

Series: STRANGE STUFF WE MISSED: Extraordinary Stories from an Extraordinary God

August 8, 2010

RAHAB'S ROPE

Joshua 2; 6:22-25

1. Is there anyone here this morning who *doesn't* have, has *never* had, *will* never have one of these? A credit card--your *flexible friend*. These things *can* be friendly, but don't turn your back on them! **They attack!**

-If the credit card is your flexible friend, this is the enemy. This is the evidence; the tally. It's *always* surprising to see how much has accumulated. **Statements** are *in-your-face* things, aren't they? They come regularly—and they're **brutally** honest. They tell you when and where the offense was committed--(although, it doesn't tell you specifically *who* did it).

-It also states clearly **that** they expect to be paid—and **when** they expect to be paid--and the fine print tells you what will happen if they are *not* paid. Fortunately, for some people, there's something called a *minimum payment*.

-Anyone remember the old credit card imprinters. Now you just have to swipe the magnetic strip on the card—or stick it, chip first, into the machine. But imprinters were a more graphic reminder of what was happening. *R-rack....R-rack!* 50 bucks for gas. *R-rack...r-rack!* \$30.31 for a new coffee-maker.

-Truth is, many times we *rack* up debt in other places besides Visa and Mastercard. We say nasty, thoughtless words to a friend—and it they stick like shrapnel in their hearts. *R-rack---r-rack!* We mess up an account at work. *R-rack--r-rack!* It's in the file. We get our 3rd speeding ticket in 6 months. *R-rack---r-rack!* It goes on our record.

-But there is also another kind of debt. **Debt** is the word Jesus chose to describe sin when He taught His followers to pray. **And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors (Matthew 6:12 TNIV)** Our **debt** is the ways our lives have offended God, negatively impacted the people around us and damaged our world

-Most people in our world would rather **not** think about the fact that this debt is recorded. See, it's not criminals that have a record; we **all** have a record! Careless, thoughtless actions. Selfish acts. Jealousy. Impatience. Sexual transgressions. Both white lies and big, fat, juicy whoppers. The things we do, the thoughts we feed on when no one's looking. *R-rack---rack!* The difference is that we haven't seen the statement yet—and would prefer **not** to!

-The story I want to tell you this morning about **Rahab's Rope** is a story about debt—and about payment. If you've accumulated some moral debt in your life—and if it weighs on your heart—I think you'll find this story powerful. Freeing!

2. When Rahab appears in the Bible record, the Israelite people are at a critical point—one I talked about several weeks ago. After 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, they are *finally* ready to take the land God had promised—and Joshua sends two spies check things out.

Then Joshua son of Nun secretly sent two spies from Shittim. "Go, look over the land," he said, "especially Jericho." So they went and entered the house of a prostitute named Rahab and stayed there. The king of Jericho was told, "Look! Some of the Israelites have come here tonight to spy out the land." ³ So the king of Jericho sent this message to Rahab: "Bring out the men who came to you and entered your house, because they have come to spy out the whole land."

But the woman had taken the two men and hidden them. She said, "Yes, the men came to me, but I did not know where they had come from. At dusk, when it was time to close the city gate, they left. I don't know which way they went. Go after them quickly. You may catch up with them." (But she had taken them up to the roof and hidden them under the stalks of flax she had laid out on the roof.) So the men set out in pursuit of the spies on the road that leads to the fords of the Jordan, and as soon as the pursuers had gone out, the gate was shut.

Before the spies lay down for the night, she went up on the roof and said to them, "I know that the LORD has given this land to you and that a great fear of you has fallen on us, so that all who live in this country are melting in fear because of you. We have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to Sihon and Og, the two kings of the Amorites east of the Jordan, whom you completely destroyed. When we heard of it, our hearts melted in fear and everyone's courage failed because of you, for the LORD your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below.

"Now then, please swear to me by the LORD that you will show kindness to my family, because I have shown kindness to you. Give me a sure sign that you will spare the lives of my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, and all who belong to them—and that you will save us from death." "Our lives for your lives!" the men assured her. "If you don't tell what we are doing, we will treat you kindly and faithfully when the LORD gives us the land."

So she let them down by a rope through the window, for the house she lived in was part of the city wall. She said to them, "Go to the hills so the pursuers will not find you. Hide yourselves there three days until they return, and then go on your way."

Now the men had said to her, "This oath you made us swear will not be binding on us unless, when we enter the land, you have tied this scarlet cord in the window through which you let us down, and unless you have brought your father and mother, your brothers and all your family into your house. If any of them go outside your house into the street, their blood will be on their own heads; we will not be responsible. As for those who are in the house with you, their blood will be on our head if a hand is laid on them. But if you tell what we are doing, we will be released from the oath you made us swear." "Agreed," she replied. "Let it be as you say." So she sent them away, and they departed. And she tied the scarlet cord in the window. (Joshua 2:1-21 TNIV)

-Archaeologists tell us that Jericho, this place where the spies met Rahab, had two walls; 30 feet high, 6 feet thick, and about 15 feet apart. These guys sneak through the gates—and into Rahab’s home.

- When we hear the word "prostitute"--lots of things cross our minds; none of them are good. And we attach value to people based on the things they do. When you hear that a young mother of two has been murdered, it registers differently than hearing that a prostitute has been killed.

- a. Some background might help. The two main gods in Jericho and the other cities in this area were Ba'al and Ashtoreth. People worshipped in fertility cults like this by having sex with temple prostitutes—believing that it would bring them prosperity and fruitfulness.

-Archaeologists who have studied the writings from these cults describe it in 21st century terms as hard-core pornography. The social problems and disease created by this practice were disastrous. The children of prostitutes either became prostitutes—or were offered as human sacrifices to these pagan gods. This worship was degrading, addictive and participated directly in the demonic world.

- b. **This** was Rahab’s world. It’s likely that she was introduced into prostitution in her early teens—and woke up to this awful form of slavery every day. It’s my guess that the weight of moral debt and brokenness in her heart was almost unbearable.

3. There’s another issue in this story that is deeply troubling to me—and to just about everyone in our culture. It’s God’s imminent judgment on Jericho--and on the whole culture. As close as I can figure it, when Rahab met these men, Jericho was about 3 or 4 weeks from disaster.

The **whole** truth about God is that He is a God of both grace and judgment—which bothers a **lot** of people. The question goes something like this: “How can a God of love order the judgment of a whole city like this?”

-There are no simple, easy answers on this issue. Richard Dawkins calls God a “...**petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser...**” among other choice adjectives. We flinch when we read words like that—not just because what Dawkins says is offensive—which it is. We flinch because **we’re** tempted to think that when we read some accounts.

-Sometimes sincere followers of Jesus try to help God with his image problems. They sometimes say that in the Old Testament, God is about law and judgment—but in the New Testament, He’s about love and compassion. There are several problems with this. First, Jesus made it clear that **He is I AM**—the One who revealed Himself to Moses. Second, the OT is filled with statements about God’s love and compassion and mercy—and Jesus spoke in very chilling terms about God’s ultimate judgment of sin.

- a. There are some facts that help us understand this narrative better than we do. First, God's command to destroy Jericho—and the other Canaanite nations was **not** a policy statement for the Israelites; it was limited to Joshua's conquest and possession of the land. It's not fair or accurate to make God's judgment the theme song for the entire Old Testament era.

-And God's judgment was reserved for ongoing, unrepentant wickedness and violence—not a form of ethnic cleansing. In fact, it's clear from the record that when Israel fell into ongoing patterns of wickedness—**they** experienced God's judgment.

-And God—as He always does--gave them a chance to turn away and be spared. In fact, He stated clearly that the Israelites would be left in slavery in Egypt for **400 years** while God gave the Canaanites time to change directions. They didn't.

- b. But there's another very important fact. This event was not a stand-alone; it was part of a God's overall plan to restore peace, save everything and everyone He created, and bless **all** nations. That's what the record of the Bible is; not a bunch of disconnected stories—but the story of God's creation—how it got wrecked, and how He is actively working to restore it all.

-The nation of Israel—and then the Church—were brought into existence—not to curse the nations—but bless the nations. The final story is that sin—which threatens everything—will **not** prevail.

- c. One more thing. God is God. As God, He has a right to do things and work in ways I, in my arrogance, don't like. Yes, He has the right to offend me—and you—and do things in ways we don't understand. He's God—and He stands in judgment over all the world—all it's systems, leaders, policies—everything. I know that's not very satisfying—at least it's not to me. But that's just the way it is.

4. Interesting—this story is not focused on judgment; it's focused on saving of a prostitute who heard about this God and believed in Him before anyone could tell her about Him. Because of her faith, she and her entire family were spared. **That** reflects who God really is. There's **no way** these spies showed up at her house by accident; I think God saw her heart—and orchestrated the whole thing!

-When the king of Jericho found out that these foreigners had gone into Rahab's house, he ordered her to give them up. That was her defining moment. She could've turned them in—and been heroine for a day in Jericho. Or she could risk her life to save theirs. So, she said “Yep—they were here—but they went **that** way—and if you hurry you can catch them!” Meanwhile, they were hidden under some bundles of flax on her roof.

-And then Rahab tells these guys why she hid them. What she reveals shows **amazing** insight. She seems to have believed more deeply in a God she didn't know—than the Israelites to whom He had revealed Himself. She knew that the

expiration date for the city she lived in—and the people who used her services—had come and gone. She said that her entire city, when they had heard of all God had been doing—and were **terrified**. But **she believed!** Listen to her words:

...Our hearts melted in fear and everyone's courage failed because of you, for the LORD your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below. (Joshua 2:11 TNIV)

-Now, how do you think Rahab figured that out? I think God looked past her credit record—and knew she would respond to His grace. See, **He** was a God who led people to value and protect the vulnerable—not exploit them.

-In essence, Rahab asks to be saved. Even though it means leaving **everything** familiar—culture, language, home, friends—**everything**—Rahab wants to become a part of this new nation. She asks that she and her family be saved when her city is destroyed—and asks for a guarantee:

Give me a sure sign that you will spare the lives of my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, and all who belong to them—and that you will save us from death. (Joshua 2:13 TNIV)

-And the **rope** was the sign! Rahab's house was built into this massive wall—and the spies escape Jericho by rappelling down a red rope hanging from her window. They told her, "Leave the red rope hanging from your window—and you will be spared." Everything Rahab had—her life, her future, her family—**everything** was hanging by that red rope. Now, **that** took guts! Faith, really.

-Ropes are not usually red—and I have no idea why **this** rope was scarlet—deep red. Maybe Rahab had it because she was part of the red-light district in Jericho. But the color red is symbolic—both of sin and the price paid for sin. Blood. Just 40 years before this the **only** way anyone was spared when the angel of death passed through Egypt was if they had the blood of a lamb smeared on the doorframe.

5. The ending to this story is very dramatic. A few weeks after this encounter with Rahab, the Israelites show up at Jericho. Biblical records tell us that there were 600,000 Israelite **men**—not counting women and children. I want you to imagine the scene—this **mass** of people—walking silently around this city every single day for a week. As they did, this scarlet rope hung silently from Rahab's window. It stood for mercy—and grace.

-Anyone here remember the footage of the twin towers collapsing in NYC the morning of Sept. 11, 2001? On that terrifying day when the walls of the Jericho collapsed—imagine Rahab and her family walking away from that scene, trembling, covered with dust. I can imagine Rahab, in particular, **wondering** if these guys had just used her like all the other men—or whether they would keep their promises. What their future would be like. The record in Joshua says,

And she lives among the Israelites to this day. (Joshua 6:25 TNIV)

- a. So, whatever happened to Rahab? Well, she became a hero of faith in God. Not only is she mentioned in Hebrews in the Bible's Hall of Faith along with Abraham, Moses and David, she is listed as an example of dramatic faith by James, half-brother of Jesus:

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? (James 2:25 TNIV)

- b. It gets even *more* surprising. Guess who was related to Rahab, the Canaanite prostitute? Jesus—Son of God! That's right. Sometimes genealogies can be boring, but not this one. Matthew, disciple of Jesus and recorder of his life, writes:

Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab, Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth, Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of King David. (Matthew 1:5-6a TNIV)

-Know what's fascinating? In Jesus' lineage—she lost the record of charges against her. Notice that her job description has changed from *the prostitute*—to *mother of Boaz*—ancestor of Jesus. See, Rahab met the God of the second chance; the God who changes everyone He meets if they'll allow Him to. No matter *what* their reputation is—or the list of charges are!

- c. And Jesus seems to have this tender spot in his heart for restoring women caught in sexually destructive lifestyles. There was the disreputable woman who crashed the party and washed his feet with her tears; the Samaritan woman he met at the well, the woman caught in adultery...and the records *all* say that tax collectors and prostitutes loved to hang around Him and hear Him teach. I sometimes wonder if when Jesus saw them, He thought about his own heritage—his great, great, great, great—grandmother—1400 years removed—who was snatched from a scandalous lifestyle—and found grace!

6. Now. Let's talk about you and me. When we talk about God reclaiming someone who was a shrine prostitute and there's a great ending to the story—we think, "Well, *that's* nice! Wow, to think God would reach out to someone like *her*? I'll bet He's glad there are decent people like *me* around who don't need dragged out of a messy lifestyle like that!"

-But debt is debt, isn't it? Have you ever looked at an itemization of your credit card bill? It will tell you how much you spend on food, transportation, entertainment, lodging—probably about 10 different categories.

-Does anyone here look at the bill and think, "Wow! Most of my money has been spent on food—*not* on entertainment. Why, *that's* proof that *my* debt is better than *most* people's debt! I feel *so* much better about paying this bill now!" Debt is all paid in the same currency. And when you're in debt, you're in debt. It doesn't matter whether you're in debt because of a fantastic vacation—or because your transmission blew in North Bay.

- a. See, here on earth—we categorize sin—moral debt. And the list changes based on the year and **mood du jour**. I was recently reading about a well-known politician from the 50s who was well-known for his sexual harassment. When the press was asked why they never said anything, they said, “He was faithful to his wife.” In the 50s, it was scandalous to be unfaithful to your spouse—but not to sexually harass women. Now the value system has **totally** flipped—even though **both** are wrong!

-See, **we** are arrogant enough to think that God takes his cues from us. “**Okay with you? Okay with me!**” And that’s not true. Jesus was pretty clear about that; deception, cheating your parents out of what belongs to them, not keeping your promises and lust are right up there with all the big-name sins.

-In fact, Jesus said more about the sin of having a critical, unforgiving heart than He did about stealing or killing or committing adultery. And that doesn’t mean those issues aren’t no big deal to God. It means that debt is debt—and God doesn’t grade on a curve. All sin is destructive, addictive and corrosive—and has a drastic effect on the people and the place God created. And all sin is spiritual **lethal**.

- b. And there’s another fact. God judges sin. At the beginning, he said that sin leads to death. All of it. And He hasn’t changed His mind. What He **has** done is make a way for us to be forgiven.

-It’s the trail of the scarlet rope. He clothed Adam and Eve’s nakedness through death. He made a way for Israel to escape death—through the death of a lamb. Rahab threw the scarlet rope out of her window to make it clear that she needed to be saved. What she didn’t know—couldn’t know—is that the trail of the scarlet rope would end at a cross—with her descendant, Jesus, hanging there with his blood dripping into the dirt. And sin was paid for—in full.

-You could put it like this: The **bad** news is that all sin is **sin**—and has been judged by God...and the **good** news is that all sin is **sin** and has been judged by God. Why is that **Good News**? Well, because it means that God is going to one day eliminate all sin—once for all—and all the mess and disease and sadness and death will be gone for good.

-It’s **Good News** because Jesus was judged and sent to a cross—and paid the price— so **we** could have a second chance. And a third chance. And a fourth chance. And He did that because he loves, values—**treasures** every single person who has ever walked this planet—from child-molesters and serial killers to small time grudge-holders and unforgivers—and prostitutes.

- c. People—you—me—can respond in one of two ways. The first is what you could call, **deny and pay**. This is the most popular choice in our world. First, you find some way to deny that sin is sin—or that **your** sin is sin. You excuse yourself. You cover up—euphemize—pretend that you’re better than you are and that, compared to others—even many religious people—you’re a pretty darn good person.

-And once you establish that you're not **that** bad, you then find ways to **pay** for what minor indiscretions you **have** committed. There are a whole **pile** of religions and businesses out there who will tell you how to improve your life, stop doing destructive things to yourself and others and feel better about life. In an irreligious culture like ours, the list usually involves going green, recycling, preserving wildlife and doing acts of compassion when places like Haiti go belly-up.

-And those **are good** things that make the world a better place. But it's a little like calling the **VISA** and saying, "Let's just for get about the debt I've been wracking up—and I'll try to spend less money and charge more wholesome things to my account." No one talks about the most blatant fact of human existence--**the List**. The fact that sin offends God and creates a trail of blood behind is. If God is just and good--**someone** has to pay.

- d. I just want to warn you that the Bible is **very** clear on one thing. If you try to save yourself—based on your own merit and the good things you do, you will be judged and you will die. God didn't want **anyone** to die for their sins—so through Jesus, He made a way to take care of the list. Rahab's list. My list. Your list.

-And that's the **second** option. To throw the scarlet rope out of the window and say, "I need to be saved from what I have done—what I rightfully have coming to me." Paul, and early church leader put it like this:

You were dead because of your sins and because your sinful nature was not yet cut away. Then God made you alive with Christ, for he forgave all our sins. He canceled the record of the charges against us and took it away by nailing it to the cross. In this way, he disarmed the spiritual rulers and authorities. He shamed them publicly by his victory over them on the cross. (Colossians 2:13-15 NLT)

-I don't know if you realize the full impact of that. The crosses of people executed by the Romans were placed on public highways—with the list of charges against them nailed to the cross and spattered by their blood. This is saying that the list of shameful things **I've** done—and the list of shameful things **you've** done are nailed to Jesus' cross.

-And we pardoned by an act of faith. Like Rahab we throw the red rope out of the window, which says, "I can't change the way I've lived and I can't undo all the damage I've done and hurt I've caused. **I can't save myself!** I can't even promise that I'll change. But I am trusting that what you told me is true; that **you** will rescue me. That **you** will send your Spirit to come into the core of my life and change the way I think about everything!"

-Have you ever done that? I'll tell you—it is an **amazing** thing to get rid of your list and have a heart that is free...and clear...and forgiven! And what God really wants is for his people to welcome the people He would welcome—and that would be? Well, everyone. **Every** person in this world is on God's list of

people to love and redeem. Osama Bin Laden. Paul Bernardo. Bernie Madoff, Richard Dawkins—I mean every person on this world's most-hated list is on God's most-wanted list.

7. If you're visiting—and you're wondering—this is not a successful church for successful people. This is not a church for good people trying to be better and work off a little moral debt—or karma. This is not even an organization of good, respectful people trying to help the less fortunate. This is a gathering of grateful people—whose lists would scandalize anyone who read them—but who have been loved into God's arms. And our goal is to love others into God's arms. **Anyone.** Tony Campolo tells a story that I've used before—but I think it describes the kind of people we want to be.

-Apparently Tony was in Hawaii, and found that the time difference really screwed up his sleep schedule. In the middle of the night he found himself wide awake and starving. The only place he could find still open at 3:30 a.m. was a diner—the kind of place we used to call a **greasy spoon**--you know where you make sure your doughnut doesn't have legs on it?

-While he was sitting there at 3:30 in the morning, he walked several prostitutes. They were talking loud, chewing gum--and one of them, Agnes, said something like, "Hey, tomorra's my birthday." One of the other girls said with a sneer, "Yeah, so what? What da ya want from us, a birthday party or sumpthin? Sing Happy Birthday?" Agnes said, "Of course not, I've never had a birthday party in my life--why now?"

-After they left, Tony Campolo asked the restaurant owner if they came in about the same time every night. He said they did--so Tony said, "Why don't we have a surprise birthday party for Agnes? I'll decorate!" The restaurant owner agreed to make the cake and spread the word.

-The next night, Tony Campolo came in at 2:30 a.m. and decorated this little diner from top to bottom. The word spread fast, and by 3:30 a.m. most of the red light district in Honolulu had jammed themselves into this little diner. Then Agnes showed up, and everyone yelled, "Surprise; Happy Birthday Agnes." Agnes was totally stunned. Her mouth fell open, her knees buckled; and then as they all sang Happy Birthday, she totally lost it and sobbed.

-When they were done singing, Harry, the owner said, "Come on Agnes, blow out the candles. If you don't, I'm gonna hafta do it. Come on Agnes, cut the cake. Yo, Agnes, we want some cake."

-When Agnes had recovered a bit, she picked up the cake and stared at it and said, "Look Harry, is it okay if I just--I mean, can I just look at it a little before we eat it?" Harry shrugged and said, "Sure, ya wanna keep the cake and take it home?" Agnes said, "Can I?" Agnes picked up the cake and carried it out of that little restaurant like it was the Holy Grail.

-Everyone stood in stunned silence. Tony didn't know what to do, so he took up an offering. Actually, he prayed. He prayed for Agnes, that God would bless her and that she would know that God loved her. He prayed for everyone in the diner. When he

was done, Harry leaned over the counter, squinted at Tony and said, "Hey! You never told me that you were a preacher! What kinda church do you belong to?"

-Tony said, "I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for whores at 3:30 in the morning." The guy said, "No you don't. There's no church like that. If there was, I'd join it. I'd join a church like that!" Most people would—and that's the kind of church Jesus—the one with Rahab's blood running through his veins--came to build.

-Know why? Because **everyone** matters; **everyone** counts! And **everyone** gets a second chance. If they'll ask.