

Reflections by the Pond

THE WRITINGS OF DAVID S. LAMPEL



Far too few people in this world have taken the time to discover what God and His word are all about. They have ingested spurious, sometimes hostile secondhand information and accepted it as truth. Many consider His word at best a dead letter, something that was pertinent at one time in the distant past, but without relevance today.

These are individuals who say such things as, “Well, you know what the Bible says, ‘God helps those who help themselves,’” ignorant of the fact that not only does the Bible not include this aphorism, but that God’s word says quite the opposite: God “helps” those who come before Him in submission, emptied of all their self-worth and pride. The Bible, from beginning to end, is filled to overflowing with God’s grace, extended to those who do not deserve it, and could never earn it.

Those ignorant of God’s word—including far too many Christians—may see the characters that people its pages as pious, plastic saints, somehow dwelling above the challenges and temptations, the weaknesses of the flesh suffered by all the rest of us. But, again, the opposite is true. Something truly remarkable about God’s holy and eternal word is

how it portrays its leading characters warts and all. It shows Abraham to be at times a liar and a coward; Jacob, the father of the twelve tribes of Israel, stole the blessing that was rightfully for his brother Esau; the apostle Paul could be short-tempered and hold a grudge; and King David, about whom God said, “I have found David the son of Jesse, a man after My heart, who will do all My will,” was an adulterer and murderer.

Meanwhile the Bible, and especially the New Testament, has a reputation among people who never read it for being anti-woman. The apostle Paul regularly comes under attack for teaching this position. Except that he is innocent of the charge. Far from being anti-woman, God’s word is replete with examples of strong, vibrant women of faith. And, like their male counterparts, they were, for the most part, far from perfect. They did not sport halos, nor did they glow in the dark with holy unction. They were just regular people who found their hope in the Lord God of heaven. Why? Because just as with the Hebrew patriarchs and Christian forefathers, the Lord chose them to serve in His name.

And an unlikely, unexpected woman chosen by God was Rahab, a prostitute from Jericho. This obscure woman would be chosen by God not just to give aid to Israel, but for inclusion in the royal line that would culminate in the birth of the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth. ●

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by grace alone

One of the more fascinating aspects of our perfect, holy God is how He unapologetically works His will through small people, unlovely people, pagans and “sinners,” those who are what we might term “base.” This is no accident; He has His reasons.

At that time Jesus said, “I praise You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and have revealed them to infants. Yes, Father, for this way was well-pleasing in Your sight.”

Matthew 11:25-26

Jesus’ first disciples were not religious scholars, nor were they from the aristocracy. Those in whom Jesus entrusted the broadcasting of His gospel included fishermen, a tax collector for Rome, a rebellious freedom-fighter, and even a traitor to the cause. Most (but not all) were country bumpkins, unlearned, rough around the edges. And this pattern would continue beyond the twelve. Here is how Paul described Christ’s followers in his letter to the Corinthians.

For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, so that no man may boast before God.

1 Corinthians 1:26-29

There’s the bottom line: Why did God choose to work through the base and

despised things of this world? “That no man may boast before God.” And one cannot get much more “base” than a prostitute from the very ancient and pagan city of Jericho.

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Rahab was a harlot, a prostitute. Ever since the writing of the book of Joshua, timid theologians have tried to soften their own embarrassment—and their assumed embarrassment of God—by referring to her as an innkeeper, tavern keeper, or hostess. Although it is true that the same word can be translated “woman” or “wife” in Hebrew, there is no getting around it in this context: the Hebrew text, as well as commentary by biblical writers in the New Testament confirm this interpretation.

By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been encircled for seven days. By faith Rahab the harlot did not perish along with those who were disobedient, after she had welcomed the spies in peace.

Hebrews 11:30-31

James, the blood brother of Jesus and in the same family line, would have more reasons than most to soften the image of an ancestor of questionable character. But he did not.

In the same way, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way?

James 2:25

The Greek word chosen by James and the writer to the Hebrews, translated “harlot,” removes any question as to what



they mean: *porne*.

When Moses died at Mt. Nebo, Joshua was left in charge of Israel. Joshua then moved Israel to (biblical) Shittim—Abel Shittim—in preparation for crossing the Jordan; this location was almost straight across the Jordan River from Jericho.

Joshua was, first and foremost, a military man, and it made perfect sense that before Israel crossed the Jordan into the Promised Land he would send out spies to scope out the most immediate city. And it also made perfect sense that the men would end up at a tavern or inn just inside the city walls. Here they could quietly gather information helpful to Israel before the invasion.

Bravery

It was a logical conclusion of the authorities that any spies in the neighborhood would hole up with a prostitute, a profession often involved in intrigue—and especially one whose house abutted the city wall. So when the king received word that Israeli spies had entered the city, he had Rahab interrogated.

Those of us who were born and live in the United States have little experience living under kings—much less the unlimited, unquestioned power of an-

cient kings. But in Rahab's time and place it took a special kind of bravery for someone to lie to her king. If found out, she would be immediately put to death.

The most applicable law at the time, the ancient law code of Hammurabi, states, "If felons are banded together in an ale-wife's [prostitute's or innkeeper's] house and she has not haled [them] to the palace, that ale-wife shall be put to death." In her answer to the king Rahab



The stooped, gray-haired woman moved gingerly through the doorway of her house. With one hand she gripped tightly the smooth knob at the top of her walking stick, with the other she steadied herself against the roughly hewed door frame. Carefully she stepped down onto the dirt street and made her way to the well-worn stone block that afforded her the best vantage point from which to survey the neighborhood.

Rahab peered steadily down the street toward the group of children playing between the haphazardly arranged rows of stone and mud plaster dwellings. The children were almost obscured by the clouds of dust that billowed up from their feet as they played "keep away" with the wad of old rags. The woman, however, was still able to spy the one special child, the delight of her heart.

Where had the years gone? Here, dwelling in the comfortable warmth of her son's family, Rahab had found peace from the nagging past. Here in this old land freshly inhabited by new people she had, at last, made a home.

Little Obed came rushing up to his grandmother. "Did you see me? Did you see me, Gram?"

"Of course, my love." Rahab wrapped the child into her arms.

"The bigger boys said I was too young, but I showed 'em I could play."

"And so you did. I saw how you dodged around Micah—he's so much bigger than you."

"But I'm fast, Gram. They can't catch me." he said, puffing out his chest.

Rahab's smiling face quickly turned serious. "Whatever it takes, Obed. You do whatever it takes."

God forgive her survival instinct. Was she wrong to teach her grandchild to look out for himself? to be strong and self-sufficient? She had always had a

difficult time sorting out God's grace from her own efforts; where did one end and the other begin? Rahab was certainly not alone in her efforts to instill in the child a sense of personal responsibility, since the "grandmother" on his mother's side had, herself, a history of extraordinary, personal determination. Naomi's return to Bethlehem after a succession of family tragedies in Moab demonstrated her own survival instinct.

"I'm trying, Gram. I'm trying to be just like you," Obed said.

"Oh, no dear," Rahab said, alarmed. "That's not what I mean."

"But you've always been so strong—and good. Don't you want me to be like you?"

"I don't want you to follow after any person," Rahab said, taking the boy by the shoulders. "Learn from us, obey your parents, grow from the collected wisdom of your family, but never try to be like us—especially me."

"But Grandma Rahab—"

"Oh, child," Rahab said, "don't be fooled by this pleasant moment. Life carries with it many twists and turns, and what you see today may not be what was there the day before." Obed said nothing, but his quizzical expression told her that he was confused. "Obed, your grandmother was not always what she is now. Today I am an old woman surrounded by the comfort of family in a peaceable land, but once I was young and beautiful—and there was no peace in my land. Today I walk with Jehovah God, but there was a time when I didn't even know He existed and, dear child, there was a time when my life would have only brought shame upon this house."

Before the Fall

Their reputation had preceded them.

was not just a liar; she was committing treason.

It was told the king of Jericho, saying, "Behold, men from the sons of Israel have come here tonight to search out the land." And the king of Jericho sent word to Rahab, saying, "Bring out the men who have come to you, who have entered your house, for they have come to search out all the land." But the woman had taken the two men and hidden them, and she said, "Yes, the men came to me, but I did not know where they were from.

"It came about when it was time to shut the gate at dark, that the men went out; I do not know where the men went. Pursue them quickly, for you will overtake them." But she had brought them up to the roof and hidden them in the stalks of flax which she had laid in order on the roof.

Joshua 2:2-6

Rahab did not just deny that the men were in her establishment; she sent the king's men on a wild goose chase outside the city! Lacking any other evidence, we might conjecture that Rahab's motives were simply self-protective. After all, she admitted to the Jews hiding on her roof that their reputation preceded them.

Now before they 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 terror of you has fallen on us, and that all the inhabitants of the land have melted 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 utterly destroyed."

Joshua 2:8-10

Everyone in Jericho, from the king on down, was fearful of the horde marching their way. So we could understand the wisdom of Rahab just choosing the side that would probably win. But the narrative tells us that she had a higher motive—which brings us to her second quality after bravery.

Faith

"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."

Joshua 2:11

While, on the surface, the daily business of living continued as usual in Jericho, a palpable fear hung over the city like a black rain cloud. Everyone had heard—not only in Jericho, but in all the surrounding city/states of the area—of a vast moving sea of people who enjoyed the favor of a powerful God—one who supplied their physical needs but, worse, also protected them in battle. And now word had come that these Israelites were approaching Jericho, and were camped just beyond the Jordan in Shittim. Their city was a fortress, but the inhabitants of Jericho were filled with terror over the prospect of facing this people and their all-powerful God.

Jericho had heard how the waters of the Red Sea had dried up before the Israelites, giving them a safe and dry escape from the pursuing Egyptians. It had heard how the Lord God had given them success against Sihon, king of the Amorites, and Og, king of Bashan. And every day these conquering tribes drew closer to the Jordan, and to the massive walls of the city.

Then Joshua the son of Nun sent two men as spies secretly from Shittim, saying, "Go, view the land, especially Jericho." So they went and came into the house of a harlot whose name was Rahab, and lodged there.

Joshua 2:1

She wasn't particularly proud of her occupation, but without husband or any other means Rahab was forced to do whatever was necessary to stay alive. Above everything else, she was a survivor, and even within the restrictive confines of her unseemly profession, Rahab had made herself a success. Beginning in the streets and back alleys, she now had a home on one of the main streets, and the back

wall of her house was the outside wall of Jericho itself.

It wasn't uncommon for strangers to come knocking at her door, since her house was also an inn for wayfarers, but even she had been taken aback when she opened it to the two Israelites. They had made an attempt to disguise themselves, but were so uneasy, standing there fidgeting in the street, that she was immediately suspicious. Then, too, because of her dual professions of innkeeper and harlot, she was familiar with people from many different tribes and nationalities, and she knew them to be from that group of former slaves of Egypt.

"Get in here, quickly!" She ordered. "Why have you come here? Don't you realize how dangerous it is for you to be in this city?"

"W—what are you talking about?" One of them said. The other added, "We're just passing through, on our way from Moab."

"Don't insult me. You're both from the nation of Israel—and my guess is you haven't risked your necks just to share my bed."

The two men grew noticeably uneasy, and unsure of how far they could trust this common prostitute with their real reason for being in Jericho. Within moments of their passing through the city gate they had both felt the unmistakable impression that every citizen knew who they were—which meant that it would be only a short time before the authorities had routed them out. So they had ducked into the nearest inn, seeking anonymous refuge. But now even that plan had failed.

Scowling, Rahab said, "If you're not honest with me I can't help you. Now why are you here?"

At last one of the men sighed and answered, "We've been sent to determine the strength of your city."

"So you can destroy us."

Israel had not yet crossed the Jordan into Canaan. This was a pagan land that did not know the God of Israel. Yet Rahab not only knew the correct name for Israel's God—yahweh—but she quoted Moses almost verbatim.

"Know therefore today, and take it to your heart, that the LORD, He is God in heaven above and on the earth below; there is no other."

Deuteronomy 4:39

This woman was not simply being shrewd, siding with the anticipated victor; she was a convert. Rahab is already a believer—and has done her homework. She did not place her trust in Yahweh because His people saved her when they took Jericho; she believed before they even showed up.

But in fact there was no homework for her to do. Remember the timeline: Israel is still on its trek out of Egypt. The only recorded word for the nation was put down by Moses while on that trek.

We can only conclude that she had not pored over the ancient Hebrew Scriptures and rationally concluded, from the evidence at hand, that Yahweh was the one true God. The only Hebrew

Scriptures at the time were contained in only one copy, and in the possession of the Levitical priests!

The only evidence she had were the reports coming into the city of Israel's victories and inevitable crossing of the Jordan. In everyone else this news produced uncontrollable fear; in Rahab it produced faith. Clearly the Holy Spirit was at work in this. God reached down into that pagan city and plucked out a soul for Himself: a prostitute named Rahab. In God's remarkable economy, His plan for offering salvation to the entire world through His Son included a lowly prostitute from Jericho.

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True faith is demonstrated in our actions, and once the spies laid down the three conditions she must meet for them to spare Rahab and her family from the assault on the city—among which was the hanging of a scarlet cord out her window to identify her house to the invaders—she obeyed.

Obedience is not faith, but true faith will demonstrate obedience. As Jesus said to His disciples,

"This land has been given to us by the Lord. What He will do to your city only He knows."

"With the river flooding this time of year, we thought we'd be safe for awhile," she said.

"But we made it across."

"Obviously. Well, you won't be safe here. Come with me," she ordered.

Checking first for the authorities, she led them back out into the street, and up a narrow flight of steps to the roof of her inn. Since it was harvest time for flax, Rahab's roof was covered with drying stalks of the plant. She directed the two men to lie down on the roof, then she heaped layers of the flax atop them.

It was told the king of Jericho, saying, "Behold, men from the sons of Israel have come here tonight to search out the land." And the king of Jericho sent word to Rahab, saying, "Bring out the men who have come to you, who have entered your house, for they have come to search out all the land." But the woman had taken the two men and hidden them, and she said, "Yes, the men came to me, but I did not know where they were from. It came about when it was time to shut the gate at dark, that the men went out; I do not know where the men went. Pursue them quickly, for you will overtake them." But she had brought them up to the roof and hidden them in the stalks of flax which she had laid in order on the roof. So the men pursued them on the road to the Jordan to the fords; and as soon as those who were pursuing them had gone out, they shut the gate.

Joshua 2:2-7

After the king's men had left, Rahab waited until she knew they would be outside the

city walls, then slipped back up to the roof of her house and the two secreted spies.

As she removed the stalks of flax that covered them, Rahab—uncharacteristic of her—was filled with apprehension over her situation. Would they believe her? Would these two strangers—aliens in her land, yet holding in their power the very fate of her people—believe what she was about to tell them? Would they trust her—and would they believe that she would trust them?

When they were uncovered, Rahab handed the men a small flask of water. She let them satisfy their thirst before she began. "I want to tell you something that may cost me my life. That, and the fact that I have protected yours from my own people, should guarantee your trust.

"Every person in this city, from the king down to the urchin who cleans the latrines, has heard about your people and their long journey out of Egypt. We have heard what you suffered there for hundreds of years, and we've heard how your God miraculously freed you from that bondage.

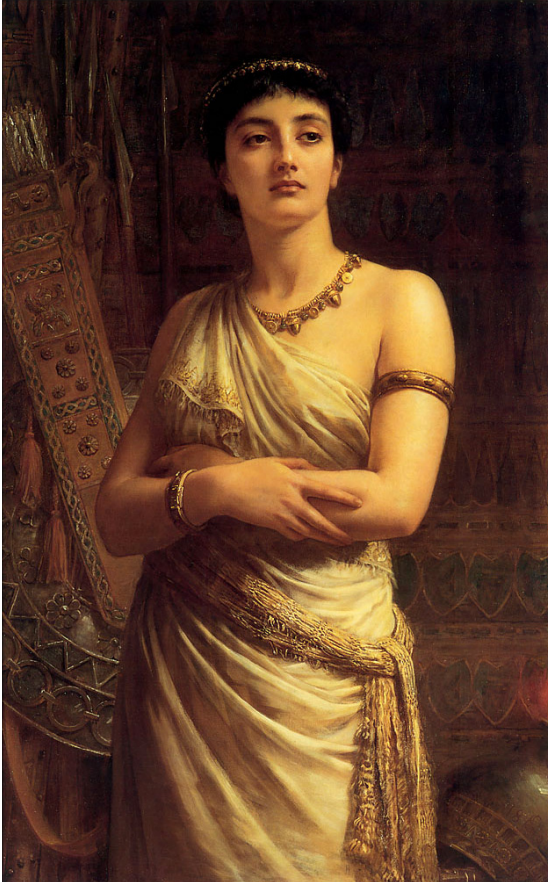
"We've all heard the stories of fantastic events in the desert—of the earth swallowing thousands of people, of food falling from the sky and food massing on the ground, of water spilling from a rock. Many have laughed at the tales; the desert is a great breeding ground for lies.

"We've also heard stories of your victories against those who might have blocked your way, of how you have utterly wiped out entire nations by the sword.

"And we've all trembled with fear at their telling.

"Every person in this city fears you. Every fighting man has quaked at the thought of going up against you in battle—for he knows going in that he will lose."

In the darkening twilight on the roof of her house, Rahab leaned closer to the two men and said with a forced whisper, "Every person in this land fears you



"If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our abode with him."

John 14:23

Because of her faith and obedience to the terms, Rahab and all her household were saved when Israel overwhelmed the city.

So the young men who were spies went in and brought out Rahab and her father and her mother and her brothers and all she had; they also brought out all her relatives and placed them outside the camp of Israel.

Joshua 6:23

Rahab was a believer in Yahweh, but because she and her household remained ceremonially unclean, they were first housed outside the camp of Israel. This, however, was not permanent.

However, Rahab the harlot and her father's household and all she had, Joshua spared; and she has lived in the midst of Israel to this day, for she hid

the messengers whom Joshua sent to spy out Jericho.

Joshua 6:25

Here is God's grace. For the rest of her lifetime Rahab did not just live with Israel; the Hebrew text tells us that she lived within, in the midst of Israel.

Grace

The story of Rahab is filled with grace—but not necessarily hers. This is a quality of the Lord she now worships.

As far as we know from the record, before she risked death to save the Israelite spies Rahab did nothing to merit God's spiritual and physical rescue. As far as we know, before Yahweh touched her life she had few redeeming qualities. She was, to put it directly, a common pagan whore. But He did choose to touch her life—and in this we see as well God's sovereign right to select whomever He wishes. No doubt there were other men and women in that city, everyday workers and shopkeepers, mothers and wives who were probably, in a human sense, morally superior to Rahab. But God chose *her*—and had the others brutally slaughtered.

God—but I believe in Him. Everyone else is afraid of what He will do to them, but I am afraid of living another day without Him."

Provision Made

The two Israelites exchanged glances, mystified by the words of this stranger.

"Yes, I know what you're thinking," Rahab continued. "You're right. I'm just another heathen—and on top of that, a common harlot. I have no assurance that I am even permitted to worship your God; He may not even have me! But I do know this: At every telling of the stories of how your God has worked His will on your behalf I became more convinced that He was, truly, the one God above all other gods. This city is filled with waxwork and plaster gods who aren't worth the sweat it took to make them. But your God, who was made by no man, is truly the Lord. He is God!

"So I put it to you: Will He have me?"

"There are others in our company," one of the men began, "who have joined us from other nations, other cultures. They've left their old gods to walk in the ways of the one true God."

"They joined us," his companion continued, "and they've been welcomed into our community. In fact the Lord Himself told Moses: 'Do not oppress an alien; you yourselves know how it feels to be aliens, because you were aliens in Egypt.' So provision has been made."

"Those who obey His holy Law are accepted into His people."

Rahab suddenly moved away from the men, sinking back into the curtain of night. "Oh, it could never be. What would such a God want with me? Even my own people turn away from me."

"Tell us which came first," one of the men said, stepping toward her, "your belief in the Lord—or your hope that He would save you?"

Simply, like an innocent girl, Rahab said quietly, "The belief."

"We all have pasts we'd like to hide," he said. "We all have something to be ashamed of. But the Lord welcomes us anyway. He's more interested in our tomorrow than our yesterday."

"You've already taken the most important step. You are already one of us."

"Then," Rahab said, "we have a covenant between us."

"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, 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." 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." Then she let them down by a rope through the window, for her house was on the city wall, so that she was living on the wall. The men said to her, "We shall be free from this oath to you which you have made us swear, unless, when we come into the land, you tie this cord of scarlet thread in the window through which you let us down, and gather to yourself into the house your father and your mother and your brothers and all your father's household."

Joshua 2:12-15, 17-18

Just as He has done with every believer, God chose Rahab and touched her life by His Spirit before she did anything for His people. His grace was not a reward—it never is. His grace comes seemingly out of nowhere, showered upon undeserving individuals. Rahab's actions were the result, not the cause of His grace.

We may not know why God chose her over others, but we certainly know what God chose Rahab for.



Abraham was the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers. Judah was the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, Perez was the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Ram. Ram was the father of Amminadab, Amminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon. Salmon was the father of Boaz by Rahab, Boaz was the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse. Jesse was the father of David the king.

Matthew 1:2-6a

After she joined Israel, Rahab married Salmon, a prince of the tribe of Judah,

and she gave birth to Boaz, who became a wealthy resident of Bethlehem Ephrathah. Boaz later married a widow from Moab, whose first husband (Mahlon) was a son of Bethlehem. The Moabitess Ruth gave Boaz a son named Obed, who became the father of Jesse, the father of King David.

Eliud was the father of Eleazar, Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob. Jacob was the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, by whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.

Matthew 1:15-16

Here is Jesus' kingly, Davidic line, from the tribe of Judah—a line that includes a woman who was a pagan prostitute and treasonous liar from Jericho.

All of grace. •

Rahab, left alone, sank back into her swarming doubts. What would become of her? She was a woman of the streets, a lowly harlot viewed with contempt by her own people—how in the world could she be accepted into a new community already aware of her past? Was she stepping into a miserable new life—even one of subjection or slavery? She had no guarantee from the men beyond the taking of the city; after that, who could say what would become of her and her family?

And what of her new God. Yes, she believed in Him, had even been worshipping Him secretly behind closed doors, but she still knew little of His personality, His ways. What would He do with her? Would she be confined to a lower strata of His society because of her publicly sordid past? At least here in Jericho she could continue her business; what would become of her with Israel?

As the inhabitants of her city awaited their fate with dread, feeling the weight of the approaching horde descend upon their fortified walls, Rahab resigned herself to a safe, yet miserable life in the company of a new people.

"And may the Lord have mercy on me," she thought.

So the young men who were spies went in and brought out Rahab and her father and her mother and her brothers and all she had; they also brought out all her relatives and placed them outside the camp of Israel. They burned the city with fire, and all that was in it. Only the silver and gold, and articles of bronze and iron, they put into the treasury of the house of the Lord. However, Rahab the harlot and her father's household and all she had, Joshua spared; and she has lived in the midst of Israel to this day, for she hid the messengers whom Joshua sent to spy out Jericho.

Joshua 6:23-25

Declared Righteous

"And so, my little love," Rahab said to Obed, "the Lord not only granted me safety with His people, but He brought blessings beyond all measure into my life. By His grace I met a wonderful, forgiving man and I became his wife. Salmon and I had many children together—including your father."

"Daddy!" Obed grinned excitedly.

"Yes, your daddy Boaz," Rahab smiled. "Then the Lord brought your mommy, Ruth, into your daddy's life—and you must ask your mommy to tell you more about her own life, and the marvelous way our God brought her here to Bethlehem." Rahab playfully swatted Obed's behind. "Now it's time for you to run inside and help your mother with the meal. Go on."

Rahab let her gaze follow the lad as he bounded into the house, and her heart swelled with thanksgiving over the many joys the Lord God had brought into her long life. She closed her eyes and drifted back to that dusty city and the days when she had plied her disreputable trade. She remembered the misery of living without God, and she thanked Him for taking her in—even her. And she thought, Yes, I may now die in peace, after this full life.

But Rahab passed from this life to the next not knowing the full extent of the Lord's grace. In this life she never knew—nor did she dare to dream—that she, a lowly woman of the street, would have a role in the very lineage of the long-awaited Messiah. •