

“God’s Surprising Grace”

Joshua 2

October 13, 2002

Dr. Jerry Nelson

Kathy was about 21 years of age when I met her in a philosophy class at the University of Minnesota.

In that class the professor and I had had some rather sharp verbal exchanges as I challenged his negative portrayals of Christianity.

After one such class Kathy asked if she could talk with me.

Sitting in a commons area she began to tell me her life story.

She was reared in a very stable middle-class home and religion was a dominant part of that upbringing.

In spite of her father’s agnostic secularism her mother was a devout Jehovah’s Witness.

Kathy had been steeped in that faith but a combination of adolescent curiosity and rebellion along with a permissive culture lured her into an immoral lifestyle and recently great confusion about life.

As I listened I couldn’t, first of all, imagine why she was telling me all of this.

And then as she spoke very affectionately of her religion – a religion that specifically excludes Jesus as Lord, I realized how different we were.

It never even occurred to me that this young woman could become a Christian – given her lifestyle and religion, it seemed there was no way she would ever embrace Jesus.

But she continued her story with parts that surprised me.

Six months earlier her then live-in boyfriend had met Jesus and had become a Christian.

He had insisted that they marry and she had consented.

He was constantly talking about Jesus but Kathy's mother was equally insistent about her faith.

Then Kathy heard me talking in class, in words which she said sounded like her husband's, and she wanted to know more.

Over the next six months this woman that I had considered spiritually unlikely, if not spiritually impossible, became a Christ-follower.

Kathy is today a wife and mother of four and a mature woman of the faith – and most of all a great example of God's surprising grace.

Many of you are examples of the surprising grace of and others of you will be but don't know it yet.

Today I want you to hear another example of God's surprising grace but this time in addition to being an unlikely example because of lifestyle and religion, this person was also citizen of a city that had been marked for judgment by God.

Not only was this person unlikely but for her time had run out.

The descendants of Abraham's grandson Jacob, now called Israelites had been led out of Egyptian slavery by Moses and after 40 years of faithlessness were finally ready to enter the land that had been promised to Abraham 400 years earlier – the land of Canaan.

One of the principal native groups living in that land was known as the Amorites.

When God promised Abraham that his descendants would one day live in that land, he told Abraham that it would be 400 years before that happened.

And one of the reasons for the long delay was because as God said it: Genesis 15:16 "In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure."

Judgment was going to come on the Amorites but in God's merciful patience, he was giving them time to repent.

Now these many years later under Moses' leadership the Israelites were ready to enter the Promised Land of Canaan and the time for judgment on the Amorites had come.

The Israelites still under Moses' leadership had fought their way up the east side of the Dead Sea, conquering the native populations, and were now poised to enter the heart of the Promised Land.

Moses died and Joshua, at God's command, assumed leadership.

Last week from chapter 1 of the book of Joshua we saw God's commission of Joshua to enter Canaan and occupy it.

Joshua 1:2-5 "Now then, you and all these people, get ready to cross the Jordan River into the land I am about to give to them--to the Israelites. I will give you every place where you set your foot, as I promised Moses.... No one will be able to stand up against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you."

In the balance of chapter 1 we see the entire people of Israel pledging allegiance to Joshua's leadership.

The next thing we **expect** is what we get **not** in chapter 2 but in chapter 3:1,14 "Early in the morning Joshua and all the Israelites set out from Shittim and went to the Jordan, where they camped before crossing over... So (then) the people broke camp to cross the Jordan..."

But interrupting that story of invasion is chapter 2 – **a story of God's surprising grace.**

Stand to honor God as I read his words.

Joshua 2:1-24 "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. 2 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." 4 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. 5 At dusk, when it was time to close the city gate, the men left. I don't know which way they went. Go after them quickly. You may catch up with them." 6 (But she had taken them up to the roof and hidden them under the stalks of flax she had laid out on the roof.) 7 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. 8 Before the spies lay down for the night, she went up on the roof 9 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. 10 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. 11 When we heard of it, our hearts melted and everyone's courage failed because of you, for the LORD your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below. 12 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 13 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." 14 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." 15 So she let them down by a rope through the window, for the house she lived in was part of the city wall. 16 Now she had 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." 17 The men said to her, "This oath you made us swear will not be binding on us 18 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. 19 If anyone goes outside your house into the street, his blood will be on his own head; we will not be responsible. As for anyone who is in the house with you, his blood will be on our head if a hand is laid on him. 20 But if you tell what we are doing, we will be released from the oath you made us swear." 21 "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. 22 When they left, they went into the hills and stayed there three days, until the

pursuers had searched all along the road and returned without finding them. 23 Then the two men started back. They went down out of the hills, forded the river and came to Joshua son of Nun and told him everything that had happened to them. 24 They said to Joshua, "The LORD has surely given the whole land into our hands; all the people are melting in fear because of us."

And the end of the story waits for chapter 6:

Joshua 6:24-25 "Then they burned the whole city and everything in it, but they put the silver and gold and the articles of bronze and iron into the treasury of the LORD's house. But Joshua spared Rahab the prostitute, with her family and all who belonged to her, because she hid the men Joshua had sent as spies to Jericho--and she lives among the Israelites to this day.

Why does the author record this incident?

The author tells the story **in such a way** that two things stand out:

1. One is of strategic military significance.

Three times the author repeats the fact that the people of Canaan were living in paralyzing fear of the Israelites. (2:9b, 11a, 24)

In fact that appears to be the key element of the report given to Joshua.

This would have been very encouraging to the Israelites – God was not only with them, **he was even going ahead of them** to prepare for victory.

2. The other emphasis, and the one I think is the primary reason for telling this story, is the emphasis on God's surprising grace.

One can easily imagine a screenplay of this story.

It includes suspense, danger, questionable characters, a twist in the plot, and an invasion that hangs in the balance.

At Joshua's instructions two spies make their way stealthily to Jericho to spy out the city and area.

They go to a public house attempting to get information but are quickly discovered by the enemy.

The officials come looking for them – Most surprisingly Rahab hides the spies and lies to divert the officials.

The city gates are closed and the future of the spies is not promising.

They are temporarily safe but still in great danger.

Rahab has done a “180” regarding her loyalty and after pleading mercy from the spies she secrets them out of the city.

The spies hide out for parts of three days until they can make their way back across the Jordan and report to Joshua.

And it ends with the escape of the spies, the conquest of the city and the eventual saving of Rahab’s and her family’s lives.

The story starts and ends in conversation with Joshua **but the story is clearly not about Joshua but about one woman and a most surprising demonstration of God’s grace.**

I think Rahab’s occupation as a prostitute is germane to the story.

But why do the spies who are representing God’s people go to such a place.

Everything in the way the author tells the story argues against the idea that the men went to Rahab’s for prostitution. (See Hess 83-84 for use of Hebrew language on this point)

A much more consistent explanation is that prostitutes often ran the modern day equivalent of hotels – seedy no doubt but nonetheless a place where anonymity would be insured and information forthcoming.

And furthermore, as the story unfolds, we also discover that God was guiding those spies whether they knew it or not because he was engineering the entire incident for the sake of Rahab.

So you see the most consistent explanation for why the spies wound up in a place of prostitution was because of the surprising demonstration of God’s grace that they would witness.

The fact that the spies are quickly discovered in Jericho, not only creates suspense in the story but highlights Rahab's role in the entire matter.

The spies have approached and entered the city undetected, or so they thought.

They enter Rahab's place to get information, which was their mission.

Somehow Rahab learns who they are and that they have been discovered.

In time to avoid detection in her place, she hides the spies on her roof and then tells the king's men that yes some men had come to her place but then lying she said she didn't know who they were AND more importantly that they had already left the city.

She then offers advice that the gullible posse might catch the spies if they act quickly going in the direction of the Jordan River, beyond which are camped the enemy Israelites.

After seeing the posse off, Rahab goes to where she had hidden the spies.

Then is when the point of the story becomes clear.

I can easily imagine that when the spies were told to hide on Rahab's roof, they were scared to death.

Why was she hiding them? Who was this woman? Would the place be searched? Were they about to die?

You can believe that when she returned to them and they discovered how she had covered for them, they were all ears to hear what she had to say.

And what they heard was a great example of God's surprising grace.

From the mouth of this pagan-god-worshipping harlot came the following words:

Joshua 2: 9-11 "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. 10 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. 11 When we heard of it, our hearts melted and everyone's courage failed because of you, for the LORD your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below."

This is an awesome confession of faith coming from **a most unlikely** person.

She starts and ends her statement of faith with **what** she has come to believe and **in whom** she is placing her trust.

She uses the name LORD (Yahweh) which was the personal, intimate, covenant-keeping name for Israel's God.

2:9 "I know the LORD (Yahweh) has given this land to you..."

2:11 "For the LORD (Yahweh) your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below."

We don't know when the change of mind and heart began in Rahab but she stood before those spies declaring:

- there is only one true God,
- that he is sovereign over all else (including the false gods of her former religion),
- and that their God, now her God, is the one on whom she will stake her future.

Is that the last thing those spies expected to hear or what?!!!

They were preparing to destroy Jericho because these were the enemies of God living under the imminent judgment of God.

And in this place that represented everything contrary to the one true God and his will for people's lives, stood this prostitute declaring allegiance to their God.

How could this be?

Rahab tells them how.

Joshua 3:10 “**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.”

There was no CNN or National Public Radio but the word had gotten to Jericho.

These Israelites had a God that made a difference.

She indicates that they had heard about how God had led his people for the past 40 years from the crossing of the Red Sea when Moses led them out of Egypt right up to recent battles against Sihon and Og.

And hearing the evidence Rahab drew some conclusions.

She did not hear about what had happened to Israel and stupidly assume that a nomadic band of slaves-turned-shepherds could escape the clutches of the mighty Egypt, could survive for 40 years in a desert and could defeat the Kings of Sihon and Og without aid from somewhere, without divine intervention.

Over a hundred years ago William Blaikie wrote, “It is one of the great weaknesses of modern unbelief that with all its pretensions to philosophy, it is constantly accepting effects without adequate cause.”

(Blakie86)

Rahab didn't do that – she heard what had happened and she drew the right conclusion and she placed her faith in the right place.

A right relationship with God begins with an acknowledgement of who God is **and** an acceptance of what that means in one's life.

What is the difference between Christians and non-Christians?

The difference is what they **do** with the truth of who God is.

People won't go to hell because they haven't heard, or because they didn't know about God, but because, as Paul tells us in Romans 1, they will go to hell because **they refused to do anything with the truth.**

Romans 1:18,21 “men...suppress the truth... For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.”

You may be one who has heard about God for years but you’ve never done anything with that knowledge.

Rahab changed her mind, swore her allegiance and she acted on her belief.

I know this is true about Rahab’s faith because of what God says about her later.

In James 2:25-26 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? As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.

And in Hebrews 11:31 “By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient.”

In these passages of Scripture she is put in the league of Noah, Abraham, Moses and others who trusted God **as evidenced by their actions.**

Her conversion is a real conversion, a significant change in world-view, a dramatic transformation from god-worshipper to worshipper of God – and one who acts on that change of mind/heart.

She staked everything on what she now believed.

Do you think she had any doubt about what would have happened to her if the spies had been found in her house?

When she acted, she had made up her mind and **as she sealed her fate, she sealed her faith.**

Earlier I said that this story was not about Joshua but about one woman and a most surprising demonstration of God’s grace.

But I don’t think the story is as much about Rahab’s faith as it is about God’s surprising grace.

Even as God prepares to judge the Amorites he holds out the offer of mercy.

For the sake of one family in that idolatrous land God would arrange an entire set of circumstances.

This mercy of God continued to surprise the Israelites down through the centuries even during Jesus' time and it continues to surprise us.

We think most often of the deserving – he or she deserves to be a Christian, after all, look at how good they are.

- Wouldn't "so and so" make a great Christian?
- She is so good, if only she were a Christian.
- He is so kind and generous surely God will accept him.

Conversely, we wonder how others could possibly become Christians.

Surely God wouldn't grant mercy to Stalin or Hitler.

We not only are unconvinced when evil people make professions of faith, we think there is injustice when a child-molester or abuser becomes a Christian and has the assurance of eternal life.

But God wants his people of all generations to know that his purpose is to save people, not destroy them, and he has called us to that same purpose.

2 Peter 3:9 "He is patient with you, not wanting anyone **to** perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

2 Peter 3:15 speaking of why the end of the age has not yet come Peter wrote, "Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation..."

- Abraham asked if God would spare Sodom if only 10 righteous people could be found and God said yes.
- Nineveh was headed for destruction but God spared her when she repented.
- The thief on the cross was spared at the last minute.

There is no person, regardless of the situation, who is too lost for the surprising grace of God.

God does not deal with a person because of his or her past but in spite of it.

Rahab was living proof that even in the midst of judgment God holds out the offer of forgiveness and life even to the least likely.

Rahab is proof that with God there is always room for grace.

How do we see people?

A couple of weeks ago I quoted from Eugene Peterson:

“To see a person as a sinner, then is not to see him or her as hypocritical, disgusting or evil. Most sinners are very nice people. To call a man a sinner is not a blast at his manners or his morals. It is a theological belief that the one (thing most needed by) him is forgiveness and grace.” “If we rigorously define people as fellow sinners, we will be prepared to share grief, shortcomings, pain, failure, and have plenty of time left over to watch for the signs of God’s grace operating in this wilderness, and then fill the air with praises for what we discover... So “sinner” becomes not a weapon in the arsenal of condemnation but the expectation of grace.” (Peterson The Contemplative Pastor)

And grace is exactly what this “least likely” Rahab received.

For Rahab was not only saved from the destruction of Jericho but this idol-worshipping, Amorite, prostitute married one of the princes of Israel and became the great-great-grandmother of King David and a forebear of the Messiah, Jesus.

That’s our God, One who surprises us with grace.

1 Corinthians 6:9-11 “Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

That's the grace he offers to you.

Let me close with a story of yet another example of God's surprising grace.

His name is Samuel.

He's nearly 8 years of age.

His **great grandmother** is not a Christian and I don't know how many generations before her have lived the way of her children and grandchildren.

Samuel's **grandfather** left his family when Samuel's mother was only 5.

Samuel's **grandmother** died of a drug overdose in her 30's.

Samuel's father is unknown and his **mother** was barely in her 20s when he was born and because of her drugs and boyfriends, abandoned Samuel in the hospital.

He was too small to leave the hospital when she did and she never came back to get him.

Samuel was placed in Denver County's foster care program.

Samuel is my adopted son, Paris' older brother.

Paris was born while his mother, Samuel's mother, was in prison.

In the first years of their lives both boys were in the HIV clinic of Children's Hospital because of their mother's diseases.

It was then that we learned that Samuel had been adopted.

After our adoption of Paris we spent over a year attempting to find out where Samuel was living.

In one of my scores of telephone calls and about to give up, I was one day directed to a different woman who amazingly said she had personally made the adoption placement of Samuel and yes she would contact the adoptive parents.

Within two weeks we received a phone call from those parents and then we arranged a meeting of our families so that Paris and Samuel could see each other.

What we learned in that phone call and meeting was nothing short of the surprising grace of God.

Samuel had been taken from the hospital and placed in a Christian home until three months later when the Longs adopted him.

Art and Karla Long are Christians and Art is the pastor of an evangelical church in Florence, Colorado.

God reached into that family that had for generations refused his grace and snatched out two little boys and set them on a whole different course.

Oh, the surprising grace of God!

It is a grace that is available to you - it is not too late.

And it is a grace that is available through you - to others – **that** can begin today.

Pray

Announce guest reception in Welcome Center