The Prostitute

Four Scandalous Women who Changed the World

Joshua 2

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That song is from the Broadway musical *Les Miserables*, taken from Victor Hugo's novel. And every time I hear that song, and I've heard it many times, I get a tear in my eye because every time I hear it I think, "I know that girl. She has sat in my office dozens of times." She believed that this smooth-talking man would be the man of her dreams. She believed his empty talk and his empty promises and she gave to him something she could never take back, only to realize once he got what he wanted, he moved on to the next conquest. And usually those situations end up with the girl longing for love all the more strongly, which leads to another bad decision, and then another bad decision, and eventually she wakes up one morning and she asks the question, "What happened? How did I get here?"

But it isn't just girls; it isn't just women; it's all of us. Nobody gets up in the morning and says, "I think I'll ruin my life today!" Yet every day somebody does. One bad decision leads to another bad decision that leads to another bad decision and finally you wake up one morning and you wonder, "How did this happen?" The lyric in the song that I find the most haunting is that final lyric—that "Life had killed the dream I dreamed." I have no doubt there are some of you sitting here this morning and those words resonate in your heart. One day you had those dreams but life has killed the dreams and you get up in the morning and you wonder, "How did it become this?"

I wonder if that's how Rahab—Rahab the prostitute—felt. Whenever I read the story of Rahab, I'm always wondering, *who was it that used her and abused her and discarded her on the trash heap of life where her only means of survival was to be the town prostitute?* I have no doubt that the words of that song tell her story and that's the story we want to talk about this morning. If you have a Bible, turn with us to Joshua, Chapter 2. Joshua is a great book—it's a book of swords flashing and courage and taking the land. It's very dramatic; it's very exciting. In Joshua, Chapter 1, it opens with these words:

> **"Moses my servant is dead…"**

If you've been reading the Bible from Genesis, you kind of pick up on this grand story of Moses, so those words are quite shocking. Now it's a whole new chapter. The torch has been handed to Joshua. The Hebrew people have wandered for forty years in the wilderness because they're unwilling to trust God, but now that generation has died and this is a new day. Joshua is the leader and it's a chance for the next generation to go in and take the Land of Promise. It's all very exciting. The repetition in chapter one to Joshua is, "Be strong and courageous; be strong and courageous!" God says it to him several times. We pick up, then, the story in chapter 2:

> **Then Joshua the son of Nun sent two men as spies secretly from Shittim, saying, "Go, view the land, especially Jericho." So they went and came into the house of a harlot whose name was Rahab, and lodged there.** (*NASB, Joshua 2:1)

Joshua sends **two spies secretly**. Now there's a lot of discussion around *why secretly*? If you remember the story, Joshua was one of twelve spies that went into the land and spied it out

forty years earlier, came back and two of the spies said, "We can take this land." Ten of the spies said, "They're too big; we can't do it," and they convinced the majority. The majority then chose not to follow God and they wandered in the wilderness for forty years and there they died. So maybe Joshua was thinking, "I don't want that to happen again." Nobody really knows, but he secretly sends spies to Jericho in order to check it out. They would have had to cross the Jordan River at flood stage, which in itself was quite dangerous. They probably came down from the North and, if they followed the typical pattern, they would have just simply walked into Jericho in the daylight. Jericho was a city that was about eight or nine acres. They have excavated the city today and around the city were two walls, about fifteen feet apart. So it's not a large area, but very fortified, and typical of a fortified city in that day. During the day the gates would open and people would come and go. It would have been packed with people so nobody would have noticed a couple of visitors wandering through the gates and just mixing with the crowd. That's probably what they did. Along the way they bumped into a prostitute—the town prostitute—by the name of Rahab.

Now it's interesting, when you read different commentators, they're constantly trying to soften the fact that she was a harlot—that she was a prostitute. In the Hebrew language the word *harlot* also could mean *innkeeper* so they'll say, "Well she wasn't really a prostitute; she was an innkeeper." But that gets you nowhere because everybody knows, in the ancient world, to be a harlot was to be an innkeeper, to be an innkeeper was to be a harlot. They were virtually synonymous; that's just the way it worked in these ancient cities. Also, when you go to the New Testament, the New Testament refers to her several times, always using the Greek word that can only mean *prostitute*. So there's no question what she did to survive.

They meet her and they go back to her house. Now the writer is very careful to use terms that have no sexual overtones. There isn't even the slightest hint that that's what these spies were interested in. They simply were looking for a safe place to stay. Verse 2:

> **It was told the king of Jericho, saying, "Behold, men from the sons of Israel have come here tonight to search out the land." And the king of Jericho sent word to Rahab saying, "Bring out the men who have come to you, who have entered your house, for they have come to search out all the land." But the woman had taken the two men and hidden them, and she said, "Yes, the men came to me, but I did not know where they were from. It came about, when it was time to shut the gate at dark, that the men went out; I do not know where the men went. Pursue them quickly, for you will overtake them." But she had brought them up to the roof and hidden them in the stalks of flax which she had laid in order on the roof. So the men pursued them on the road to the Jordan to the fords; and as soon as those who were pursuing had gone out, they shut the gate.** (Vs. 2-7)

Now in these ancient cities like Jericho, they were kind of a city-state where they were a law unto themselves. They were a government unto themselves and most of these types of cities would have their own sitting king, which is the case in Jericho. Somebody comes and says, "Hey, there's a couple of spies here from the Hebrew people and they've gone down to pay a little visit to Rahab." So the word goes to the king and the king sends his people to Rahab and he wants the men. Rahab, then, just simply lies through her teeth and tells the king's men, "They were here but they've gone and I don't know who they were and I don't know where they went." And she sends them out to follow. Meanwhile the narrator tells us that actually that **was** just simply a lie. She had hidden them up on the roof in the midst of the flax, the

stalks of flax. Basically what that's talking about is: They would have taken these stalks and they would have soaked them in water for two or three weeks. Then they put them out into the sun and when they were dry they basically were made into like a linen cloth and sold. So there would have been stacks of these on the roof and obviously the two men hide in there.

Now interestingly enough, there's a lot of discussion around whether or not it was acceptable for Rahab to lie. In Christian circles there are these debates that go on, referred to as *situational ethics*. Basically, are there times when it's okay to not tell the truth? And there are camps that say, "Yes," and there are camps that say, "No," and Rahab is one of the classic examples they argue about. I think when you're really looking at the text, that's not the point. She's not condemned for lying; it's not approved that she lied. It's just simply not the point of the text. The point of the text is: At that point, she had to make a decision. She either had to side with the Hebrew spies or she had to side with her king and her people. There was no middle ground. I think the role of that part of the text is to tell us, at that moment her life was at great risk. The moment those words came out of her mouth, her life was in jeopardy. If the king would have found the spies on the roof, both she and the spies would certainly have been put to death. So there's a sense in the text in which we must understand that she literally risked everything to take a side and to choose to side with the Hebrew spies and we're left wondering, "Why would she do that?"

The other part of that paragraph that, again, intensifies what's going on here, is twice there's the repetition of the words **...shut the gate**. In the ancient world, in a city like Jericho, during the day you could come and go. And these spies at any point could have left the city. But once the gate is shut in the evening, not only can people not get in, people cannot get out. So there's a repetition of the phrase that the gate was shut as a way of saying these spies were now completely in the hands of Rahab the harlot. They had no hope of survival other than her, so it's building this tension of both the risk that she is taking and the risk now that belongs to them. Verse 8:

> **Now before they lay down, she came up to them on the roof, and she said to the men, "I know that the LORD has given you the land, and that the terror of you has fallen on us, and that all the inhabitants of the land have melted away before you. 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 utterly destroyed. When we heard it, our hearts melted and no courage remained in any man any longer because of you; for the LORD your God, He is God in heaven above and on earth beneath. Now therefore, please swear to me by the LORD, since I have dealt kindly with you, that you also will deal kindly with my father's household, and give me a pledge of truth, and spare my father and my mother and my brothers and my sisters with all who belong to them, and deliver our lives from death." So the men said to her, "Our life for yours if you do not tell this business of ours; and it shall come about when the LORD gives us the land that we will deal kindly and faithfully with you."** (Vs. 8-14)

Now we find out, out of the mouth of Rahab herself, why she made the decision she made. Understanding she had been raised in a pagan, idolatrous culture, she somewhere along the way had heard the stories of the Hebrew God. The two specifically that she mentions are: God's delivering them through the parting of the Red Sea and this great victory over the two Amorite kings—and you can read about that in Numbers, Chapter 14. What's interesting is what she

says the effect of those stories was on her people. Going back forty years ago, ten of the spies said, "It's a land flowing with milk and honey, but we can't take it. They're too big and they're too strong." Forty years later Rahab is saying, "Actually that's not the case at all." They had heard the stories of the Hebrew God; their hearts had melted. The courage had gone out of them; they had lost their will to fight. You get the clear sense that God had already prepared the ground. They could have easily taken the land but they chose not to trust Him. Now we're forty years later and Rahab is saying, "Hey, my people are scared to death of your God because of what we have heard." Now what she has concluded, then, is that, "Your God is **the** God—the God of the Hebrew people is **God**." Now for a woman who has grown up in a pagan, idolatrous culture, this is a remarkable witness of faith—that based on what she has heard, she has concluded the God of the Hebrews *is* God—to the extent that she was willing to risk her life for what she believed to be true. She chose to take the side of the two Hebrew spies, at the risk of her own life, because she believed with all her heart that their God is *the* God.

Now one of the remarkable features of this particular part of the text is the length of the statement that Rahab the harlot makes. When you read through the Old Testament, you find out that the dialogue coming out of a woman's mouth is very rare and very short. This is one of the longest uninterrupted statements out of a woman's mouth in the entire Old Testament. There's no question at this point that Joshua, chapter 2 is about this remarkable woman of faith, an idolatrous prostitute who figured out, "The God of the Hebrews is God and I'm willing to stake my life on it." That's the feature of the text; that's the point that's being made. Now what she's asking for in terms of an agreement is what would be referred to as a hased agreement. The word **kindly** there shows up several times and it's a rather technical term. It shows up over two hundred fifty times in the Old Testament. And basically the idea is this: If I act kindly toward you, I'm asking for you to reciprocate and deal kindly with me. In other words, the question is, "Will you enter into a hased agreement? So when she says that, that's what she's asking for. So when the two spies—and it's worth noting they don't utter a word until this point in the text—these are the first words out of their mouth and what they say is, "I agree. We're entering into this hased agreement. You were kind to us; we will be kind to you." And that's the promise that is made. Verse 15:

> **Then she let them down by a rope through the window, for her house was on the city wall, so that she was living on the wall. She said to them, "Go to the hill country so that the pursuers will not happen upon you, and hide yourselves there for three days, until the pursuers return. Then afterward you may go on your way." The men said to her, "We shall be free from this oath to you which you have made us swear, unless, when we come into the land, you tie this cord of scarlet thread in the window through which you let us down, and gather to yourself into the house your father and your mother and your brothers and all your father's household. It shall come about that anyone who goes out of the doors of your house into the street, his blood shall be on his own head, and we shall be free; but anyone who is with you in the house, his blood shall be on our head if a hand is laid on him. But if you tell this business of ours, then we shall be free from the oath which you have made us swear." She said, "According to your words, so be it." So she sent them away, and they departed; and she tied the scarlet cord in the window.** (Vs. 15-21)

So Rahab lives on the wall. One of the interesting things the archaeologists have found is evidence that because these two walls were so close in proximity—about fifteen feet apart—that it was believed at certain places around the wall, they would put planks from one wall to the other and

then they would put a little shack on top of those planks, and people actually lived on the wall. It appears that's how Rahab lived. So she gets this rope and she lets them down and they have this discussion about the conditions under which they will keep or not keep the agreement. What's interesting, when you read through the dialogue, you get into this scarlet cord—basically a red rope—and when you start to read through the discussion, it sounds very *Passover-ish*. Go back and read the text talking about the Passover and the Hebrew people in Egypt and the final plague and that the Angel of Death is going to come over and the responsibility to take blood of an animal and paint it on the doorframe and that would identify that you were under the blood of the Lamb and the Angel of Death would pass over. But there's a lot of this similar language. "You go into the streets and you will die, and you don't paint the blood and you will die." And clearly the intent of the text is to draw some imagery from the Passover. It's not blood on the doorpost, but rather it's this red rope that will hang in the window of her house that still has this symbolism of the blood. You get this sense that the text is saying that her faith is going to put her under the blood of the Lamb and she will experience God's salvation.

Now a logical question would be, "What about the rest of these people? How come they don't have the option of God's salvation?" And the answer is: For four hundred twenty years, they have been warned. It goes all the way back to the days of Abraham where they have been warned over and over and over again that the God of the Hebrews is God. They've all heard the stories, the same as Rahab. It's just that there's one among them who has made the choice to believe that the Hebrew God is God and she will experience the salvation that comes under the blood of the Lamb. I think that's the symbolism there.

So with that, there is agreement. The spies get away and the remainder of the chapter is just the spies going back, relaying the story and, "Let's take these guys". At that point Rahab, for the most part, goes away. The following chapters are filled with excitement and steps of faith and the parting of the Jordan River and then you get to chapter 6. If you're not familiar with the story, the strategy to take the city is really quite unique. A lot of people believe that Joshua was a military genius but, in this particular campaign, Joshua's genius was not at play. God stepped in and said, "Here's how we're going to do this. Every day for six days you're going to march up to the city; you're going to march around the walls and then you're going to go home. And on the seventh day you're going to march around the city seven times and you're going to blow a trumpet and you're going to yell and the walls are going to fall down and you're going to take the city." The reason God did that, clearly was to say we're going to take this city, not on the basis of *our* strength, not on the basis of strategy, but on the basis of *My power* delivering the city to you. So that's the strategy; we're caught up in the battle and they're marching and it's all starting to get pretty exciting. In the back of our minds, however, we're still thinking, "Hey, what about this prostitute that was promised salvation?" Well we finally find her in verse 17 of chapter 6:

> **The city shall be under the ban, it and all that is in it belongs to the LORD; only Rahab the harlot** *(notice the label never goes away)* **and all who are with her in the house shall live, because she hid the messengers whom we sent.**

Verse 21 says they utterly destroyed the city. Verse 22:

> **Joshua said to the two men who had spied out the land, "Go into the harlot's house and bring the woman and all she has out of there as you have sworn to her." So the young men who were spies went in and brought out Rahab and her father and her mother and her brothers and all she had; they also brought out all her relatives and**

placed them outside the camp of Israel. They burned the city with fire, and all that was in it. Only the silver and gold and articles of bronze and iron, they put in the treasury of the house of the LORD. However, Rahab the harlot and her father's household and all she had, Joshua spared; and she has lived in the midst of Israel to this day, for she hid the messengers whom Joshua sent to spy out Jericho. (Vs. 22-25)

Fulfilling the promise they had made, now most believe the reason that they were put outside the camp was because they would have to go through a purification ritual before they could be invited into the camp. I don't think it implies that it was necessary for them to stay outside. It's just in wartime they were placed there. But I find myself wondering, when Joshua said to the two spies, "Go get the prostitute," and they placed her outside the camp, can you imagine that, at any moment in time, they had the slightest indication of the scandalous thing God would do with this prostitute? And the answer is, "Obviously not". For the most part Rahab goes away and disappears into the story until we find her in Matthew, Chapter 1.

I mentioned last week, in the genealogy of Jesus, it was very unusual in an ancient genealogy to list women...very unusual. In the genealogy of Jesus there are four women listed, other than Mary. And can you believe it, the second scandalous woman showing up in the kingly line of the Messiah is none other than Rahab the prostitute. Not only did they invite her into the camp of Israel, not only did they allow her to stay, but she found a man; she married him; she produced a child and, through that child would come the kingly line of the Messiah Himself. If you had that story in your family tree, that's a story that you would like to keep hidden. Again we ask the question—it's so unusual that any women are listed in the genealogy—why would you actually advertise that one of these women had been this pagan, idolatrous prostitute? — unless that's the point! That is the reason why God would become flesh—to seek and to save those who have been used, abused, and discarded, those who have been tossed into the trash heap of life, those who have had their dreams abused and crushed. And the reality is: we all find ourselves on the trash heap of life, desperately in need of a Savior. These scandalous women are in the family tree of Jesus to remind us, "This is the point!" God's ways are not our ways, as God extends His grace and mercy to those in desperate need of a Savior.

Rahab shows up two other places. In Hebrews, Chapter 11—a lot of people refer to this as the Faith Hall of Fame—it's a remarkable chapter and there are only two women in the Hall of Fame. One is Sarah, the wife of Abraham. Guess who number 2 is? Rahab! And when you read the text, she's not Rahab—she's Rahab the prostitute. The label never goes away.

The other writer in the New Testament that uses her is James, in James, Chapter 2. When he's talking about faith and works and he talks about, "A faith that saves is a faith that works," of all the remarkable women in the Old Testament that he could have used to illustrate this point, who do you think he uses? Rahab! But it's not just Rahab—it's Rahab the prostitute. There's this constant emphasis on the reality that God took this woman who was so scandalous and made her into this hero of faith. As a matter of fact the thing about Rahab that is continually emphasized is her courage and faith, that in that moment, when the spies entered into her city, she could no longer remain neutral. She had heard the stories of the Hebrew God. She had grown up in a culture of pagan idolatry and she had to make a decision. Was the God of the Hebrews, God, or is it true what I've been taught my whole life? At this point she could not remain neutral. That's the point of the Joshua 2 story. She had to make a decision, at a great risk. At the risk of her very life, she took her stand and she said, "I believe the God of the Hebrews is God." That decision not only saved her life but put her in a position to be a woman

whom God would use to change the world.

In the United States of America, we consider ourselves to be very "Christian-ly." People embrace Easter; people embrace Christmas. If you lay out the basics of the message of the gospel, people for the most part give some sort of assent. But we tend to view that message from a distance. In other words, there's kind of a mental assent—"I think that's true". But that mental assent has no life-changing power, has no salvation power. It takes far more than just mentally saying, "I think that's probably true," and then living my own life my own way, by my own rules, doing my own thing. To truly experience this life-changing power, this life-changing grace, this scandalous grace and mercy that God so freely offers, one must do more than just give mental assent. There must come a point in time where I must say, "I believe that; I *really* believe that. I'm going to risk my entire eternity on my belief that this is true." Jesus said, "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. Nobody comes to the Father but by Me." At the end of the day, everybody has to decide, did Jesus tell the truth or is He a liar? If all roads lead to God, then Jesus is a liar—or Jesus tells the truth. But you can't have it both ways. You can't keep riding some sort of a neutral stance. There has to come a moment in time where you make up your mind. To not decide is to decide. And when you stand before your Maker, you're going to find that out. God grants you, in His grace and mercy, a gift—a gift of His salvation—to come under the blood of the Lamb. The Lamb is God Himself, who became flesh and shed His blood in order to pay for your sin, that if you're willing to believe, "I am a sinner in need of a Savior," and I'm going to take my stand and I'm going to say, "I believe! I believe Jesus died for me!" Not from a distance, but to own it, to embrace it, to take my stand and to say, "I am going to now be a Christ-follower. This is how I'm going to live my life." Some of you sitting there this morning would resonate with the words: "Life has killed the dream I dreamed." You get up in the morning and you wonder what happened. "At one time I thought I had a dream and I thought life was going to be *this*, but I woke up one morning and I found out life had killed my dream." And now you survive day after day after day. This morning God offers you a new dream—a new dream that is forever—a new dream that's filled with grace and mercy and love, a dream that's filled with everything you've ever wanted and longed for. But you can't embrace this dream from a distance. At some time you have to have the courage to say, "Hey, I'm in!" You have to pull the trigger; you have to believe. You have to take your stand and say, "Jesus, I believe and I want You to be my Savior." The grace of God is so unimaginably scandalous that who knows, God may actually want to use you to change the world.

> *Our Father, we're thankful this morning for Your scandalous grace. Lord, there are probably quite a few people here this morning that would say life has killed the dream. They get up in the morning and they wonder just exactly what happened. Lord, I pray that this morning You would open up their hearts to hear that You offer them a new dream—not for a day or a week, but forever. And it's a gift! Lord, I pray that they would have the courage to believe. In Jesus' Name, Amen.*

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