

Rahab: The Grace At The Heart of Christmas

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[0 : 00] Good afternoon everyone. Welcome to the lunchtime service. We're making a prompt start this afternoon. Trying to. Do come and grab a seat and we'll get underway.

Well, can I warmly welcome you to our lunchtime service this Wednesday. It's very good to see you all indeed. And before we read God's words, just one or two notices for your attention. And you'll see these notices are both on the back of the sheet. So just below the carol we'll sing later, you'll see there are two notices. So firstly, next Wednesday is the Christmas lunchtime carol service.

And that will be at one o'clock. So we're a bit earlier next week, so we can squeeze in a few more carols next Wednesday afternoon. There'll be no lunch served, but there will be tea and coffee and mince pies served afterwards.

So that's next week, one o'clock. And also next week we'll be taking up the Christmas offering. And this year the offering is going towards our gospel partners, Imran and Nagina Gill, who work in Pakistan.

[1 : 15] And the offering is to go towards helping them to buy their own property. They're currently in rented accommodation, which isn't really suitable. And the rents keep going up by huge margins each year.

So it'll be good for them to be able to have their own home. So we're going to be putting some money towards that. So next week there'll be an offering at some point during the service. Good. Well, could you turn to Matthew chapter 1? And I'll read the first few verses of Matthew chapter 1. Beginning at verse 1. The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of God, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, and Judah the father of Perez, and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Ram, and Ram the father of Amminadab, and Amminadab the father of Nashon, and Nashon the father of Salmon, and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of David the king.

[2 : 54] Amen. Well, may God bless to us his word this afternoon. And whilst you're there, could you keep a finger in Matthew chapter 1 and turn to Joshua chapter 2?

We're thinking about one of the women mentioned in the genealogy, and we're looking at Rahab this afternoon. So turn to Joshua chapter 2, which is on page 178.

And I'll read that a bit later. So keep your finger in Joshua chapter 2. But before we get any further, I'm going to pray. So let's gather together our hearts and pray, shall we?

Amen. Our Lord Jesus Christ, who at your first coming did send thy messenger to prepare your way before thee, grant that the ministers and stewards of thy mysteries may likewise so prepare and make ready your way by turning the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, that thy second coming to judge the world, we may be found an acceptable people in thy sight, who live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, ever one God, world without end.

Amen. Amen. Well, I wonder if there are people that you've written off as being beyond God's grace.

[4 : 33] They'll never become a Christian, you might think to yourself. Or perhaps you feel yourself that you're somehow beyond God's grace. You're beyond his care and concern.

He can never really want someone like me, you think to yourself. Well, the message of Christmas, the message of the gospel, is all about God. But it's all about the God who in his grace reaches down into this world of darkness and touches individuals.

Yes, God's story is cosmic in proportions, but it's also personal. It is about individuals, people just like you and me. Just read the Bible.

So much of it is about God's people in a corporate big sense, but it's also about his working in and through the lives of individuals. We see that as we read these opening words in Matthew's genealogy.

At first glance, it looks pretty unpromising, doesn't it, as we read this series of names. It doesn't look very promising for a Christmas series, you might think.

[5 : 44] But it's not just a list of names, of course. It is the royal family tree of the long-promised Messiah, Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

And Matthew includes it. He begins his gospel with it to demonstrate that the coming of Jesus was a coming rooted in history. It was a coming rooted not in an idealized history, but a messy one, a real one.

And we saw that last week, didn't we, as we looked at the first of the women who make an appearance in the family tree. We looked at Tamar. And we saw that the coming of Jesus demonstrates that God not only works through the grime of humanity, but also that he works to remove the grime of humanity with the coming of Jesus Christ.

And this afternoon, we consider the second woman mentioned there in Matthew's genealogy, Rahab. And you can read all about her in Joshua chapter 2.

And we're about to read a section of that in a moment. And again, we see the remarkable way that God works in the lives of individuals to bring about his ultimate purpose that we particularly remember and celebrate each Christmas.

[7 : 05] Now, Rahab, she was a Canaanite, a pagan, a total outsider of the people of God.

And not only that, but she lived in a city that was about to come under attack by Joshua and all the army of Israel. Things did not look promising for her.

But extraordinarily, God, in his grace, saved her. And not only that, but she was given the privilege of a significant place in the royal line that would eventually lead to the long-promised serpent crusher.

She is another unlikely woman who saved Christmas. So let's turn now to Joshua chapter 2. And at this point, after decades of wandering in the wilderness, God's people are at the brink of the promised land.

Their great leader, Moses, has just died. And Joshua takes the lead. He is preparing for the conquest of the land long promised to God's people.

[8 : 12] That conquest is about to begin. So Joshua chapter 2, verse 1. And Joshua, the son of Nun, sent two men secretly from Shittim as spies, saying, Go, view the land, especially Jericho.

And they went and came into the house of a prostitute whose name was Rahab. And they lodged there. And it was told to the king of Jericho, Behold, men of Israel have come here tonight to search out the land.

Then the king of Jericho sent to Rahab, saying, Bring out the men who have come to you, who 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, True, the men came to me, but I did not know where they were from. And when the gate was about to be closed at dark, 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 hid them with the stalks of flax that she had laid in order on the roof.

[9 : 22] So the men pursued after them on the way to the Jordan, as far as the fords. And the gate was shut as soon as the pursuers had gone out. Before the men lay down, she came up to them on the roof and said to the men, 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.

For we've 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.

And as soon 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 the God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath.

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. And the men said to her, our life for yours, even to death. If you do not tell this business of ours, then when the Lord gives us the land, we will deal kindly and faithfully with you.

[10:49] Then she let them down by a rope through the window for her house was built into the city wall so that she lived in the wall. And she said to them, go into the hills or the pursuers will encounter you and hide there three days until the pursuers have returned.

Then afterwards, you may go on your way. Now look down to verse 22. They departed and went into the hills and remained there three days until the pursuers returned.

And the pursuers searched all along the way and found nothing. Then the two men returned. They came down from the hills and passed over and came to Joshua, the son of Nun, and told him all that had happened to them.

And they said to Joshua, truly, the Lord has given all the land into our hands and also all the inhabitants of the land melt away because of us.

Well, that's just a taste of Joshua and the story of Rahab. And we see there in that chapter, Joshua chapter 2, we see in this remarkable chapter that there is a battle looming.

[11:59] The men of Israel are about to take the land. There is a great judgment coming. But not before a pagan prostitute is saved from the coming judgment.

Now that is a bit of a surprise, isn't it? As you sit down to read through the book of Joshua, you think this is going to be a story all about military reconnaissance. But as it turns out, the Lord is busy at work saving pagans.

You see, God is keeping all of his promises, not just promises of a great kingdom, but of grace shown to real people, messy people.

Grace shown even to a pagan prostitute, Rahab. So let's trace through the action in Rahab's story. It reads a little bit like a Bond spy thriller, doesn't it?

It's got everything. Intrigue, suspense, a few close shaves, and the dramatic escape out of a window in the wall. There's a river crossing by stealth, and then into the stronghold of Jericho.

[13:06] But things seem to go downhill pretty quickly once the men reach Jericho. The spies somehow end up in a brothel, and the king of Jericho finds out, and he knows what they're doing.

The tension is running high. How will the spies get out alive? Will they make it back to Joshua? Well, enter Rahab.

She takes center stage now. And in her story, not only do we see the bigger picture of the safe return of the spies and the encouraging report they're able to bring to Joshua, but we also see the astonishing God who shocks us with his grace in the faith of a pagan prostitute.

The king has heard about the spies. He knows what they're doing, and so he sends around the Jericho cops to Rahab's. What will she do? Well, she deflects the officers, having already hidden the spies.

Look at verse 5. Yes, they were here. I've no idea who they were, but they've gone not long ago. But if you hurry, you'll catch them. Now, let's not be sidetracked by Rahab's deception.

[14:25] She tells a lie, doesn't she? But the text is silent on us. It makes no evaluation of her actions. But clearly, by her actions in hiding the spies, she demonstrates a real and profound change in allegiance.

She could easily have given the men up, couldn't she? She could have avoided the risk of deceiving the officers and of the men being found on her property.

But Rahab aligns herself with the spies from Israel. And in fact, Hebrews chapter 11 identifies her friendly welcome of the spies as an indicator of her faith.

Her actions evidence the reality of a change in loyalty for Rahab. Now, what on earth happened for Rahab to do that?

A Canaanite prostitute there in Jericho. Why is her allegiance changed to side with these men of Israel, these spies? Well, let's look to the next scene in the story.

[15:31] She creeps up onto the roof to speak to the spies. Look down to verse 8 there in Joshua 2. And in this extraordinary confession, we see here what Rahab has come to know about the Lord and the mighty acts he's done for his people.

And these words show us why Rahab throws herself upon the Lord's mercy and shifts her loyalty from Jericho to Joshua. She knows, verse 8, that the Lord has given Israel the land.

She knows that the fear of the Lord has fallen on everyone. She knows that all the inhabitants melt away in fear because of Israel. She knows that her city, Jericho, she knows the whole land is about to face defeat.

She knows that there is a certain coming judgment. She knows this because, verse 10, she has heard about the mighty acts of God, the crossing of the Red Sea, the exodus from Egypt, the defeat of those two kings on the other side of the Jordan.

News of God's mighty acts had reached Jericho. And verse 11, their hearts melted. It was hearing about the mighty acts of God that was the basis of Rahab's faith.

[16:56] And that's always the way, isn't it? Biblical faith is based on testimony of God's acts. It's based on his actions in history. And that is how it was for Rahab.

Faith has its basis in the fact of what God has done for his people. That is how people begin to come to faith, then and now. We look back in history.

We see the way in which God has acted in history, the way he has revealed himself in history. But it doesn't stop at her merely hearing testimony.

What Rahab heard led her to confess the supreme sovereignty and majesty of the Lord. Look at the second half of verse 11. For the Lord your God, he is the God in heavens above and on the earth beneath.

Rahab is identifying the God of Israel as the God in the heavens and on the earth. He alone is God. There is no one else like him. She knows that the earth belongs to him.

[18:06] And that if he wants to give Israel Jericho and Canaan, then nothing is going to stop him from doing that. And she believes, perhaps more surely than any of Joshua's army, that God really is giving his people the land they promised.

And that means judgment for her and her city. And so Rahab does the only thing that she knows she can do.

She takes refuge in the Lord. Look down at verse 12. She flings herself on God's mercy in the face of this certain coming judgment. And it's not just a case of a confession of the truth about God.

Faith is more than just words on lips. It means loyalty. Loyalty to God and to his people. It meant for Rahab not betraying those spies. It meant for Rahab tying that scarlet cord to her window.

It meant gathering her household under her roof. In all this, Rahab demonstrates real faith. Because real faith is visible.

[19:16] Real life loyalty to God, to Christ, to his people. James, the New Testament, speaks about Rahab in a passage all about faith.

And he's basically saying, do you want to know what real faith is? Well, consider Rahab. Her faith was a real saving faith. Her faith was demonstrated in her allegiance to the Lord and to his people. Standing with them. Throwing her lot in with them. It wasn't about using the right evangelical language or using the right formulas. The spies didn't care about that.

Rahab's actions spoke louder than her words. And it saved her. See, faith cannot be separated from the actions of allegiance to the Lord and his people.

And we see a few chapters later that Rahab, this pagan prostitute, she was indeed saved. She was then included in the Lord's people.

[20:23] It's astonishing as you read through the book. Of all the people in Jericho, Rahab was saved. But God in his grace isn't finished with Rahab yet, is he?

We know, having just read the opening verses of Matthew chapter 1, that our name crops up in the most surprising of places. That a Canaanite prostitute should end up in the legal lineage of Jesus is shocking, isn't it?

That's the kind of thing that you or I would brush under the carpet, if we're honest. You don't want to hide that away in the footnotes or in an appendix at the end. Not there, right at the front at the start of your gospel.

But God isn't like us. He works in ways and through people we wouldn't choose. He shocks us with his grace, doesn't he? The story of Rahab is truly astonishing.

That she, like Tamar before her and Ruth after her, would be touched by the grace of God and used for his eternal purposes to be mothers of children that would one day lead to the promised child, the seed of the woman long promised.

[21:38] How extraordinary that they would play such a role in God's plans to bring forgiveness of sin, to bring life everlasting through the Christ child.

Rahab's part of that. Isn't that astonishing? Well then, three implications for us as we think about Rahab this Christmas time.

First, marvel at God's grace. Marvel at his grace shown even to a pagan prostitute. Don't write anyone off.

He chooses the sort of people that we would write off in a millisecond. If you're anything like me, I do that all the time. You think, they couldn't possibly be saved and loved by God.

But God is not like us. From a human point of view, her prospects were not good, were they? But the Lord showed his marvelous grace to her and she is welcomed into the people of God.

[22 : 38] And this is how God has always worked and works now because he delights to save sinners. And don't you find that just so encouraging when you see God at work in the life of an individual?

You can think of people, I'm sure, where you've seen that happen. Someone you wouldn't expect. God's reached into their lives and touched them, saved them. Perhaps someone you've long prayed for.

Perhaps a child who for many years seemed disinterested and on the fringes. They turn their life around. They throw their lot in with the Lord and his people. Perhaps it's the sort of people you might just turn your nose up at.

But the church is a refuge for sinners. For people just like Rahab. So let's not fall into the trap of thinking that church is a place for the finished articles.

It's not a place where perfection is going to be achieved. The church is a hospital for the sick, isn't it? It's not a catwalk for the perfect. And if we're honest with ourselves for a few seconds then we'll know that's true of the people around us.

[23 : 52] And if we're really honest for a few more seconds then we'll know it's true of us too. It's only by God's grace that we're included in his family. Will you marvel at that?

That is how God works. The second implication is this. Throw yourself upon God's grace. Rahab knew that God was sovereign.

She had been faced with the reality of a God who was about to judge her and her city and rightly she's afraid. In fact all of Jericho is fearful about what is about to happen to their city.

But Rahab unlike the rest of Jericho who knew as much as she did Rahab didn't in her fear harden herself resist the Lord no.

She has no choice but to risk all on the mercy of God by seeking a place amongst his people. She's no idea if she can be saved but she stakes all in hope.

[24 : 55] She's no choice. But she finds that there is an open door even to her. To the one who knocks it will be opened.

That's grace isn't it? And when people sometimes come to reality of their sin before a holy God they rightly fear they wonder can there possibly be acceptance for me?

Perhaps especially so for a prostitute. Well the answer is yes. There is grace for all who throw themselves upon Christ.

So will you seek refuge in him this Christmas time? Will you fling yourself upon his grace? But there is a necessary corollary to God's grace and it's this.

It's our third implication. Don't presume on God's grace. For Rahab to make no choice or to choose to side against the Lord and his people as all of Jericho does that is to face certain disaster.

[26 : 08] There is no other way to escape the coming judgment than to fling yourself upon God's grace. No special exemptions. No appeals to impunity.

God's grace to make God's grace but even the greatest unlikeliest outsider God can call bring into his story.

And the marvel is that Rahab is not just recorded there in Joshua chapter 2. Not only is she wonderfully included in the people of God as you read about in Joshua chapter 6 but she is an ancestor of Christ.

She is right there as we have seen on the first page of the New Testament in Matthew's genealogy. What astonishing grace to even the most unlikely of people.

That is the great wonder of Christmas isn't it? That God became man and that through the personal work of Jesus God calls unlikely people people just like you and me he calls us to himself offering forgiveness of sin and life eternal.

[27 : 21] That is astonishing. It's amazing. So at this Christmas time will you fling yourself upon his mercy his grace just as Rahab did and will you marvel at his grace because he delights to save sinners.

Let me pray. Our Father God how astonishing is your grace that you would include the most unlikely of people in your plans and purposes and how glad we are that you are a gracious God like that.

For even if we're just honest for a moment we will know that we ourselves are the most unlikely of sinners to be included in your plans, to be recipients of your grace and how thankful we are that you are a gracious God.

And so help us this Christmas time to marvel again afresh of all your goodness and grace shown to people like us. So help us to be a marveling people before we ask it in your namesake.

Amen. Amen. Now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all now and forever more.

[29 : 08] Amen. Amen.