
The Book of Hebrews – The Superiority of Christ

...God has spoken to us in His Son...(Hebrews 1:2)

The Characters of Faith (Rahab – Part 7) Hebrews 11:31

By faith Rahab the harlot did not perish along with those who were disobedient, after she had welcomed the spies in peace.

I hope that in our study of Hebrews 11 it has been clear that the author has not been elucidating through a series of random thoughts concerning faith. This chapter has both systematically and chronologically walked the original readers through history and in so doing has showed them significant facets of faith.

Let us remember that the first audience to hear the words of this letter was a congregation of Hebrews, Jews by birth, who had left the synagogue to see what was so spectacular about Jesus Christ. Many, upon hearing of the superiority of Christ believed. But there were a number who held back and held on to Judaism, to their old way of life under the law and its condemnation. Some had not fully come to embrace Christ as truly Lord, truly Messiah, and truly Savior. And so, when opposition and persecution came, when they were pressed concerning their commitment to Christ, when a choice between professing Christ alone or professing some other means of living for God – some doubting Thomas', some double-minded professors of faith in Christ were tempted to easily fall away.

So then, the issue facing the author of this letter is to give an explanation of real faith looks like so that they might examine their own lives and see if they be “in the faith.” For ultimately we find in Hebrews 11 that there is but one common denominator present among every true child of God and that is – faith in the Lord – a life devoted to trusting God – and, as we have been saying – faith is a firm trust in the person, promises and provisions of God through Jesus Christ, a trust that expresses itself in behavior consistent with God’s revealed word.

If I could put this another way, Hebrews 11 is a museum of monuments, a theater of testimonies and tributes – not necessarily focused on the individuals presented, but rather focused upon the way this thing called faith works and manifests itself in those who possess it. Notice that we do not have simply one monument, but multiple monuments, all of which testify of this – that it is only by faith that one may experience being right with God, at peace with God and able to please God. Why do we have multiple monuments? I say because faith is so vast, so rich, and so multi-facet that there is not one life that can aptly express it.

This brings us then to our text this morning – which is particularly extraordinary, and, perhaps to the first readers, particularly stunning! As Hebrews 11 has progressed from Able through to Joshua, there is a sense in which the author has been building to a climax, point building upon point, wonder upon wonder. And as though we have reached the mountaintop, the very peak of this treatise on faith, we are presented with a seemingly and most unlikely of candidates to be considered a monument of faith – Rahab the harlot. Isn’t amazing that she is not referred to here simply as Rahab, or Rahab of Jericho – no – rather it is Rahab the harlot; Rahab the prostitute (ESV); Rahab the loose woman (BBE), that is offered to us the readers as the last of those named in this chapter with their own epitaph of faith. It would be this Rahab the harlot, seemingly the last one who would ever consider the wickedness of sin and the certainty of judgment who believes, who trusts the person, promises and provisions of God. The chief of sinners in this list of people experiences the grace of God “by faith.”

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From Hebrews 11:31 and the experience of Rahab the harlot as recorded for us in Joshua 2 and 6, I offer you then three more considerations regarding faith. For we see in her life a three-dimensional picture of faith noting the very breadth of faith, the depth of faith and finally the height of faith.

I. The Breadth of Faith

“By faith Rahab the harlot...”

Our text begins with a rather crude, harsh and sin-exposing description saying, *“By faith Rahab the harlot...”* Stopping right there in the text gives us an opportunity to examine what I have called the breadth of faith – that is the width, the span, the extent, the very wideness of faith. Let us remember that the Hebrews became a rather exclusive people believing that there were only two kinds of people on the earth, Jews and everyone else; Israel and the Gentiles. Israel, of course, had been chosen by God to be His peculiar people, to be a light and witness to the nations of the power of God. By divine command, those in the land of Canaan who refused to heed the witness of Israel concerning the sovereignty and majesty of God were to be put to death. Turn with me to Joshua 11:19-20. Here we read of a statement concerning the hearts and attitudes of the pagan nations living in Canaan at the time of Israel’s invasion –

19 There was not a city which made peace with the sons of Israel except the Hivites living in Gibeon; they took them all in battle. 20 For it was of the Lord to harden their hearts, to meet Israel in battle in order that he might utterly destroy them, that they might receive no mercy, but that he might destroy them, just as the Lord had commanded Moses.

We find that the general attitude of the peoples of Canaan was opposed to God and God gave them over to this attitude by hardening their hearts, having them dig in their heels in rebellion against God. Now, what does this have to do with Rahab? Let me present to you three things about Rahab that make her such an unlikely candidate of faith.

First, Rahab was a Gentile, a pagan and therefore among those marked out for destruction. The people of Canaan did not look kindly upon the people of Israel. For rather than turning to the one true God for mercy, they were hoping to defeat this God of Israel by means of their own false Gods and their own meager strength. What pagan gentile of Jericho would bow down to the God of the coming invaders?

The second strike against Rahab was that she was a woman. Generally speaking, women were regarded as second-class citizens who couldn’t own their own land or vote or express their own opinions. Often, in the ancient cultures, including Israel, girls were not educated in anything other than tending to the home and children. What Gentile woman would dare to express faith in the God of Israel?

The final strike against Rahab, and perhaps the most damning was that she was a harlot, a woman who sold her body for money, who submitted to any man who crossed her doorway provided he had cash. It is seen by some that Rahab may well have been a Madame, the proprietress of a bordello or brothel. To be sure, Rahab was a chief of sinners as prostitution was high on the list of great trespasses in the eyes of the Hebrews. So despised were prostitutes in the eyes of the Hebrews as chief of sinners that even Jesus

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mentions them as such in Matthew 21:31 to chastise the Pharisees, who should have embraced Christ, saying to them,

"Truly I say to you that the tax collectors and prostitutes will get into the kingdom of God before you."

Beloved, what is the point of all this? Can we not see the breadth of faith? For in a moment we are going to find out that this pagan, multiple-god worshipping, sexually loose gentile woman believes in the true God of Israel. This reminds us that no one is beyond the grip of grace; that no one is too bad, too lost in sin to be rescued by the mighty hand of grace to have the heart sprinkled clean and renewed to love the Lord God. We find in Rahab the truth that God will grant faith to whomever He desires and saves even the most wretched of people. How often do you look at the unlovely, the shunned of society, or even those of another ethnic background and think – he or she would never come to faith, would never be convinced of the truth concerning Jesus. Let us remember that we are not called to explain but to proclaim. May it never be that true believers in Christ limit the breadth or extent of faith. The faith that God gave you is the same faith that Rahab the harlot experienced in the walls of Jericho. How shocking would it have been to first century Jews to read this statement, “by faith Rahab the harlot...” and be taking aback at the author’s intention, that intention being to communicate that they were *called to exercise the same kind of faith as this harlot, a faith that triumphed over sin and sustains her through to deliverance*. We are to have the faith of Rahab the harlot, a faith which understood the breadth of God’s grace, God’s love and God’s salvation.

II. The Depth of Faith

“By faith Rahab the harlot did not perish along with those who were disobedient...”

But not only do we see the breadth of faith in the life of Rahab, but we also learn of the depth of faith. Hebrews 11:31 continues, *“By faith Rahab the harlot did not perish along with those who were disobedient...”* What I would like to have you see from this statement, as we flesh it out, is that the faith of Rahab resulted in a genuine belief, a true, abiding and deep trusting in the one true God. Let us get a grasp on what is being said here in the text and then take that back to the Joshua account of Rahab.

First, we are told that “by faith” because of her trust in God, Rahab “did not perish along...” The word for perish along literally means to be destroyed together; to be corporately doomed; destined to die apart from the grace of God. Second, we are given the reason given as to why these would be so doomed – because they “were disobedient” – says our text. The word “disobedient” does speak of not obeying a command, but it delved in a bit deeper as it can speak of being “un-persuaded, unconvinced, or simply un-agreeable to certain terms. What we see here then is that the people of Jericho were un-persuaded by the truth, unconvinced of the person, promises and provisions of God and therefore un-agreeable to repent or plead for mercy. Their hearts, according to the testimony of 11:20, were hardened so that Israel might destroy them in battle.

In essence then we are given a picture of what it means not to have faith in God – it means to be unmoved, uncaring and unconvinced concerning the truth revealed by God and such an attitude manifests itself in disobedience – in not doing what God has commanded and

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this results in a common end – destruction, eternal condemnation, everlasting removal from all that is godly, all that is pleasant, all that is good, all that is peaceful and all that is restful.

Turn with me to Romans 2:5-8. Here we see this very principle of being unmoved, uncaring and therefore unmoved by the truth of God resulting in judgment. Let us start in verse 5 –

5 But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, 6 who WILL RENDER TO EACH PERSON ACCORDING TO HIS DEEDS: 7 to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life; 8 but to those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey [same word as in Hebrews 11:31 – those who are unconvinced, uncaring and unmoved by...] the truth, but obey unrighteousness, [here is their lot] wrath and indignation [destruction, even worse than what happened at Jericho].

We read of this contrast between genuine faith and disbelief, between a heart persuaded by the truth versus a heart steeped in denial of the truth in 1 Peter 2:7-8 – if you would turn there. Here we read –

1 Peter 2:4-8

4 And coming to Him as to a living stone which has been rejected by men, but is choice and precious in the sight of God, 5 you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. 6 For this is contained in Scripture: "BEHOLD, I LAY IN ZION A CHOICE STONE, A PRECIOUS CORNER stone, AND HE WHO BELIEVES IN HIM WILL NOT BE DISAPPOINTED." 7 This precious value, then, is for you who believe; but for those who disbelieve, "THE STONE WHICH THE BUILDERS REJECTED, THIS BECAME THE VERY CORNER stone," 8 and, "A STONE OF STUMBLING AND A ROCK OF OFFENSE"; for they stumble because they are disobedient [unconvinced, unmoved] to the word, and [resulting in] to this doom they were also appointed.

All of this is in contrast to the faith of Rahab, a faith, which under the circumstances, is remarkable. Just what was it that Rahab believed? We have an accounting in Joshua 2:9-11. As you turn there please remember that day after day Rahab would be greeted with the trumpeting of the shofars of Israel, which announced the approach of the three things; the people of God, the ark of God and therefore the very presence of the one true Almighty God. What did she know and believe? We read her own testimony in Joshua 2:9-11 -

9 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. 10 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. 11 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.

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Beloved, Rahab had heard the stories of the exodus from some 40 years before and the accounts of Israel's recent crossing of the Jordan and from these testimonies she says she "knows that the Lord has given" Israel the land; she knows of the coming judgment on Jericho; and she knows that God is sovereign in both heaven and on earth. When genuine saving faith is at work, it takes the believer to greater depths of insight concerning God and His purposes. Why is it that Rahab could see these things and respond while the great majority of Jericho did not? Rahab had conviction of things not seen and, as we will see in a moment, the assurance of things hoped for [that is her own deliverance].

Does your faith transport you to depths of wonder that those outside of faith simply cannot see? If, as Lamentations 3:23 declares, the mercies of God are new every morning, know that it is only by faith that we can delve daily into the waters of that mercy and draw up for ourselves great assurance of things hoped for and great conviction of things unseen. Genuine faith allows us to plunge deep into the things of God and to rejoice. Disbelief and disobedience brings only, to borrow from 10:26-27, "a terrifying expectation of judgment."

A couple of years back, my wife and I were staying in a cabin on Lake Taneycomo in the late winter/early spring before the Bald Eagles had retreated back north. One morning we were sitting on a bench overlooking the lake. On the other side, in the trees, were a pair of Eagles, perched majestically on the branches. I never expected to see what I saw next. One of the Eagles alighted from the branch and made a descent toward the surface of the lake heading right toward us. This was spectacular enough, but then the bird of prey reached down into the water with its talons and snared for itself a pretty good sized fish. It was amazing. Now, what does this have to do with the depths of faith and the judgment of God? For those who delve deep into the waters of faith, there is security from whatever waits from above to snatch you away. For those who, in the words of Hebrews 6:4-6, having only tasted the heavenly gift and have only tasted the good word of God, but delve not deeper, are in danger, because by staying too close to the surface of the water, they will be snatched away to their destruction. Let us know the depths of faith.

III. The Height of Faith

"By faith Rahab the harlot did not perish along with those who were disobedient, after she had welcomed the spies in peace."

So, we have seen the breadth of faith, seeing that faith in God may be found in anyone, in any circumstance regardless of race, gender or even depth of sin – that God extends His grace to the most unlikely of candidates; and we have seen the depth of faith that allows the believer to see as it were the unseen, to have insight beyond human reason; to understand all that is necessary to trust God; and now, finally we can see the height of faith found in this last phrase of Hebrews 11:31, *"after she had welcomed the spies in peace."* This seemingly unassuming little statement is pregnant with meaning, showing us the heights to which faith takes the believer. Let me show you what I mean.

In Joshua 2 we find the story of Rahab. Joshua had sent out two spies to infiltrate the city of Jericho. These two spies had disguised themselves with Amorite clothing, made their way into the city that Israel was soon to conquer. Because they were strangers, they made their way to the most unlikely place to arouse suspicion, the house of a harlot, for it was not uncommon for traveling merchants to frequent such places. So here we have holy men of God in the home of a most vile sinner. But as we had already noted, Rahab had been thinking a lot

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about the God of the Israelites and God had now providentially brought to her those who could tell her more about this God and His people. I said that Rahab's belief revealed the height of faith because I see in her welcoming the spies, her willingness to identify with both the people of God as well as with God Himself.

You see, Rahab was no longer acting like an Amorite. Her heart had been changed and she aligned herself with the people of God. Her faith boldly manifested itself as she did the most disloyal thing imaginable to her city by not giving up the spies to the king; by giving them refuge and ultimately enabling their escape. The word "welcomed" in Hebrews 11:31 means "to take in graciously or wholly" and in conjunction with people it means "to receive with hospitality." Rahab wholly accepted and received these spies for who they were, men of the most high God. While we do not know if her faith was saving at this point or not, we do know that this event caused her to draw the proverbial line in the sand dividing her old life with the new life in which she hoped. After this event it is safe to say that Rahab never again returned to harlotry; that she would no longer worship the false gods of the Amorites; that she would never again look upon the Jordan river or gaze into the heavens without realizing that, as it is stated in Joshua 2:11, "for the LORD your God, He is God in heaven above and on earth beneath."

This faith raised Rahab to gaze upon the Lord of Heaven and to trust Him for salvation on earth below. By welcoming the spies in "peace" – a word meaning in harmony of relation with others, she was seeing herself being lifted out of the muck and the mire and having her feet set upon the rock, upon the sure foundation of God; His promises and His provisions. And not only did the faith of Rahab cause her to welcome and help the spies, but it also gave her boldness to ask for help from the spies. In Joshua 2:12-13 we read –

2 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, 13 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. 14 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."

Rahab's faith caused her to look to the God of these spies for deliverance; not only for her, but also for her family. What faith, to trust two foreigners with not only your own life, but the very lives of your whole family. But the faith of Rahab did not end here, for she would exercise faith everyday for seven days as she watched Israel march around the city. For, as the story relates, the spies pledged Rahab and her family's safety under the condition that she did not report the spies' business and if she would leave a scarlet cord the spies used to escape in the window (2:21). By the way, it wasn't necessarily unusual for a scarlet cord to be seen in the window of a harlot. But she did this "by faith" – that scarlet cord signifying her faith in God – for she must have known that the walls were to come down and her home was in the wall. I suspect, however, that each day, as she heard the shofars blowing, Rahab looked off into the distance to see her new people, the people of God. Then, after seven days of exercised faith, Rahab saw hope come to fruition as the walls toppled all around her. She and her family had been spared, her faith had made her well. And while the people of God

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ransacked the rest of Jericho, the spies were sent to deliver Rahab and her family to the safety of the camp of Israel.

Beloved, Rahab's faith was certainly not fully developed, it didn't understand the fine points of theology, but it was a faith that brought her to great heights of a fantastic adventure in trusting Him. She had become a child of God, and what is remarkable is that Rahab the harlot would marry a man by the name of Salmon, a prince of Judah and she became the mother of a man named Boaz, who would marry a Moabites named Ruth and thus Rahab became the great-grandmother of David, who would be King of Israel. And even more remarkably, Rahab the harlot, who by the breadth, depth and height of faith trusted the LORD, was in the line of the Messiah, Jesus Christ.

I find it remarkable that in a list dominated by men of faith, we are offered this one, lost wretched woman – Rahab - Rahab the harlot – Now, some may see this as being derogatory and unflattering, but perhaps it remains for her as a monument of grace, as a badge of honor; not because she forever remained a harlot, but she, being a chief or foremost of all sinners, might be a testimony of the words of Paul found in 1 Timothy 1:15-16

15 It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all. 16 Yet for this reason I found mercy, so that in me as the foremost, Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience as an example for those who would believe in Him for eternal life.

Beloved, if Rahab the harlot is found in this God-inspired record of those of faith, let us know that there is no one beyond the breadth of faith; that there is no one who cannot be plunged into the depths of faith; that there is no one who cannot be lifted up into the heights of faith. The only hindrance is found in our text – will you trust in God “by faith” even as Rahab did, or will you be disobedient, that is unconvinced, uncaring of your soul and unmoved to follow after God. If you have a desire to please God, how does Hebrews 11:6 say it must be done? “By faith” – by faith, will you trust in the deliverance offered by God through Jesus Christ from sin even as Rahab trusted in God for deliverance from Jericho? For it is a simple faith that understands –

For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life (John 3:16).

Soli Deo Gloria

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