her house. I remember seeing the tree

planted in her honor outside the memorial to the Holocaust in Jerusalem a few years ago and being deeply touched that the tree had died at the very same time when Corrie ten Boom had died in April of 1983.

The point is, God doesn't guarantee that the exercise of faith won't get messy. We will be called upon to make decisions in split-seconds and we may well be unable to know what to do. And we will break one of God's commandments because something else is dominating our concern at that moment: saving our children lives, or someone's honor and integrity. Later we will look back and see that we didn't handle it perfectly: but the intent was a good one. And that's, maybe, why God in both James and Hebrews doesn't say one word about Rahab's lie—not a single word! As though He might be saying: "Yes, it was wrong, and some day I'll show you what you should have done. But what you did, putting your life at risk like that for someone else—that was something very special indeed and I want you to know that I saw it."

We have a God who loves us, and is patient with us, even when we stumble. He doesn't go for the sin, but points out the good thing.

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