

Faith in Action

Joshua 2

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Today's passage that was just read will be our sermon passage, from Joshua 2. And it's a very captivating story, as is the rest of the Book of Joshua. And chapter 2 gives us an account of Rahab providing safe haven to the spies of Israel. And this suspenseful episode is the story in which the author of Hebrews in chapter 11, as well as James in chapter 2, both make reference to Rahab in her faith and her actions. Let's pray and ask the Lord to give us understanding and for him to grow our faith.

God, we ask that you would bless the hearing of your Word, that you would grow us in faith. Would you strengthen us and embolden us and give us good courage to then act, to respond, to live out that faith. We pray that in Jesus' name. Amen.

Gino Bartali was a well-known and accomplished cyclist. He was from Italy, and he won the Tour of Italy three times—1936, 1937, and then again in 1946. He also won the Tour de France in 1938 and then again in 1948. Now, you may have noticed a gap between those races. At least, those victories. And if you would guess that maybe it was because of World War II, then you are correct. Bartali later in life, actually, as accomplished as he was as a cyclist, he also became renowned for what he did during those years during the war. It came to be known later that he had hidden a Jewish family in his cellar, which saved their lives. It came to be known later that he would ride his bike throughout Italy, in view of all to see, all the while carrying messages and documents hidden in his bike frame and handlebars to the Italian Resistance.

There's one story of Bartali leaving Florence in the morning under the pretense of training, riding his bicycle. But he would ride specifically to this convent that was hiding Jews, and he would collect documentation, he would collect pictures and these forged documents that would help further aid this underground network of harboring and giving safe passage to Jewish families. There's another account of Bartali pulling a wagon behind his bike with a secret compartment that would hide people. And if he was stopped, which he sometimes was by patrols, he would just say, "Oh, I'm training. This is for strength conditioning. This is for training." And it was believable, of course, and he also had the fame and the reputation that he just kind of did this all in the view of everybody.

Of course, World War II has many more stories like this, and they surely are captivating, and they're inspiring. But such heroism is not confined to World War II. It's not confined to any particular nation. Really, any time throughout history, there are times where ordinary people do extraordinary things at great cost to themselves, for great benefit to others. At a human level, these are stories of faith—faith in action. What do they believe? What undergirds, what associates them with causes or sides? And what do their beliefs say about what they're motivated to do, and how they're motivated to do it?

In Joshua 2, we see the faith of Israel acting upon the promises of God for the inheritance of the land, and we see the faith of a Canaanite woman acting upon the faith of the witness of God to the stories of his people. Although we can find it all throughout the Bible, today we'll look at this relationship in Joshua 2 between faith and action. We'll do it kind of in three ways. It's in your bulletin. And I'll just give you one caveat. You know, the greatest task and the task that pastors and preachers most often fail in, is cutting out things. Right? And it's a common practice, though unintentionally. We kind of do it in reverse. Like, we go to take things out, and we end up adding things. So just a head's up—we may not get to the third point. But the third point actually is kind of a crescendo and a culmination of the prior two points. So I hope if I do my job, you'll at least—we'll still get the gist and bring this thing home.

But we'll first look at faith in action, as it's anchored to God's sovereignty. Consider where we are in the story of God's salvation as it's unfolding in the events of the people of God. You see, the people of God have been in this situation once before. Do you remember? They were on the edge of entering the land when Moses first sent out spies to look upon the land. And at that time, the people, though, fail to enter the land. And consequently, they wandered around the wilderness for forty years. But even before that, we see in Genesis that God had promised Abraham that he would become a people and that he would receive—or, his ancestors at least—would receive a land. And in Exodus, we see that God delivered that people from bondage out of Egypt under Moses's leadership.

Now we're in the part of the story where the people are receiving what was promised in that inheritance, the Land of Canaan, under Joshua's leadership. And in his youth, when Joshua was one of those first spies, he now leads and sends other spies to look out upon the land that God has promised. And we come to this passage, chapter 2, and we see under the microscope how the people in the story interact with God's sovereignty at this juncture. The spies were acting in faith with the knowledge of the Lord, the promise of the Lord, and the provision of the Lord.

Rahab is a dynamic character in this story, and she acts in faith, too. Now, the text tells us that she is a prostitute, and the spies find themselves in her house. There has been some debate whether she really is a prostitute, or merely an innkeeper. But there's no reason to discount the plain reading of the text here. And even more so, it's further fitting. It makes sense in the context that her house, which resides within the city wall, matches what would be perhaps darker recesses of Jericho, hidden away in the shadows for the clients' discretion, and certainly convenient for the spies' entrance into the city and later their escape.

But whether she was or wasn't, the reputation of her house and the patrons of her establishment made information within its walls incredibly valuable to the leaders of Jericho. For we read in verses 2 and 3 that the king of Jericho had heard of the spies, and that they might be in Rahab's place. So he sent for her. And at this point in the story, the suspense starts to build. Sometimes in our more maybe western or American ears, we get bored with reading long passages of the Bible, and we would prefer maybe a movie. So put on your Netflix glasses and see this story as indeed a movie unfolding. What will Rahab say in the moment of being summoned upon these authorities of the city? We're quickly told in verse 4 that she acknowledges that she met them, but she fabricates that she did not know from where they came. And then in verse 5, she further elaborates her cover by saying that they had already left through the gates, which provides this huge misdirection for the authorities.

The text briefly tells us that instead, what did she do? She hid them. She hid them on her roof. But we don't understand why she is helping the spies until we get to verses 8 through 14. You see in verse 9 that Rahab speaks of what she knows of the Lord. She begins by stating that she knows the Lord has given the spies, the people of Israel, the land. Notice that she uses the divine name of God himself, the Living God, the God of Israel—not a god, but the Living and a particular God. And she says, "The fear of you have fallen upon us. All the inhabitants of the land melt before you." In a way, she's describing this faint of heart, this wavering that comes upon a group of people, very much like infantry in battle when their frontline breaks and soldiers begin to retreat in helpless and disorganized manner.

Not only does she speak about what she knows of the Lord—she goes on to talk about what she has heard about the Lord. Verse 10, she recounts these wonderful deeds that have been even listed in our call to worship from the Psalms, remembering the history, remembering the redemption, remembering the deliverance of the Lord. She recalls what she has heard of how the Lord dried up the Red Sea as they came out from Egypt. She recalls what she's heard about the victories over the two Amorite kings. And again she repeats, "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." What Rahab knows and hears are reports of the Lord's sovereignty, and she is affected by it. She includes herself as one whose heart is melted at hearing such terrible news.

You can see in this context, we can unpack sovereignty in just two brief ways, two facets. First, God's right to reign supremely. Rahab, a Canaanite herself, acknowledges that the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, the God who is in the heavens above and the earth beneath—this is the comprehensive way of her acknowledging that, indeed, God is supreme and reigns over all. This is the great struggle in life, is it not? All of history, all the kingdoms crowned, all the kingdoms cracked, all the peoples' referendums or all the peoples' revolutions, whether it's the battle between a parent and a child, between a worker and her tools, or a child and his toys—at some point, it all stems back to authority, to sovereignty. Who is in charge? Rahab's circumstances present her with the truth of who is truly sovereign over Jericho.

Sovereignty secondly looks at this aspect of how God's power provides richly. The Scriptures tell again and again of how God's abundant provision—and this is merely one episode. But we see the Lord guiding and directing the steps of his people. He is able, and he makes the way. He provides in his sovereignty, which flows out of his sovereign reign and rule. Rahab participates in God's providence for his people. The spies benefit from that providence in that their mission is met. In the rest of the Book of Joshua, in the rest of the Scriptures telling of God's salvation, we see the descriptions and the outcomes of this success in Joshua chapter 2.

So you and I are presented with a similar opportunity to know and hear of God's sovereignty in the life of his creation, in his way of his great salvation, and in the ways we are to exercise faith as we participate in his kingdom. Our sinful hearts and our sin patterns reveal areas where we fight for our sovereignty over and against his. So the call to us, what we glean from this story on this side of the Jordan, on this side of the cross, on this side of history, benefiting from God's great salvation—our call and imitation is to look to God's great salvation through the ages, and ultimately upon his final salvation provided through Jesus Christ, from whom all things are held together, and for whom all things exist, and through him all things are reconciled to God.

Going from anchoring herself to God's sovereignty, Rahab's faith in action flows from God's mercy. Rahab tells the spies she knows what is in store for Jericho. She believes the Lord has given Israel the land, and this is further attested by their prior victories. You'll notice in verse 10 that Rahab describes Sihon and Og being devoted to destruction. This topic is much bigger than we have time for today, although it's important. So I will make a few comments regarding this topic, and one additional in just one moment. But first, this idea of devoted to destruction.

For some of you, the events of the Book of Joshua or other events in the Old Testament, for instance, might be of little consequence to your lived experiences, or they may seem distant or even not relevant to your life today. However, others may rightly be aware to the implications of what this phrase implies and the weight of any moral or ethical challenge. The concept of being devoted to destruction relates to a ban of all things set apart by the Lord. And in the context of Israel's warfare in the land, it involves devoting or dedicating all things to destruction as worship to the Lord. So it is important to consider the question—or even, by some, the accusation—how can a holy, just, good, and loving God command from our vantage point such atrocities? How? That is an important question through the ages, and it certainly is an important question for our day when such atrocities exist all around us, right?

There's certainly more that can be said, and what is said has more context. But for the moment, I'll say this. The Bible presents two main reasons for the complete destruction of cities and the inhabitants of places like Jericho. First, the requirement of religious purity in the life and worship of Israel. It was commanded that Israel be religiously and morally set apart from the other nations, and it was forbidden to mix their practices with the religious practices of these other nations. And it was foreshadowed with much sadness—that foreshadowing came true—that Israel would not fully carry out God's commands, and they would fall to similar idolatries. So the first requirement the Bible presents is one of religious purity for Israel.

The second is God's just punishment for the sins of the Canaanites. Now, their sins would likely be similar to those discussed in places like Leviticus 18 as well as the historical and archaeological record that suggests that the peoples of Canaan practiced such vile—or, they conducted such vile practices such as child sacrifice. So the requirement of Israel's worship and then punishment for the sins of the Canaanites are what the Bible presents of what's going on here in the land specifically. But two more short comments regarding that topic.

God gives strict instructions to the people of Israel in his Word how to engage in warfare. And he made key distinctions between those cities and inhabitants outside of the land and those cities and inhabitants inside the land. This was not a blanket, irrespective, just cart blanche, just a crazy, chaotic destruction. This was purposeful. It was specific. And it was with key instructions.

It's important also to note that these commands are indeed from the Lord. And we have to wrestle with that from his Word. But they were given at a specific time, with specific purpose, and with specific geography. It was limited to the nation of Israel at this time as a means of purifying their worship and punishing the sins of Canaanites, as we've already mentioned. It was never intended to be used as a model for future campaigns of conquest in the name of the Lord. And when it has been done so, the people of God must repent of such sin against peoples in the world.

So now moving to that second kind of side comment that we need to address from this passage. There's been much discussion, but regarding Rahab's lie, her interaction with the king of Jericho. We know from Scripture that her faith is commended. James 2:25 mentions her specifically as an exemplar beside Abraham as being justified by their works. Some scholars believe the situation warranted the lie, and she was not morally wrong to do so. Others believe that regardless of the situation, God's character stands firm in his goodness, his righteousness, and truth, and his law is clear that we shall not bear false witness; therefore, Rahab did indeed sin in her lie. The passage itself does not present any editorial comments for us on the rightness or wrongness of her action, nor do the New Testament writers present clarification. She's merely commended for her faith, which involved actions that aided the spies in their mission, which then aided Israel in their calling as God's people in the land.

It's important to ask questions like these of the text, of the Bible. It's important that we don't shy away from hard things that are presented in Scripture, but that we wrestle with them, that we meditate upon them, we ask questions, we have our questions shaped by the questions that are presented in the Bible, the questions that the original audience is first asking: of who is God, and who are they, and what are they to do in relationship to who he is? So it's important. It's important to build an ethic for such circumstances. For example, what if you are harboring a person that the State deems an enemy of the State, and you think that law is unjust? And to obey the law would be to disobey God. What are you to do when you are asked a direct question, if you are hiding someone in your home? Another example—what do you do when asked to pay a bribe and participate in a nation's corruption?

These kinds of ethical questions need to be discussed. And we must submit to the Word of God and have our responses shaped by the Lord's character. This is for us to discuss in community, for us to even think about how this plays out in our work places. Some of you might be directly involved with things like a State's espionage in the worlds, global climate—I don't know. You can't tell me. So how we engage these questions are incredibly important. And it's incredibly important that we don't project onto the text what it doesn't tell us, but that we take away what the text is communicating, and we're seeing those principles and then seeing where they connect into our lives today, recognizing that there are dissimilarities or there are discontinuities between us today and the nation of Israel then.

But wherever you might fall on such ethical questions, it's still important to see the mercy of God through and through. First, note that despite her knowledge of Jericho being devoted to destruction, Rahab makes a request, verse 12 and 13. And she sees a sense—or, she's asking this question. Or, it's more of a request. But verse 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 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." We see her being exposed to the sovereignty of God, realizing the character of his mercy, and calling out for that mercy.

The beauty of this in this passage—and we can pull this out from throughout all of Scriptures—but it's also further evidence that God's deliverance and particular calling upon Israel in this time is not meant to be any sort of ethnocentric aspect of who the people of God is. Here is this Canaanite who is deserving of the punishment of her fellow citizens, and yet she cries out for mercy because she knows the Lord is merciful. What if Jericho did the same? What if we do the same? Of course, the spies respond, and they say, "Yes, your life for ours, our life for yours." Now, there's conditions here. It's an oath between them. Now, you might make the—raise the question or make the accusation that this is merely a convenience, or maybe another ruse like maybe she's done to the king. But I don't think we can take that away as a conclusion from the text, based on that indeed she keeps her end of the bargain, and indeed the spies and Israel keep their end of the bargain. And as we trace Rahab's story throughout Scripture, we see that she continues to live in the land of the people of Israel. We see that she becomes the father of a lineage. She's one of four women who are mentioned in Jesus's genealogy.

So in the moment, okay, maybe it's a matter of convenience. But it doesn't nullify the desire. Who wants to be destroyed? Why disparage calls for mercy? And certainly why disparage the one who can grant such calls for mercy? I wonder if all those years later, if another inhabitant from Jericho remembered this story, if he remembered the spies, if he remembered God's destruction, if he remembered God's mercy, if he remembered Rahab's request—what if Bartimaeus, Mark 10:46, a blind man interacting with Jesus as Jesus is on his way from Jericho to go up to Jerusalem. He cries out, "Son of David, have mercy on me. Jesus, Son of David, have mercy." And similarly, he too had a request. Bartimaeus asked Jesus, "Rabbi, let me recover my sight." And Jesus said, "Go your way." You remember? "Your faith has made you well."

Where do you need mercy? Where do you cry out to the One who is sovereign, the One who is merciful? Where in your life do you need mercy? Brothers and sisters, do you cry out for mercy? If there's mercy for others who are more deserving or less capable or weaker, and what is reserved for you is what you can do on your own, or what is what you deserve, whether that's good or bad. Faith in action flows from God's mercy. It is believing that he is sovereign, believing he is merciful. And that faith is then activated to call out to him, to rely on him, to make your allegiance with him.

And we did—just for a couple comments with the third, faith in action embraces God's redemption. This is the culmination of God's Scriptures, that we see God delivering his people based on his promises. And he does that from Abraham to Moses to Joshua to David to Jesus. And just as Rahab is placing her faith and salvation in the God of Israel, so, too, are we to place our faith in Christ the Messiah, the one who has come to bring redemption to both Israel and to the nations. And whereas there was a time when God did devote things to destruction in this specific context for specific purposes, we see God both in his justice and in his mercy, he still devotes something—or, rather, someone—to destruction. And whereas though we are deserving of the punishment of Jericho, though we are deserving of what Rahab could have received, should have received, but in her recognition cried out for mercy—we have one who was utterly destroyed on our behalf.

So the terrible news of God's justice and, dare I say, right anger, right wrath—he pours that out on Jesus. And we have a deliverer who was sent, who goes about and looks upon the land, sees his creation, sees his kingdom, and says, "I am going to die for her. I am going to make it right. I am going to make the world as it should be." And so faith in action embraces God's redemption. Now, there's more to be said, which we'll get to when we get into Hebrews 11. But Paul and James are in agreement. Paul focuses on Abraham, and the author of Hebrews focuses on Rahab. And they are focusing on her faith.

And we can rightly say that our salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. As an instrument of what it means to be in Christ. And likewise, James is right by acknowledging Abraham and even Rahab's faith as something that is justifying them. Their works justify them. And he's focusing on the evidence of faith. Paul is focusing on the instrument of faith. They are in complete agreement. And so our faith is in Christ. And as we are in Christ, we act. We are moved. We're compelled to serve, to love, to do good deeds—not as a way of garnering favor or making a deal with God in order to be in his kingdom or not destroyed; but we're recognizing that if it weren't for Jesus, we deserve to be destroyed, but by his grace and his love and his mercy we are not.

In September 2013, which was thirteen years after Bartali's death, Israel recognized him as righteous among the nations. This is an honorific title, and it's an allusion to Gentiles who sacrifice for Israel. And he was awarded this for his efforts to aid Jews during the war. When he son asked him why he did it, he said, "One does these things, and then that's that." Now, I don't know the extent of his faith, but Bartali was a devout Roman Catholic. He was asked to participate in this underground network by a bishop in Italy. His faith motivated him to action at great risk for the benefit of another. How much more that Christ, the most righteous one above all nations, sacrificed himself for both Israel and the Gentiles for our salvation?

The door is Christ through faith. The fruit of the Spirit compels us to act as evidence of our faith. Faith, as James said, is dead without works. And we don't do it perfectly. We fail. We forget. But as we are a community of Christ's body, we are to spur one another, to encourage one another to love and good deeds—faith in action. And that faith in action is anchored in God's sovereignty. It flows from God's mercy. And it embraces God's redemption. Amen? Let us pray.

Lord, we give you thanks. We give you thanks that Rahab was faithful, but we give you more thanks that her faith is not what makes us whole. It does not make us right with you. But we are to follow in her steps, in the One who she has faith in. May we look to you as the author of our life and the author of our faith and certainly the finisher of our faith. So, Lord, in the meantime, grow our faith that we might be your body, your witness to the world as they see and observe, that we would demonstrate your character, your intentions, and that we would showcase your love for the world and the mercy that you show. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.