

# Amazing Grace

GOD USED RAHAB, AN IMPERFECT PERSON,  
TO ACCOMPLISH HIS PLANS.

God continually surprises us with the kinds of people that He uses. Here's a story you don't hear every day about a man who lived in a rural area of Nigeria, the Barkin Ladi area of Plateau State. This man lived in a rural area that had experienced widespread ethnic and religious violence. In June of 2018, violence again erupted in his region. A group of predominantly Muslim herdsmen were violently driving predominantly Christian farmers out of the entire region. The herdsmen burned ten of the farmers' villages and killed many. This man single-handedly hid 262 Christians from these Muslim herdsmen. He sheltered Christian farmers and their families in his own home and in a public building nearby. He stood outside his home pleading with the attackers, offering his own life in exchange for the lives of those he sheltered. Because of his reputation and social position, the attackers relented. More than eighty Christians had already been killed in the attack. Who knows how many would have died if he had not intervened?

This man? He was an eighty-three-year-old Muslim named Abubaker Abdullahi. Besides sheltering Christians in his home, what was the public building where he protected his Christian neighbors? It was the local mosque, and Abdullahi served as its Imam. Because of his fearless actions, Abubaker Abdullahi received the 2019 International Religious Freedom Award by the U.S. Secretary of State.

You never know whom God might choose to use to protect His people. We can be certain that it will sometimes be someone that we do not expect. Jesus warned the religious leaders, "Tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God before you" (Matt. 21:31). Joshua 2 tells a story of a prostitute who protected Israelite spies from Jericho's king and in so doing ended up saving the lives of her entire family.

## Joshua 2:1-24

In Joshua 1, Joshua was told to gather God's people and be ready to cross the Jordan River. That is exactly what happened in chapters 3-4. But chapter 2, in many respects, interrupts the narrative. In the Bible, any time a larger narrative is interrupted by a particular story, you can be sure it is a crucial event. Chapter 1 emphasizes the Israelites, but chapter 2 focuses on the Canaanites, and one surprising Canaanite in particular, the prostitute named Rahab.

Chapter 2 begins with what may seem like a familiar story. Joshua sent out some spies to scout the region of Jericho. A generation earlier, Moses had sent out twelve spies to scout out the land of Canaan (Num. 13). Because of their refusal to enter the promised land, that generation of Israelites had died in the wilderness (chap. 14).

Joshua was now in charge of a completely different group of people a generation later. These spies were sent secretly (Josh. 2:1), but evidently, they were not very good about keeping their secret. When they arrived in Jericho, everyone seemed to know they were in town somewhere. Even the king of Jericho received word that the spies had been to Rahab's house. Out of town travelers spending time at the home of a prostitute would have been no great surprise. But the king was suspicious nonetheless. He sent word to Rahab to bring out the two men (vv. 2-3).

Rahab protected the spies and made a pact with them to spare herself and her family as long as she refused to reveal the secret of the spies' mission even to the king's agents (vv. 8-14). She let the two spies down by a rope from her window, tied a signal in the same window, gathered her family around her, and waited for the spies' return (vv. 15-21).

The last several verses of the chapter (vv. 21-24) are full of verbs. The two spies stayed in the hill country for a few days until everything blew over. Then they returned to Joshua with their report. Interestingly, Joshua played no role in this account, except that he sent out the spies and received their final report. The placement of this story between Joshua 1 and 3 is crucially important. Chapter 2 reveals who can become part of the people of God. And we will see below that Rahab's story does not end there.

## A Bold Act (Josh. 2:4-7)

Somehow the king of Jericho got wind that Rahab’s visitors were, or had been, in her home. The king suspected they were spying. Canaan was comprised of city-states, and many cities had their own kings. Jericho is one of the oldest cities in the world. It was the gateway to Canaan, called the City of Palms (Deut. 34:3).

### VERSE 4

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**But the woman had taken the two men and hidden them. So she said, “Yes, the men did come to me, but I didn’t know where they were from.”**

Rahab, “a prostitute” (v. 1), was now simply referred to as **the woman**. Actually, Rahab is the only person named in this story. The king of Jericho, the spies, and the king’s agents all remain forever unnamed.

The writer used two active verbs to describe Rahab’s actions: she **had taken** and **hidden** the spies. Furthermore, she buried a lie in the truth. **“Yes, the men did come to me, but I didn’t know where they were from.”** She acted from the motive of self-preservation. Yet we do not need to make a precedent of everything in Scripture. Almost no one in the Bible is a perfect example of how a believer should behave. Rahab is no different in this regard.

But the New Testament does not blush regarding Rahab’s actions. James says that Rahab was justified by her works when she received the messengers, gave them lodging, and sent them out (Jas. 2:25). The book of Hebrews says that by faith she “welcomed the spies” (Heb. 11:31). Matthew places her squarely and proudly in Jesus’s own genealogy (Matt. 1:5).

### VERSE 5

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**“At nightfall, when the city gate was about to close, the men went out, and I don’t know where they were going. Chase after them quickly, and you can catch up with them!”**

When a biblical narrative includes specifics, it is for a good reason. The Bible reveals that this event took place **at nightfall**, as **the city gate**, the most vulnerable part of an ancient city, **was about to close**. This same

gate was later sealed to protect the city's residents and to keep the Israelites out (6:1).

Rahab falsely testified that she did not know where these spies were from (2:4) or where they were going (v. 5). This feigned agnosticism set the stage for a later reversal when she confessed something that she most definitely knew (v. 9). Here she deliberately rushed the king's agents out of the house, urging them to chase after the spies.

## VERSE 6

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**But she had taken them up to the roof and hidden them among the stalks of flax that she had arranged on the roof.**

Rahab had hidden them, of all places, on her **roof**. Most homes in this part of the Near East had flat roofs, accessible from inside the home. Except for the rainy season, the roof could be used as additional living space, and even during the rainy season it could be used for domestic purposes in between heavy rains.

Rahab hid the two spies among **the stalks of flax**. *Flax* is a flowering plant, cultivated in Egypt and Canaan (Ex. 9:31). It was an all-purpose textile to make fabric, lamp wicks, torches, and even linen clothing. When flax matured at the end of the rainy season, it was dried in the sun, its fibers separated, then spun. The fact that the flax was on the roof hints about the time of the year all this took place, February or March, the early harvest.

## VERSE 7

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**The men pursued them along the road to the fords of the Jordan, and as soon as they left to pursue them, the city gate was shut.**

The king's agents followed Rahab's urgent instructions. They mistakenly **pursued** the spies by traveling the road down to the Jordan River. Jericho was at about 2500 feet above sea level, and **the Jordan** is about 900 feet below sea level. They misguidedly chased their prey down to **the fords of the Jordan**, natural crossings where people could safely traverse the river. The Jordan is not a large river, but during flood stage it tends to rise quickly and remain high. The verb *pursued* essentially means to overtake or even harass.

Verse 7 ends with the statement that **the city gate**, which was about to close earlier, was now securely shut. There was no way out. The spies were vulnerable.



## Explore Further

Read the article “Flax” on page 577 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. How was flax used literally and metaphorically in the Bible?

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## A Kind Action (Josh. 2:8-13)

Joshua 2:1-6 indicates the kind of person God can use, while verses 8-13 disclose the kind of confession that God honors. This narrative puts a human face on a marginal foreigner. Previously God had stated that He would expel the Canaanites from the land because of their wickedness (Deut. 9:3-5). But Rahab, a Canaanite, would not be expelled; rather, she confessed her faith in Yahweh and aided Israel!

### VERSES 8-9

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**Before the men fell asleep, she went up on the roof and said to them, “I know that the LORD has given you this land and that the terror of you has fallen on us, and everyone who lives in the land is panicking because of you.”**

Before the spies **fell asleep**, Rahab approached them and uttered one of the most startling and lengthy confessions of faith recorded in the Bible, **“I know that the LORD has given you this land.”** How did she know that? By God’s divine revelation alone. She just knew! After twice falsely affirming what she did not know, she professed her faith with unflinching certainty (vv. 9-13). She boldly confessed what she knew in her heart. And she even uttered the divine name, *Yahweh* (translated **LORD**). Yahweh had given the very land on which she stood to someone else. That meant her future and the Israelite’s future were integrally linked.

Rahab confessed God’s gift of the land to the Israelites. As Christians, we also confess God’s gift, the gift of His Son, Jesus (John 3:16).

What about Rahab’s peers? **Terror** of the Israelites had fallen upon the Canaanites. The Hebrew word for *terror* means to melt or faint. It can even be translated as “collapse.” In Exodus 15:14-16, Moses sang a song that foreshadowed exactly what the inhabitants of Jericho would go through, “When the peoples hear, they will shudder . . . terror and dread will fall on them.”

## VERSE 10

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**“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 Sihon and Og, the two Amorite kings you completely destroyed across the Jordan.”**

Verses 10-11 use the pronoun **we** multiple times. Rahab’s confession was personal, yet she was also speaking for the entire community. Everyone’s courage had failed. Both verses also refer to what the Canaanites, and Rahab in particular, had **heard** about the arrival of Israel. The residents of Jericho had *heard* that God **dried up the water of the Red Sea**. The Hebrew verb for *dried up* is used in Joshua 4:23 and 5:1 to refer to how the Jordan River dried up when the priests entered the river with the ark of the covenant (3:15-17).

The Canaanites had also heard about Israel’s defeat of the Amorite kings **Sihon** and **Og** (Num. 21:21-35). The term **Amorite** was probably a catch-all term that included various people groups in the region of the western coast of the Mediterranean Sea. Israel sent messengers to Sihon asking for safe passage through his territory east of the Jordan. He refused and instead dispatched his whole army against Israel. That was his last mistake. Israel took possession of a portion of his land, and Sihon died in the battle. King Og of Bashan also came against Israel, and he and his army were also defeated by Israel.

Joshua completely destroyed the two Amorite kings. Here we see the use of the verb *haram* (translated **completely destroyed**) which refers to something or someone devoted to God for destruction. This important concept is deeply ingrained with the idea of holiness. There’s a sacred sense of the word (Josh. 6:18-21; 10:28,35,37,39,40; see Deut. 7:2-6).

## VERSE 11

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**“When we heard this, we lost heart, and everyone’s courage failed because of you, for the LORD your God is God in heaven above and on earth below.”**

Rahab continued speaking in the plural. When the Canaanites **heard** of what God had done for the Israelites, they **lost heart** and **everyone’s courage failed**. Because of Israel’s God, Rahab made an extraordinary statement of faith, **“The LORD [Yahweh] your God is God in heaven above and on earth below.”** Moses stated these same words to the Israelites adding “there is no other” (Deut. 4:39).

Rahab's confession is similar to many other Gentile confessions in the Bible including: Jethro, Moses's Midianite father-in-law (Ex. 18:11); Naaman the Syrian (2 Kings 5:15); Ruth the Moabitess, who left her family to follow God (Ruth 1:16-17); the widow of Zarephath, whose flour never ran out (1 Kings 17:24); and the people of Nineveh, who repented when they heard Jonah's message of repentance (Jonah 3).

### VERSES 12-13

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**“Now please swear to me by the LORD that you will also show kindness to my father’s family, because I showed kindness to you. Give me a sure sign that you will spare the lives of my father, mother, brothers, sisters, and all who belong to them, and save us from death.”**

Rahab asked the spies to **swear** an oath by the name of *Yahweh* (“**the LORD**”) promising that they would **show kindness** to her father's family. Rahab is a model of faith to us as we read her story today. People are drawn to God not on the basis of ethnicity, gender, or social status, but on the basis of faith. *Kindness* translates the Hebrew word *chesed*. This word marries together compassion and obligation. It can refer to God's love for His children as well as relationships between people. *Chesed* is love in action.

Rahab still wanted some reliable evidence that the spies would protect her and her family when they returned. **“Give me a sure sign.”** The stakes were high. Rahab knew that she was literally risking her life. She asked the spies to save her and her family **from death**. Rahab's belief in *Yahweh* (salvation) apparently spread to her family as well. The New Testament book of Acts provides plenty of examples of household salvations just like hers, where the saving faith of one individual spreads to the entire family. Our belief in God influences how we treat others. In this case, that influence worked both ways. Rahab showed kindness to the spies, and she trusted that they would eventually show kindness to her entire family.

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### **Explore Further**

Read the article “City Gate” on pages 302–303 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What was the significance of a city's gate? What kind of activities occurred at the city gate?

## A Daring Escape (Josh. 2:14-16)

Rahab confirmed her faith by her actions. She lowered the spies to safety by taking a rope and feeding it through her window located on the outside edge of the city wall. Whereas verses 1-7 describe the kind of person God chooses, and verses 8-13 the kind of confession God honors, verses 14-16 address the active nature of biblical faith in God.

### VERSE 14

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**The men answered her, “We will give our lives for yours. If you don’t report our mission, we will show kindness and faithfulness to you when the LORD gives us the land.”**

Rahab had asked the spies to swear an oath that they would show kindness to her family. Now the spies promised, **“We will give our lives for yours.”** The spies entered into a binding covenant with Rahab: **“We will show kindness and faithfulness to you when the LORD gives us the land.”** Twice, the spies asked Rahab not to **report** their **mission** (vv. 14,20).

### VERSE 15

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**Then she let them down by a rope through the window, since she lived in a house that was built into the wall of the city.**

Rahab received the spies promise in good faith and **let them down by a rope**. The Hebrew term for *rope* is used to describe the kinds of ropes used in tents, ship tackle, snares (Job 18:10), and even tying people up (Ps. 119:61). It is used metaphorically for the “ropes” of death (Ps. 116:3) and “cords” of affliction (Job 36:8). Rahab’s home was probably built along a casemate **wall**. A casemate wall was made of two parallel rock walls with a gap of a meter or two in between. In times of warfare that gap could be filled with rock rubble so that the enemies’ battering ram, even if it broke through the outer wall, would lose momentum as it hit the softer rubble between the outer and inner walls. Rahab’s home shared a common wall with the city wall itself.

### VERSE 16

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**“Go to the hill country so that the men pursuing you won’t find you,” she said to them. “Hide there for three days until they return; afterward, go on your way.”**

Some scholars suggest the Hebrew of **she said to them** renders this discussion as having taken place before Rahab let the spies down the wall. She advised the spies to hide for three days in **the hill country**, which refers to the more rugged terrain west of the Jordan. Rahab overcame two barriers that endangered the spies, the closed gate and the king's agents searching for the spies.

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### **Explore Further**

Read the article entitled “Jordan River” on pages 925–926 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What role does the Jordan River play in the Gospels of the New Testament? How is baptism a kind of crossing?

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## **A Firm Assurance** (Josh. 2:17-21)

Rahab solidified her confession of faith by a series of very specific actions. She protected the spies, she sent them out, she tied a cord in the window as a signal for when they returned, and she gathered her entire family together, faithfully expecting God's deliverance.

### **VERSES 17-18**

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**The men said to her, “We will be free from this oath you made us swear, unless, when we enter the land, you tie this scarlet cord to the window through which you let us down. Bring your father, mother, brothers, and all your father's family into your house.”**

There were specific conditions to the oath that the spies uttered. Rahab had to do two things. First, she had to tie a **scarlet cord** to the same window from which they escaped. Second, she was to gather her entire **family** into the shelter of her home. Gathering the family together would not have roused unnecessary attention.

The Hebrew term for *cord* is different from the “rope” by which Rahab let the spies down through the window of her home (v. 15). The *scarlet cord* was clearly an identifying marker. Furthermore, it was a marker that would not have drawn a lot of attention. The cord was a signal to the spies who returned with the Israelite army.

## VERSES 19-20

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**“If anyone goes out the doors of your house, his death will be his own fault, and we will be innocent. But if anyone with you in the house should be harmed, his death will be our fault. And if you report our mission, we are free from the oath you made us swear.”**

Everything was contingent on obedience. Like the final plague of the exodus account, if anyone went **“out the doors of your house,”** they would not be protected. Again, the spies stressed that they would be under no obligation if Rahab did not comply with their agreement.

## VERSE 21

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**“Let it be as you say,” she replied, and she sent them away. After they had gone, she tied the scarlet cord to the window.**

**“Let it be as you say,”** Rahab replied, indicating she would comply with the spies’ orders. The rest of Rahab’s amazing story is found in Joshua 6:22-25. In that chapter, there are nearly as many words describing what became of Rahab and her family as there are describing the battle of Jericho itself. Rahab remains to this day a compelling symbol of the members of the body of Christ. The church is comprised of forgiven sinners who have repented of their sins and placed saving faith in Jesus Christ, the type of faith Rahab expressed in her confession of belief in Israel’s God, a faith that motivated her to hide and help the two spies. Rahab and her family are trophies of divine grace. Integrated into Israel, Rahab would go on to become the great-great grandmother of King David. Her story concludes, **“She still lives in Israel today”** (6:25). Furthermore, she appears in the genealogy of Jesus (Matt. 1:5).



### **Explore Further**

Rahab demonstrated her commitment and faith by helping the spies not to be captured. Her faith eventually led to her being incorporated into Israel, and God made her an ancestor of both David and Jesus. How do you demonstrate your faith in and commitment to God? Think of one habit you could incorporate into your life that will demonstrate your faith and/or commitment to God. Commit to adding that to your daily life,

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