

God's Astonishing Grace

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[0:00] Right, we're going to turn to our Bibles now. And Paul began last Sunday evening a new study in the book of Joshua.

! So near the beginning of the Old Testament, the sixth book of the Bible. And we're going to read together in Joshua chapter 2. And if you don't have a Bible here, there's some visitors' Bibles at the sides and the back and around the place.

Do feel free to go and pick one up. And then you can follow along. And I'm going to read the whole of the second chapter of Joshua. And Joshua the son of Nun sent two men secretly from Shittim as spies, saying, Go, view the land, especially Jericho.

And he went. He came into the house of a prostitute, whose name was Rahab, and 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.

[1:15] And she said, True. The men came to me, but I didn't know where they were from. And when the gate was about to be closed at dark, the men went out. I don't know where the men went. And then went.

Pursue them quickly. You'll overtake them. But she'd brought them up to the roof and hid them with the stalks of flax that she'd laid in order on the roof.

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 the inhabitants of the land melt 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 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 God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath.

[2:31] 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 me 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. 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 to the hills, or the pursuers will encounter you, and hide there three days until the pursuers have returned. And then afterward, you may go your way.

The men said to her, But we will be guiltless with respect to this oath of yours that you have made us swear. Behold, when we come into the land, you shall tie this scarlet cord in the window through which you let us down.

[3:44] And you shall gather into your house your father and mother, your brothers, and all your father's household. Then, if anyone goes out of the doors of your house into the street, his blood shall be upon his own head, and we shall be guiltless.

But, if a hand is laid on anyone who is with you in the house, his blood shall be on our head. But, if you tell this business of ours, then we shall be guiltless with respect to your oath that you have made us swear.

And she said, According to your words, so be it. Then she sent them away, and they departed. And she tied the scarlet cord in the window.

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.

And then the two men returned. They came down from the hills, and passed over, and came to Joshua, the son of Nun. And they told him all that had happened to them. And they said to Joshua, Truly, the Lord has given all the land into our hands.

[5:00] And also, all the inhabitants of the land melt away because of us. Amen. Well, this is God's word to us.

And, it's rather good, isn't it? We were looking at Rahab in James' letter just a couple of weeks ago. And it's great that we'll be having the whole story this evening. Good.

Okay. Joshua 2. Let's get going. Now, this is really a pretty remarkable chapter for a couple of reasons. Number one, in a sense, this chapter doesn't need to exist.

At the end of chapter one, we were on the brink of battle, remember? Joshua's there with the army. They are looking over the Jordan, ready to go, in, take the land. You could easily jump from the end of chapter one and go straight into chapter three, verse one, and you wouldn't miss anything in terms of the narrative.

Chapter three, verse one, picks up with Joshua and they're about to cross over the Jordan. There's no break in the narrative between chapter one and three. So, chapter two, in a sense, you could take it out and not really miss anything.

[6:16] So, why is it there? Clearly, the author of Joshua included it for a good reason. So, that's the first slightly strange thing. Number two, the second reason it's remarkable is because of its focus.

The focus is not on Israel, it's not on Joshua, but the focus is on a Canaanite and not just any Canaanite, a prostitute.

Sure, the king of Jericho gets a mention, but the focus is on Rahab, a total outsider. Not only is she not a Jew, she's not an Israelite, she's not a man, she's a woman and she's a prostitute.

Why the focus on her? It's pretty astonishing. What's this all about? Well, it's a very carefully structured passage, it's a sandwich, one of Phil's famous sandwiches.

We've got a beginning and the end, focusing on the spies and in the middle we have the focus on Rahab. That whole episode is the meat of the sandwich.

[7:28] Her actions, her words, that's the focus. So, we're going to think about that first, the main bit in the middle, then we'll think about the beginning and the end. So, we're going to look at verses 1b all the way through to verse 21, the big middle part of our sandwich.

And we've got two points tonight. Here's the first one in this big middle section. We see there the astonishing God who shocks us with His grace. We see the astonishing God who shocks us with His grace.

There is a battle looming, that's the big picture. You've got the whole army of Israel arrayed on the east bank of the Jordan. There's a great judgment coming for the people that live in the land, but not before a total outsider is saved from the coming judgment.

It's a huge surprise. As you're reading through the book, this comes as a bit of a shock. We think it's going to be a story all about military reconnaissance, but it turns out the Lord is busy saving Canaanites.

It's a reminder of God's great promises to Abraham. Remember those? Not just that God would give Abraham and his people a place to live, but also that his people would be a blessing to the nations, and that those who bless Israel will themselves be blessed.

[8 : 58] chapter 2 of Joshua is a great reminder of all the promises of God coming to fruition. This is yet another example here at the start of Joshua that God is keeping all of his promises.

Not just promises of a great kingdom, but of grace shown to real people. Grace shown to individuals, even to Rahab, a prostitute from Jericho.

So let's just cast our eyes over this middle section. It's full of action. It's really the kind of stuff you see in James Bond, isn't it? It's got everything. Intrigue, suspense, a few close shaves, a dramatic escape out the window.

It begins there in verses 1 and 2 as Joshua sends out two spies, which in itself is a bit of a cause for alarm.

The last time spies were sent out into Canaan 40 years prior, it did not go well. Do you remember the 12 that went? 10 came back saying, we're not going to go, and the people didn't go.

[10 : 11] And we perhaps wonder, as Joshua does this, is that really a wise thing to do, sending spies into Canaan? Remember what happened last time? well, there's a river crossing by stealth, they go over the Jordan, they head into the stronghold of Jericho, and they find themselves in a brothel.

Things have gone downhill pretty quick for these spies. They're not really up to much, are they? The king finds out almost immediately who they are, where they are, and what they're doing. I think Jericho picked the wrong men perhaps.

But tensions are running high. How will the spies get out of this tight corner? Will they make it back to Joshua? Will it be Kadesh Barnea all over again?

Well, enter Rahab. And she, from the end of verse 1, takes center stage. 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 give to Joshua, but we see the astonishing God who shocks us with his grace in the faith of this outsider.

The king, verse 3, has heard about the spies, and he knows where they are, so he sends in the Jericho copse, so they head round to Rahab's. What will she do?

[11 : 43] Well, she deflects the officers. She's already hidden the spies. She's put them up on the roof. End of verse 4. And to paraphrase, she basically says, yep, they were here, but I've no idea who they were, but they've gone not long ago, and if you hurry, you'll catch them.

They've gone that way. That's basically what she says. All the while, they're upstairs on the roof. Now, let's not be sidetracked by Rahab's deception.

The text is silent on it, isn't it? It makes no evaluation of her actions, and certainly when the New Testament speaks about Rahab, and it does on three occasions, there is no reference at all to her deception here.

Absolutely not. The New Testament emphasizes her faith, not her fibs. And remember the context of what's happening here. One writer put it this way, is it possible to see Rahab's actions as part and parcel of war's necessary subterfuge, I can't even say that word, deceit?

Were Rahab's deeds any different from Corrie Ten Boom's family hiding Jews from Nazi stories? War Troopers in World War II. Is any different? Can you imagine Corrie Ten Boom when the Nazis knock on the door?

[13:12] Oh yes, by the way, they're just hiding in this cupboard. It would be as ridiculous as that if Rahab was to give away where these spies were. But clearly, by her actions in hiding the spies, she demonstrates, by what she does here, she demonstrates a radical change in allegiance.

She could easily have given the men up, avoiding the risk of deceiving the officers, of the men being found on her property upstairs. She risked that.

No, what she does is she aligns herself with the spies from Israel. In fact, Hebrews 11 identifies her friendly welcome of the spies as an indicator of her faith.

Her actions evidenced the reality of her change in loyalty. She was prepared, wasn't she, to stand firm with God's people even though to do so was highly risky.

What on earth happened to Rahab? Why would she do that? The king has sent around the officers and she's lying to them, deceiving them. Why would she do that?

[14:27] Well, let's look on to the next scene where she creeps up the roof and she speaks to the spies. Look from verse 8. And what we have here is an extraordinary confession.

We see Rahab, what she's come to know about the Lord and the mighty acts that he's done for his people. These words show us why Rahab throws herself on the Lord's mercy and shifts her loyalty from Jericho to Joshua.

Look at verse 8. 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 have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you devoted to destruction.

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 heaven above and on the earth beneath.

[15:43] Rahab knows 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 before the Lord and Joshua's army. She knows that Jericho, the whole land, is about to face defeat.

It's about to be crushed. She knows there is a certain coming judgment. She knows this because, verse 10, she has heard about the mighty acts of God.

She's heard about the crossing of the Red Sea, the exodus from Egypt, the defeat of two kings on the other side of the Jordan. News about the mighty acts of God has reached Jericho.

And verse 11, their hearts melted away. You see, for Rahab, it was hearing about the mighty acts of God. That was the basis of her faith.

[16:53] And that's always the way, isn't it? Biblical faith is based on the testimony of God's acts. It's based on his actions in history.

That's how it was for Rahab. Faith has its basis in the facts of what God has done for his people. Rahab didn't have the history, didn't have the pedigree, but she had ears.

She could hear all these things that the Lord had done. Faith has its basis in the facts of what God has done. That is how people begin to come to faith then and today.

But it doesn't stop at her merely hearing about the testimony of what God has done. What Rahab heard led her to confess the supreme sovereignty of the Almighty God, the majesty of the Lord.

She confessed it with her lips. Look at the second half of verse 11. For the Lord your God, he is the God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath.

[17:59] She is identifying the God of Israel as the God in heaven and earth. He alone is God. There is no one else like him.

She knows that the earth belongs to him and if he wants to give the land of Jericho and the Canaanites to Israel he will. He can do it.

Nothing is going to stop her from giving this land to Joshua and his people. She believes perhaps more surely and certainly than Joshua's army that actually the Lord is giving this land to them.

She knows it. She's melting away. She's fearful. She knows that God really is giving this land. And so Rahab does the only thing that she knows she can do.

Look down at verse 12. she flings herself upon God's mercy. In the face of the certain coming judgment with Joshua's army she does the only thing she can do.

[19:10] She flings herself upon the mercy of God. She seeks refuge from God in God. It's not just a case of her confession of the truth about God.

Faith is more than just words on lips. It means loyalty. Loyalty to the Lord and loyalty to his people. And that meant for Rahab not betraying the spies.

It meant tying that scarlet cord to her window. It meant gathering her household together under that roof, under the protection of that red rope.

In all of this, Rahab is demonstrating real faith. You see, real faith is visible. It's tangible.

It's real. You can see it in real life loyalty to Christ and to his people. Sometimes pretty difficult, isn't it, to define and describe what faith is.

[20:15] But the Bible gives us constant examples of it. The New Testament commends Rahab for her faith. She is an example of faith. We saw that, didn't we, last week.

James speaks about Rahab in a passage all about faith. He's basically saying, do you want to know what real faith is? Do you want to know what saving faith is?

Well, look at Rahab. Consider Rahab. Her faith was demonstrated in her action of allegiance to the Lord and his people.

It meant standing with them, throwing her lot in with them. That was the key thing. It's not about using the right evangelical language or using the right formulas.

It's just what we were hearing last week, wasn't it, with Willie preaching on those very verses in James. Plenty of religious Pharisees had all the right language. They could articulate with great eloquence the central tenets of the Orthodox faith, but they hated Jesus, didn't they?

[21:22] They would have aced the exams in seminary, but they hated Jesus. And the thing is, blind beggars got up and followed him, didn't they? They wanted to be with him.

They loved him. They wanted to be among his people. That's faith. It's what Rahab does. Some Christians are obsessed about being able to articulate all the right evangelical language.

If they don't say it in just the right way, I'm not sure they're really a Christian, you know. They can't quite tick off all the right phrases and language. Well, the spies didn't care about that, did they?

Rahab's actions spoke louder than her words. And it saved her. Faith cannot be separated from actions of allegiance to the Lord. And as people, whose side are you on in the end?

That's the key question. And we see a few chapters later that Rahab, a pagan prostitute, was indeed saved. She was included in the people of God.

[22:37] Just read Joshua 6 verse 23 and follow on, you'll find it. Rahab is rescued. When these guys come back, they see the red cord and they rescue her.

It's pretty shocking, isn't it, when you think about it. Here's Rahab, a prostitute from Jericho, finding her place amongst God's people, serving his purposes.

It is one of the most beautiful pictures, isn't it, of God's amazing grace that you'll find in the Bible, this scandalous grace. Let me mention three implications for us as we see this remarkable inclusion of Rahab into God's people.

Number one, marvel at God's grace. Marvel at his grace, even to a woman from Jericho's red light district. Don't write anyone off.

He showed his grace to you, didn't he? And to me. believe. The Lord chooses the sort of people that we would write off in a millisecond. From a human point of view, her prospects weren't great, but the Lord showed his marvelous grace to her.

[23:56] He welcomed her into his family. And this is how God always works. It's how he works now, because he delights to save sinners.

And don't you find that so encouraging when you see God at work in the life of an individual? When you see someone coming into the family of God, saved. Perhaps somebody you've long prayed for.

Perhaps a child, who for many years has seemed disinterested on the fringes. But they throw their lot in with the Lord and his people, years down the line.

Isn't that wonderful? Perhaps it's the sort of person you might turn your nose up at. Someone raised in the faith, but they totally rebel, totally rebel.

They make a mess of their life, but wonderfully the Lord saves them and pulls them back. Do you welcome them as warmly as the Lord Jesus does when he does that? But the thing is, the church, it's a refuge for sinners, for people just like Rahab.

[25:09] So let's not fall into the trap of thinking that church is for the finished articles. It's not a place where perfection is ever going to be achieved. It's not a place where everyone is going to articulate the doctrine of the faith just as you would like them to.

No, the church, the church is a hospital for the sick. It's not a catwalk for the perfect, strutting their religious heritage, not at all. And I think if we're honest with ourselves for a few seconds, then we'll know that that is true for the people around us.

And if we're honest for a few more seconds, we'll know it's true of us as well. It's only by the grace of God that we are included in his family, any of us. And so will you marvel at it?

Will you marvel that you are included and that other people are included? Anyone? Don't write people off. Marvel at God's grace. Number two, second implication here is to 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 entire city and she is rightly afraid.

[26:29] afraid. She knows that judgment is coming. In fact, the whole city, all of Jericho is fearful of what is about to happen. But unlike the rest of Jericho, who knew as much as she did, Rahab didn't in her fear harden herself into opposition in the face of the sovereign Lord.

She doesn't do that, does she? No, she throws herself on the mercy of God. She seeks a place amongst his people.

She had no choice. She risks everything and she finds wonderfully an open door for her. She's included.

And that's the great reality of the gospel, isn't it? To the one who knocks, it will be opened. That's grace. And when people sometimes come to the reality of their sin before a holy God, they rightly fear, they wonder, can there possibly be acceptance even for me?

You think in all the things you've done, they're just too bad, they're too evil. If you just knew the things I'd done, I've gone too far, God won't accept me.

[27 : 49] I imagine Rahab had grounds for feeling like that as well. But the answer is, yes, there is room for you.

There is grace for all who throw themselves upon Christ's mercy. And perhaps that's you tonight. I don't know, I can't see into your hearts.

God's But you have come face to face with the living God. You have heard the testimony of his mighty acts. It is your conviction that he is the sovereign Lord of all the earth, that there is judgment coming.

You know there's an eternity, you know there's a heaven, there is a hell. You cannot deny your sin. You know that you need to be rescued. Well, will you seek refuge in the Lord Jesus?

That's the key question. Will you fling yourself upon his grace? And if you do that, if you do fling yourself upon his grace, you will find a warm welcome because the Lord doesn't turn anyone away who flings himself upon him for mercy.

[29 : 06] And if that's you tonight, then do business with the Lord tonight. And don't let it pass without speaking to someone. Perhaps this person you brought you, one of the welcome teams speak to me, we'd love to chat with you.

But keep coming. Come next Sunday. Come to our Christmas services, come to the life course in the new year, but don't let this moment pass without coming to terms with the living God.

Will you turn to him tonight if you've not already done so? If you don't know the hope and joy that Rahab knew, then fling yourself tonight upon his grace. But there is also a necessary corollary of God's grace, and it's this.

Do not presume upon it. Do not presume upon 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.

There is no other way of escape from the coming judgment than to fling yourself upon God's grace. There are no special exemptions. There are no appeals to impunity. There is no resting on your heritage.

[30 : 25] There is only one way to receiving the grace of God, and it's on your knees. Our sin, rather than our sin disqualifying us, it qualifies us for his grace.

And coming to terms with that reality is absolutely central. To realize that you need only one thing, and it's the forgiveness and grace that only God can give.

All of us need rescuing, like Rahab. And so even the greatest, unlikely outsider God can call. He can bring into his story, and they can find their true destiny, as Rahab does.

And the amazing thing is that Rahab is not only recorded here, not only is she wonderfully included in the people of God, you read about that in chapter 6, but she is, as we discover, an ancestor of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Read the opening verse of Matthew's gospel, that genealogy of the Lord Jesus. Rahab's there. Matthew chapter 1, verse 5. Isn't that amazing? What astonishing grace, even to the most unlikely of characters, the Lord plucks her out from Jericho, and places her in the family tree of the Lord Jesus.

[31 : 47] Astonishing. Are you amazed by the grace of God? Are you stunned by God's grace? Are you moved by it? Or we should be. It really is amazing. Well, that's the meat of Joshua 2.

That's the key thing. And I want to finish by just thinking about the bread for a minute of our sandwich, looking at the two bookends. And we see there, verse 1 and at the very end, verses 22 to 24, what we see here is the God who stoops to bear with the fearful people.

So we're zooming back a bit here. We've been focused very much on the story of one woman in Jericho, Rahab. And the camera's pulling back now from Rahab's house in the wall in Jericho.

It's pulling right back. And we're now out further. We can see all of Jericho. We can see the River Jordan. and we can see the army of Israel camped on the east side, preparing for battle.

[32 : 54] What's the big picture story? Well, look at verse 24. Here's the report the spies give to Joshua. 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.

What an encouraging report. Joshua is hearing that Jericho is already defeated. That's what they're saying. The people are melting in fear. That is just the sort of thing you want to hear before going to battle.

Now, I don't have experience of battle, as you can perhaps tell. But, when it came to football matches at school, there was nothing like hearing the opposition were quaking in their boots to give you a real spur on for the match.

It emboldened us to know the enemy were frightened. And when they saw us lining up, they were very frightened. But that's what's happening here.

The news to Joshua and his army, wouldn't that have given great courage to them to know that Jericho is melting, they are quaking in their boots? And the thing is, God didn't have to give them this encouragement.

[34 : 09] encouragement. How emboldening it would have been to receive this report. The thing is, God had already given his promise, hadn't we? We saw that last week. He's promised the land already.

But he indulges their weaknesses. He graciously removes all their doubts with the events of this chapter. He confirms to them what he's already promised.

He assures them that victory really is already won. How encouraging for them to know that the Lord rules supreme over the hearts of men, even in the city of Jericho, even Rahab.

Mustn't that have encouraged Joshua and his people, particularly when they're facing this intense battle to come? And if they have confidence and were encouraged, how much more can we be encouraged?

We just need to look on to Rahab's descendant, the Lord Jesus. We can look back, can't we, on his victory, won on the cross, confirmed by the resurrection.

[35 : 16] We know that what he has promised, to never leave or forsake us, we know that that is a sure thing. His spirit is upon his church, so that through us spreading the good news of his grace, he is conquering the world.

He will build his church. He will fill the world with his glory one day. We have absolute confidence on that front. But not only that, not only do we know the big story of what God is doing in our worlds, the great plan he's out working, but doesn't the Lord also in his kindness give us real encouragements personally?

Up close, personal encouragements to really help us to marvel at, just like here in Joshua 2. God confirms his promises to us in so many small ways.

Now, of course, we know that the Lord's word is sufficient. We know the gospel is true. But isn't it wonderfully kind of the Lord to give us just little tokens of his faithfulness from time to time, just when we need them?

He put something right in our path, so clear we can't miss it. We can't help but feel sure of God's promises when we see what he's doing for us. Even though we know his promises in his word are true, he gives us little signs, little providences to help us feel assured.

[36 : 49] And we shouldn't expect those things. We can't demand them. But God, in his grace, knows that we are often a fearful people. He remembers that we are just dust.

We're fragile. And so in his marvelous grace, he does, doesn't he? Give us these tokens that graciously confirm to us his already sure word.

He doubles up. He confirms it to us. Little reminders from the Lord that you are firmly in his grasp, that he's got you. His promises to you are sure.

He brings someone to you just at the right time. Might be a friendship that is struck up at a time when he most needed encouragement. You're given real, solid, practical help when things are very hard for you financially.

Something just comes up at the right time. A friend you've written off entirely wonderfully comes to faith after many years. God doesn't have to give us these tokens of his faithfulness, but he does.

[37 : 58] He is a good and a kind and a gentle God. He often stoops down to reassure us, to steady us, to strengthen us when we're fearful.

And we're often fearful. Aren't you fearful often? Every week I feel fearful about something. God's faithfulness in these small tokens of grace that he does give us from time to time.

Not that we're to be super spiritual looking for them under every rock, but we do need to recognize that the Lord in his kindness does show us his faithfulness. He does help us feel his promises in very real ways.

So give thanks for his kindness. Take courage from it. And don't neglect the primary way that he does that, which is what we're doing right now, gathering together every week.

Isn't this the most wonderful confirmation of God's goodness to us? To look around the room and see one another? Give thanks for it. Our God is extravagant in his grace, isn't he?

[39 : 09] Stooping down to encourage his people, showing grace to people who we would write off to the Rahabs of this world, people just like you and me. What amazing grace.

So this chapter is a favorite of mine. It shows us again the scope of God's wonderful gospel of grace. His gospel is for the nations.

It shows us the scope of his grace, even to those that we would write off in a second, the overlooked. So will you marvel again at the outrageous grace of our great Lord and Savior?

Will you marvel? Let's pray, shall we, before we sing to close. Lord, we thank you for our sister in the faith, Rahab, how we look forward to meeting her in the new creation.

What a story she'll have to share. But we thank you for her example of faith. We thank you for the great example it is of your great grace. grace. And so would you help us to marvel afresh at all that you have done for Rahab, for countless millions of individuals down through the years.

[40 : 36] And each one of us in this room, please help us to be a people that are thankful and grateful for your grace. grace. For without it, we would be lost for eternity.

So help us to respond in great thanks and great rejoicing at your amazing grace. We ask it in your name. Amen.