

Surrender Joshua 2

As Kenny Rogers famously sang, if you gotta know when to hold 'em, you also gotta know when to fold 'em. When your basketball team's down 20 points in the last 2 minutes of the game, it's well past time to put in the benchwarmers. If you've lost more states than it takes to win the Electoral College, you just need to give a gracious concession speech and go to bed. Sometimes, when you face overwhelming odds, surrender is the only reasonable option – there's just no point in trying to win one more battle when the war has already been lost. And that's what Rahab the prostitute realized when the Israelite spies showed up in her brothel.

Now, at first glance, it might seem that she had jumped to such a conclusion. After all, all she could see was two Israelite men, who could very well have been literally been caught with their pants down. They certainly didn't pose any immediate threat to her, at least not right then. She could easily have handed them over to the local authorities, thus avoiding any risk of being suspected as a traitor, and perhaps getting a nice reward to boot.

Moreover, as we will see in chapter 6, Jericho was surrounded by thick, sturdy walls – Rahab couldn't deny this as her house was built either into or on top of one of them. As she reached out and touched that comforting, solid mass of stones, it would have been so easy for her to assume that there was no way the Israelites could possibly overcome Jericho's defenses. She could have gone on believing what her senses and her reason told her, that her life would continue much as it had before.

And this is the choice which so many people today have made. It's so easy to live only according to what you can see and touch, to do only what makes sense and what feels good. It's so easy to put your faith in policemen and soldiers to keep you safe, to trust in your job or your savings to provide for you, to expect your relationships to give you happiness and fulfillment. It's so easy to imagine that this world is all there is, so getting more of its possessions and pleasures is what life's really all about.

But Rahab knew something else, something beyond what she could see with her eyes and feel with her hands. For she had heard some amazing things about the God of the Israelites – about how He had brought their armies out of Egypt some forty years earlier, even parting the waters of the Red Sea so that they could cross on dry ground. No, she hadn't seen that amazing event, but the victories of those same armies against Sihon and Og just a short time ago had given her every reason to believe it had really happened, and thus that the God of the Israelites would indeed sweep all before Him.

That's why the appearance of two helpless, harmless men in Jericho was enough to drive Rahab to her knees. For now it was clear to her that these victorious Israelites were indeed preparing to come across the Jordan River and attack them – why else would these spies have come to Jericho? No, it's no wonder that Rahab said in verse 9 that everyone in the land was melting away at the prospect of such an imminent invasion. It's no wonder she decided to surrender to God.

But this is where all too many people stop in their spiritual journey, in a simple state of fear. Now, such fear of God is more than reasonable. As more and more holes are punched in Darwin's theory of evolution, as more and more evidence mounts up for the intelligent design of this world and all its amazingly complex lifeforms, as we human beings begin to decode the language of DNA and RNA, learning the language in which God spoke all living things into existence, it's getting harder and harder to deny God's existence and His power. Moreover, it's hard to explain the last 2000 years of human history unless you admit the truth of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. You don't have to see the cross

and the empty tomb to know Jesus is Lord, and that He possesses unimaginable, miraculous, supernatural power.

So, even if we don't allow our senses to put boundaries on what is real, it's all too easy to respond to the reality of Jesus only with the sort of fear that Rahab and her friends felt. And that's the way lots of folks live today, believing that some sort of divine being exists, but not really knowing how He wants them to live, simply hoping that their good deeds will somehow outweigh the bad if a time of judgment ever comes. Even those who call themselves Christians often live in such blind fear, trying to perform certain rituals – things like taking Communion or attending public worship or making contributions to the Church – in hopes of earning God's favor. Yes, many people believe God is real, and they know Jesus is powerful enough to fear Him, but that's about it.

And that's why Rahab's example is so powerful for us. For if she admitted God's reality and His power, she didn't remain in the blindness and paralysis of fear. Instead she came to the logical conclusion that total and abject surrender to this God was the only reasonable thing she could do. In short, she knew when to fold 'em, and that's exactly what she did. As we see in verses 12 and 13, she threw herself on the mercy of the two spies, begging them to spare her on the day when their army would destroy her city.

And we face the same stark choice today. For what did Jesus say while He was traveling around the different cities of Judah? He said that through His own life and ministry, the time was fulfilled – everything the prophets had promised was about to come true, and the Kingdom of Heaven was right around the corner. And so how did He say the people should respond to the reality of immanent divine judgment? The first thing He told them to do was to repent – that means they needed to turn away from their sins and to turn to God. Just so, if we believe all the things we say in the Apostles' Creed, if we believe that God is real and that Jesus is His Son, risen from the dead and holding all authority in Heaven and on Earth, we also must repent. We must surrender ourselves completely to the sovereign power of Christ.

And no, we can't have it both ways, holding on to some of our sins while we also try to hold on to Christ. Rahab shows us the futility of that sort of thinking, doesn't she? For notice what total surrender meant for her – a complete revolution in her allegiances. For instead of handing the spies over to the rulers of her own people, she went to extraordinary lengths to protect them, hiding them on the roof in stalks of flax, lying about their movements to make their escape possible, and then letting them down through a window in the city wall. In short, Rahab's surrender to God necessarily meant abandoning all her old loyalties, rejecting her own culture, turning against everyone and everything she had ever known. She had to pick a side, and she chose God and His people over the people of Jericho.

And in her own way, she also made a public profession of her newfound faith when she tied that scarlet thread or cord in her window. That cord was like a banner, visible to everyone, but making clear to the faithful that she was really one of them, a follower of God, a loyal subject of God's kingdom. Oh, Rahab may have gone on living in Jericho for a short time, but in reality, she had already begun a new life as one of the people of God.

In the same way, all of us who claim to follow Christ must do what Rahab did, which is really the same thing that His first disciples did – we must repent, we must leave our old lives behind and follow Him, living as He lives, loving as He loves. And such a life will necessarily reveal Christ to those around us, as He lives His life of perfect love through us.

Now, this is not to say that a life lived for Christ will be easy in this sinful world. After all, the spies went into a dangerous situation, infiltrating Jericho to try to determine the strength of their

enemies – although why they thought exploring a brothel was critical to their mission is a bit puzzling. Rahab's newfound allegiance to God certainly put her in harm's way – for if the Jericho authorities had gotten wind of how she had helped the spies, she would doubtless have been put to death as a traitor.

And standing up for Christ continues to be costly, as so many of our brothers and sisters around the world can testify. Whether making a public profession of faith in a majority Muslim country, or maintaining a traditional view of marriage in the face of the sexual revolution in America, following Jesus has never been easy – I wonder how Zebedee took it when his two sons summarily left him and the business he had built for them to tag along after a wandering rabbi. When we reject the world and what it considers to be important, we shouldn't be surprised if the world rejects us in return.

But Jesus didn't just tell His followers to repent. He didn't just tell them what they had to give up in order to follow Him. He also told them to believe in the good news. And the good news is that following God has always brought great blessings to God's people.

Just look at the blessings poured out as a result of the events of this passage alone. Because God softened Rahab's heart, giving her hope that she could be saved from the coming destruction of Jericho, the spies were allowed to return to their army – they were able to encourage God's people before their invasion of the Promised Land. And Rahab and her family were eventually spared when Jericho fell to the Israelite army, as chapter 6 makes clear. God blessed her faithfulness by saving her life.

But Rahab received an even greater gift, one she never saw in her own lifetime. For if you look at the first chapter of Matthew, in that long list of names, in verse 5 you find Rahab. It turns out that Rahab eventually married an Israelite and became the great-grandmother of King David. And that means that Rahab, the prostitute from Jericho, also ended up being an ancestor of Jesus, the greatest Savior His people would ever know.

For that was the good news that Jesus told His followers to believe – that He had come to save them, not as a conquering general at the head of an army like Joshua did, but as a sacrifice offered for all who would trust in Him. In dying on the cross and rising from the dead, Jesus came to redeem us - regardless of what any of us may have done or left undone, no matter how broken and scared and helpless any of us may feel. He came to save us from our bondage to sin and death, and thus to allow us to live a truly transformed life, loving God with all we are and all we have, and loving our neighbors just as much and in the same way that we love ourselves.

Yes, that's the good news Jesus offers to each of us. So the question that faces us is the same one that faced Rahab when she saw those two spies: will we go on living for ourselves, trusting in the things of this world, and just hoping that the conquering King won't show up after all? Or will we believe what He says? Will we repent? Will we surrender to Christ and accept His gracious pardon?