

In the beginning . . .

Rahab

Watching the foreign men who came and left her house, no one doubted that Rahab was “bad.” Yet today this bad girl is so respected for her faith that her name is listed in the Bible’s honor roll of believers.

Radical change is possible when God’s love takes over.

Rahab was a prostitute. That’s not a mistake or a mistranslation. The Bible actually says three times that she was a prostitute (or a harlot). Some have tried to downplay that ugly description, saying it really meant she was an innkeeper. But in her culture, “innkeeper” and “harlot” were often considered the same thing.

In a community where women were protected by their families, Rahab left the safety and security of hers to live alone. We don’t know if she left willingly or if she had no choice. Maybe her parents disagreed with her moral choices and kicked her out, or perhaps she left voluntarily, seeking a freer lifestyle than the one offered in her society. Whatever her reason, she lived alone in a house built into the city wall—a prime viewing location for the local gossips. Everyone could see the men—both the locals and the travelers—who came and went from her house.

The foreign men who stayed with her must have told her about the world outside the walls of Jericho—a world where people didn’t gossip about her in the streets.

She heard stories of the Israelites traveling in the desert, the

miraculous parting of the Red Sea, and the recent overthrow of nearby cities. These strangers did not have temples as Jericho did and did not worship the many gods Rahab had always been taught to revere.

Is it possible there is only one God? An Almighty God? We can imagine that Rahab hungered for more information. And then one day someone knocked on her door.

“Come in!” She probably began clearing the flax off the bed to prepare for another customer.

Two men entered her home.

She sized them up and said, “Okay, but it will cost you double.”

“Shhh. We’re not here for that,” said the one called Salmon.

They told her they were Israelites on a mission from God. She invited them in, though she must have realized they were spies. The Israelite army had been wiping out pagan cities along their path. Surely Jericho would be next, and these two men were here to scout out the best way to defeat her neighbors.

Yet Rahab let them stay. Maybe she was tired of the rumors and disapproval of those around her. Maybe she felt the heart-tug of the Israelites’ God.

She probably gave the two men food and prepared a place for them to spend the night. But their careful preparations were interrupted by a pounding on her door. Messengers from the king—Rahab’s king, the idol-worshipping leader of Jericho—were there to arrest Rahab’s houseguests. Even the king started to look for foreign men at the house of the village harlot.

“Where are they?” the messengers asked Rahab. “Give them to us, because they are here to destroy us all.”

At that point, Rahab should have turned the spies over. Anything else was considered treason, and treason was punishable by death.

But Rahab had never been concerned by the law, and she wasn't ready to sacrifice her houseguests now just because the people who looked down on her said so.

"They were here earlier, but they left town," she lied. "If you hurry toward the river, I bet you can catch them." The king's men took her advice, never knowing that God's spies were just a few feet away, hiding on Rahab's roof under piles of flax.

After darkness fell, Rahab uncovered them and said, "The LORD your God is the supreme God of the heavens above and the earth below" (Joshua 2:11, NLT). For a woman who'd grown up worshipping many gods, this was perhaps an even bigger betrayal to her community than lying to her king. But Rahab was now a believer. She sold out the king of Jericho because she was sold out to the King of Glory.

Knowing she was in trouble, she asked the spies for help. "Look, I hid you; now I need something. When you conquer this city, promise me you won't kill me or my family."

The spies had to be impressed with her faith. They promised if she wouldn't betray them, they'd spare her and all those who belonged to her. That night, she let them down the town wall with a scarlet rope and told the spies how to escape without being detected. The spies returned safely to their camp with valuable information for overthrowing Jericho—and an incredible story about a "fallen woman" whom God was using in mighty ways.

In opening her house to the spies, Rahab made herself over with a radical change—she showed herself willing to totally reevaluate her identity. The power of the Israelites' God changed the way she saw her life—not only her immoral profession, but also her faith and the community where she lived. The spies' love of God was irresistibly attractive to a woman who'd only ever worshipped lifeless statues.

But it wasn't all about her. Rahab wanted to spare her family,

too. She'd been separated from them for a while, whether by her choice or theirs, yet she loved them so much, she negotiated for their safety.

Imagine the scene at the family's front door: "Dad, it's me, Rahab. I know it's been a few years, but you and Mom and the rest of the family need to pack your most treasured belongings and sneak over to my house without letting anyone see you."

Somehow, despite their past disagreements, she was able to persuade family members to reconcile long enough to come to her house. There the entire family huddled together while the city was taken siege and eventually overthrown. The scarlet cord that hung out of Rahab's window was the sign that her house and all who were in it should be spared. And they were.

The woman who had fallen so far, the woman considered the slut of the community, sacrificed herself and, in return, was saved. So was her family. Salmon must have watched with amazement as all of this unfolded. He knew her past, was a beneficiary of her kindness, and was a witness to her faith. His gratitude grew into something more. Eventually, he married her.

Rahab joined the family of a prince, a son of a leading family in the house of Israel. She spent the rest of her life among God's chosen people as if she were one of them.

And she was.

It was through her offspring, generations later, that Jesus was born. Rahab is one of only two foreigners and five women listed in Jesus' lineage. Her reward is great as an ancestor of the Savior.

Rahab may not have been loved by the people in her community—or at times even by her family—but God found her worthy of salvation. Despite her immoral behavior, He saw value in her even when those who knew her best didn't. God loves bad girls. Rahab is a reminder that God sees past our past, to our hearts. He can and does use anyone for His glory.