

We continue our short series in Joshua that was excellently begun by Matthew Sleeman last week. If you weren't here do catch it on the website.

Today we look at Chapter 2 and it is a great story isn't it? It has a bit of John Le Carre about it with spies and the secret police and so on.

I don't know how familiar you are with the story. Often I presume people know these stories but don't. So in case you have never heard the story before and even if you have let's just recap the story.

Joshua 1 sees God's people with Joshua as their leader standing on the eastern edge of the Jordan looking across into the land which God had promised to them through Abraham. There was a mix of excitement and apprehension.

The apprehension we see in v1 as Joshua sends two spies to look over the land and especially Jericho. Why Jericho because that walled city stood as a barrier to their access into the land. It was the first great obstacle.

As the story unfolds the spies get into Jericho and end up in the house of Rahab a prostitute.

The King of Jericho got wind of that and sent the Stasi to her to get the men. She told them a lie saying they'd already left and if the secret police hurried they might catch them.

They left but by now the city gates had been shut and the spies are stuck in the city – da, da, da dahhhhh!

What's going to happen to them? We are left with that cliff hanger while Rahab talks to these guys and effectively spills the beans.

She tells them that Jericho in effect is not great obstacle because the people are terrified of the Israelites and their God. More Rahab expresses her own faith in that God and how as it were she had switched sides from one king, the king of Jericho to another King, the God who is God.

She then pleaded for mercy asking for her life and that of her family to be spared when Jericho was captured. I'm not sure if they had Bet 365 then but clearly she was seeing the odds in favour of an Israelite win!

The men agreed to the deal "our lives for your lives" (v14) and gave her a scarlet cord to tie in the window of her house as a sign that those in the house were to be spared.

She then let them down out of the window, which was part of the city wall and the men escaped and made it back to their camp where they gave Joshua the confident message that "The Lord has surely given the whole land into our hands".

That is the story of Joshua 2 but what is it all about? What is it that we are meant to see from this story?

The question at the beginning of the chapter is how can we take the land? Jericho stood as a barrier and the fear was that once across the Jordan they would have a strong enemy in front of them and a full river behind. The answer at the end of the chapter as we have just seen is, "The Lord has surely given the whole land into our hands".

Indeed that is the point of this whole book so that by the time we get to Joshua 21:43 we see that this has been accomplished "So the Lord gave Israel all the land he had sworn to their forefathers". The book is about the faithfulness of God and how God kept his promise.

In these early chapters we have God's people, a people forged in slavery in Egypt, rescued through the Exodus and disciplined through the time in the wilderness. God's people who were under God's rule through the law given at Mt Sinai, the cloud of pillar and fire that had been leading them and the tabernacle at the centre of their encampment. However they were not yet in God's land and it was this final piece of the promise made to Abraham that the book of Joshua is about.

The book tells us of God's faithfulness to his promises.

As it does so and especially in this chapter we see other things about our God.

The first thing is that

1. Our God is God v8-11

Now I realise that sounds obvious but it isn't to many people. It wasn't in Joshua's day and it isn't in ours. People may be at ease with the idea of a God but most who entertain that idea are at best practical atheists that is they act as if God doesn't exist.

When the Stasi had gone and Rahab had gone up to the roof top the first thing she said was "I know the Lord has given this land to you" (v9). Now how did she know that because, as she says in v11 "for the Lord your God is God".

Why was it that Rahab had acted in the way she did? Why had she hidden the spies and acted as a traitor to her people? Well it centred round what had been heard in Jericho and Rahab's response to that.

As we look at the text here we see that people in Jericho had heard about the exodus from Egypt but then more recently and more relevantly they had heard about the defeat of the Amorites and their kings. The press was full of it. Every news programme had an in depth analysis of the events and the issue they raised for other nations. If the Amorites had been so easily defeated then what chance for the Canaanites?

The response of the people in Jericho was clear they were "melting with fear" v9 and "our hearts sank and everyone's courage failed" (v11). They were afraid because, Rahab put it "the Lord your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below."

However while the rest of Jericho seems to have remained in a state of fear Rahab was different.

What Rahab heard of this God caused a change in her. Yes the King of Jericho might have power but this God was something else. As a result she changed allegiance from one king to another and that is a transfer that is at the heart of the Bible.

At the heart of this story we learn about Rahab's faith.

When she spoke to the spies it is her faith that is clear.

She said "I know that the Lord has given this land to you" (v9). How did she know, "we have heard" (v11). Her faith came from hearing about the power of God at work on behalf of his people. The same word that caused many to fear brought her to faith.

Ultimately in the face of God there are only those two options. We either continue in fear to oppose God and his will or we recognise he is God and submit to him. That is what Rahab did.

2. Our God is merciful v12-14

But also we see clearly in this story that our God is merciful.

Rahab and the people had heard of God's acts and how he had routed his enemies. What could the Canaanites expect but just the same? But here in v12 Rahab asked for kindness that is for mercy for herself and her family. The spies offered her that mercy, "our lives for your lives" v14.

In a very real sense their promise was made on God's behalf. Through these two men God offered Rahab mercy.

In this I think we should note two things:

a. in mercy God chose Rahab

You may have seen the film Casablanca where Humphry Bogart plays Rick Blaine the owner of upscale nightclub and gambling den in Casablanca. Into the bar walks Ingrid Bergman who plays his ex-lover Ilsa Lund and Bogart utters the line "Of all the gin joints in all the towns in all the world, she walks into mine." I wonder if Rahab said something similar when these two guys came to her house? Under the sovereignty of God we see that God had prepared Rahab to be involved in God's purpose to bring his people into the promised land. Now that is an act of mercy. Here was Rahab, a Canaanite, a prostitute and a woman and God chose to use her in his eternal purposes. That is mercy. She was a most unlikely instrument and yet she figures highly in the history of God's people as we see from Matt 1 where she appears in Jesus' family tree! But Rahab is not an exception. God continues to call unlikely people to follow him and to use unlikely people in his service. I don't think Saul would have passed the interview to be an apostle certainly not when he was "breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples" (Acts 9:1). When John Newton was working the slave ships who would have seen him as an ordination candidate? Similar things can be said of many others whose faith has made its mark down the centuries. God in mercy calls and uses who he will.

That includes you, he can use you despite your weaknesses and it includes that person whom you think is perhaps beyond the pale. You don't get more beyond the pale than Rahab.

b. in mercy God saved Rahab.

Rahab pleaded with the spies for mercy that would bring salvation to her house, v12 "Now then please swear to me by the Lord that you will show kindness to my family". It was a plea for mercy and in v14 the deal was made, "our lives for your lives". This is the nature of our God who shows mercy even though we don't deserve it. Rahab pleaded the good she had done as a reason for the spies to spare her life. However it was not that action which was at the heart of her rescue but her faith. She believed as she says in v11 "the Lord your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below". God saved her on the basis of her faith. But again we must note that her faith was seen as real in what she did. That is pointed out for us in James 2:25 when we read "In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction?"

But the clear message here is that Rahab despite her background was a woman of faith and she was saved by her faith. The same is true for us. That phrase, "our lives for your lives" has a deeper meaning as see how Jesus gave his life for us that through his death we might be saved from the result of our sin. Our God is merciful.

3. Our God is faithful

As we saw at the start the whole of this chapter and indeed the whole of the book of Joshua is showing how God is faithful to his promises.

As a result of the sin of Adam and Eve God had banished them from the garden from his place and there was a barrier between humanity and God because they had rejected God's rule. However in his grace and mercy God had promised to remove that barrier, to restore humanity to himself and bring us once more under his rule. The promise was made to Abraham in Genesis 12 that God would create from him a great nation, that God would give him a land and God would bless his people and make them a blessing to all nations – God's people in God's land under God's rule.

What we see here is part of that promise being worked out in that God's people who were under God's rule were about to be brought by God into the land that he was giving them. This episode with Rahab was part of that process. God was proving himself faithful to his promise.

But also we see how God is faithful to us as individuals. The two spies in v14 made the promise "If you don't tell what we are doing, we will treat you kindly and faithfully when the Lord gives us the land". Later on at the fall of Jericho we see how through Joshua God was faithful to that promise and so in 6:25 we read "But Joshua spared Rahab the prostitute with her family".

We can literally, as Rahab did, trust God with our lives. The question for us is are we able to do that? What are the things we face this week? What are the things that concern us? Where will we look for help? We might say that for Rahab the situation was much clearer and she had no option but to ask God for help and yet it doesn't seem as if anyone else around her was doing that!

God is faithful but are we able to trust him and ask him for help as Rahab did? Yes we can because as Rahab realised God is God and as his children all his power and might is on our side. Part of Paul's prayer for the church in Ephesus was that they might know "his incomparably great power for us who believe". (Eph 1:19). Those who are parents will know the frustration that we are not able to do all we would wish for our children. We can't protect them from things. We can't sort out all their problems. We don't have the wisdom to guide them through difficult choices. Our God does have that power and as a God of mercy he uses his power in us and through us, yes not always as we might like. But always for the good of his children and he is faithful. He keeps his promises which we who are parents don't always do.

What we see here is God who is God faithfully working out his purposes according to his promise in so doing, in mercy, he chose to use an unusual woman. God is still doing the same today as he uses you and I to help build his kingdom. May we trust him and work with him in that building process. It is exciting isn't it?